

The Dynamics of Family Homelessness in Ireland: A Mixed Methods Study

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By

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SUMMARY

Background and Rationale: Available data in many European countries, Australia and the United States indicate that family homelessness has increased, generating intense discussion and debate about the emerging nature of this phenomenon and how it can be explained. Over the past 20 years, homelessness research has focused increasingly on the temporal character of shelter utilisation by analysing large-scale and longitudinal sources of administrative data. Most notably, the seminal work of Dennis Culhane and colleagues in the late 1990s and early 2000's demonstrated that a majority of individuals and families use homelessness services on a short-term basis, with much smaller numbers going on to experience prolonged or recurrent shelter stays.

While statistical evidence of these three service use profiles has since been found in shelter populations across Denmark, Canada and Ireland, understanding of *why* (and *how*) these patterns emerge has, hitherto, not been fully interrogated. Initiated in 2016 against a backdrop of exponentially rising numbers of families experiencing homelessness in Dublin, this study examined *the dynamics of family homelessness* in the Irish context. Adopting a mixed methods approach, a primary goal was to fill a gap in the homelessness research literature by extending beyond a *descriptive* statistical account of families' shelter entries and exits, towards a deeper *explanation* of service use patterns derived from their lives as lived. The research objectives were as follows:

1. Determine to what extent patterns of short-term, long-term and recurrent shelter use exist in the Irish context.
2. Identify risk and protective factors related to families' prolonged and repeated shelter stays as well as those which facilitate lasting exits to alternative housing.
3. Generate in-depth understanding of the individual, contextual and structural drivers that influence families' differing shelter system trajectories over time.

Methodology and Methods: Situated in a Critical Realist paradigm that equally values and validates multiple perspectives in the production of knowledge, the research employed a sequential (explanatory) mixed method design. Quantitative analysis was first undertaken to interrogate a large-scale data set (N = 2533) assembled from administrative records pertaining to all families who had accessed Dublin-based State-funded emergency accommodation over a six-year observation period (2011 - 2016). A cluster analysis was performed to test the prevailing three-fold typology of transitional (short-term), chronic (long-term) and episodic (recurrent) homelessness service use using variables derived from the entry and exit dates of families' shelter stays. The emergent groupings were then compared by available demographics, family-level characteristics and service background data. These results fed directly into the development of the qualitative 'arm' of the research and informed the selection of theoretically relevant cases for participation. Twenty-six parents whose families exhibited transitional (n = 7), chronic (n = 12) and episodic (n = 7) service use histories were recruited and in-depth interviews were conducted with these mothers and fathers. These data were analysed thematically to generate rich insights to help explain, elaborate and contextualise the broader patterns of shelter utilisation observed.

Theoretical framework: This research mobilised a complex-realist explanatory framework that fused the ontology of Critical Realism with complex systems theory to advance understanding of families' homelessness service use patterns. With analytic emphasis placed on families' interrelationships with the multiple 'parts' of the shelter system, the conceptual constructs of non-linearity, adaptation, self-organisation and emergence were used to identify mechanisms, contexts and circumstances that helped to explain why certain families exited emergency accommodation quickly, while others went on to experience prolonged or repeated shelter stays.

Findings: The results of the quantitative analysis revealed three distinct shelter system trajectories - linear, uninterrupted and circuitous - that broadly corresponded to Culhane and colleagues' typology of transitional, chronic and episodic service use, respectively, though notable proportional differences were observed amongst the sub-groups. While cluster membership was not related to parents' age or gender, significant inter-cluster differences *were* found on the basis of household composition, migrant status, race/ethnicity and the number and type of emergency accommodation services accessed over the study period. From these patterns of association, episodic service users emerged as having the most distinctive 'profile', while transitional and chronic service users demonstrated a number of similarities across several metrics.

The study's qualitative data were analysed according to families' macro- and micro- level interactions both with and within homelessness service (and other related) systems. Parents' narratives revealed that their families' distinct shelter system trajectories were strongly influenced by their interdependencies with the wider 'environment' of emergency accommodation, including: how they related (and responded) to linear models of homelessness service provision and evolving homelessness policies; their ability to access and navigate public and private housing systems; and their experiences with health and social care systems over the course of their lives. Turning to their interrelationships within the shelter system, specifically, parents' accounts emphasised the role of shelter rules, management practices and service settings in contributing to their experiences of exiting, remaining in and moving *between* emergency accommodation(s) over time.

Conclusions: While there is general consensus that homelessness must be viewed as a process, this thesis extends this conceptualisation by reframing the distinct trajectories that families' take through the shelter system as a process of 'becoming' that is unpredictable, yet ordered: it is complex. Mobilising a mixed methods approach that contextualises administrative data and individual action, the analysis opens up a manner of thinking about the relationship between agency, 'choice' and constraint in the lives of families navigating homelessness services in a way that transcends a limited individual/structure dichotomy. Two generative (causal) mechanisms - neoliberalism and pathologising responses - are proposed to explain the dynamic patterning of shelter use amongst families in the Irish context. It is argued that when activated, these mechanisms have critical implications for homelessness policy, practice and service-level interventions.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my grandparents, J.G. (Gerry) Ryan (1924-2018), Máire Ryan (née Drohan) (1924-2018) and James (Jim) Parker (1929-2020), three of the smartest people I knew whom I lost over the course of this work and miss very much. To Máire and Gerry, I'll be forever grateful for the endless support and encouragement that you gave me always and without question to complete this PhD. Though you're not here to see it, I hope I've produced something that would make you both proud...

"Oíche mhaith"

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AHB	Approved Housing Body
B&B	Bed and Breakfast Accommodation
CR	Critical Realism
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DCC	Dublin City Council
DRHE	Dublin Region Homeless Executive
DP	Direct Provision
DV	Domestic Violence
EA	Emergency Accommodation
ETHOS	European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion
EU	European Union
Family HAT	Family Homeless Action Team
FEANTSA	European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless
FRP	Family Reference Person
HAP	Housing Assistance Payment
HHAP	Homeless Housing Assistance Payment
HRC	Habitual Residence Condition
HSE	Health Service Executive
MMR	Mixed Methods Research
NGO(s)	Non-Governmental Organisation(s)
ONO	One Night Only Accommodation
PASS	Pathway Accommodation and Support System
PEA	Private Emergency Accommodation
PRS	Private Rental Sector
SLÍ	Support to Live Independently (Scheme)
STA	Supported Temporary Accommodation
TA	Thematic Analysis
TEA	Temporary Emergency Accommodation
UIC	Unique Identification Code
UK	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
US	United States

1. INTRODUCTION

Households with accompanying children represent an increasing proportion of those accessing homelessness services in Ireland, particularly in the capital, Dublin city. Yet, less than might be expected is known about family homelessness from the Irish and, indeed, international perspective. As will be discussed in later chapters, much of the available research evidence has focused on characterising families who present as homeless and identifying risk factors related to their routes into shelter settings, all of which has revealed important and distinctive features of family homelessness that differ from those associated with homelessness amongst ‘single’ adults. However, in keeping with contemporary conceptualisations of homelessness as a *process*, rather than a once-off event, there is a clear need to better understand the temporal dimensions of families’ interactions with homelessness service systems. This research seeks to redress a significant gap in knowledge by generating a methodologically and theoretically robust understanding of families’ trajectories through, out and sometimes back into emergency accommodation in the Irish context, with dedicated analytic attention to why and how these distinct trajectories *emerge* over time.

In an attempt to counteract the narrow methodological focus of existing homelessness research literature, this study implemented a sequential explanatory mixed methods design that sought to (quantitatively) capture and (qualitatively) explain families’ patterns of shelter use in the Dublin region. More specifically, longitudinal administrative data on families’ homelessness service use was integrated with qualitative (narrative) insights to produce a rigorous and contextualised account of families entries into and exits from emergency accommodation. Mobilising a complex-realist explanatory framework that fused the ontology of Critical Realism with complex systems theory, these data were then analysed to identify key processes, mechanisms and contexts that helped to explain why certain families exited, while others went on to experience prolonged or recurrent shelter stays. Initiated in 2016 when an unprecedented number of families were presenting as homeless, this research represents the first large-scale study to integrate quantitative and qualitative data to generate in-depth understanding of the dynamics of family homelessness in Ireland.

This introductory chapter sets the scene by considering the context in which this work is situated. To begin, a brief outline of the extent of family homelessness globally is presented. This is followed by a more detailed discussion of the ways in which family homelessness is defined and measured, including consideration of the implications of enumeration techniques in determining the scale of the problem. Next, a comprehensive account of family homelessness in Ireland is laid out, with specific attention paid to the circumstances that have contributed to the rising number of families presenting as homeless. Attention then shifts to the Irish homelessness policy landscape and legislation underpinning the provision of services for households with accompanying children. Finally, the chapter concludes by outlining the research rationale and mapping the contents of this thesis.

1.1. Family Homelessness: A Global Social Problem

There is strong evidence that homelessness has increased in many Western countries over the last four decades and recent indicators suggest that the composition of homelessness populations has also shifted considerably. These trends have been attributed to a number of social processes operating on a global scale, including the restructuring of the world economy *via* globalisation, the erosion of welfare safety nets and the predominance of neoliberal economic systems; all of which, it has been argued, has led to deep pockets of unemployment and underemployment that has increased the risk of poverty and homelessness among underserved or marginalised groups (Marsh and Kennett, 1999; Rossi, 1994). More specifically, since the 1980s, a growing number of young people, women, single mothers and minority groups have presented to shelter, with many commentators sharing the observations of Rossi (1990: 956), who noted from an American perspective that “soon, entire families began showing up among the homeless, and public attention grew even stronger and sharper”. The changing profile of homelessness populations - which will be discussed in much more depth in Chapter 2 - was particularly pronounced in the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK), and came to be branded as the ‘new homeless’, a juxtaposition that stood in sharp contrast to historical representations of homelessness that conjured images of middle-aged white men with complex needs residing in “decaying and derelict city-centre locations referred to as ‘skid rows’” (O’Sullivan, 2016b: 15). Now, some 40 years later, family homelessness remains a significant and complex social issue in many countries in the Global North, including those with developed welfare systems. This includes, for example, the US, many - though not all - European Union (EU) member states, the UK and Australia, with families sometimes representing the fastest growing subgroup in homelessness populations in these jurisdictions.

In the US, for example, families - generally understood as comprising at least one adult with an accompanying child or children - comprise 34-40% of all individuals experiencing homelessness, with approximately 1.8 families experiencing homelessness during a given year (Fusaro *et al.*, 2012). Across EU member states, the number of families becoming homeless and accessing homelessness services has increased in Belgium, Sweden and the Netherlands (De Boyser *et al.*, 2010, Nordfeldt 2012; Planije *et al.*, 2014; Vandentorren *et al.*, 2016), with particularly high numbers of homeless families recorded in France and Ireland. One French study reported that families (including 81,000 adults and 31,000 accompanying children) represented 29% of all individuals counted as homeless (Yaouanq and Duée, 2014) while recent figures in Ireland indicate that there were 1120 families (including 1619 adults and 2620 accompanying children) living in State-funded emergency accommodation across the country in August 2020, accounting for 48.7% of the total population of service users (Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, 2020). By contrast, in Germany, Denmark and Portugal, families are reported to constitute only a small minority of those officially recorded as homeless (Baptista *et al.*, 2017). In Denmark, for instance, the bi-annual survey from 2017 stated that families accounted for just 5% of their homeless population (though this represented a 3% increase from the 2015 survey) (Benjaminsen, 2017) while Portuguese

data indicate that families accounted for just 12.5% of all homeless households (MAIS, 2017). In the UK, approximately 71% of all those recorded as statutorily homeless in England between 2010 and 2016 were families, while the proportion in Wales and Northern Ireland has been estimated to be 44% and 40%, respectively (Baptista *et al.*, 2017). Finally, Australian statistics indicate that, between 2011 and 2017, families represented just over half of all presentations to specialist homelessness services (Conroy and Parton, 2018). While these figures denote a clear upward trend in the scale of the problem of family homelessness in many countries, it is important to note that these data are not necessarily comparable due to differing definitions and enumeration techniques used across jurisdictions, as will now be discussed in more depth.

1.2. Determining the Scale of the Issue: Defining and Measuring Family Homelessness¹

Homelessness is understood variously and there is no universally accepted or legislated definition of homelessness across the EU (Anderson and Christian, 2003; Busch-Geertsema, 2010; Jacobs *et al.*, 1999). This is perhaps unsurprising since, as Hansen Löffstrand and Quilgars (2016: 49) write, “any definition or typology of homelessness is, by its very nature, a social, political and cultural construct or categorization, reflecting particular assumptions held by particular actors at a particular point in time”. Moreover, complexity arises when trying to decide at what point a person is, or should be, categorised as housed or homeless (Johnson *et al.*, 2015). While the task of defining homelessness is wrought with difficulties (see Busch-Geertsema, 2010 and Harvey, 1999 for a thorough discussion), there is nevertheless broad emerging consensus in recent years that restrictive definitions referring only to ‘rooflessness’ or ‘literal’ homelessness - that is, where an individual is without shelter or residing in emergency accommodation - are too narrow (Hansen Löffstrand and Quilgars, 2016; O’Sullivan, 2016b).

Put differently, such definitions arguably fail to reflect the full spectrum of circumstances that constitute homelessness and housing instability experienced by a more diverse population including parents with children in their care, such as living in situations of ‘hidden’ homelessness - including time spent staying temporarily in the homes of friends, family members or acquaintances

¹ Theoretical debates about the concept of ‘homelessness’ have centred on whether homelessness is in fact a discrete social problem; that is to say, some have questioned whether it is a ‘real’ phenomenon or one that is simply created’ by “discursive labelling of certain circumstances as deviant and problematic” (McNaughton Nicholls, 2009: 74; see also Jacobs *et al.*, 1999). Others have focused on the subjective nature of the term, arguing that the issue of definition is, for all intents and purposes, intractable and irresolvable and should therefore be rethought or abandoned. This is because the range of meanings attributed to the experience of homelessness are considered to be “too vast and too complicated to have any explanatory or prescriptive use” (Watson, 1984: 70; see also, Hutson and Liddiard, 1994). However, this study stands in agreement with Tipple and Speak (2005) and Busch-Geertsema *et al* (2016: 4) who assert that the term ‘homeless’ is in fact a useful one as it “has a resonance for lay people and an implied moral and policy imperative that we seek to preserve”. Thus, while cognisant of theoretical debates about the concept of homelessness, this section focuses on the range of operational definitions of homelessness that are required for specific purposes such as providing a frame of reference for comparative cross-study homelessness research; eligibility criteria for homelessness assistance; determining how public funds for homelessness will be allocated; and estimating the size and scale of the extent of homelessness in various countries.

- and residential circumstances that are not considered to be safe or appropriate or to provide adequate security of tenure (Baptista *et al.*, 2017). Equally, the lives of people who lack secure accommodation are characterised by varying degrees of transience due the fact that they “change location, status and living arrangements” (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2010: 14). For this reason, definitions must take into account the temporal dimensions of homelessness and consider the ways in which homelessness among individuals and families range from those “who are temporarily or episodically without a permanent home (or in temporary accommodation) to individuals who are persistently without shelter” (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2010: 14).

In response to these definitional issues and a recognised need for clarity to enable cross-country comparative research, significant progress has been made in the European context to develop a frame of reference in which a continuum of homelessness situations is recognised. Developed by the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) and the European Observatory on Homelessness in 2005, ETHOS (the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion) provides the most systematic conceptual framework for defining homelessness and housing exclusion developed to date. The typology includes four distinct categories of homelessness and housing exclusion: ‘rooflessness’, ‘houselessness’, living in ‘insecure’ accommodation and living in ‘inadequate’ accommodation (see Appendix A)². Moreover, within the typology, a person is said to be *housed* if they are residing in an adequate dwelling (or space) over which an individual or family can exercise exclusive possession; are able to maintain privacy and enjoy relations; and have a legal title to occupation. Although ETHOS has been critiqued for its arbitrary threshold between homelessness and housing exclusion and for its focus on an individual’s living situation at any given time rather than whether their specific *circumstances* constitute their classification as ‘homeless’ (see, for example, Amore, 2013; Amore *et al.*, 2011), it is nevertheless widely accepted as a useful standardised benchmark for defining and enabling the measurement of homelessness and housing instability throughout Europe (Busch-Geertsema, 2010).

While ETHOS provides a comprehensive framework from which to base comparative accounts of different *forms* of family homelessness, its utility is frustrated by poor data infrastructure, a lack of periodic data collection and varying official definitions of homelessness adopted across EU member states (Brousse, 2004; Edgar and Meert, 2006), all of which can produce “wildly different numbers” (O’Sullivan, 2020: 50). Indeed, the processes of defining and measuring homelessness are inextricably linked; the way a nation defines homelessness dictates who is ‘counted’ *as* homeless and this, in turn, impacts State statistics. For instance, a recent comparative European report on family homelessness noted that across all participating countries, families in “emergency shelters, temporary accommodation, hostels and other specific accommodation provision for homeless people” were included in cases where an official homelessness definition existed (Baptista *et al.*,

² Rooflessness and houselessness are broadly classified as ‘homelessness’, while insecure and inadequate housing are categorised as ‘housing exclusion’. Notably, within ‘houselessness’, ETHOS incorporates a specific category for women escaping domestic violence and accessing women’s refuges.

2017). However, in some countries, women and children fleeing situations of domestic violence (DV) are not defined as homeless and are typically provided for by a separate system of service provision; as a consequence, these families are not officially - or, at least not consistently - recorded *as* homeless, despite demonstrating strikingly similar needs and profiles to those accessing designated homelessness services (Williams, 1998; Stainbrook and Hornick, 2006)³. In assessing the accuracy of State figures on family homelessness, the ‘service statistics paradox’ (Tipple and Speak, 2009) must also be considered whereby it should be taken into account that “the number of homeless families in any jurisdiction is partially a function of the threshold eligibility requirements of the shelter system and of the capacity of local shelters” (Rossi, 1994: 358).

To complicate matters further, in some countries - including France, Finland and Sweden - parents (particularly mothers) may be recategorised as ‘single’ and no longer viewed as a ‘family’ at the point when their child or children are placed in State care or in the care of a relative (Mina-Coull and Tartinville, 2001; Kärkkäinen, 2001; Löfstrand 2005). Research on single women experiencing homelessness in Ireland and the UK, for example, has demonstrated that two-thirds or almost half of their samples, respectively, were mothers or expectant mothers, many of whom had children that no longer lived with them (Hutchinson *et al.*, 2014; Mayock and Sheridan, 2012). Thus, as Rossi (1994: 357) notes, “shelters literally determine who shall be called homeless families by the policies they pursue about whom they will admit”. Moreover, while a small number of jurisdictions, such as Denmark, Sweden, the UK and Finland, have developed robust methodologies that include individuals and families who are living in situations of hidden homelessness in their official statistics (Allen *et al.*, 2020; Brush *et al.* 2016; O’Sullivan, 2020); at the time of writing, most only systematically tallied levels of rough sleeping and emergency accommodation usage on a consistent basis (Baptista and Marlier, 2019)⁴. This is significant since there is mounting evidence to suggest that women or couples with children are more likely to engage in distinctive strategies that serve to conceal their homelessness prior to accessing shelter; in other words, they often reside in informal living situations that are ‘invisible’ to official homeless counts, at least for a period, before approaching homelessness services for assistance (Pleace *et al.*, 2008; Mayock and Bretherton, 2016; Shinn *et al.*, 1998)⁵.

³ In Ireland, for example, although mothers and children in women’s refuges were initially included in State measurements of homelessness, they were subsequently transferred to the auspices of The Child and Family Agency in 2015 and have not been enumerated as part of the official homelessness statistics since that time (O’Sullivan, 2016a).

⁴ It is worth noting that in countries that *are* able to adequately incorporate rates of hidden homelessness into their official statistics, it has been demonstrated that this sub-group typically accounts for a majority of the total homelessness population (Allen *et al.*, 2020).

⁵ Though less studied, there is also evidence to suggest that fathers with accompanying children may initially avoid contacting homelessness services for assistance (Fitzpatrick and Pleace, 2012) - particularly if they are involved in custody disputes and/or fear involvement from child protection services (Hulse and Kolar, 2009). One small-scale Australian qualitative study of single fathers experiencing homelessness also found that men were often reluctant to seek assistance due to feelings of shame linked to normative conceptions of what it means to be a ‘good father’ (McArthur *et al.*, 2006).

