

Making Sense of the Homelessness Crisis

Using a Mixed Methods Approach to Examine Patterns of Family Homelessness in the Dublin Region

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1. Research Context

Ireland is experiencing an acute housing crisis that has seen an unprecedented rise in the number of families presenting as homeless. This steady increase has been exacerbated by structural forces - associated with **low housing affordability and availability** - that have created housing and rental market conditions that 'push' low-income families into situations of homelessness and housing instability (Walsh and Harvey, 2015).

Mirroring trends in other European cities (see Baptista *et al.*, 2017), families now represent an increasing proportion of the homeless population in Ireland, particularly in the capital. Statutory figures show that **the number of families living in emergency accommodation in the Dublin region has more than trebled in the last three years**, rising from 331 families in December 2014 to 1121 families in December 2017; representing an increase of 246% (see Figure 1).

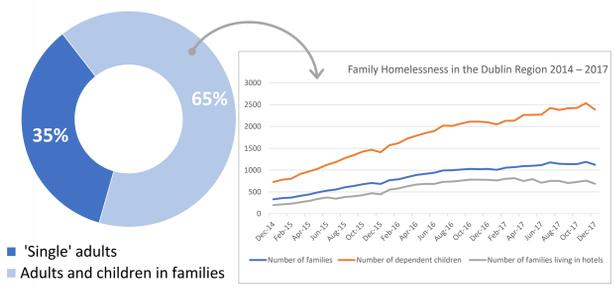


Figure 1: Breakdown of homeless population in Dublin, December 2017 (N = 6097) (DHPCLG, 2014-2017; DRHE, 2014-2017)

2. Research Problem

Lack of Attention to Families
 Familial dimensions of the homeless experience have been neglected within research and policy throughout Europe, where homelessness services have been modelled on provision for an 'archetypal homeless male'. Yet, research has indicated that families' experiences of homelessness may differ significantly to those of the general homeless population (Shinn *et al.*, 2005). As a result, they will have distinct needs; face unique barriers to exiting homelessness; and will require specific responses.

Lack of Attention to Process
 Research has also demonstrated that homelessness is not a static phenomenon but rather an ongoing process. Evidence suggests that some families exit homelessness quickly, while others go on to experience repeat or prolonged homeless episodes (Culhane *et al.*, 2007). However, **little is known about the nature and temporal dynamics of family homelessness**. Advancing understanding of the mechanisms and conditions that impede or promote patterns of residential (in)stability is crucial to ensure that the support needs of homeless families are met.

This Study's Primary Research Question
 What are the key drivers of distinct patterns of family homelessness, including transitional (short-term), episodic (recurrent) and chronic (long-term)?

3. Research Objectives

- I. Generate **nuanced understanding** of the individual, contextual and structural factors that conduce salient patterns of homelessness.
- II. Identify **key risk and protective factors** related to prolonged/repeat homelessness among families.
- III. Inform **policy and service-level recommendations** to guide the development of interventions that are specific to the diverse needs of families experiencing homelessness.

4. Methodology

To achieve these objectives, this study will employ a **mixed methodology** that incorporates a **sequential explanatory design** (see Figure 3). Two phases of research will be conducted successively and connected during the intermediate stage:

- **Quantitative techniques** will be used to characterise the population of homeless families; identify 'clusters' of homelessness service use; and tease out causal mechanisms through the identification of patterns and relationships related to the temporal dynamics of family homelessness.
- **Qualitative methods** will then be deployed to contextualise/explain the statistical findings in more depth and examine experiential aspects of family homelessness that cannot be captured by the variables available in administrative datasets.

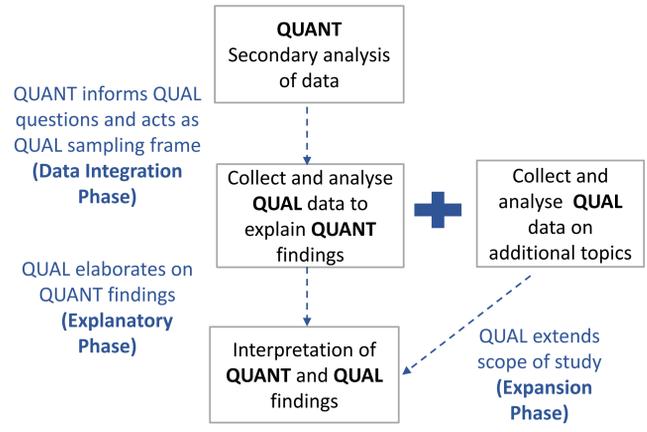


Figure 3: Sequential explanatory mixed methods study design

5. Methods & Analysis

| 1. QUANTITATIVE | 2. QUALITATIVE |
|---|---|
| Analyses of linked administrative datasets: Pathway Accommodation + Support System (2011-16); Local Authority housing list (2013-16) | Random stratified and purposive sampling strategy: 30 families recruited according to the frequency and duration of their homelessness |
| Ind. variables: Socio-economic status + personal characteristics Dep. Variables: Level and chronicity of homelessness | In-depth interviews |
| Analysis: clustering, descriptive and inferential (SPSS) | Analysis: Thematic and narrative (assisted by Nvivo) |
| Matrix analysis | |
| Integrative findings | |

3. Rationale for 'Mixing'

- C Complementarity**
To build upon, expand and elaborate statistical (quantitative) findings with narrative (qualitative) data.
- E Expansion**
To extend the depth/breadth of inquiry by using different methods to address different aspects or dimensions of family homelessness.
- P Philosophical**
To facilitate different levels of abstraction of a multi-layered world within a Critical Realist paradigm.

7. What will be Gained?

Studies undertaken on family homelessness, albeit small in number, have been **dominated by quantitative methodologies** and therefore lack a detailed exploration of the complexity of families' experiences, as well as the qualitative meanings and explanations of statistical findings.

A deficit of multi-dimensionality and nuance in homelessness research of this kind **presents only a "narrow slice of the experience of homeless families"** and is thus problematic in the context of longer-term programme and policy development (Bassuk, 2007: 39).

Combining quantitative and qualitative methods offers an **innovative research approach that has the potential to contribute to a more holistic, broader understanding** of the type(s) of policy, housing and service responses that are best suited to families with different needs to ensure that they successfully exit homelessness and remain housed.

Audience Poll

In the space below, please use the stickers to the right to answer the following question:

Do you consider mixed methods research to be

- a) Developing and emergent =
- b) An established paradigm =

Please ONLY pick one. Thank you!

Get in Touch!

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