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; an increase of 246% (see Figure 1).

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. Understanding 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 (recurring) 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.

5. Methods & Analysis

1. QUANTITATIVE


- Ind. variables: socio-economic status + personal characteristics

2. QUALITATIVE

- Random stratified and purposive sampling strategy: 30 families recruited according to their frequency and duration of their homelessness

- In-depth interviews

- Analysis: Thematic and narrative (assisted by Nvivo)

- Matrix analysis

- Integrative findings

6. Acknowledgements

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