Such weaknesses and inconsistencies in homelessness data are problematic when it comes to determining the true extent of family homelessness. As brush *et al.* (2016: 1048) write, this means that “those who are *seen* and *counted* likely represent only the tip of a large and looming iceberg of housing instability among [...] families [emphasis in original]”. As political and media agendas surrounding homelessness have tended to be monopolised by those who are most ‘visible’ (Aldridge, 2001), issues such as these, as Edgar and Doherty (2001: 19) point out, can result in families being overlooked because they disguise “the full extent of the problem from public gaze and hence as a welfare issue”. These factors arguably contribute to a broader misrepresentation of family homelessness which has meant that far less attention than might be expected has been paid to the specific experiences and needs of families in the design and development of mainstream homelessness service provision (Baptista *et al.*, 2017). Despite the challenges associated with definition and measurement, however, it remains clear that family homelessness continues to be a significant problem across Europe as well as in other developed countries, and, if anything, is significantly underestimated.

1.3. Family Homelessness in Ireland

Since 2014, the number of individuals experiencing homelessness in Ireland has grown dramatically, particularly in the Dublin region, and a key feature of this increase has been the number of adults presenting with accompanying children. This section provides an important contextual backdrop to this research. First, an overview of the broader structural and socio-economic circumstances that precipitated what has been coined the Irish ‘crisis’ of family homelessness is provided before moving on to discuss the extent and profile of family homelessness across the country in much more detail. Following this, the homelessness policy context is set out and the section ends with an overview of Ireland’s homelessness legislation and homelessness service provision as it pertains to families.

1.3.1. The Crisis of Family Homelessness

As in other developed economies around the world, rising homelessness rates in Ireland are broadly linked to housing market conditions and macro-economic change related to growing populations, high rental prices and insufficient numbers of new homes being built (Scanlon *et al.* 2015). From the late 1990s until 2007 - commonly referred to as the ‘Celtic Tiger’ era - Irish house prices rose rapidly, fuelled by unregulated lending practices, speculative construction and an acute influx of foreign direct investment. Following the global economic downturn in 2008, when Ireland’s economy entered a deep recession, unemployment rates increased dramatically, the construction sector collapsed and property prices plummeted. New builds contracted and there was a near cessation of social housing construction during these years following a succession of austerity budgets, with social housing output falling by a reported 86.6% between 2008 and 2011 (Norris, 2013; Norris and Byrne, 2017).

Since 2013, the Irish economy has moved steadily out of recession but despite a rapidly-growing demand for housing, supply has remained “sluggish” (McQuinn, 2017: 3). By May 2017, the number of properties available to rent in Dublin was just over 1000 units, compared to 4500 in June 2012 and between 2010 and 2015, just under 6000 social housing units were built nationally compared with an output of almost 35,000 between 2004 and 2009 (O’Sullivan, 2017). Moreover, despite an 8% decrease in the unemployment rate between December 2010 and December 2017 (Eurostat, 2018), many families have remained ‘priced out’ of the property market (Lima, 2018). Indeed, a report from the Residential Tenancies Board (2018) stated that working couples, for example, would need more than one third of their take-home pay each month to cover the instalments necessary to repay a mortgage in the Dublin region.

In the context of limited housing options, families have become increasingly reliant on a poorly functioning private rental sector (PRS) in which a depleted housing stock, coupled with the re-emergence of investors, has driven prices up dramatically (Kitchin *et al.*, 2015) and created conditions in which rents have risen for 26 consecutive quarters (Lyons, 2018). Low-income and welfare-dependent families, in particular, are unable to compete and find themselves “structurally excluded from increasingly unaffordable private rented housing”, while those who do secure a rental agreement remain extremely vulnerable to landlords ending tenancies “to pursue higher rental yields offered in a more competitive market” (Murphy, 2019: 257). As O’Sullivan (2020: 74) points out, the current context of housing unaffordability and unavailability is therefore not simply a consequence of the Global Financial Crisis; rather, it is “the result of longer-term trends in the commodification of housing”.

Ireland, then, is currently in the midst of an acute housing crisis in which housing transitions are taking place in a new property cycle characterised by a retrenchment of social housing provision, skyrocketing rents, rapidly declining availability of private rented dwellings and a lack of housing construction and development (Kitchin *et al.*, 2015). As Healy and Goldrick-Kelly (2018: 34) state, lack of access to affordable homes of acceptable quality now “constitutes a significant crisis for *all* parts of Irish society [emphasis added]”. Thus, despite the substantial increase in rental subsidies available to families deemed to be ‘at risk’ of homelessness since July 2016, compounding issues related to housing affordability and availability have created conditions that have pushed an unprecedented number of families into emergency accommodation, often for the first time (Walsh and Harvey, 2015).

1.3.2. The Extent and Profile of Family Homelessness

Following official recognition by Irish Government that the production of “good data is critical” (Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, 2013: 4), a range of homelessness indicators have been developed and implemented to monitor the number and profile of households in, as well as the rate of entry to, length-of-stay in and exits from, State-funded

emergency accommodation across Ireland since 2014⁶. These official statistics are published by the Department of Housing and are derived from the national electronic case management system called Pathway Accommodation & Support System (PASS). In the main, these data are used to generate stock data to compile monthly reports on the number of adults and accompanying children residing in homelessness services in a given week across the country. State-funded emergency accommodation (hereafter, EA) is divided into three broad categories in Ireland: 1) private emergency accommodation (PEA), which includes commercial hotels, Bed and Breakfast (B&B) accommodation and other residential facilities utilised on an emergency basis; 2) supported temporary accommodation (STA), which includes purpose-built congregate shelter-type accommodation with onsite supports; and 3) temporary emergency accommodation (TEA) which includes lodgings with no or minimal on-site supports. Thus, using the ETHOS framework outlined in the preceding section, for the purposes of gathering State measurements in Ireland, homelessness is defined as a combination of the operational categories 2 and 3 (that is, people staying in a night shelter and people in homelessness accommodation, respectively)⁷.

These data indicate that not only has the number of families accessing EA increased almost four-fold nationally, rising from 407 in December 2014 to 1611 in January 2020, but that three quarters of these families were accommodated in the four Dublin local authorities (municipalities). Indeed, a total of 1201 families (including 1735 adults and 2678 accompanying children) were recorded in Dublin-based EA by the end of January 2020; by contrast, a combined 410 families (including 562 adults and 896 accompanying children) were recorded in EA located throughout the rest of the country (see Figure 1). These data also demonstrate a dramatic and near consistent upward trend in the number of families accessing EA in the Dublin region (with distinct seasonal patterns evident) over the three-year period between December 2014 and July 2018; increasing by 313% before appearing to slow and stabilise by mid-2018 (albeit remaining at very high levels)⁸. Some

⁶ Prior to this time, national-level data on homelessness rates were derived from periodic assessments of social housing need conducted in 2008, 2011 and 2013 (Allen *et al.*, 2020).

⁷ PASS is discussed in much more depth in Chapter 4; however, it is important to briefly note the limitations of these data here. These statistics do not include, for example, data on families living in the small number of homelessness accommodation services that are *not* State-funded nor do they include those living in domestic violence services or individuals seeking asylum and temporarily accommodated in Direct Provision reception centres, both of which operate under different governmental departments and funding streams (Allen *et al.*, 2020). In addition, these monthly figures do not account for those residing in situations of hidden homelessness or sleeping rough; instead, street homelessness is enumerated through rough sleeper counts conducted twice a year in the Dublin region. In keeping with the discussion outlined earlier in this chapter, official data on homelessness provided by PASS are therefore, as O’Sullivan (2017: 204) points out, likely to “underestimate the extent of family homelessness”.

⁸ It is worth noting that a number of Ministerial decisions made in 2018 led to “considerable confusion and debate” (Daly, 2019: 5) when a total of 1601 individuals (including 625 adults and 981 accompanying children) who were temporarily placed in ‘houses and apartments’ funded by local authorities were removed and subsequently excluded from the monthly reports (Allen *et al.*, 2020). In a note prepared for the Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government, O’Sullivan (2018: 17) pointed out that this modification “has [...] undermined confidence in the data as it is unclear what the criteria is for removing these households”. It is not known whether and to what extent these re-categorisations are ongoing and, as a consequence, there is a need to interpret official homelessness figures with some caution since it is possible that there is an unspecified number of insecurely housed families that are temporarily accommodated in ‘own door’ or self-contained accommodation who are not currently (or no longer) counted.

have speculated that these trends are due to a balancing of inflow and outflow *via* a rapid rise in the number of exits during this time (Stanley and Allen, 2018). For example, O’Sullivan (2020) notes that of all families who entered EA since June 2014, approximately 60% had exited by June 2019, though not all of these exits were to tenancies⁹. Nevertheless, the number of *new* family presentations to homelessness services - that is, families with no previous service use history - continues to grow, jumping from 33 in August 2014 to 102 in August 2017 and representing an increase of 209% in just three years (Morrin and O’Donoghue Hynes, 2018). The number of families in EA for more than 18 months has also risen from 919 in September 2016 to 1257 in June 2019, representing an increase of 37%, (Morrin, 2019).

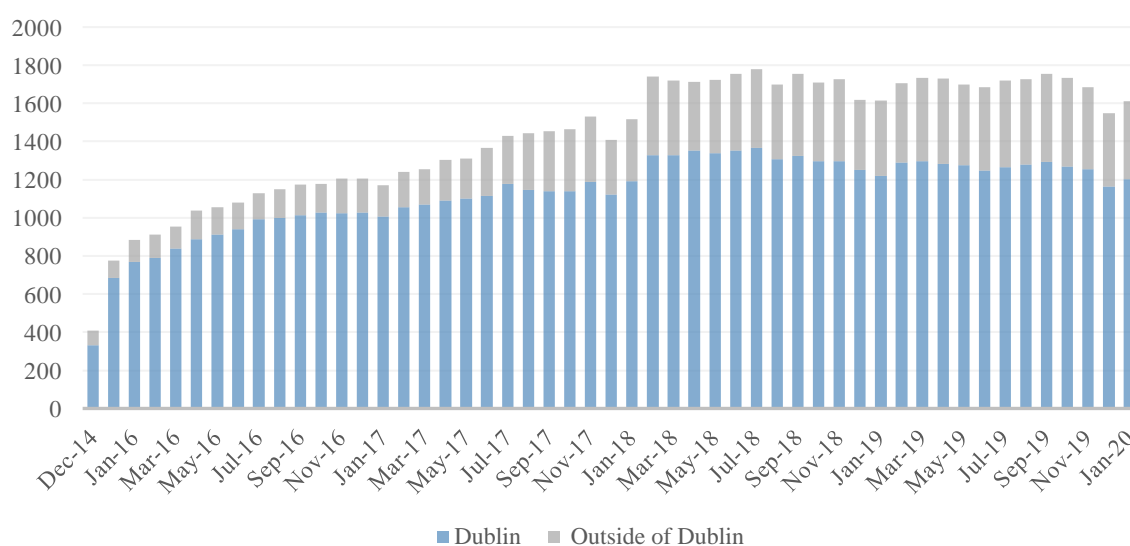


Figure 1: Number of Families in EA Between Dec 2014 and Jan 2020, Broken Down by Region¹⁰

The steady rise of adults with accompanying children both presenting to, and experiencing prolonged stays in, EA since 2014 has swelled the point-in-time figures, with adults and children in family units now accounting for approximately 60 -70% of the *total* number of individuals residing in Dublin-based EA - that is, including single unaccompanied adults, adults with accompanying children and the children themselves - between January 2016 and January 2020. Looking at households, specifically, O’Sullivan (2020) comments that when systematic homelessness data collection commenced in June 2014, over 80% of those accessing homelessness services in Ireland were headed by single adults; however, calculating the average proportional share of all adults and children in families between January 2016 and January 2020 indicates that they now generally account for 55% of households residing in EA across the four Dublin regions. The growing number

⁹ Available data that tracked 3000 new family presentations to EA in Dublin between 2016 and 2018, for example, reported that, by July 2019, only half had exited to tenancies that were in the PRS or managed by an Approved Housing Body or local authority, while the remaining families were either still residing in EA (accounting for 30% of participants) or had exited to an unknown living situation (accounting for 20% of participants) (Morrin, 2019).

¹⁰ Source: Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (2014 - 2020).

of parents with accompanying children presenting to EA has thus become a striking feature of Ireland's contemporary homelessness landscape; one which has overwhelmed local authorities and resulted in approximately 60% of all households with accompanying children being accommodated in PEA by the end of June 2018 (Dublin Region Homeless Executive, 2018).

Analyses of these administrative data also point to some important demographic trends in Ireland's homelessness service users. Perhaps most significantly, there appears to be a "growing feminisation of homelessness" that is skewed towards the younger age groups (that is, those aged 18-25 and 26-30) and is driven, to a large extent, by the increase in the number of families presenting as homeless, most of whom are headed by a single mother (Allen *et al.*, 2020: 93). Indeed, the most recent National Census conducted by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in 2016 revealed that 68% of families experiencing homelessness were single parents, 96% of which were single mothers with children (CSO, 2017). A more detailed demographic profile has been outlined in a report published by the Dublin Region Homeless Executive (DRHE) on 971 families who newly presented to homelessness services in the Dublin region during 2017. Analysing PASS data, this research reported that a majority (73%) were accompanied by one or two children, the average age of whom was seven with a majority (43%) aged between four and 11; moreover, the average age of parents was 32 years, with a majority (77%) being over the age of 25 (Morrin and O'Donoghue Hynes, 2018).

Directly comparing their data with the general population the authors highlighted a number of key 'at risk' groups found to be disproportionately represented amongst families accessing EA. These groups included: single parent households, almost all of which were female-headed (65% versus 24% in the general population); larger family sizes, where adults presented with four or more accompanying children (11% versus 7% in the general population); and those where at least one parent was a 'non-Irish national' (33% versus 12% in the general population) (Morrin and O'Donoghue Hynes, 2018). The CSO (2017) also recorded that although Irish Travellers - an officially recognised ethnic minority group in Ireland - comprised less than 1% of the general population, they accounted for 7.5% of the 6,871 adults and children in EA in 2016, a number that reportedly rose to 9% in 2018 (Expert Group, 2019).

A final trend to emerge from PASS data is that the number of migrant families accessing EA appears to be growing. As O'Sullivan (2020) notes, the proportional share of migrants in the total population of adults residing in EA across the four Dublin local authorities rose from 10% to 33% between 2014 and 2018. This sharp increase, he suggests, has been driven by the purportedly large number of migrant parents with accompanying children who have recently been pushed out of the PRS and into homelessness services due to the ongoing crisis of housing affordability and availability in Ireland. Looking at family data specifically, a longitudinal analysis of PASS data on new family presentations to Dublin-based EA between 2016 and 2018 reported that migrants went from representing 25% of the total population of families accessing EA to 39% over the three-year observation period (Morrin, 2019).

Additional research carried out by Focus Ireland, a leading Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) in the homelessness sector, surveyed 237 families who were engaging with a dedicated homelessness case management service in Dublin. This research found that a majority (56%) of the participating families were born *outside* of Ireland - either in EU (15%) or non-EU countries (41%) - with 15% (n = 35) of these families reporting that they had sought asylum and lived in Direct Provision (DP) reception centres in the past (Long *et al.*, 2019).

1.3.3. *The Policy Landscape*

Ireland has adopted a strategic approach to responding to homelessness since 2000; yet, it is only in the last decade or so that homelessness has become a major plank of the political agenda (Allen *et al.*, 2020). A comprehensive account of the history of homelessness policy in Ireland is beyond the scope of this work and can be found elsewhere (see O’Sullivan, 2008a, 2012, 2016a, 2020). Broadly speaking, however, contemporary Irish homelessness policy has been relatively progressive, with a strong emphasis placed on prevention, the elimination of long-term homelessness and, in particular, its more recent ambition to move towards sustainable housing solutions (O’Sullivan, 2012). Reflecting on Ireland’s extensive homelessness policy output, O’Sullivan (2016a: 17) usefully concludes that “the core recommendation of increasing supply is the common denominator”. Commenting on the most recent iteration of homelessness policy, however, he states that it is best described as “reacting to homelessness” rather than addressing the structural drivers of homelessness (O’Sullivan, 2020: 73). This section focuses on key policy developments related to family homelessness, with particular attention paid to the shift towards ‘housing-led’ approaches¹¹, the marketisation of social housing provision and the most recent Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness, titled ‘*Rebuilding Ireland*’.

The publication of *Homelessness: An Integrated Strategy* in 2000 (Department of the Environment and Local Government, 2000) signalled a significant change in government policy on homelessness that was characterised by a move away from crisis-led responses towards the development of an holistic and comprehensive approach. This arguably marked the first time that Irish homelessness policy acknowledged the complex interplay of structural and individual forces in the production of homelessness and articulated a commitment to ensuring sustainable housing solutions for individuals and families who experience homelessness. More specifically, the strategy emphasised the importance of developing: 1) a continuum of care from the time an individual becomes homeless; 2) EA for short-term use only, with settlement or independent housing being an

¹¹ In 2011, the Jury of the EU Consensus Conference drew a distinction between ‘housing-led’ and Housing First responses to homelessness given the history and specificity of the latter term. ‘Housing-led’, then, refers to the practice of adopting the broad principles of Housing First (that is, the aim to provide immediate access to secure housing, with supports as needed). However, housing-led approaches vary in terms of the intensity, range and duration of supports provided in-housing, meaning that they do not necessarily conform to some of the core principles of the Pathways to Housing First model developed in the US (see Tsemberis, 2010). Put another way, housing-led refers to a broad, differentiated range of policy approaches to homelessness of which Housing First is one example.

important immediate goal; 3) long-term supported accommodation for those individuals in need of such services; and 4) support services and preventative strategies for 'at risk' groups. A series of reviews and implementation plans followed and, in 2008, a revised national strategy entitled *The Way Home: A Strategy to Address Adult Homelessness in Ireland 2008-2013* (Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2008) was published. This strategy's core aim was to eliminate long-term homelessness (that is, stays in EA for more than six months) and rough sleeping by 2010.

The Way Home outlined a restructuring plan for homelessness services that sought to move away from the provision of EA towards the provision of long-term housing solutions. The homelessness sector subsequently underwent a significant service reconfiguration, reflecting the shift in homelessness policy away from a traditional linear or staircase model - which requires progression towards 'housing readiness' on the part of individuals and families before they can secure access to permanent housing - towards a housing-led approach. Importantly, this signalled the phasing out of transitional housing programmes where individuals and families stayed for a period of up to two years prior to moving to independent housing. Whilst the adoption of a housing-led approach was implied in *The Way Home* policy document, it was later explicitly articulated in a review and restatement of the strategy via the publication of the *Homelessness Policy Statement* (Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, 2013) in 2013. In this revised strategy, 'housing-led' was defined as "the rapid provision of secure housing, with supports as needed to ensure sustainable tenancies" and the stated goal was to end long-term homelessness by 2016 (Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government, 2013: 3).

However, as mentioned earlier, the impact of the economic crisis seriously stalled new housing construction and reduced housing stock during this time. In 2014 the *Social Housing Strategy 2020* (Department of Environment, Community and Local Government, 2014) was launched and this document made commitments to: 1) providing funding to allow local authorities (municipalities) and voluntary organisations known in Ireland as Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) to build, acquire or lease 35,000 units of social housing over a six-year period; and 2) providing a new means-tested social housing support via rental subsidies to access PRS accommodation. Alongside other rental subsidy schemes already in place, including Rent Supplement and the Rental Accommodation Scheme, it was stated that this new Housing Assistance Payment (HAP)¹² would have the potential to provide accommodation for up to 75,000 households.

As the 2016 deadline approached, it became clear that the target to end long-term homelessness would not be met (Allen *et al.*, 2020). As noted previously, this period saw a rapid rise

¹² HAP is a form of 'social housing support' that, subject to rent limits and conditions, allows qualified applicants to source rental accommodation in the private market. Under the scheme, the local authority makes monthly payments to a private landlord while the tenant pays a weekly rent contribution to the local authority that is based on household income (O'Sullivan 2020). HAP payments may be suspended or ceased if the property is sub-standard; the landlord is not tax compliant; the tenant fails to pay differential rent to the local authority; or a tenant engages in anti-social behaviour (The Housing Agency, 2018).

in the number of individuals and families presenting to homelessness services due, primarily, to adverse housing market conditions. May 2016 saw the formation of a new Government where the needs of families were explicitly recognised in *A Programme for Partnership Government*, in which it was stated that it is “not acceptable in 2016 to have families living in unsuitable emergency accommodation or to have people sleeping rough on our streets” (Government of Ireland, 2016: 19). The Government subsequently launched its new Action Plan for housing and homelessness, *Rebuilding Ireland* (Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, 2016) which is the current policy initiative that aims to address the housing and accommodation needs of parents with children. Importantly, *Rebuilding Ireland* specifically acknowledged that “families with children presenting as homeless require a response that is separate and distinct from presentations by adult individuals and couples” (p. 34) and that “accommodating family units in hotel arrangements is inappropriate for anything other than a short period of time” (p. 16).

