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. Using qualitative and quantitative data, families now present 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 334 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; DHRE, 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 instability is crucial to ensuring 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 conduces 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
   - Analyses of linked administrative datasets: Pathway Accommodation + Support System (2011-16); Local Authority housing list (2013-16)
   - Ind. variables: Socio-economic status, personal characteristics
   - Dep. Variables: Level and chronicity of homelessness
   - Analysis: clustering, descriptive and inferential (SPSS)
   - Matrix analysis
   - Integrative findings

2. QUALITATIVE
   - Random stratified and purposive sampling strategy: 30 families recruited according to the frequency and duration of their homelessness
   - In-depth interviews
   - Analysis: Thematic and narrative (assisted by Nivo)

3. QUANTITATIVE
   - Collect and analyse QUANT data to explain QUANT findings
   - Collect and analyse QUAL data on additional topics
   - Interpretation of QUANT and QUAL findings
   - QUAL extends scope of study (Expansion Phase)

6. 7. What will be Gained?

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.

References

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Get in Touch!
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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!