Accordingly, the plan includes specific measures relating to children and families such as a promise to reduce the number of commercial hotels and B&Bs used to house families by mid-2017. The stated goal is to replace these responses with “suitable permanent family accommodation” by delivering what is described only as “additional housing solutions” (p. 13). Recognising that “the long-term solution to the current homelessness issue is to increase the supply of homes” (p. 33), the plan also makes a commitment to: 1) increasing social housing units through the construction of new builds as well as through the purchasing and leasing of existing housing units; 2) extending tenancy sustainment services; and 3) increasing the amount of rental subsidy available to households experiencing homelessness. Although Housing First has been operational in Dublin since 2011 when a small-scale Housing First Demonstration Project was initiated, *Rebuilding Ireland* also sought to expand the Housing First initiative across the country to house 300 individuals by 2021, alongside the promise of accelerating provision of Rapid Build (modular) housing. Notably, while *Rebuilding Ireland* frames housing as a primary solution to homelessness, what differentiates this Action Plan from previous strategies is that it does not make an explicit commitment to ending long-term homelessness; rather, as O’Sullivan (2020: 75) points out, it “contains a series of actions primarily designed to enhance the coordination of services, particularly across statutory bodies”.

Despite *Rebuilding Ireland’s* commitment to a housing-led approach, the rapid growth in homelessness rates since 2014 has seen emergency-based responses to homelessness gradually return as the *modus operandi* of policy action including the expansion of emergency infrastructure to accommodate the steady stream of families presenting as homeless to local authorities. The mismatch between policy and implementation is clearly reflected in the published local authority financial expenditure on homelessness. For instance, in 2018, a total of €118.3 million was spent on EA in Dublin alone, representing 83% of the total budget; by contrast, only 3.3% (or €4.7 million) of homelessness expenditure was spent on prevention services or tenancy support services during the same year (Dublin City Council, 2019). Commenting on the development of Irish homelessness policy more broadly, Allen *et al.* (2020: 69) write that:

The early optimism that long-term homelessness could be ended was increasingly replaced by narrower targets; however [...] as the numbers of adults and children in emergency accommodation increased each month, even more modest targets, such as reducing the use of hotels and B&B-type accommodation by a certain date, were quietly abandoned.

Rebuilding Ireland and other government policy responses, including the *Social Housing Strategy 2020*, have also come under sharp criticism for their reliance on the private rental market to meet a sizeable proportion of social housing need (see Burns *et al.*, 2017; Hearne and Murphy, 2018; Lima 2018). Notably, there has been a decisive and relatively rapid shift away from a bricks-and-mortar approach provided *via* State and local authority constructed and managed dwellings - which traditionally dominated Irish social housing policy and delivery - towards a more neoliberal model in which social housing is delivered through the PRS *via* the provision of rental subsidies (Hayden, 2014; Hearne and Murphy, 2018; Norris, 2013). The utilisation of these subsidies, the most recent iterations of which are HAP and the Homeless HAP (HHAP)¹³, also signals an important “shift in rights” whereby responsibility for providing and sourcing these tenancies has transferred from the State to private providers and those individuals and families in need of housing, respectively (Murphy, 2019: 257).

Coupled with an historically low level of purpose built social housing, these developments have meant that since 2016, HAP has become the “primary mechanism for preventing homelessness and for assisting people to exit emergency accommodation” (Hearne and Murphy, 2018: 14)¹⁴. While HAP accounted for just 11% of social housing provision in 2014 when the scheme was first introduced, under *Rebuilding Ireland* 65% (87,000) of social housing is to be delivered through HAP tenancies, while just 15% (21,300) is to be provided *via* new-builds by local authorities and AHBs (Hearne, 2017). In the case of Dublin, specifically, Figure 2 demonstrates that approximately 62% of all exits to housing in the last two quarters of 2019 were to HAP tenancies, compared to just 12% in the latter half of 2014.

¹³ Under the HHAP scheme, discretion is given to increase the basic HAP payment by up to 20% (outside of Dublin) and 50% (in the Dublin region) for those at risk of homelessness and local authorities may also pay rental deposits and advance rental payments, if required (O’Sullivan, 2020).

¹⁴ Notwithstanding the relatively promising outcomes captured in an evaluation of the Dublin Housing First project, which has reportedly high fidelity to the original Housing First model (Greenwood, 2015), the number of Housing First tenancies remains low in comparison to the larger problem and thus its overall impact is limited. Even with the planned expansion of the programme, it remains “marginal in the overall scheme of homelessness provision, despite some rhetorical nods in its direction from some NGOs” (O’Sullivan, 2016a: 33). Also, despite some encouraging findings concerning the experiences among a small number of tenants (Nowicki *et al.*, 2018), only 423 of the planned 1500 homes under the rapid build housing programme had been delivered by the end of 2018 due primarily to issues around investment and planning. As Daly (2019: 12) notes, this plank of the response to homelessness is considered to be “a minor element” and, in fact, it remains unclear “if it is still active as a policy”.

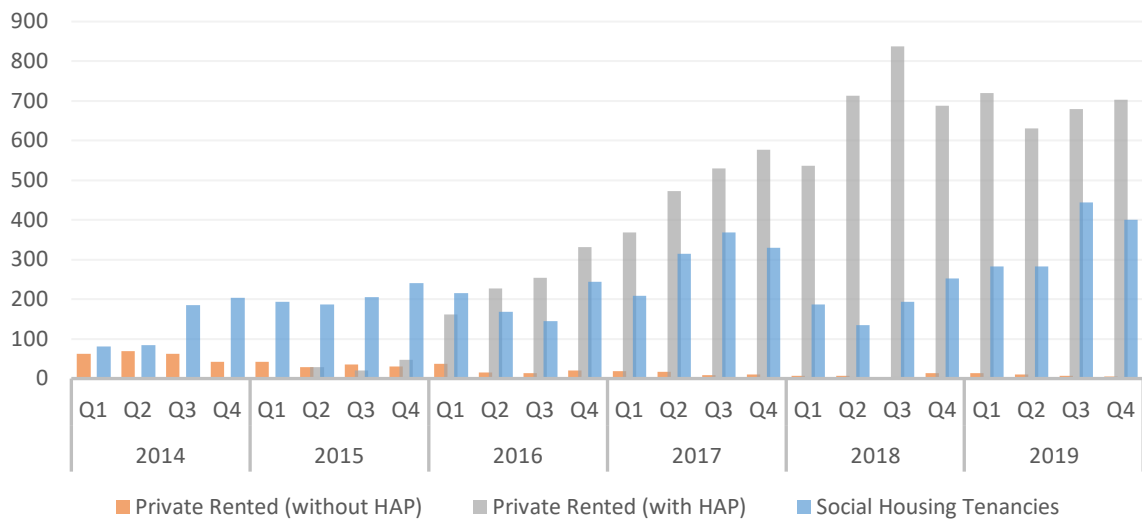


Figure 2: Exits from EA to Tenancies in Dublin, Q1 2015 – Q4 2019¹⁵

While rental subsidies for the PRS can improve exit rates from EA by providing quicker access to independent accommodation due to a considerable waiting list for local-authority managed tenancies (O’Sullivan, 2020; Stanley and Allen, 2018), valid concerns have been raised as to whether the use of HAP as a *primary* housing solution is sufficient and, indeed, sustainable. Issues arise, for example, in relation to the limited availability of supply of appropriate housing, a highly competitive rental market, discrimination against those in receipt of rental subsidies and the fact that large-scale State subsidisation of private landlords offers a poor return of State investment (Hearne and Murphy, 2018; Norris and Hayden, 2018). Moreover, since private landlords can still legally terminate a tenancy and demand vacant possession in certain circumstances (such as when they wish to sell, refurbish or give the property to a family member), even when the tenant is receiving social housing supports (O’Sullivan, 2016a), it has been argued that additional actions are needed to “rebalance the private property rights of landlords and the needs of households for the secure occupancy of their rental dwellings” (O’Sullivan, 2020: 77). Families who receive HAP are also considered to have their housing needs ‘met’ and, as such, are removed from the local authority’s waiting list. In what has been described as a “byzantine” and “opaque” administrative procedure, families in receipt of HAP are instead given the option to be placed on a social housing ‘transfer list’ that incurs much longer wait times between allocations (O’Sullivan, 2020: 79)¹⁶.

While the preceding discussion demonstrates that some progress has been made to the extent that the explicit needs of families have become more visible in Irish homelessness policy, the steadily

¹⁵ Source: Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government (2020).

¹⁶ O’Sullivan (2020) points out that, at the time of writing, national level data on the number of those individuals and families placed on this transfer list is not published or publicly available. Moreover, Murphy (2019: 259) notes that local authorities can also “restrict choice and impose ‘reasonable’ offers to those on a public housing waiting list who may be demonstrating ‘HAP reluctance’”. Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that these changes essentially altered the “choice architecture” for homeless families by significantly diminishing the range of appropriate and more permanent housing options available to them (Murphy, 2019: 259).

growing numbers of families presenting as homeless calls into question whether the current policy goals are being implemented effectively; or indeed, whether they are in fact feasible or sufficient at all. Commenting on the prospects of sustaining a successful housing-led approach in Ireland, O’Sullivan (2016a: 33) draws a rather bleak conclusion, writing that “the aspiration to reorient homeless service provision towards a housing-led approach is further from being realised than at any point over the past 30 years”. Under these circumstances he suggests that families are likely to be particularly affected, due, in large part, to “a lack of social housing in the short term, the relentless increase in rents in the private rented market and the plummeting availability of such dwellings, particularly in Dublin” (O’Sullivan 2016a: 33). Thus, despite some positive outcomes and the relative success of several schemes and interventions implemented *via* current homelessness policy provision, one could argue that these changes, as well-intentioned as they might be, are flawed since they “do not fundamentally disrupt the structural failings of the system” (O’Sullivan, 2020: 76).

1.3.4. Homelessness Legislation and Emergency Accommodation for Families

Currently, there is no explicit right to housing in Ireland’s constitution nor is there an express statutory right to shelter or housing in existing Irish law (Mercy Law Resource Centre, 2018)¹⁷. Specific provisions relating to housing and housing supports are included in primary and secondary legislation, particularly the *Housing Acts 1966-2014*. However, these relate to the right to apply and be considered eligible for social housing *via* the provision of a dwelling managed by either a local authority or AHBs. That is to say, the provision of shelter to homeless children residing with their family - whether emergency or permanent - is largely (and legally) discretionary¹⁸. Most notably, there is no statutory recognition of the needs of those experiencing homelessness *as a family unit* and no special provisions are made for children in families in the *Housing Act 1988*, specifically, which refers only to ‘any other person who normally resides’ or ‘who might reasonably be expected to reside with’ a person who presents as homeless. Thus, unlike other jurisdictions such as England, Scotland and France, families and children are included under the same homelessness policy and legislative frameworks as single unaccompanied adults (Mercy Law Resource Centre, 2018)¹⁹.

Ireland is, however, one of the few countries in the EU that has a legal system in place to provide a statutory structure with regard to homelessness service provision (Daly, 2019; European

¹⁷ It is only in very limited cases that an implied right to adequate shelter may be “a necessary corollary of other constitutional rights, including the right to bodily integrity and the right of the person” (Mercy Law Resource Centre, 2018: 8). However, for all intents and purposes there is no clear legal right to shelter for adults and children in Irish legislation. Of interest is that a recent report by the Ombudsman for Children (2019: 18) points out that while the matter of enshrining a constitutional right to housing has been considered numerous times by the Oireachtas over the past 20 years, “no substantial progress has been made”.

¹⁸ Although the *Child Care Act 1991* infers a legal responsibility on Tusla to provide suitable accommodation for children who can no longer remain at home, this provision only applies when the children are *not* in the care of their parent.

¹⁹ The Housing (Homeless Families) Bill 2017 is proposed legislation that seeks to amend the *Housing Act 1988* to legally oblige housing authorities to recognise homeless families as family units, with specific regard to the best interests of children. At the time of writing, the bill had passed the third stage of the Dáil and was due to proceed to the committee stage.

Observatory on Homelessness, 2018), with local authorities having primary statutory responsibility for the planning and steering of a homelessness service infrastructure. In particular, the *Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009* mandates a statutory obligation on each local authority to: 1) establish homelessness consultative fora that must include voluntary and statutory representatives; and 2) adopt local homelessness action plans which specify the measures proposed to be undertaken to address homelessness, including the prevention of homelessness and the provision of services to address the needs of households experiencing homelessness. As mentioned, Irish housing legislation does not impose a legal duty on local authorities to house families experiencing homelessness in either settled or emergency accommodation; however, they are deemed responsible for assessing and responding to their needs. Thus, although in practice many local authorities prioritise placing families in EA, the ongoing national homelessness and housing crisis means that the system is often under pressure.

The DRHE - formerly the Homeless Agency - is the lead statutory local authority in the response to homelessness in Dublin and is responsible for the planning, coordination and administration of funding for the provision of homelessness services in the region. As per Section 10(1) of the *Housing Act 1988*, it is a matter for the DRHE to initially assess and determine whether a family is officially considered ‘homeless’ and thus eligible for homelessness supports. It is also within their purview to, at their own discretion:

- 1) make arrangements, including financial arrangements, with approved bodies, relating to their provision of accommodation for a homeless person;
- 2) provide a homeless person with such assistance, including financial assistance, as it considers appropriate; and
- 3) rent accommodation, arrange lodgings or contribute to the cost of such accommodation or lodgings for a homeless person.

It is worth noting that since 2014, the DRHE do not operate EA services directly; rather, this role has been entirely contracted out to private for-profit operators and NGOs under service-level agreements (O’Sullivan, 2020). As O’Sullivan (2016a: 22) explains, the nature of homelessness service provision in Ireland is therefore determined in part by the varying “origins and ethos” of a disparate range of NGOs and, more recently, by their funding arrangements with local authorities in line with the strategic objectives outlined in the Homelessness Action Plan for each municipal area²⁰. As a consequence, policy-makers’ ability to develop coherent strategies is limited; at the same time, relatively little is known about the structure and organisation of the broad patchwork of homelessness service provision targeting families, many of which have developed in an *ad hoc* fashion while at least some are private or charitable services that operate without the use of State funding and are therefore largely unregulated (European Observatory on Homelessness, 2018).

²⁰ O’Sullivan (2016a) points out that this structure has led to a relatively small number of agencies operating a majority of homelessness services in Ireland, with four NGOs receiving almost half of all section 10 funding nationally. This, he argues, “poses considerable risk for these agencies if the funding model were to change, and risk for the State as it becomes increasingly dependent on these bodies” (O’Sullivan, 2016a: 22).

What is known, however, is that up until recently there were very few STA services that were family-oriented and located in Dublin (Walsh and Harvey, 2015). This means that the vast majority of families in the city were placed in PEA (most often commercial hotels), with costs paid directly by the DRHE. In cases where there is no emergency provision available in DRHE-contracted PEA, families are given the option to ‘self-accommodate’ by contacting non-contracted private operators directly to secure arrangements that are typically on a night-by-night basis²¹. In the most recent published data on the breakdown of families accessing EA in the Dublin region, there were a reported 822 families living in PEA while 530 were residing in TEA and STA in the fourth quarter of 2018 (DRHE, 2018). That well over half of families experiencing homelessness have been accommodated in PEA - which is universally recognised as inappropriate and unsuitable for families experiencing homelessness - is what O’Sullivan (2020) describes as, a “dramatic change” (p. 66) and “striking feature” (p.84) of current responses to homelessness that ultimately serves as compelling evidence of the limitations of current policy measures.

The nature and types of services and supports available to families experiencing homelessness in Dublin have many forms and, consequently, standards and experiences vary²². For instance, while families will almost always have access to private room(s) (as opposed to dormitories), some accommodation is simply lodgings while other facilities have on-site or visiting support staff. Moreover, the line between emergency and temporary accommodation is not clear; indeed, while some services offer longer-term placements of up to six months, others operate on a weekly basis or as ‘one-night-only’ (ONO) accommodation, meaning that families must leave the premises each morning (often with their belongings) and are not allowed to return until that evening. Finally, some services provide meals (free or subsidised), some provide cooking or clothes washing facilities (private or communal) and some charge a fee for staying there (European Observatory on Homelessness, 2018)²³.

²¹ Previously, media reports have detailed specific cases in which no immediate EA was available for families who were left with no other option but to stay overnight in cars and sleep rough in tents (Kearns, 2015) while some 199 families were directed to stay overnight in Garda (police) stations in 2018 (O’Brien and Burns, 2018). Since this time, the emergency homelessness system has changed with the DRHE taking primary responsibility (working in collaboration with NGOs) to put in place effective contingency placements for families who present in crisis need.

²² Notably, Ireland does not have any specific laws regarding the setting of quality standards for homelessness services; however, in 2019 the DRHE developed a National Quality Standards Framework (NSQF) on behalf of the Irish Government to ensure the operation of operating safe and efficient services (European Observatory on Homelessness, 2018).

²³ In 2013, the DRHE commissioned a mapping of homelessness services to identify the full range of accommodation options available to women in the Dublin region, including women’s refuges (Mayock *et al.*, 2013). Of the services that specified that they worked with mothers and children (45%, n = 17), seven stated that, in some instances, they may not be able to accommodate large families due to capacity constraints. In general, the maximum number of children that can be accommodated (along with their mother) at any given time is between three and seven, depending on the type of accommodation available. Restrictions with regard to children are operational in ten services, with the most commonly cited restrictions relating to the age and gender of children. For instance, four services stated that they did not accept children over the age of 18 while three services did not accept boys over the age of 10, 16 and 17 years, respectively. A number of services also had restrictions in place concerning eligibility criteria with a majority stating that they did not accept individuals with a history of sex offending or violence or individuals who were active substance users.

The Family Homeless Action Team (HAT) was established in 2012 as the principal service that assesses each family following their placement in EA across Dublin and assists them in finding suitable accommodation, with some case workers being based on-site. Operated by various homelessness NGOs on behalf of the DRHE, the Family HAT assigns families a Case Manager “who works to support the family out of homelessness as quickly as possible” (Long *et al.*, 2019: 13)²⁴. However, in the context of limited funding and resources as well as the unprecedented rise in the number of families presenting as homeless since 2014, at least one estimate in Dublin indicated that the Family HAT could only allocate a dedicated Case Manager to 55% of families (Focus Ireland, 2016) while another report states that the wait for a Case Manager is approximately six months (Walsh and Harvey, 2015). This, in turn, suggests that a significant number of families living in EA receive extremely limited or no official supports, at least for a period.

Family homelessness in Dublin is increasingly managed *via* a relatively new form of STA known as ‘family hubs’ that were introduced in 2017 without pilot, a published rationale or any plan for rigorous evaluation (Daly, 2019; O’Sullivan, 2020). Although not explicitly referenced in the most recent homelessness strategy documents, hubs have emerged as the primary response to reducing the number of families being temporarily housed in PEA. Developed primarily through the repurposing and refurbishing of existing buildings and accommodation, including hotels as well as “institutions, offices guest houses, and warehouses” (Murphy, 2019: 257), family hubs are designed to be highly supervised, regimented congregate service settings that deliver therapeutic supports to residents with an intended stay of up to six months (though there is no upwards time-limit)²⁵. Each family has one bedroom and shared cooking, laundry, bathroom and social spaces as well as access to on-site supports, including those related to health, welfare, parenting and housing. As of 2018, there were 26 family hubs across Ireland, with 22 located in Dublin. According to Allen *et al.* (2020), these services are operated primarily by NGOs (n = 16) followed by private providers (n = 6) and have a combined capacity to house 564 families, although individual family hubs typically house less than 40 households each²⁶.

While it is generally acknowledged that family hubs provide a preferable alternative to the use of PEA (particularly hotels and B&Bs) they have also been the subject of considerable scrutiny and public debate in recent years (see, for example, Hearne and Murphy, 2017, 2018; Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, 2017; Nowicki *et al.*, 2019; Ombudsman for Children, 2019; O’Sullivan, 2017). Concerns are well-documented and centre primarily around their unsuitability

²⁴ Apart from assistance with securing appropriate mainstream accommodation, this can include support with facilitating travel to help children get to school, sourcing nutritious food, access to medical needs and other social support. The Family HAT also includes specialised Child Support Workers funded by Tusla and the Health Service Executive (HSE), who provide child-centred support to families which are assessed as requiring that assistance (Focus Ireland, 2016).

²⁵ Although the Department of Housing has indicated that the length-of-stay in family hubs is not currently captured, the Minister for Housing recently reported that the average length of time families are spending in this form of accommodation is approximately six months (Dáil Éireann debate, 2019).

²⁶ Nevertheless, it is perhaps worth noting that at least one converted hotel in Dublin can hold up to 98 families at any given time.

and inability to address the structural causes of family homelessness and that the strict rules and conditions (including those related to curfews, visitor bans, physical restrictions on movement and limited overnight-leave) may in fact “institutionalise and reduce the functioning capacity of families” (Hearne and Murphy, 2017: 32). Apart from the negative impact that quasi-institutional and regulated environments might have on the well-being of children and parents in the longer-term, other issues have been raised with regard to the general absence of an overarching design model, operational/management framework and regulatory clarity across family hubs, where complaints and evictions, for instance, are dealt with differently by different operators (Hearne and Murphy, 2017; Ombudsman for Children, 2019). Other have questioned the inherent ‘conditionality’ built into the family hub system whereby access to this kind of EA requires an ‘agreement’ on the part of families to “work over a 6-month period to do all they can to seek and accept HAP-funded private rented sector accommodation” (Murphy, 2019).

Finally, it has been argued that the establishment of what are essentially service-intensive congregate facilities that are transitional in nature, is reminiscent of the linear or staircase models of service provision that assume families require some degree of therapeutic intervention before moving to independent housing. The significant and increasing State investment in such responses thus arguably departs “from the stated objective of homelessness policy in Ireland to move to a housing-led approach” (Allen *et al.*, 2020: 69)²⁷. As consequence, it has been proposed that the development of this extensive shelter infrastructure is “increasingly becoming part of the problem, rather than part of the solution to ending homelessness over the next decade” (O’Sullivan, 2020: 85).

1.4. Research Rationale

The rapid and sustained influx of families to homelessness services since 2014 has not only overwhelmed existing systems of intervention but also resulted in a “radically different picture of homelessness in Ireland than prevailed in the recent past” (O’Sullivan, 2020: 72). A drastic shift in the profile of homelessness service users of this kind arguably requires a corresponding shift in ‘thinking’ about how we should respond from a research, service and policy perspective. While a burgeoning evidence base on families and children experiencing homelessness has emerged, the vast majority of these studies have been small-scale, qualitative and/or cross-sectional in design and have examined very specific aspects of the homeless experience amongst households such as: food insecurity; residential histories and pathways ‘into’ homelessness; finding and maintaining housing; the impact of living in hotels or family hubs; and the educational needs of children living in EA (see, for example, Haran and O’Shiochru, 2017; Hearne and Murphy, 2017; Lambert *et al.*, 2018; Long *et al.*, 2019; Nowicki *et al.*, 2019; Walsh and Harvey, 2015, 2017; Scanlon and McKenna 2018; Share and Hennessy, 2017).

²⁷ For example, local authorities reportedly spent €14.8 million on the operation of family hubs in the first nine months of 2018 while capital funding for the development of additional family hub services was estimated at €45 million. Moreover, a significant portion of the additional €60 million in capital spending targeted at tackling homelessness has been assigned to the family hubs programme (Children’s Rights Alliance, 2019).

This body of literature has provided rich and important insights into the characteristics and day-to-day lives of families experiencing homelessness in the Irish context, but, to date, the *temporal nature* of family homelessness and the *drivers* of families' trajectories through, out and sometimes back into EA has not been sufficiently interrogated. As a consequence, homelessness responses and service infrastructure for families have developed in the absence of empirically and theoretically robust research evidence that could help to ensure (more) effective housing outcomes. Initiated in 2016 against a backdrop of exponentially rising numbers of families presenting as homeless, this work employed a mixed methods sequential (explanatory) approach to provide the first rigorous and contextualised account of the dynamics of family homelessness in the Dublin region. Through the synthesis of longitudinal administrative data with rich narrative insights, the central aims were to not only advance understanding of *how much* variation there is in families' service use patterns, but also *why* (and *how*) these patterns vary.

1.5. Mapping the Thesis

This introductory chapter has provided an important contextual backdrop to the study. The remainder of this thesis aims to advance understanding of families' shelter system trajectories through an in-depth examination of their service use patterns and experiences of exiting, remaining in and returning to, Dublin-based EA.

Chapter 2 reviews international research evidence on the dynamics of family homelessness, with specific attention to the distinct routes that families take into, through and out of homelessness service systems. In particular, a number of crucial developments that have fundamentally changed our understanding of the *temporal nature* of homelessness are highlighted. Here, I trace the chronological development of empirical work that paved the way for a typological approach to the study of shelter use, with an in-depth focus on studies that have harnessed longitudinal and large-scale administrative data. The path-breaking findings from this body of research are outlined before presenting an assessment of research that has examined *families'* exits from, length-of-stay in and returns to, homelessness services, specifically. Drawing on the key implications arising from this evidence base I argue that, to move the discussion forward, it is necessary to consider the role of systemic, institutional and structural contexts as well as the critical dimensions of process, agency and lived experience in the production of families' distinct service use patterns over time.

Chapter 3 reviews the theoretical literature on homelessness causation and its relevance for this work. While contemporary theorising of explanations for homelessness have clearly progressed from the strict dualism of the prevailing agency/structure debates of past, I argue that the matter remains largely unsettled. Nevertheless, what is clear is that attempts to conceptualise homelessness causation must consider the ways in which agency *interacts with*, or *relates to*, social structures (and *vice versa*) if they are to be able to uncover *why* homelessness occurs. I propose a theoretical approach that fuses complex systems theory with the ontology of Critical Realism as a means by which to bridge this gap. More specifically, I contend that a complex-realist theoretical lens can

incorporate three fundamental dimensions of homelessness theorising - relating to non-linearity, temporality and complex causality - into a coherent framework to help explain the dynamics and drivers of families' shelter system trajectories.

Chapter 4 sets out the rationale for the methodological approach adopted by this work. The chapter begins by outlining the ontological and epistemological orientation of the research and demonstrates how the Critical Realist paradigm provides a theoretical justification for steering a course between positivism and interpretivism to address the study's research objectives. This is followed by a detailed overview of the study design, including discussion of the merits of: implementing a mixed methods sequential (explanatory) model; including a classification system to tease out causality through an exploration of difference; and using the methods chosen to meet the stated aims of the study. The remainder of the chapter deals with the practical elements of 'fieldwork' (quantitative and qualitative), including ethical considerations as well as how (and where) data were collected, analysed and 'mixed'. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how the study achieved an integrated analysis and established rigour *via* the development of quality inferences.

Chapter 5 is the first of three to present the study findings. Drawing primarily on the study's quantitative data the results of a cluster analysis are presented. The key characteristics of the three emergent clusters are described followed by a descriptive comparison of the results with similar research in Ireland and the US. The narratives of the participating parents are then interrogated to further unravel the complexity of families' homelessness service user profiles by providing rich, textured insights into the trajectories they take through, out and back into homelessness service systems over time. Three distinct shelter system trajectories are revealed - linear, uninterrupted and circuitous - that broadly correspond to the dominant typology of transitional, chronic and episodic service use, respectively.

The remaining two findings chapters draw primarily on the study's qualitative (interview) data to further interrogate these patterns, with a particular focus on how and why these trajectories emerge. Adopting a macro-level systems perspective, **Chapter 6** explores the ways in which families' service utilisation was influenced by their interrelationships with the wider 'environment' of EA, including: how they related (and responded) to prevailing linear models of homelessness service provision; how evolving homelessness policies affected their capacity to access public and private housing systems; and their experiences with health and social care systems over the course of their lives. Adopting a micro-level systems perspective, **Chapter 7** examines families' interrelationships with the various 'parts' of the shelter system, specifically. The analysis focuses on how families' exposure (and responses) to shelter rules, management practices and service settings contributed to their experiences of exiting, remaining in and moving *between* emergency accommodation(s) over time.

In **Chapter 8**, the final chapter, I synthesise, interpret and extract meaning from the findings presented by bringing them 'into conversation' with each other and with the theoretical and conceptual constructs underpinning this research. The value of the study's methodological approach

is first reflected upon. The bulk of this chapter, however, develops and expands on the integrated understanding of families' distinct shelter system trajectories that emerged from the incorporation of a complex-realist theoretical framework in this thesis. The discussion is structured according to three core findings that stemmed from the analysis: 1) conceptualising families' shelter system trajectories as (complex) system effects; 2) explaining change through the generative mechanisms of neoliberalism and pathologising responses; and 3) examining the non-linear relationship between interventions and (unexpected) outcomes in complex systems. To close, the key policy and practice implications are laid out before concluding with a discussion of the study limitations and directions for future research.

2. A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1. Introduction

Having outlined the crisis of family homelessness as well as the key policy and service responses in Ireland and the Dublin region, in particular, attention now turns to situating this work in the broader context of ‘what we know’ about the dynamics of families’ shelter system trajectories. This chapter reviews a broad sweep of empirical literature on families’ movements into, through and out of homelessness service systems and is divided into three parts. First, the immediate ‘triggers’ as well as key risk factors and trends concerning families’ routes into homelessness are discussed. Focus then shifts to a number of critical developments informed by analyses of large-scale longitudinal administrative data on homelessness service utilisation that have fundamentally altered our understanding of homelessness. Here, studies that have re-shaped contemporary thinking about homelessness as a temporal *process* are discussed, with dedicated attention to research that has examined the dynamic patterning of families’ shelter exits and (re)entries, specifically. The chapter closes with a discussion of the key research, policy and service-level implications arising from this evidence base and how they support the need for this work.

2.2. Families’ Routes into Homelessness: Triggers, Risk Factors and Trends

2.2.1. *The Immediate ‘Triggers’ of Family Homelessness*

Research in the Global North demonstrates a remarkable degree of consistency with regard to the immediate causes or triggers of homelessness amongst families; that is, the proximate reasons why they lose their *last* stable place of residence. These primarily include: eviction prompted by rent arrears; relationship breakdown (including experiences of DV); and to a lesser extent, loss of paid work (Fitzpatrick, 2012c). Research in Ireland and the UK, in particular, has used survey and administrative data to develop a relatively robust picture of the most common circumstances that precipitate families’ entries into EA. As mentioned in Chapter 1, there is general consensus that the most prominent factors that propel families into homelessness services in Ireland relate to structural factors in the private rented market (Long *et al.*, 2019; Walsh and Harvey, 2015).

According to Long *et al.*'s. (2019) survey of 237 families on the family HAT caseload in 2018, a majority (58%, n = 137) cited the termination of their tenancy in the PRS (due to the property being removed from the market or from issues related to affordability, quality or tenancy relationships) as the reason for their presentation to EA. This was followed by family circumstances (30%, n = 70), including family conflict, overcrowding, DV and/or relationship breakdown and ‘other’ reasons (13%, n = 30), such as sustained residential instability or moving abroad. Similar findings have been documented in the UK, where the largest study of statutorily homeless families in England, which surveyed 2500 households, found that the most prevalent reason for applying as

homeless was relationship breakdown (38%). With the caveat that multiple responses were possible, the other key contributing factors were eviction or a tenancy being ended (26%); overcrowding (24%); and ‘outstaying their welcome/could no longer be accommodated’ in the homes of friends and/or family (20%). Conversely, very small numbers reported that complex needs related to anti-social behaviour (4%), physical or mental ill-health (2%) and/or substance use (>1%) were significant drivers of their routes into temporary accommodation. Mirroring evidence in the Irish context, the authors concluded that the findings lend considerable “support to arguments for a ‘structural’ understanding of family homelessness” (Pleace *et al.*, 2008: 29)²⁸.

It is important to note that issues in the PRS or, indeed, those related to labour market change, that can lead to evictions or a loss of tenancy do not *inevitably* result in homelessness. That is to say, such outcomes are dependent on country-specific contextual factors concerning housing affordability and availability as well as welfare protection and social security systems, particularly those related to housing assistance (Stephens *et al.*, 2010; Stephens and Fitzpatrick, 2007). For example, research conducted in Belgium, which has a strong welfare state, found that one quarter of evictions involved families with dependent children. Yet, in these instances, relatively few families presented to homelessness services since many were able to quickly secure alternative housing (Kenna *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, analyses of time series data in the UK indicate that homelessness figures tend to move in parallel with affordability trends concerning homeownership (Pawson, 2007).

This, as Fitzpatrick (2012c: 5) suggests, means that “housing market conditions affect not so much the reasons why people lose their last settled accommodation (notwithstanding the modest impact on the relative importance of eviction and relationship breakdown with partners), but rather their ability, if they are on a low income, to find an alternative without resorting to the statutory system”. Families’ paths into homelessness are thus strongly influenced by macro-level factors in private and public housing markets, especially those that constrain access and supply (Baptista *et al.*, 2017). Put differently, in situations where there is a crisis of housing affordability and availability, and an increasing gap between rent levels and welfare benefits, families who might have otherwise been able to find and maintain alternative independent accommodation are left with no choice but to present to homelessness services for assistance (Walsh and Harvey, 2017).

While understanding of the immediate triggers of family homelessness is crucial, unpacking the more fundamental underlying causes of family homelessness is more complex. To so do requires understanding of the key risk factors and trends concerning family homelessness as well as how the socio-economic profiles of families accessing shelter compare with single (unaccompanied) adults and similar low-income households who *do not* experience homelessness.

²⁸ A much more detailed discussion and historical overview of individual and structural explanations for homelessness is presented in Chapter 3 as a way of leading into the theorising of the dynamics of family homelessness.

2.2.2. Families that Present as 'Homeless': Who Are They?

The requirement for family-specific approaches to understanding and responding to homelessness is increasingly recognised, particularly in the US and to lesser extent in Europe (Baptista *et al.*, 2017; Bassuk *et al.*, 2010; Haskett, 2017; Shinn *et al.*, 2005). This shift in focus has been driven largely by research that indicates that, apart from the presence of children, families 'look' fundamentally different to single adults in homelessness populations (Culhane *et al.*, 2007; Shinn, 1998; Shinn *et al.*, 2005; Shinn and Weitzman, 1996; Rog *et al.*, 2007). Notwithstanding the clear diversity and heterogeneity among families that experience homelessness - and with the caveat that, as discussed in Chapter 1, homelessness figures vary and are also collected, defined and measured differently across countries - this body of research points to a number of patterns and demographic trends suggesting that certain families are more at risk of homelessness than others²⁹.

Perhaps most significant is that there appears to be "notable gender dimensions to the problem of family homelessness" (van den Dries *et al.*, 2016: 181). Gendered statistics on the composition of homeless families are not available in all countries; however, among those that do report these data, the figures are striking and suggest that female-headed households are disproportionately represented (Baptista *et al.*, 2017; Mayock and Sheridan, 2012; May *et al.*, 2007). For instance, recent statistics from the UK indicate that single mothers were eight times more likely to experience homelessness than two-parent families and that 92% of all one-parent families were headed by women, who accounted for 66% of the total population of homeless families (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2018). Similarly, a Swedish survey conducted in 2011 reported that female-headed households accounted for 60% of all families recorded as homeless in Stockholm (Stockholms stad, 2011) while in Ireland, virtually all one-parent families recorded as homeless during the 2016 census were headed by a woman, standing at 96% (CSO, 2017). Similar trends have been reported in France (Vandentorren *et al.*, 2016), Norway (Dyb and Johannassen, 2013) and Germany (Gerull and Wolf-Ostermann, 2012) as well as in Canada (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2014) and the US (USICH, 2018). These women are typically young (aged between their 20s and 30s) and have an average of two children under the age of 10 (Shinn *et al.*, 2005; van den Dries *et al.*, 2016).

As Baptista *et al.* (2017) point out, there is also a "clear causal link" between family homelessness and intimate partner violence; that is to say, these two processes are often inextricably linked due to an individual's urgent and sometimes sudden need to flee an abuser for their own safety. While violence that occurs in the domestic or private sphere is a multidimensional issue that cuts across all socio-economic groups, research has shown that women are more likely than men to

²⁹ It is important to note that the bulk of available research literature on family homelessness to date has focused on the experiences of single mothers, as opposed to two-parent families or fathers parenting alone. This focus within homelessness research is arguably related to the fact that female-headed households consistently account for the largest proportion of the population of homeless families across countries (Baptista *et al.*, 2017), though it is acknowledged that these trend statistics may be influenced, to a certain extent, by rules or practices that exclude men or discourage their presence in family shelter settings (Rossi, 1994). Nevertheless, the precise nature of the target population of all cited research will be clarified accordingly.

experience DV and an associated loss of accommodation (Baptista, 2010; FEANTSA, 2007; Jasinski *et al.*, 2010; Levison and Kenny, 2002). Large-scale quantitative studies on homeless families in the US, for example, have found that mothers are more likely to have experienced abuse or violence during childhood or from an intimate partner than low income housed mothers (Browne and Bassuk, 1997; Bassuk and Rosenberg, 1988). Indeed, several studies have recorded high rates of DV and trauma in the lives of homeless women (Jasinski *et al.*, 2010; Jones *et al.*, 2010; Mayock and Sheridan, 2012; Quilgars and Pleace, 2010; Reeve *et al.*, 2006) and the experience of DV and victimisation in the lives of homeless families, specifically, is well documented (Baptista *et al.*, 2017; Bassuk *et al.*, 1997; Bassuk *et al.*, 2001; Browne, 1993; Pleace *et al.*, 2008). In the UK, Pleace *et al.* (2008) reported that 41% of homeless parents surveyed (mostly women) had experienced violence from a romantic partner in their lives - a figure that is considerably higher than that recorded in the general population (Fitzpatrick, 2012c) - with 13% of participants citing DV as the direct cause of their current homelessness episode.

European, US and Canadian data also point to a significant overrepresentation of ethnic-minority and migrant families (that is, families where the head(s) of household are born outside of the host country) among those presenting to homelessness services (Baptista *et al.*, 2017; Burt *et al.*, 1999; Culhane *et al.*, 2007; Long *et al.*, 2019; Morrin and O'Donoghue Hynes, 2018; van den Dries *et al.*, 2016; Paradis *et al.*, 2008), while other research has identified racial and ethnic-minority status as a significant predictor of homelessness amongst households (Bassuk *et al.*, 1997; Shinn *et al.*, 1998). Indeed, in several US-based studies of homeless families, those with White head(s) of household have been found to be in the minority while those with Black or Hispanic head(s) of household were disproportionately represented (Culhane *et al.*, 2007). Similarly in the UK, those with a Black/British or Black ethnic/cultural background were found to be overrepresented amongst the population of statutorily homeless families, while one in 10 (11%) of all families surveyed were former asylum seekers (Pleace *et al.*, 2008).

Turning to studies that have compared the characteristics and circumstances of homeless families with single homeless adults, parents with accompanying children have been found to be *more* likely to have higher educational attainment levels, recent employment experience and regular positive contact with friends and family and *less* likely to have histories of substance use and criminal justice contact than their single counterparts (Burt *et al.*, 2001; Chambers *et al.*, 2014; Fitzpatrick and Pleace, 2012; Shinn and Weitzman, 1996; Rog *et al.*, 2007; Smith and North, 1994). Families are also considered to have distinctly different mental health needs compared to those within the single homeless population and tend not to “fall under the rubric of ‘severe’ mental illness” (Bassuk, 2007: 6). As Gerstel *et al.* (1996: 555) pointed out over 20 years ago: “virtually all studies, including ours, conclude that mental illness is not a critical factor in *family* homelessness [emphasis in original]”. Importantly, this finding has been replicated in recent research in the US and the UK, where it was found that although children and women in families may experience high rates of depression and anxiety, the causes of family homelessness are much *less likely* to be connected to

the presence of high and complex needs related to psychotic and/or substance use disorders (see, for example, Pleace *et al.*, 2008; Fitzpatrick and Pleace, 2012; Glendening and Shinn, 2018; Shinn *et al.*, 2018)³⁰.

Families experiencing homelessness are said to have more characteristics in common with families who are poor than with single adults in shelter populations. Indeed, comparative studies that have examined the differences between homeless families and their ‘poor-but-housed’ counterparts reinforce these observations, typically reporting relatively few behavioural or individual-level differences between these two groups (Shinn *et al.*, 2005). Importantly, where more significant differences have been found between families who do and do not experience homelessness is with regard to poverty and economic status, housing assistance and welfare benefits (Bassuk *et al.* 1996, 1997; Shinn *et al.* 1998; Shinn *et al.*, 2005). Reflecting on the implications of these findings - which as discussed earlier, have consistently identified structural forces, as opposed to individual characteristics, as the key drivers of family homelessness - Culhane *et al.* (2007: 3) suggest that, by and large, families who become homeless are quite simply “poorer than other poor families”.

Yet, merely asserting that poverty is the overarching root cause of family homelessness is overly simplistic and warrants further elaboration (Fitzpatrick, 2005; Neale, 1997a; Sharam and Hulse, 2014). As Batterham (2019: 2) argues, “defining ‘at-risk of homelessness’ [...] requires an understanding of the broader causes of homelessness and the mechanisms through which they might act”. Following Fitzpatrick (2005), perhaps the more pertinent question to ask, then, is: what it is *about poverty* that *tends* to cause homelessness amongst families? A question which, hitherto, remains “remarkably unexplored” (Sharam and Hulse, 2014: 294). The remainder of this section examines the processes that propel families into homelessness systems of intervention by focusing specifically on research evidence that explores the ways in which *poverty and socio-economic disadvantage* intersect with three significant risk factors for homelessness among families identified in the literature presented above, namely: 1) lone motherhood; 2) domestic and other forms of violence in an individual’s life; and 3) migrant and ethnic minority status.

2.2.3. Exploring the Nexus between Poverty and Family Homelessness

2.2.3.1. The Feminisation of Poverty, Lone Motherhood and Homelessness

The concept of a ‘feminisation of poverty’ - which refers to global patterns indicating that women tend to represent a disproportionate percentage of those who are economically poor - has become a staple in academic lexicon since its introduction in the 1970s³¹. While income is clearly a primary

³⁰ One of these studies, for example, found that among families accessing emergency shelters in the US, just 11% and 13% of parents (including some men) reported current alcohol dependencies and current substance use, respectively. Although serious psychological distress was common among mothers at the time they were in EA (22%), fewer mothers reported such symptoms 21 months and 3 years after their shelter stay, suggesting low rates of serious mental illness overall (Shinn *et al.*, 2018).

³¹ Chant (2003: 46) cautions that there is a significant deficit of reliable and/or consistent data on the gendered dimensions of poverty, specifically, which means that it is “impossible to pin down the fine detail of exactly

factor, the phenomenon has been more intimately linked to a deprivation of choices, opportunities and capabilities that are compounded by a range of gender biases and inequalities embedded in social, political and economic systems. More specifically, the key drivers of poverty amongst women are said to include, “the gender differentiated impacts of neo-liberal restructuring, the informalisation and feminisation of labour, [...] the erosion of kin-based support networks and [...] the mounting incidence of female household headship” (Chant, 2004: 20). These issues not only serve to undermine women’s access to, and participation in, housing and labour markets; but, importantly, also point to a “lack of power to control important decisions that affect one’s life” (Razavi, 1999: 417). Put simply, while macro-level market change and shifting welfare responsibilities can negatively impact *all* low-income groups, “social relations of gender predict greater vulnerability among women” (Moghadam, 1997: 41), thus making them more susceptible to economic shocks.

Several studies have, for example, linked the onset of family homelessness with sudden income losses related to relationship breakdown (O’Flaherty, 2009) and partner incarceration (Geller and Franklin, 2014). Indeed, household composition and familial separation, including both marital and non-marital relationships, have been found to effect income levels and housing (in)stability. Reviewing existing studies in this area, Feijten and van Ham (2007: 624-625) argue that “separation has a disruptive effect on the housing careers of those involved [...] [e]specially the housing careers of women and one-parent families”. Research has demonstrated that one-parent families are more likely to be at risk of poverty than two-parent families³² and that female-headed households, in particular, face higher risks of poverty and social exclusion than those that are headed by a man (Brady and Burroway, 2012; Gornick and Jäntti, 2009). More specifically, since women usually retain child custody, separation can dramatically reduce their access to crucial financial, economic and social resources, particularly in cases where they were unemployed and/or had no property rights at the time relationship breakdown occurred. These families tend to go on to experience what Feijten and van Ham (2007: 625) describe as “downward moves on the housing ladder” where they relocate from “large to smaller and lower-quality dwellings, [...] from owner occupation into rented housing and from single-family dwellings into multi-family dwellings”. The authors argue that the negative impact of this disruption to housing trajectories can be significant in the longer-term, particularly if they are “unable to ‘repair’ their housing career in the years after” (Feijten and van Ham, 2007: 625).

Perhaps significantly, then, studies conducted on families’ routes into homelessness in the UK, Ireland and Sweden, for instance, have found that a vast majority of families that are typically headed by a single woman entered homelessness services directly from the private rented market (see Lalor, 2014; Long *et al.*, 2019; Pleace *et al.*, 2008; Walsh and Harvey, 2015). In other words, these women were not (or were no longer) home owners and most likely had few prospects or

how many women are poor, which women are poor, and how they become and/or remain poor”. This, she argues, precludes “inferences of any quantitative precision” (Chant, 2003: 1).

³² Recent figures collected from 28 EU member states in 2018 show that an estimated 35% of one-parent families with dependent children were at risk of poverty, compared to 12% of two-parent families with one dependent child (Eurostat, 2019). Likewise, in the UK, parents are said to have a 17 times greater risk of homelessness than couples (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2000).

opportunities that would enable them to acquire property in the mainstream housing market given their socio-economic circumstances and disadvantaged position in European housing systems (Kam Wah and Kennett, 2011). Moreover, in the context of retrenchment of social housing provision across many European countries (Scanlon *et al.*, 2015), these women are also more likely to be vulnerable to adverse conditions in already stressed and competitive rental markets where they can be further marginalised due to childcare responsibilities that prevent them from entering into full-time employment. Consequently, low income female-headed households face a heightened risk of homelessness in countries where welfare provisions and childcare policies are considered to be insufficient to meet their needs (Baptista, 2010; Edgar and Doherty, 2001; Watson, 2000)³³. It is for these reasons that homelessness amongst individuals and families must, as Anderson (2001: 3) puts it, be considered within the wider context of “household formation, housing needs and available housing opportunities across the different tenures”.

2.2.3.2. *The interplay between homelessness, poverty and violence*

Violence perpetrated by a partner has been found to be a key trigger for family homelessness, most often due to women’s urgent and sometimes sudden need to flee an abuser for their and their children’s personal safety (see, for example, Baptista *et al.*, 2005; Jones, 1999; Hutchinson *et al.*, 2014; Pleace *et al.*, 2008; Reeve *et al.*, 2006). Yet, it has also been argued that the notion that homelessness and violence are inextricably linked is overly simplistic and reductive since it can “de-emphasize structural causes such as income inequality and lack of affordable housing” (Shinn, 2011: 585). Moreover, the relationship between DV and women’s homelessness is complex and non-linear: although DV is often a dominant and recurring theme in the life histories of women who experience homelessness, it is often experienced variably and is not *always* or *explicitly* linked to their home-leaving (Mayock and Sheridan, 2012). DV, then, is perhaps better located within a complex matrix of individual and structural factors which, in concert, may contribute to a family’s loss of housing over time (Shinn *et al.*, 2007). Examining the ways in which homelessness and DV are *mediated* by broader experiences of poverty and socio-economic marginalisation, however, goes some way towards understanding *why* such an association between the these processes exists (Williams, 1998).

Research has, for example, pointed to poverty as a major risk factor for DV (Benson and Fox, 2004; Browne and Bassuk, 1997; Fahmy *et al.*, 2016; Tolman and Rosen, 2001) and has also demonstrated that poor women, in particular, may have fewer alternatives available to them when leaving an abusive living situation (Goodman *et al.*, 2009; Williams, 1998). This is because low-income women tend to be excluded from labour market participation and entirely financially dependent on their partner (Goodman and Epstein, 2008); report fragmented ties with ‘anchor’ relationships, including friends and family, due to poverty-related stressors (Johnsen and Watts, 2014; Wood *et al.*, 1990) which can be exacerbated, for example, by prolonged exposure to coercive

³³ Comparative EU research, for example, has indicated that lone parents’ risk of poverty is notably greater in Ireland than it is in other EU member states (Watson *et al.*, 2018).

and controlling behaviours (Mosse, 2010; Nielsen *et al.*, 1992); and have social support systems that are also resource-poor and unable (or unwilling) to offer financial or other forms of practical assistance in the immediate or longer-term (Anderson and Rayens, 2004; Edin and Lein, 1997; Letiecq *et al.*, 1996; Lindsey, 1996; Shinn *et al.*, 1991). As Goodman *et al.* (2009: 322) put it, when poverty and DV are co-occurring, “their negative effects - including stress, powerlessness, and social isolation - magnify each other”. Terminating an abusive relationship is therefore a complex and protracted process (Moss *et al.*, 1997; Ponick *et al.*, 2011) that often makes women likely to experience extreme economic hardship should they decide to leave with their children (Browne and Bassuk, 1997; Browne *et al.*, 1999; Mayock *et al.*, 2012). In the absence of other options or resource ‘burn out’ (Shinn *et al.*, 1991), this, in turn, means that to escape violence, *poor* women are more likely to “render themselves homeless and turn to shelters” (Stainbrook and Hornick, 2006).

Violence in the lives of women (and men) who go on to present as homeless can also be located in wider patterns of socioeconomic disadvantage that are often characterised by childhood trauma(s), including experiences of neglect, abuse, family separation and placement in foster care. The high rates and likelihood of these adverse life experiences among low-income individuals and homeless populations, including women and female-headed households, have been chronicled by researchers over the years (Bassuk *et al.*, 1997; Browne, 1993; Browne and Bassuk, 1997; Mayock and Sheridan, 2012; Pleace *et al.*, 2008). While childhood abuse in and of itself is not considered to be an unequivocal predictor of future homelessness amongst families (Bassuk *et al.*, 1997), results nevertheless “consistently point to links between homelessness and experiences that represent separation from, neglect by, or emotional unavailability of significant family relationships” (Anderson and Rayens, 2004: 14).

The negative effects that experiences of violence or abuse in an individual’s life can have on their circumstances can be severe and long-lasting. In particular, they can contribute to mental ill-health, including depression, anxiety and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Goodman *et al.*, 1997); negative coping strategies, including substance use and self-harm (Reeve *et al.*, 2006); revictimisation and cyclical patterns of abuse (Tomas and Dittmar, 1995); and, importantly, fractured family ties and stunted social support networks that can significantly diminish the sources of emotional and practical assistance from which an individual can draw on in later life (Anderson and Rayens, 2004), particularly if it results in foster care placement (Piliavan *et al.*, 1993). It stands to reason that, without the proper supports or interventions, early and lifetime experiences of poverty, violence and abuse can significantly compromise a household’s personal and social resources. This, in turn, can not only undermine their capacity to remain stably housed (Shinn *et al.*, 2005) but also their “capacity to become self-supporting, form sustaining relationships, access care, and parent without a range of supports” (Bassuk and Gellar, 2006: 796).

2.2.3.3. *The Dynamics of Poverty, Migration/Ethnicity and Housing (In)Stability*

As mentioned earlier, migrants are disproportionately represented in families and female-headed households accessing homelessness services in many European countries (Baptista *et al.*, 2017;

Edgar and Doherty, 2001; Long *et al.*, 2019; Nordfeldt, 2012). This indicates a high risk of homelessness and housing instability amongst this sub-group (Edgar *et al.*, 2004; Pleace, 2010), particularly among former asylum seekers and refugees (Pleace *et al.*, 2008) as well as “irregular migrants and, increasingly, economic migrants from central and eastern Europe” (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2012: 31)³⁴. In comparison to their indigenous counterparts, migrants in the general homeless population have been found to be less likely to report experiences of abuse, family difficulties or socio-economic disadvantage during childhood; less likely to report past or ongoing substance dependencies; and are more likely to have higher educational attainment and stable employment histories (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2012). Notwithstanding the heterogeneity of this population, migrants’ routes into homelessness are thus considered to be more broadly linked to macro-economic - rather than individualistic - processes of disadvantage which, unlike the indigenous population, tend to be linked to “the structural barriers that vulnerable migrants face in meeting their immediate practical needs in countries of destination” (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2012: 55).

These barriers can include, for example, issues that are related to legal status and citizenship as well as residency restrictions in many EU member states which stipulate that one must demonstrate ‘habitual residency’ or a history of employment to access welfare entitlements, essential services or housing benefits. For this reason, individuals with an uncertain status face considerable challenges with regard to accessing and maintaining affordable housing (Edgar *et al.*, 2004; Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2012). Non-EU migrants who are ‘undocumented’ are particularly marginalised since some are denied even the most basic supports, making them vulnerable to acute poverty, disadvantage and housing exclusion (McNaughton Nicholls and Quilgars, 2009). In this way, as Edgar *et al.* (2004: 95) point out, “the causes of homelessness will vary for [migrants] dependent on their personal situation and the legal status afforded to them”. While migrant status does not necessarily denote an individual who is vulnerable to social-economic disadvantage and housing instability (McNaughton Nicholls and Quilgars, 2009), immigration policies are nevertheless determinants of the choices, opportunities and resources available to migrants in their ‘host’ countries (Robinson *et al.*, 2007). Consistent, then, with other research and commentary, the intersection of welfare regimes and immigration policy is critical to understanding migrant homelessness, including homelessness among migrant families (Edgar *et al.*, 2004; Harrison *et al.*, 2005; Pleace, 2010).

Apart from citizenship-based issues, migrants and those with an ethnic-minority status - including Travellers in the Irish context - appear to face considerable obstacles within housing

³⁴ There are different categories of migrants who experience housing instability and homelessness (Edgar *et al.*, 2004; Pleace, 2010). Pleace’s (2010) typology of migrant homelessness in the EU includes the following broad groups: people seeking asylum and refugees; failed asylum seekers and undocumented migrants; women and children from outside the EU who lose their immigration status when escaping DV; A-10 economic migrants who have become homeless in EU-15 member states; and ethnic and cultural minorities who appear to be at a disproportionate risk of homelessness but who are not recent migrants. Nonetheless, across the EU, the extent to which each of these categories of migrants is at risk for housing instability and homelessness remains unclear, although it is widely acknowledged that migrants without immigration status, asylum seekers, refugees and new immigrants are particularly vulnerable to homelessness (Edgar *et al.*, 2004; McNaughton Nicholls and Quilgars, 2009; Stephens *et al.*, 2010).

markets, which may lead them towards undesirable and unsafe housing circumstances as well as housing instability (Edgar *et al.*, 2004; Grotti *et al.*, 2018; Robinson *et al.*, 2007). Pillinger's (2009) research on the experiences of migrants living in a large suburb of Dublin city, for example, found that migrants had different patterns of housing from those in the general population, with the majority living in private rented accommodation, often of poor quality, overcrowded and in a poor state of repair. Research has also identified discrimination, racism and xenophobia on the part of landlords or housing officers as negatively impacting migrants' ability to secure housing, particularly among those of a different ethnicity (Edgar *et al.*, 2004; Pillinger, 2009; Pleace 2010). In Ireland, Grotti *et al.* (2018: ix) reported that Travellers, in particular, experienced the highest levels of discrimination in the housing market and were "almost ten times as likely to report discrimination in access to housing as the White Irish population, even after education and labour market status are held constant". These multiple and overlapping structural issues frequently place migrant and ethnic-minority families in a disadvantaged position in the housing and labour market and, thus, at greater risk of homelessness.

2.2.3.4. *Reassessing Families 'At Risk' of Homelessness*

This section has explored how structural patterns of *socio-economic disadvantage* can intersect with other realms of experience in the lives of parents with accompanying children to precipitate their routes into homelessness service systems over time. It is clear that the evidence strongly points to the ways in which macro-level factors including poverty, unemployment and the operation of housing systems "underpins all pathways through homelessness" and that "low incomes, and structural exclusion from suitable affordable housing are almost universal factors in homelessness" (Anderson, 2001: 3-4). Thus, a core argument emerging from this body of literature is that family homelessness does not just 'happen to anyone'; rather, it disproportionately affects *poor families* (Bramley and Fitzpatrick, 2018)³⁵. However, attention has also been drawn to the complex nature of poverty and its intersection with the social determinants of class, gender and migrant status. More specifically, it was argued that the interplay of these factors may contribute to low income, long-standing familial or personal vulnerabilities, exclusion from market participation and limited access to homeownership; all of which can profoundly impact on families' housing and homelessness trajectories. As Fitzpatrick *et al.* (2011b: 15) remind us, if these families also experience individual-level risk factors related to mental ill-health or substance use, for example, then "the weight of the weighted possibility of homelessness starts to increase substantially".

³⁵ Importantly, research has suggested that "where trigger factors [for homelessness] exist and are not dealt with, they can be transmitted down the generations (intergenerational) and within families (intra-generational) (Ravenhill, 2008: 112). Several studies have indicated that those who experienced adversities and deprivations during childhood - including experiences of family homelessness - appeared to have a higher likelihood of experiencing homelessness in the future (Flatau *et al.*, 2013; Mayock *et al.*, 2014; Mayock and Parker, 2015; Mayock and Sheridan, 2012; Ravenhill, 2008). While there is nothing inevitable about the consequences of early experiences of homelessness (Bassuk and Rosenburg, 1988; Pleace *et al.*, 2008), findings such as these nevertheless point to the ways in which the social and personal costs associated with homelessness and socio-economic disadvantage can be magnified when they are experienced across generations and within families.

Moreover, the discussion highlighted the ways in which poverty is an often-entrenched *process* in which families are “propelled downwards in terms of a shift in assets, and outwards in terms of belonging to the mainstream”, reflecting “not just material struggle but the effects on social relationships and on belonging” (Sharam and Hulse, 2014: 306-7). Moving beyond a preoccupation with income or structural deprivation alone, poverty can thus also be understood as the “outcome of a system of social relationships” (Green, 2009: 310) whereby critical resources have been weakened or lost completely over time. Those who are destitute can therefore be considered “the individuated remnants of a collapsed household” (Harriss-White, 2005: 883) insofar as they have limited safety-net supports on which they could depend in times of crisis. Indeed, McNaughton’s (2008: 169) biographical study of homeless persons in the UK found that once an individual went ‘over the edge’, “their resources eroded until they had few options but to rely on state funded agencies for accommodation”. Yet, the research evidence presented here arguably tells us little about the how the relationship between poverty and one’s housing and homelessness trajectories *evolves* over the course of their life (Stephens and Leishman, 2017; Sosin *et al.*, 1990). Similarly, cross-sectional research that focuses on comparisons between ‘homeless families’ and their ‘poor-but-housed’ counterparts runs the risk of viewing homelessness as a static phenomenon by suggesting that these two groups never, in fact, change places. The following section therefore moves the discussion forward by discussing the *temporal* dynamics of family homelessness and the drivers of their trajectories through, out and sometimes back into homelessness systems over time.

2.3. Attending to Process: Examining the Dynamics of (Family) Homelessness

While a growing and now substantial body of research has advanced understanding of who is most likely to become homeless and how individuals and families enter official homelessness service systems, much less is known about their movements *through* and *out* of shelter accommodation (Anderson, 2001). As Piliavin *et al.* (1996: 34) rightly point out, “the dynamics of homelessness extend beyond its initial onset” and, as such, must include consideration of exits from, and returns to, EA; transitions that “despite their relative ease of study have been almost entirely neglected in the literature”. This is particularly the case in the European context, where systematic research on the dynamics of homelessness remains rare (Allen *et al.*, 2020).

This section reviews the methodological shifts, pioneering research and contemporary insights into the dynamic nature of homelessness that have emerged in more recent years. It begins by presenting some of the earlier empirical work that paved the way, both conceptually and theoretically, for the advancement of a typological approach to the study of homelessness *via* statistical analyses of large-scale administrative datasets on shelter utilisation. The key findings arising from this research - which focused primarily on single homeless adults - are discussed before attention shifts to a growing body of work that has examined families’ trajectories through and out of homelessness service systems, specifically. The section concludes with a brief critical discussion of the current research evidence base on the dynamic patterning of families’ shelter use.

2.3.1. A Longitudinal Approach to Understanding Shelter Use Patterns

The notion that homelessness is a fluid process rather than a fixed state has been long-since established in homelessness discourse and scholarship. However, it is only in the last 20 years or so that contemporary thinking about the dynamics of homelessness has been transformed by research that has paid specific attention to the study of the duration and incidence of homelessness; what Sosin *et al.* (1990: 158) first described as “the *patterning* of homelessness [emphasis added]”. The 1980’s first saw researchers begin to problematise the perception that homelessness was a more permanent condition by documenting a sub-set of individuals in several US-based and mostly cross-sectional studies who had experienced ‘bouts’ of homelessness that were characterised by multiple transitions between homelessness settings and conventional housing (see, for example, Acre *et al.*, 1983; Baxter and Hopper, 1981; Farr *et al.*, 1986; Rossi *et al.*, 1986; Wright and Weber, 1987; Rousseau, 1981). This, in turn, led to the development of three broad categorisations of homeless individuals that were repeatedly alluded to, though not yet empirically tested, within homelessness literature and commentary of the time, including: 1) those who experienced an acute, short-term housing crisis; 2) those who were long-term and perhaps permanently homeless; and 3) those who moved in and out of housing before ultimately becoming chronically homeless (see Jahiel, 1992 for an overview).

Observations of this kind marked a crucial shift that saw greater analytic interest in understanding and describing the *temporal character* of homelessness and how one’s status as ‘homeless’ evolves and is subject to change with the passing of time. However, the methodological limitations of prevailing cross-sectional research designs precluded any meaningful analyses of the dynamic *process* of homelessness itself (Wong, 1997). That is to say, descriptive accounts based on single-wave studies of shelter users could not speak to the true length of an individual’s current episode of homelessness; if and how they exited homelessness services; and whether they went on to experience subsequent shelter stays (Piliavin *et al.*, 1996). Likewise, they were also unable to “identify antecedents that may be associated with the duration, ending, and recurrence of homelessness”, rendering the findings of “little relevance to social policy making” (Wong, 1997: 138). It became clear, then, that building *time* into studies designed to examine the dynamics of service utilisation was a necessary corrective to the shortcomings of previous ‘snap-shot’ approaches.

In one of the first empirical studies to incorporate a longitudinal perspective (see also Kelly *et al.*, 1990), Sosin *et al.* (1990) conducted a two-wave panel survey designed to follow 451 adults accessing homelessness services in Minneapolis over a six-month period. The findings revealed that, although a relatively high proportion (approximately 80%) of participants had exited to housing at some stage over the course of the research, around 50-60% of these individuals reported at least one readmission to shelter over the study’s observation period. Two important conclusions emerged: first, that more people than might be expected were able to secure a route out of homelessness services relatively quickly and, secondly, that for some, patterns of homelessness and housing instability did not simply end once they did so. Similarly, in the early 1990s, research examining the period prevalence (that is, prevalence *over time*) of homelessness in Philadelphia and New York found that

the proportion of those recorded as homeless over a one-year period only rose from 1% to 3.5% when examined over a five-year period (Culhane *et al.*, 1994). Thus, estimated rates of shelter bed turnover were found to be much higher than had been previously projected using homelessness figures derived *via* cross-sectional samples (Burt, 1994; Culhane *et al.*, 1994; Link *et al.*, 1994). Contrary to popular belief at the time, this work lent further weight to the notion that a large proportion of the homeless population only resided in shelters for a relatively short period.

On foot of these emerging findings, a number of longitudinal studies set out to interrogate the trajectories that individuals and families take through homelessness systems of intervention (a number will be discussed in the following sections; also see Wong, 1997 for a detailed review). However, the most seminal research on this complex dynamic was developed by academics Dennis Culhane and Randall Kuhn (see Culhane and Kuhn, 1998; Culhane *et al.*, 2007; Kuhn and Culhane, 1998). Following the development and implementation of standardised data infrastructures designed to track homeless individuals' service use contact in the US, Culhane and Kuhn (1998) analysed administrative data on homelessness shelter utilisation (that is, their entries, exits and returns to shelter) among a large sample of single adults in New York ($n = 137,657$) and Philadelphia ($n = 16,435$). Specifically, they examined distributions of shelter-stay lengths, rates of re-admission and predictors of shelter exits over a seven- and three-year observational period in each respective city. The results revealed that age (being older), ethnicity (being Black) and indicators related to substance use dependency and mental ill-health were all strongly associated with a reduced probability of exiting homelessness and longer shelter stays.

Of particular interest, however, was that most adults in the study sample used shelters on a short-term basis; approximately 55% of men and 65% of women were recorded as only having one single service-entry over a two-year period and half of all shelter users were found to have spent less than 45 days in shelters. Yet a still-significant proportion of repeat (four or more admissions) and long-term (at least 365 days) service users were also apparent in these data, with each making up approximately 7% of the New York sample, for instance. These two sub-sets were found to be the "heaviest users [...] consuming triple the days for their proportionate representation in the population in both cities" (Culhane and Kuhn, 1998: 38). The authors speculated that individuals who experience recurrent or chronic homelessness may have more complex needs and would require additional assistance to facilitate speedy exits. They went on to present a hypothesised typology of homelessness service use based on earlier empirical work and their analysis of shelter stay patterns, which they described as follows:

(a) the chronically homeless, characterized by very few episodes, but which may last as long as several years; (b) the episodically homeless, characterized by multiple stays over a long period of time, with increasingly shorter stays; and (c) the transitionally homeless, who have one or two stays within a relatively brief period of time, and for a short duration (Culhane and Kuhn, 1998: 41).

In an influential paper published the same year, Kuhn and Culhane (1998) used the same data to further test the validity of the typology. They did this by conducting a cluster analysis to

explore the relative size and characteristics of the groupings based solely on shelter utilisation patterns of each individual (that is, the number and length of their homeless episodes). In so doing, they were also able to depart from prior research by “subsequently validating the clusters by measuring differences among them on various background variables” (Kuhn and Culhane, 1998: 210). The analysis succeeded in demonstrating the robustness of the model by replicating results both between the datasets and within sub-samples. To this end, they identified three statistically distinct clusters of service utilisation that corresponded with their initial observations: ‘transitional’ (short duration, low frequency), ‘episodic’ (short duration, high frequency) and ‘chronic’ (long duration, low frequency). The analysis further elaborated on predictors of group membership and found that the transitionally homeless were *less* likely to have recorded medical issues or issues related to mental ill-health and/or substance use. The chronically and episodically homeless, on the other hand, were *more* likely to have medical, substance use and mental health problems, which the authors proposed limited their ability to make a stable, independent exit from homelessness.

In the absence of further data, the authors could only theorise that those classified as chronic shelter users were utilising the homelessness service system as “a long-term housing arrangement” as opposed to emergency, short-term provision; episodic shelter users were “possibly alternating shelter stays with bouts of street homelessness, hospitalization, and incarceration”; and finally, transitional shelter users presumably were using their short stays as “a time to recover from a temporary emergency” (Kuhn and Culhane, 1998: 226-229). However, perhaps the most striking finding was that, when combined, the episodic and chronic sub-groups accounted for just 20% of the entire population of those under study. This convincingly called into question the effectiveness of homelessness service provision since a small proportion of high-cost and high-needs shelter users were evidently consuming a disproportionately large share of resources (65%). The different proportional share and profiles of these clusters led the authors to conclude that, for the clear majority, approximately 80%, homelessness was transitory and presumably due to poverty and lack of affordable housing while much smaller numbers experienced repeat or prolonged episodes in homelessness services that appeared to be linked to the presence of complex needs.

The implications of these insights were far reaching, particularly in terms of demonstrating that shelter users had, in fact, been “fundamentally misunderstood” since the number of those experiencing long-term homelessness with complex needs was much smaller than had been previously thought (Pleace *et al.*, 2016: 211). Moreover, as Table 1 demonstrates, the findings warrant special attention not just because they successfully questioned long-held misconceptions about the dynamics and drivers of homelessness in the US but also because similar patterns and profiles have been repeatedly found in similar studies conducted in other countries with differing socio-political contexts, including Denmark (Benjaminsen and Andrade, 2015), Ireland (Waldron *et al.*, 2019) and Canada (Aubry *et al.*, 2013; Kneebone *et al.*, 2015; Rabinovitch *et al.*, 2016). There is also evidence to suggest the presence of a small high-needs group experiencing long-term or

recurrent homelessness in the UK (Jones and Pleace, 2010), Finland (Tainio and Fredriksson, 2009), Australia (Taylor and Johnson, 2019), France (Brousse, 2009) and Spain (Muñoz *et al.*, 2005).

Table 1: Kuhn and Culhane’s Typology Applied to Adult Shelter User Populations

	Location (City)	Period (years)	Sample Size	Transitional (%)	Episodic (%)	Chronic (%)
Benjaminsen and Andrade (2015)	Denmark	11	25,326	77	7	16
Waldron <i>et al.</i> (2019)	Dublin	5	12,735	78	10	12
Kuhn and Culhane (1998)	NYC	3	73,263	81	9	10
	PHL	2	6897	79	12	10
Aubry <i>et al.</i> (2013)	Toronto	4	56,533	88	9	4
	Guelph	4	1016	94	3	3
	Ottawa	4	18,879	88	11	2
Kneebone <i>et al.</i> (2015)	Calgary	5	32,972	86	12	2
Rabinovitch <i>et al.</i> (2016)	Victoria	4	4332	85	14	2

While the broad *patterns* of homelessness service use are strikingly similar across studies, analyses of the *characteristics* of each cluster have revealed important differences. In the only other study listed to incorporate data regarding complex needs (related to, for example, mental ill-health and substance use), Benjaminsen and Andrade (2015) directly compared adult Danish shelter utilisation data with Kuhn and Culhane’s (1998) findings. The authors reported that both in the US and Denmark, high and complex needs were prevalent among those in the episodic and chronic shelter use clusters. Significantly, however, the Danish data revealed that transitional shelter users demonstrated notably high levels of complex need, with “82.7 per cent having either mental illness, substance abuse problems or both” (Benjaminsen and Andrade, 2015: 13). This finding led the authors to conclude that large-scale homelessness arising from structural issues related to poverty and housing affordability problems is rare in countries with extensive welfare systems; rather, it appears that homelessness affects, and is concentrated amongst, smaller numbers of people with complex needs who have otherwise fallen through various safety nets. This, as Benjaminsen (2016: 2059) points out, demonstrates the ways in which these types of welfare systems may not be meeting the needs of the most “socially vulnerable” in society.

Culhane *et al.* (2007) replicated their earlier work to explore a parallel typology of *family* homelessness and ascertain whether families experience similar patterns of service utilisation to those of single adults unaccompanied by children. Equally, they sought to shed light on whether these patterns were associated with distinguishing characteristics of the head(s) of household. Using longitudinal administrative data from family shelters in four US jurisdictions (New York, Philadelphia, Massachusetts and Columbus Ohio), the authors found broadly similar service use patterns insofar as a clear majority (72-80%) experienced transitional homelessness, while a smaller

albeit significant proportion accounted for those who experienced chronic (18-21%) and episodic (2-8%) shelter stays. Critically, although prolonged shelter stays were more prevalent amongst families, they were *not* associated with evidence of intensive service needs. Higher rates of substance dependencies, mental ill-health, disability, unemployment and placement of children in foster care were, however, found among the small sub-set of families who cycled in and out of services. Importantly, though, of the 25% of households identified as having intensive service needs, only 2-4% were classified into the episodic cluster, meaning that a majority of those who had complex needs were in fact able to successfully exit homelessness services over time. Ultimately, this is an argument for a more positive interpretation than is normally conveyed in the literature regarding the housing outcomes of families who present with ongoing individual-level challenges.

What is clear is that the robust statistical analyses outlined above represent a seismic shift in understanding of the dynamics of homelessness and the characteristics and composition of adult shelter users. Most crucially, these studies have taught us that homelessness is much more likely to be transitional; in other words, the vast majority of those who enter homelessness services exit to alternative housing relatively quickly and do not return while smaller numbers go on to experience prolonged or recurrent shelter stays and make high use of homelessness service systems. Likewise, analyses of these clusters differentiated by household type (that is, singles and families) dovetail with the conclusions drawn in the previous section by revealing that adults with accompanying children are much less likely to present with high and complex needs related to psychosocial challenges. Nonetheless, despite clear recognition of the importance of longitudinal research, particularly in terms of its ability to yield a more robust analysis of the temporal dimensions of shelter use, understanding of the nature and dynamics of families' paths *through* EA remains extremely underdeveloped (Anderson, 2001; Bassuk *et al.*, 2014; Culhane *et al.*, 2007).

2.3.2. Understanding Families' Shelter Duration and Rate of Exit from Services

Identifying robust patterns of short-term (transitional), long-term (chronic) and recurrent (episodic) shelter use is one thing; understanding factors that *explain* such variation in service utilisation is, however, another. Numerous attempts have been made to predict the pathways that people take through and out of homelessness in order to shed light on the drivers of these differing trajectories through service systems. Central to this research is the investigation of rates of shelter exits and length-of-stay patterns. However, only a relatively small number of mostly US-based studies have used longitudinal administrative or survey-based data to investigate the service and residential transitions of *families* who enter EA. Significantly, Wong's (1997) early review of this literature revealed that, again, families' experiences appear to be fundamentally different to those of single adults as they move through and out of homelessness systems of intervention. More specifically, families typically report: 1) higher rates of exiting homelessness services; 2) lower rates of shelter re-entry; and 3) a higher incidence of placement in permanent housing. This is presumably due to the fact that in both the US and Europe, parents with accompanying children are less likely to

experience long-term or repeat shelter stays due to the extensive safety nets provided by welfare systems designed primarily to protect children (Baptista, 2010; Baptista *et al.*, 2017; Pleace *et al.*, 2016)³⁶. Comparing data pertaining to families only, however, points to some important differences between *those families that exit shelter quickly* and *those who do not*.

While many studies have sought to identify individual characteristics and circumstances that predict homeless families' service and housing outcomes, a review of the research evidence calls into question the efficacy of using person-centred indicators to explain families' shelter utilisation patterns. For instance, although family size as well as the race and age of head(s) of household have been found to influence exit rates, duration of homelessness or placement type (Culhane *et al.*, 2007; Kim and Garcia, 2019; Kontokosta *et al.*, 2017; Pleace *et al.*, 2008; Rocha *et al.*, 1996; Stretch and Krueger, 1992; Wong *et al.*, 1997), the findings are inconsistent across studies (and contexts) and, in some instances, have been outright refuted (Donley *et al.*, 2017) rendering them to "have little explanatory power overall" (Trillo *et al.*, 2016: 2). Similarly, although experiences such as prior homelessness, DV and negative tenancy relationships have been found to effect families' length of shelter stay (Kelly *et al.*, 1990; Wong *et al.*, 1997) or likelihood of exit (Weinreb *et al.*, 2010; Wong and Piliavin, 1997), the effect sizes recorded have been generally small. Studies have also found that families with a history of incarceration were no less likely to successfully exit over time than other families without these characteristics (Donley *et al.*, 2017; Shinn *et al.*, 2018). In one study, although the relative size of informal support networks did appear to contribute to more favourable housing outcomes, those who received *no* emotional support from these resources exited just as quickly as those who did (Gerstel *et al.*, 1996). There is also data to suggest that neither high educational attainment nor previous employment leads to an early exit while prior institutionalisation does not appear to be associated with longer shelter stays (Gerstel *et al.*, 1996).

The evidence pertaining to mental ill-health and substance use is somewhat more complicated. As mentioned earlier, Culhane *et al.* (2007) reported that a *small* number of families who experienced recurrent shelter stays were more likely to present with complex needs related to, for example, intensive behaviour health treatment histories and drug or alcohol dependencies. In a three-year panel study of families' exits from shelter in New York (n = 3630), Trillo *et al.* (2016: 15) found that measures associated with mental health and substance use "yielded mild results, though not in the manner expected". More specifically, the authors noted that having a history of mental health counselling or residential treatment decreased the probability of exiting; conversely, having a history of alcohol dependency had no effect while having a history of substance use led to a *greater*

³⁶ In the UK context, for example, families' trajectories through homelessness services are mediated by homelessness legislation that makes them more likely than single or childless couples or adults to be prioritised for housing (Anderson and Morgan, 1997). Similarly, in many European countries including France, Luxembourg, Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Finland, women with accompanying children are prioritised for social housing ahead of single adults and unaccompanied couples (Baptista *et al.*, 2017). Referring to the ways in which mothers *without* children in their care are categorised as 'single' in many homelessness systems, Mina-Coull and Tartinville (2001: 147) make an important clarification when they say that "it is the *presence of children* rather than the *status of motherhood* which differentiates access to services [emphasis added]".

likelihood of exiting. Yet, in an earlier study of families' shelter exits in Massachusetts (n = 121) Weinreb *et al.* (2010) found that families with a positive alcohol or drug screen in the year prior stayed 85 days longer than those without a positive screen while mental health was *not* found to predict shelter stay duration. Nevertheless, the bulk of this evidence base chimes with Glendening and Shinn's (2018: 6) observations when they say that:

Practitioners attempting to identify repeated or persistent family homelessness may want to avoid focusing on family behavioral health problems such as drug abuse and disabling physical, emotional, and mental health conditions. Although these conditions feature prominently in official definitions of chronic homelessness for single adults [...] they seem less connected to repeated or persistent homelessness for families with children.

Of course, pointing this out is not with the intention to minimise the fact that families may indeed be dealing with (sometimes) significant personal difficulties that can profoundly impact their lives in many ways and for which they may wish to receive supports. Rather, it is to emphasise how individualistic explanations, which focus on the characteristics and traits of *families*, appear to do little to help us understand why they face barriers to exiting EA and securing permanent housing *once homelessness has occurred*³⁷. What has proven to be more fruitful in this regard is research that has paid specific attention to the *structural* or *institutional* mechanisms that shape families' progression through and out of homelessness services.

Wong *et al.* (1997), for instance, analysed data comprising records on 27,919 families residing in shelters in New York and found that families exiting to unknown destinations tended to report significantly shorter lengths-of-stay than those who moved directly to subsidised housing. This differential pattern was believed to be an 'artefact' of the city's rehousing policy, which "established eligibility for subsidized housing only after 90 days of stay in family shelters" (Wong, 1997: 151; see also Kontokosta *et al.*, 2017). Similarly, in a sample of families in New York shelters, Shinn *et al.* (1998) found that longer shelter stays ('waiting their turn') and placement in a small non-profit service with targeted advocacy support on behalf of families ('queue jumping') predicted exits to subsidised housing as both situations "signaled coming to the head of the housing line" (Shinn *et al.*, 2001: 103). Culhane *et al.* (2007) assert that such findings are consistent with a view of family shelters serving as a sort of "de facto queuing system" (p. 5) that are "proving grounds for housing placement opportunities" (p. 20). In this way, families are said to 'graduate' only once they have been deemed 'housing ready' by service providers, thus potentially leading to prolonged stays in services (see also Gerstel *et al.*, 1996).

Similarly, the duration of families' time spent in homelessness services can also be a function, at least in part, of a shelters maximum length-of-stay policy. For instance, it has been

³⁷ It is worth noting that, in many cases, it can also be difficult to disentangle individual-level characteristics that are, in fact, independent of the experience of homelessness itself (Culhane *et al.*, 2007; Somerville, 2013). That is to say, it can be difficult to distinguish "whether empirical correlates of homelessness represent its causes, its consequences, spurious correlates, or differential rates of exiting (heterogeneity)" (Piliavin *et al.*, 1996: 54). Such causal quandaries are well-rehearsed in homelessness research dating as far back as the 1940s where authors such as Robert Straus (1946), to name one example, found that problematic drinking could be both the cause and the consequence of homelessness amongst men on skid row.

proposed that longer stays may be driven by “the relatively greater availability of service-intensive transitional shelters [which have longer maximum stays than hostel accommodation] for families compared with their single adult counterparts” (Culhane *et al.*, 2007: 20). Of course, prolonged shelter stays are also likely to be exacerbated in situations where there is a chronic shortage of permanent housing options and lengthy waiting lists for social housing (Bassuk and Geller, 2006; Culhane *et al.*, 2007; Hearne and Murphy 2017; Gerstel *et al.*, 1996). In Australia, for instance, a policy review of Housing First implementation found that, across all of the programmes selected, a lack of appropriate social and private rental housing seriously constrained immediate access to housing. As a consequence, many individuals with high and complex needs were left with no other option than to remain on the streets or in EA for up to one year before being placed in independent accommodation (Bullen and Baldry, 2019).

A small body of qualitative research on shelter exits among families also points to the ways in which service dynamics can influence families’ shelter utilisation patterns. For example, Fogel’s (1997) qualitative study of mothers (n = 12) living in a transitional housing unit in North Carolina found that residents who ‘followed the rules’ were allowed to stay longer than the official maximum length-of-stay. Additionally, the study reported that residents who did not cooperate with programme regulations often experienced premature placement termination linked to substance use, violence or unauthorised leave, with many of the evicted families moving to poorer housing conditions post-exit. Importantly, like the statistical analyses mentioned above, ‘exits’ here refer simply to a discharge from services that are not necessarily exits to stable housing. Nevertheless, as Weinreb *et al.* (2010: 599) point out:

For families, exiting shelter is often synonymous with exiting an episode of literal homelessness, unlike for homeless adult individuals, for whom a shelter exit may not result in an exit from homelessness. The majority of families, when exiting emergency shelter, go to some type of housing arrangement, including doubled-up arrangements, market rate housing, subsidized housing, and transitional housing.

Further research evidence has pointed to the ways in which the structure and nature of homelessness support services and systems, albeit well-intentioned, can become sites of continued stigma that serve to marginalise and institutionalise families by ultimately undermining their ability to exit homelessness (Bogard, 1998; Gerstel *et al.*, 1996; Hearne and Murphy, 2018; Trillo *et al.*, 2016). Benbow *et al.*’s (2019: 1) qualitative exploration of 26 mothers’ experiences of accessing EA in Ontario, Canada, found that women’s interactions with the homelessness service system “perpetuated experiences of exclusion in spaces ironically designed to enhance inclusion” by creating a sense of ‘enforced dependence’, a culture of control and surveillance and a hierarchical dichotomy between those deemed worthy or ‘deserving’ of support and those who were not. Similarly, Gerstel *et al.*’s (1996) three-year longitudinal study of 340 families accessing a transitional housing programme in New York reported that the social and physical isolation of families engendered by shelter policies ultimately undermined their survival strategies by eroding their support networks, thus reducing their chances of departure.

In a similar vein, Mayberry's (2016: 302) US-based study drew on interview data from 50 parents who had recently exited homelessness and found that families who reported positive relationships and clear, consistent communication with service providers were more likely to be "in the know" about the homelessness service system and thus able negotiate successful exits from shelters to more stable housing. Conversely, families who experienced negative service interactions - characterised by poor client-provider communication; a lack of clarity about eligibility criteria, 'paperwork' or service options; and poor cross-programme collaboration between agencies - described feeling that the "service environment, more than any single service, impeded their efforts towards independence and stability" (Mayberry, 2016: 307). Other qualitative studies of mothers accessing shelter have reported that stigmatising experiences in service environments that contribute to communication failure can lead to "missed opportunities to intervene and improve outcomes" (Gordon *et al.*, 2019: 6; see also Sznajder-Murray and Slesnick, 2011).

One of the most striking observations to emerge from this body of scholarship is the ways in which the homelessness service system itself, and the practices and policies therein, can be directly implicated in shaping families' "trajectories (or lack thereof) out of homelessness" (Dordick, 1996: 374). In some studies, 'the system' was described as an "active participant" in the lives of families experiencing homelessness, drawing attention to the "structures of exclusion" that influence their day-to-day realities (Benbow *et al.*, 2019: 7). In this way, as Mayberry (2012: 159) writes, inherent challenges facilitating speedy exits from services "are not incidental or due to the individuals, but rather indicative of a larger institutionalization of homelessness that is propagated by the current structure of services". From this perspective, it could be said that, for many families, the chronic and iterative nature of homelessness "may be embedded in the service industry itself" (Hoffman and Coffey, 2008: 207).

2.3.3. Families' Exits to Housing: Tenancy Sustainment and Returns to Services

The preceding section set out the available research evidence on the key drivers of families' exit rates and length-of-stay patterns in homelessness services. Much less is known about how families fare once they exit service systems and what circumstances might precipitate further homeless episodes. As Somerville (2013: 409) notes, "although pathways out of homelessness appear to be more clearly patterned than the pathways into homelessness, they are less well understood". Indeed, almost nothing is known about those who exit to 'unknown' living arrangements or situations of hidden homelessness; equally, there is extremely limited knowledge about the *process* of not only exiting homelessness but also of remaining housed (Weinreb *et al.*, 2010). Put differently, there is a dearth of knowledge about how families 'get out' and 'stay out' of homelessness services. Where there *has* been dedicated research and analytic attention, however, is on the predictors of families' housing (in)stability over time, with specific focus on tenancy sustainment (relating to *transitional* patterns of service use) or alternatively shelter readmission (relating to *episodic* patterns of service use).

While only a relatively small number of mostly US-based studies have investigated the paths taken by families as they transition out of homelessness, the findings are consistent in identifying subsidised housing as one of the strongest predictors of successful exits among formerly homeless households (Bassuk *et al.*, 2014; Shinn, 2009; Wong *et al.*, 1997), even in cases where families present with “multiple and severe needs” (Rog *et al.*, 1995: 512). Notably, two separate studies conducted 19 years apart reported that the odds of housing stability were 20 times greater for families receiving housing subsidies than those who were not in receipt of this form of housing assistance (Kontokosta *et al.*, 2017; Shinn *et al.*, 1998). There is also strong evidence to suggest that access to subsidised housing significantly reduces the probability of shelter re-entry, specifically (Stretch and Krueger, 1992; Wong *et al.*, 1997). Thus, as Shinn and Baumohl (1999: 13-13) pointed out almost 22 years ago, subsidised housing is “both necessary and sufficient” to stabilise and end homelessness for nearly all formerly homeless families.

Such findings have been further substantiated by more recent research, the bulk of which has been derived from the Family Options Study in the US, which is the largest systematic evaluation of interventions and responses to family homelessness to date to use an experimental design, large sample sizes and randomised control trials. The study’s key outputs have shown that access to priority provision of *long-term* housing subsidies was the most effective predictor of housing stability (Gubits *et al.*, 2015; Gubits *et al.*, 2016; Shinn, 2009), particularly when compared with other housing and service interventions such as EA, short-term rental subsidies, rapid re-housing and traditional transitional housing programmes (Gubits *et al.*, 2018; Fisher *et al.*, 2014; Shinn *et al.*, 2016). Importantly, research has also demonstrated that permanent housing options can also support other positive social outcomes such as: family preservation or reunification (Shinn *et al.*, 2017); reduced rates of child maltreatment, substance use and DV (Brown *et al.*, 2017b; Fowler and Schoeny, 2017); adult and child well-being (Samuels *et al.*, 2015); reduced psychological distress (Gubits *et al.*, 2018); and food security (Shinn *et al.*, 2016).

Nevertheless, although subsidised housing has been found to assist 80-90% of families out of homelessness, there remains a small number of families for whom housing subsidies alone may not be sufficient to ensure residential stability in the longer term (Collins *et al.*, 2019; Rog and Gutman, 1997; Rog *et al.*, 2007). Indeed, some researchers have emphasised the importance of *in-housing* supports to ensure that these particularly vulnerable families do not fall back into homelessness (Bassuk *et al.*, 2001) or remain isolated in permanent housing (Bassuk and Gellar, 2006). However, others have argued that the precise role, if any, that such services play in affecting housing outcomes remains unclear and that more rigorous testing is needed before any firm conclusions can be drawn (Shinn *et al.*, 2005). That said, understanding the difficulties faced by the small group of families who do not achieve residential stability in subsidised housing is crucial. While research in this area is extremely limited, some threats to families’ housing security post-exit include: sub-standard accommodation (Collins *et al.*, 2019); DV (Bassuk *et al.*, 2001; Broll and Huey, 2020); substance use (Shinn *et al.*, 2018); neighbourhood stressors and safety concerns

(Wiesel *et al.*, 2014); insecurity of tenure in the PRS (O'Donnell, 2019); and issues related to labour market exclusion and housing affordability (Meschede and Chaganti, 2015).

While there is little doubt that access to affordable housing is crucial to facilitate families' exits from homelessness service systems, some researchers have argued that positioning programme interventions as singular solutions to homelessness "risks obscuring distal causes and marginalizing systemic responses" (Katz *et al.*, 2017: 139). Similarly, Chamberlain and Johnson (2018: 14) assert that presenting housing interventions as a kind of 'magic bullet' is problematic since it can "lead to an underestimation of the challenges of re-integration", particularly as it relates to social isolation and exclusion. Indeed, available European evidence concerning adult homeless populations suggests that housing-led solutions do not, for example, generate high levels of employment (Bretherton and Pleace, 2015) and one US study of 550 participants across 11 Housing First sites reported that "chronically homeless adults showed substantial improvements in housing but remained socially isolated and showed limited improvement in other domains of social integration, which were only weakly correlated with one another" (Tsai *et al.*, 2012: 427). Reviewing international research evidence on the effectiveness of housing interventions for families, Bassuk *et al.* (2014: 470-471) similarly concluded that after exiting shelter to these programmes "families were no longer literally homeless, but many were not residentially stable".

2.3.4. A Critical View of the Current Research Evidence Base

As the bulk of research on family homelessness that has been presented here has emerged from the US, one might reasonably question its applicability to differing socio-political contexts. Pleace (2016: 31), for instance, argues that European homelessness research has borrowed heavily on thinking, evidence and theories based largely in American, Australian and Canadian literature as a "kind of conceptual life raft". In particular, he advises caution when relying on insights garnered from research conducted in these jurisdictions since the findings might not be appropriate to the interpretation of homelessness in European countries, due, in large part, to their differing welfare systems (see, for example, Benjamin and Andrade, 2015). However, discovering patterns of difference and/or similarity across countries arguably brings "a valuable epistemological framework" (Soaita and Dewilde, 2019: 45) to help understand and contextualise the complexity of homelessness by providing opportunities to both test or build upon old theories and contribute to new theories about the very nature of homelessness itself. Perhaps more fundamentally, as Salway *et al.* (2011: 2) write, "comparative analyses can [also] make visible taken-for-granted assumptions and underlying ideologies; reveal the arbitrariness of particular categorisations and concepts; and suggest new innovative solutions". Thus, a more nuanced and cohesive understanding of the dynamics of families' shelter use can emerge, rather than a fragmented evidence-base that can be difficult to stitch together and interpret as a whole.

It is important to also take stock of some of the methodological implications of the research discussed in this section, particularly in terms of how they may impact the conclusions that can be

drawn. Importantly, one should be prudent, to some extent, when interpreting the findings of this body of research due to their differing study parameters and target populations (for example, first-time service users versus repeat service users; high-need versus low-need; or indeed, studies that viewed ‘homeless families’ as one homogenous group); differing follow-up periods used to examine housing outcomes (for example, six months versus five years); differing outcome measures and variables of interest (residential stability versus shelter readmission); differing research sites and interventions (for example, transitional housing programmes versus Housing First initiatives); and differing sample sizes and research designs (for example, secondary analysis of administrative data versus survey-based research or small ‘n’ qualitative studies). Moreover, there is considerable definitional ambiguity evident across existing studies regarding terms such as ‘tenancy sustainment’ and ‘residential stability’ as well as in relation to the precise criteria that constitute an ‘exit’ and ‘return’ to homelessness “either in terms of housing situations or duration thresholds” (Dworsky and Piliavin; 2000: 211). In light of these issues, comparisons across studies are difficult and generalisability is certainly hampered; nevertheless, critical insights have been gleaned that not only warrant further research attention but also build a strong case to better understand the dynamics of family homelessness to develop systems of intervention that are (more) responsive to their needs.

2.4. Implications for Research, Policy and Service Provision

The implications of the research evidence detailed here are quite significant. First, taken together, the findings suggest that the primary drivers of families’ exits from, and length of stay in, homelessness service settings are located in structural forces and programme and policy factors rather than any individual-level characteristics related to, for example, complex need. In other words, the features of homelessness policy and service *systems* appear to “play a stronger role in sustaining long-term [chronic] shelter stays” than has been previously understood (Culhane *et al.*, 2007: 20). Such conclusions support the argument that the inherent design, programmatic functioning and structuring of service provision means that, irrespective of whatever circumstances led families to present to services for assistance, certain policies may serve to inadvertently prolong their stays in EA, even if they would have been capable of successfully exiting to alternative housing (Culhane *et al.*, 2007; Gerstel *et al.*, 1996; Wong *et al.*, 1997). At the same time, those with greater support needs appear to be more likely to experience shorter shelter stays and exclusion from services, despite having demonstrably more barriers to housing stability (Culhane *et al.*, 2007; Fogel, 1997; Wong *et al.*, 2006).

Culhane *et al.*’s (2007: 22-26) work therefore makes a strong case to argue that the services charged with assisting homeless families are “inequitable and inefficient”, pointing to a need for further research to help inform the development of new programme models that should be “systematically tested against prevailing shelter-based practices”. Importantly, though, Bassuk (2007: 39) points out that such inferences typically “go well beyond the data” and that additional (qualitative) research is required to understand *how* these apparent ‘system effects’ interact with such

conclusions. Similarly, in the European context, there have been calls for research that can “reveal the role of structures and policies in determining mothers’ responses and their routes to housing, particularly in countries with limited or restricted housing resources” (van den Dries *et al.*, 2016: 201). What is clear, then, is that in addition to personal risk factors, any study of the dynamics of family homelessness *must* take account of the “structural and systemic contexts in which such risks emerge” (Johnson *et al.* 2017: 30). Yet, as Trillo *et al.* (2016: 1) point out, there is scant homelessness research that examines “the institutional confines in which family homelessness occurs”.

Second, studies of formerly homeless families’ exits to housing demonstrate beyond any doubt, that access to affordable and subsidised housing (with or without supports) is enough to help most families exit homelessness services and achieve residential stability. This, in turn, challenges the “countervailing view that families must address psychosocial problems in a supervised setting” before succeeding in mainstream housing (Gubits *et al.*, 2018: 28). However, there also appears to be a considerable number of families who are unable to maintain independent accommodation post-exit, with a smaller number returning to EA. For this reason, caution must be exercised in presuming that housing-led solutions alone are a panacea for resolving homelessness in all cases. As Culhane *et al.* (2007: 23) point out, “research has not specifically focused on the small proportion of families with bad housing outcomes (repeat homeless spells) despite a housing subsidy”, noting that this is an area that deserves further study. To fully interrogate this, however, an in-depth investigation of the *process* of housing stability as well as the mechanisms through which families experience both successful *and* unsuccessful transitions to more permanent housing over time is needed.

Finally, notwithstanding the significant advancements in our understanding of the dynamics of family homelessness, it is important to note that the vast majority of research undertaken in this area to date has been quantitative in nature and has relied heavily on administrative data; that is, data derived from the operation of administrative systems and collected by government agencies for the purposes of record-keeping. While administrative data of this kind have clear value in advancing a longitudinal perspective on homelessness and housing trajectories over time, they are not without limitations, the most notable of which relate to the rigidity of fixed and pre-determined responses³⁸. The findings of such studies are therefore unable to capture the critical dimensions of context, process and lived experience which, in turn, runs the risk of leading to the oversimplification of research evidence (Bassuk, 2007). Put another way, these data cannot speak to what happens to these families ‘in-between’ their contact with homelessness services or to other critical aspects of their lives that might underlie their trajectories but are not captured by administrative systems (Brush *et al.*, 2016). In a critique of Culhane *et al.*’s (2007) research on families’ patterns of shelter use, Bassuk (2007: 29-33) queried the appropriateness of using such data alone to inform homelessness policy and planning due, in the main, to their narrow scope:

³⁸ A much more detailed discussion about the advantages and limitations of using and repurposing administrative data for homelessness research, specifically, is presented in Chapter 4.

While Culhane et al.'s approach represents a good beginning, it has significant limitations that involve the risk of underestimating and misunderstanding the needs of many homeless families by not incorporating a full and accurate picture of their experiences [...] These data sets are [therefore] limited in that they fail to incorporate the complex, intense, and sometimes traumatic experiences that characterize the lives of homeless families, causing this study to fall short of what is required to create an adequate typology.

Perhaps on a more fundamental level, research that has sought to unpack or explain the dynamic patterning of families' service utilisation has tended to be located within the positivistic paradigm, focusing on individual-level risk factors and prediction which aims to test whether certain characteristics or interventions can predict entry to, frequency/duration of and exits from, homelessness services over time. However, this approach has been critiqued for being relatively atheoretical and overly pathologising (Batterham, 2019; Parsell and Marston, 2012; Trillo *et al.*, 2016) and for positioning homelessness as a "discrete social problem caused by isolatable mechanisms" (Farrugia and Gerrard, 2015: 276; see also Jacobs and Manzi, 2000). Significantly, it can also disconnect and obfuscate experiences of homelessness from wider social contexts (Pleace, 1998) and write agency out of an important discussion about the "generation and sustainment of homelessness" (McNaughton Nicholls, 2009: 82). As Trillo *et al.* (2016: 1) explain:

The small number of studies that focus on the duration of a homeless family episode, and their attempts to find stable housing, emphasize background measures in a manner that pathologizes homeless people, over-individualizes their circumstances, and understates the dialectical contributions of both structure and agency in the search for permanent housing.

The available research evidence therefore fails to provide a sense of completeness; a full 'picture' that can explain why (and how) some families experience continued or repeat homelessness while others successfully exit to stable housing. A deficit of complexity, multi-dimensionality and nuance in homelessness research of this kind, Bassuk (2007: 39) argues, presents a "narrow slice of the experience of homeless families" and is therefore problematic in the context of effective longer-term programme and policy development. What is required is corroboration and elaboration to fully capture the range of families' needs, experiences and interactions with homelessness service systems and the extent to which they relate to the dynamics of shelter use (Karnas, 2007). Indeed, as Jay *et al.* (2018: 315) put it, "unless we know who is coming into the system, where, when, how, and why and what happens after, then we cannot begin to understand the deficiencies and fix them". Culhane *et al.*'s (2007: 22) work represents a critical contribution and makes a strong argument for the need to better understand the distinct trajectories families take through homelessness systems. The challenge in moving forward, however, is to "integrate the methodology with knowledge generated from [...] the families themselves" (Bassuk, 2007: 33).

2.5. Conclusion

This review has demonstrated that families are increasingly represented in the homelessness research literature; indeed, there is now strong evidence to suggest that the characteristics, needs and experiences of homeless families are fundamentally different to those of single homeless adults,

meaning that families will likely require unique approaches as well as distinct service- and policy-level responses. However, as Karnas (2007: 62) points out, “the debate continues because research on how families move *through* the homelessness assistance system has been very limited [emphasis added]”. For this reason, very little is known about “families that become homeless only once or that are residentially unstable for long periods of time” (Rog *et al.*, 2007: 2-20). This gap in knowledge could be because long-term and repeat homelessness is generally seen as a male phenomenon (Pleace *et al.*, 2016), even though the evidence documented here suggests that more women and children than might be expected experience prolonged or recurrent homeless episodes. Researchers have thus repeatedly signalled a need to develop understanding of the circumstances that may contribute to chronic homelessness among families (Bassuk *et al.*, 2001) as well as the mechanisms through which they make the transition to permanent housing and, in some cases, return to homelessness service provision (Wong, 1997).

In the absence of robust comparable data, our understanding of the contexts, mechanisms and circumstances that drive families’ shelter system trajectories remains weak and fragmented. As a consequence, the lack of evidence on which to “build sound policy to address and end family homelessness” is alarming (Bassuk *et al.*, 2014: 472). To this end, the primary goal of this study was to redress this gap in knowledge by counteracting the narrow methodological purview of the available research evidence. It did so by using the analytic leverage generated by synthesising administrative (quantitative) data with narrative (qualitative) insights to advance a rigorous and contextualised understanding of families’ distinct shelter system trajectories in the Irish context. Indeed, as Johnson *et al.* (2017: 29) argue, mixed method studies of this kind “can yield more nuanced insights into the factors that prevent homelessness and the factors that drive entries into and exits from homelessness”. The following chapter seeks to build theoretical depth into the study’s understanding of families’ service use patterns as well as the systems of intervention charged with meeting their needs. It also lays bare the theoretical underpinnings of this work.

3. THEORISING CAUSATION: TOWARDS A DYNAMIC ANALYSIS

3.1. Introduction

The previous chapter provided an overview of the empirical literature pertaining to families and their paths into, through and out of homelessness service systems. The contribution of this body of work has enabled a greatly enhanced understanding of families' movements in and out of EA; however, it was argued that the dominance of studies situated in epidemiological and positivistic paradigms has meant that the dimensions of *context*, *process* and *agency*, and their role in shaping shelter system trajectories, remains largely uninterrogated. This chapter moves the discussion forward. It commences by reviewing the relatively 'young' theoretical literature regarding explanations for homelessness, including debates about causation and the role of structural and individual factors that have influenced theoretical discourse amongst homelessness scholars. Following this, the theoretical orientation for this work is set out. As mentioned previously, this work aims to generate in-depth understanding of the temporal dynamics of family homelessness and the drivers of their trajectories through, out and back into homelessness service systems. The mobilisation of complex systems theory underpinned by a Critical Realist ontology is proposed as an explanatory and conceptual framework that can contribute to a nuanced analysis of families' homelessness service use patterns. The chapter ends with a brief discussion of theory and its implications for the development of homelessness policy and models of service provision.

3.2. The 'Search for Cause' in Homelessness Research and Scholarship

3.2.1. *The (Under)Development of Homelessness Theory*

Broadly speaking, homelessness research and scholarship has been critiqued for being conceptually weak and displaying a distinct lack of theoretical rigour and clarity regarding the issue of causation (Anderson, 2003; Fitzpatrick, 2005; Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2000; Neale, 1997a; Pleace and Quilgars, 2003; Somerville, 2013). Acknowledging that this lack of robust theory building is perhaps unsurprising since the first systematic studies of homelessness only began to appear in the 1980s, Joanne Neale's (1997a) seminal review nevertheless drew strong attention to a lack of theoretical engagement in the homelessness research literature. Her critique was influential and her endeavor to elaborate several potential theoretical lenses (including feminist theory, postmodernism and poststructuralism) led to increased efforts to produce more creative and theoretically informed homelessness scholarship (see, for example, Horsell, 2006; Wardhaugh, 1999; Watson, 2000). However, homelessness research continues "to develop at a distance from the theoretical insights and priorities of sociological theory and Critical Social Policy analysis" (Farrugia and Gerrard, 2015). Indeed, research on families experiencing homelessness, in particular, has been largely atheoretical (Haber and Toro, 2004), with a strong focus on empiricism - such as documenting

characteristics and identifying risk factors - rather than theoreticism, which attempts to understand and *explain* homelessness among households. For this reason, the views expressed by Ellen Bassuk and her colleagues over 20 years ago may be all the more relevant today when they argued that “the question of why homelessness exists as a major social problem has been confused with the question of who is most likely to become homeless” (Bassuk *et al.*, 1997: 241).

Anderson (2003) and Pleace and Quilgars (2003) argue that theoretical advancement has been stunted on account of how, and by whom, most homelessness research is funded, since this tends to be dominated by governments or voluntary agencies who are often pursuing particular agendas³⁹. However, that homelessness is a social problem means that most research is, perhaps understandably, “policy-relevant, but not necessarily theoretically informed” (Anderson, 2003: 198). Nevertheless, as a consequence, homelessness research evidence has been primarily developed within an empirical rather than a theoretical research tradition (Jacobs *et al.*, 1999; Neale, 1997a), with theoretical insights being frequently buried beneath policy debates. While empirical studies generate detailed information upon which to plan and develop policy and service provision in the short-term, they invariably fall short of being able to produce rigorous causal analyses (Anderson, 2003). Thus, any detailed review of the current homelessness research literature, as Pleace (1998: 56) writes, “leaves the reader searching for any sort of pattern”. Owing to this tendency to link homelessness research with political/policy agendas, homelessness theory remains somewhat underdeveloped in relative terms. Nevertheless, there are several existing theoretical perspectives that have helped to shape our understanding of homelessness, with most of this theory development focusing on explanations for homelessness.

3.2.2. *Shifting Paradigms: Individual Versus Structural Explanations*

In 1992, Barret Lee and his colleagues argued that “the biggest issue facing sociologists - and all scholars, for that matter - is what causes a person to become homeless” (Lee *et al.*, 1992: 536). Nearly 30 years later, debates about why homelessness occurs are ongoing and remain largely unresolved. To analyse the causes of homelessness across countries, from both an empirical and theoretical perspective, is an extremely complicated task. As outlined in Chapter 1, the international literature is replete with varying definitions of homelessness, which means that the explanations proffered may well be focusing on different phenomena entirely. Furthermore, interpretations of ‘cause’ are likely shaped by the dominant research traditions, the type of data available and by ideological assumptions in different national contexts as much as by the complexion of homelessness itself (Jacobs *et al.*, 1999; O’Flaherty, 2004; Pleace and Quilgars, 2003).

³⁹ In Ireland, for example, O’Sullivan’s (2008a) review of homelessness research revealed that, between 1970 and 2008, 128 publications on different aspects of homelessness were identified, with a majority being funded and/or commissioned by the voluntary sector (n = 52, 40.6%) and the State (n = 40, 31.3%). Only 36 (28.1%) were in the category of ‘academic’ and, notably, only 10 of the 128 identified publications (7.8%) focused specifically on homeless families.

That said, explanations for homelessness have been historically polarised into two broad ideological positions: ‘individualistic’ and ‘structural’ (Gowan, 2010; Johnson and Jacobs, 2014; Neale, 1997a). Structuralist arguments locate the causes of homelessness as external to the individual and within macro-level forces; that is, related to wider socio-economic contexts beyond their control such as rising levels of poverty, adverse housing or labour market conditions, welfare retrenchment and increasing family dissolution. In this way, the causes of homelessness are said to be found at the “level of societal structures” (Clapham, 2003: 119). Individualistic analyses, by contrast, imply deficiencies of character in some way or another asserting that those who are homeless are either directly implicated in the loss of their housing due to personal ‘inadequacies’ or moral ‘failures’ (substance use, criminality, ‘laziness’) or are victims of circumstances that are beyond their control (physical/mental health-related issues, adverse life experiences, DV) (Neale, 1997a). Lee *et al.* (1992: 536) provide a succinct summary of the structuralist/individualist dichotomy within homelessness research, stating that: “the latter perspective blames the homeless for their lot; the former, society”.

Explanations that emphasise some kind of individual deficiency prevailed up until the 1960’s and typically involved minimalist accounts based on narrow definitions of literal homelessness. O’Sullivan (2016b: 17) argues that these explanations were driven, to a large extent, by a “distorted and skewed” understanding of homelessness that arose from studies of skid row conducted by British and American researchers during the previous two decades. He writes that “this heavily pathologized portrayal of homelessness, with its population of drunken, deviant, damaged, disaffiliated males - supplemented by a small number of ‘shopping bag ladies’ - persisted among the public and policymakers well after the disappearance of skid rows” (O’Sullivan, 2016b: 17). Homelessness, then, was widely constructed as a “process of disaffiliation from society because of individual deficits” (O’Sullivan, 2008b: 72) and underpinned by an implicit assumption that arguably persists to a certain degree today: that individuals actively *choose* to be homeless, “refusing both responsibility and work” (Pleace, 1997: 159). Importantly, individualist perspectives influenced the way homelessness was responded to (or indeed, not responded to) by governments across countries. Harvey (2008: 10) notes that, in Ireland, homelessness was by and large considered a “private matter for charities” and was therefore absent from the social policy narrative during this time with only “one parliamentary question on homelessness in the entire 1970s”. In the UK context, statutory responsibility for homelessness was placed on the welfare department rather than the housing department, further lending weight to the perception that homelessness was a “welfare, rather than a housing problem” (Neale, 1997a: 50).

In the context of rising homelessness rates and the diversification of homelessness populations outlined in Chapters 1 and 2 (including growing numbers of families, women and young people), research conducted during the 1970’s and 1980’s began to challenge dominant individualistic explanations by consistently highlighting links between homelessness and malign socio-economic forces (Pleace and Quilgars, 2003; O’Sullivan, 2008b). With mounting research

evidence pointing to the role of structural drivers and the need for definitions of homelessness that encompass a much broader range of living situations, an ideological shift occurred among policy-makers and academics. This led to growing support for the belief that “the answer to much homelessness lay in access to housing, rather than social services and many homeless households required little, if any, support, just a permanent home of their own” (Neale, 1997a: 50)⁴⁰. However, although these structurally-orientated accounts resulted in key policy changes and shifts in determining statutory responsibility for homelessness - *vis-à-vis* for example, the *Housing (Homeless Persons) Act 1977* in the UK and the *Housing Act 1988* in Ireland - implicit forms of conditionality (and thus, deservingness) were, and still are, evident in the overall architecture of housing supports in both the British (Neale, 1997a) and Irish (Murphy, 2019) context, respectively.

While structural perspectives provided an important corrective to the overly-pathologising explanations offered by individualist accounts, they too became unconvincing. This was primarily because of research evidence that emerged during the 1980s which repeatedly demonstrated that homelessness occurred in areas where few structural issues exist and that there were high levels of health and social support needs (that is, non-housing-related needs) among single homeless adults (Pleace, 1998). As O’Sullivan (2008b: 73) explains, structuralism therefore “failed to adequately explain why only some households who found themselves exposed to growing unemployment, increasing poverty and a shortage of affordable housing became homeless”. Critiques of structuralist explanations arguably laid track for a growing drift away from structural accounts and back towards another form of individual-centred explanation that is evident in much contemporary theorising about homelessness. This is most notably encapsulated in discourse that views homelessness through the lens of social exclusion, which is one of the more recent paradigms “within which homelessness is conceptualised and researched” (Pleace and Quilgars, 2003: 194).

Underpinned primarily by social constructionism, a core tenet of this position is that homelessness is not a discrete social problem; rather, it is simply the most extreme manifestation of social exclusion that occurs due to increasing (structurally-generated) inequality (Pleace, 1998; Harvey, 1999). However, revisiting the arguments put forward by this conceptualisation points to some flaws; namely, that although it does not conjure notions of deviancy in the way that early individualist constructions of homelessness espoused, it nevertheless positions those experiencing

⁴⁰ Simultaneously, public discourse and media framing of the problem had begun to portray a more sympathetic image of those experiencing homelessness. These causal beliefs, in turn, affected policy attitudes (Lee *et al.*, 1992), with increasing numbers favouring government action - *via* policy and welfare provision - to address the issue (Jacobs *et al.*, 1999). Shifting perspectives of this kind fostered the development of a loosely organised coalition of pressure groups, including NGOs, lobbyists and activists, who advocated for reforms in housing and social policy on account of what they argued were apparent systemic structural failures and, therefore, the need for large-scale change. In the US, for example, an analysis of 205 New York Times articles published during 1980 and 1990 found that 72% of stories reporting on homelessness linked its onset to structural factors (Lee *et al.*, 1991). Similarly, a review of American media stories about homelessness between 1986 and 1989 found that of the 69 stories identified as discussing homelessness causation, a vast majority (96%) attributed the problem to ‘systemic’ issues, while only 4% related it to individual traits (such as ‘laziness’ or substance misuse) (Center for Media and Public Affairs, 1989). Several British academics also refer to the screening of ‘*Cathy Come Home*’, a popular television drama about a family experiencing homelessness, as playing a pivotal role in reshaping public opinion (Neale, 1997a; Pleace, 1998; Fitzpatrick, 2005).

homelessness, or rather exclusion, as being somehow fundamentally different to those who do not. As Pleace and Quilgars (2003: 194) assert, “it is a small step from this position towards one in which the ‘characteristics’ of a marginalized group start to be used to ‘explain’ their marginalization, while structural causation and indeed social constructions, are ignored”.

3.2.3. *Striking a Balance? The Emergence of the ‘New Orthodoxy’*

Mirroring the now largely discredited notion of a strict agency/structure divide within sociological theory, the shifting perspectives detailed above clearly demonstrate that homelessness cannot be explained by structural or individual accounts alone (Fitzpatrick, 2005; Pleace and Quilgars, 2003). Rather, there appears to be a constellation of risk factors, associated with both individual and societal strands of experience, that require a comprehensive and more process-oriented approach to fully understand. Attempts to reconcile the dualism embedded in traditional academic discourse thus led to the development of a ‘new orthodoxy’ (Pleace, 2000), which proposed a dynamic *interaction* between individual-level circumstances and structural change in the production of homelessness (O’Flaherty, 2004; Fitzpatrick, 2005). The central premise of this conceptualisation is that structural factors *create the conditions* that precipitate homelessness and that *certain groups* are more vulnerable to this structural change than others due to ‘personal problems’, lack of access to formal/informal supports and/or individual short-comings; all of which, it is argued, leave them ill-equipped to cope in such circumstances (May, 2000; Pleace, 2000; Pleace and Quilgars, 2003; Fitzpatrick, 2005; Somerville, 2013; Farrugia and Gerrard, 2015; Pleace, 2016). As Pleace (2016: 21) notes, homelessness was therefore “a negative assemblage of structural and individual disadvantages; homelessness was a *pattern* [emphasis in original]”.

The new orthodoxy breathed new life into mainstream debates about homelessness, providing a means by which to address the theoretical impasse that had arisen between those championing individualist explanations, on the one hand, and structuralist explanations, on the other. By facilitating the incorporation of both society and the individual, of micro- and macro-level factors, it offered a way of thinking about homelessness that recognised its complex and multi-dimensional nature (Anderson and Christian, 2003). For this reason, it has become a widely accepted framework for understanding homelessness among both researchers and policy-makers alike in Europe and in the US (see, for example, Caton, 1990; McChesney, 1994). Nonetheless, the new orthodoxy has not escaped critique since it first appeared within academic lexicon more than 20 years ago. As will now be discussed, these criticisms broadly cluster around three main arguments related to: 1) a lack of precision and explanatory power; 2) an over-emphasis on structural factors at the expense of agency; and 3) an unsatisfactory treatment of causation.

Several authors have drawn attention to the vagueness of the new orthodoxy insofar as the factors - whether individual or structural - and the relationships between them are not clearly defined. Important questions therefore remain about what this assemblage ‘looks like’ and how exactly it materialises in any given circumstance; clearly, as others have suggested, such ambiguity has

significant implications for any analysis that seeks to understand patterns within a population as diverse and heterogeneous as those experiencing homelessness (Hopper, 2003; Neale, 1997a; Pleace, 2000). While some have pointed to a distinct lack of systematic research that examines the relationship between socio-economic processes and homelessness as contributing to this paucity of understanding, others, like Somerville (2013: 388), have argued that “the main problem is that the relationship itself is not well understood in the first place”⁴¹.

Fitzpatrick (2005) similarly asserts that the explanatory potential of the new orthodoxy is undermined because it is unable to clearly differentiate between forces operating at the individual and structural levels. Using the example of ‘marriage breakdown’ she asks, “should the breakdown in a homeless person’s marriage be considered an individual problem or the result of a structural trend towards growing family fragmentation?” (Fitzpatrick, 2005: 5). In a similar vein, she also questions the new orthodoxy’s ability to account for cases in which homelessness has occurred in a context where only individual *or* structural ‘causes’ are evident. Consequently, while the new orthodoxy represents a more ‘practically adequate’ and, certainly, more helpful descriptive account of homelessness for policy purposes than was provided by structural or individual explanations, for all intents and purposes, it is essentially an atheoretical exercise. As Pleace (2016: 24) writes:

For critics, the new orthodoxy was not a testable hypothesis; it failed, even in broad terms, to explain how this causal interaction of personal and structural worked. The criticism was that the new orthodoxy amounted to a series of vague suggestions, not a coherent, testable, social scientific theory.

Others have problematised the new orthodoxy on a more fundamental level, arguing that macro-structural factors are over-emphasised *a priori* with little attention paid to the role of agency in the production of homelessness. McNaughton Nicholls (2009), for example, argues that this lack of engagement with agency is likely due, at least in part, to a reluctance among academics and researchers to risk reigniting the old notions of blame and culpability that were embedded in homelessness paradigms of past. However, she makes the case that this only serves to disempower those experiencing homelessness, depicting them as wholly passive victims of circumstance who are unable to affect change in their situations whether it be in a negative or positive sense. Indeed, a significant body of research has challenged prevailing assumptions of homeless individuals as

⁴¹ Somerville (2013) positions the new orthodoxy as an ‘epidemiological approach’ to homelessness research which attempts to ascertain whether a relationship exists between a set of independent variables (that is, individual and structural risk factors) and the dependent variable of homelessness. This can work in theory; however, he clarifies that it would only be possible if there was “general agreement on the specification of these variables” (Somerville, 2013: 389) as well as a clear distinction between those factors that predict homelessness and those that either result from or are exacerbated by it. Yet this is not the case at present.

passive agents with little or no power to influence their homelessness and housing trajectories⁴². As Bogard, (1998: 257) asserts, such individuals are often, in fact, acutely aware of the dynamics and ideologies that play out around them and have deep knowledge about “their relationships to dominant social structures” as they interact with a range of individuals, institutions and service settings. McNaughton Nicholls’ argument (2009) therefore levels a strong critique against the new orthodoxy’s ability to provide an adequate explanatory framework given that an essential aspect of explaining at least some part of homelessness is missed. Agency, she contends, “needs to be explicitly explored rather than conveniently ‘written out’ of academic accounts” (McNaughton Nicholls, 2009: 75)⁴³.

Finally, it has been suggested that the new orthodoxy tends to imply (either directly or indirectly) a rather simplistic positivistic notion of causality inherited from the Newtonian tradition. Fitzpatrick *et al.* (2011b) take issue with the orthodoxy’s apparent linear cause-effect logic which asserts that if a risk factor leads to homelessness in one instance, then it must lead to homelessness in all instances. The authors argue that there is an implicit assumption here that “for something to constitute a ‘cause’ of homelessness it must be both ‘necessary’ (i.e. homelessness cannot occur unless it is present) and ‘sufficient’ (i.e. it inevitably leads to homelessness)” (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2011b: 14). Yet, the appropriateness of attributing causality to complex social phenomena, such as homelessness, has generated much debate (Williams 2001; Fitzpatrick 2005; Pleace 2005). Indeed, given the ‘open’ and fluid nature of social systems, it is difficult to establish causal relationships in the same way that it is possible to do so in the natural sciences (Fitzpatrick, 20005). However, as Johnson and Jacobs (2014: 32) assert, this does not mean that the idea of cause is redundant; rather, it suggests that there is a need to reflect more precisely on the “qualitative nature of recurring antecedents” (Fitzpatrick, 2011b: 14) by asking what is it *about* these individual and structural factors and their interrelationships that *tend* to cause homelessness in some instances, but not others.

⁴² Several ethnographic studies of homeless populations, for example, have demonstrated the ways in which agency influences individuals’ trajectories through homelessness (Dordick, 1996; Marr, 2015; Vincent *et al.*, 1995) while other research findings suggest that individuals and families are adept at negotiating homelessness settings for their own purposes and needs and employ distinct strategies in order to survive their situations (Gerstel *et al.*, 1996; Snow and Anderson, 1993; Reppond and Bullock, 2020; Trillo *et al.*, 2016). For instance, there is evidence to suggest, that individuals and women with children sometimes engage in “identity enactment” (Parsell, 2011: 454) or “impression management” (Bogard, 1998: 248). In these instances, people comply with (or resist) the roles both ascribed to and expected of them by the homelessness ‘system’ in a strategic manner and as a means to (re)gain control and autonomy. In cases where individuals or families are dissatisfied or frustrated with homelessness service systems, research has also indicated that they may voluntarily avoid, disengage or ‘opt out’ of services in an attempt to manage their homelessness and reclaim some semblance of dignity and control of their lives and housing futures (Hoffman and Coffey, 2008). In American ethnographic research of a homeless community in “North City”, Wagner (1993: 104) studied collective resistance among the study participants and positioned the decision to eschew shelter as empowering, concluding that the more regimented a shelter environment was, the more likely residents were to choose “literal homelessness over submission”.

⁴³ This position is not necessarily new. For example, Hopper *et al.* (1985) made a similar argument nearly 35 years ago when they criticised comparable models in the US for omitting the essential dynamic of agency on the part of those experiencing homelessness. As Gerstel *et al.* (1996: 566) similarly wrote several years later, this neglect in causal analyses “yields a biased and incomplete portrait of the homeless condition as well as a set of policies that cannot serve the needs of the destitute”.

Notwithstanding the crucial insights and debates sparked by the new orthodoxy over the past two decades, it is clear that the framework fails to adequately address the relationship between the individual and society or, rather, between agency and structure, in the production of homelessness. A number of theoretically-grounded attempts to conceptualise causation and reconcile the schism between agency and structure with respect to explaining homelessness will now be discussed, including the pathways approach and the development of a Critical Realist framework.

3.2.4. Homelessness Causation and the Interaction of Agency and Structure

In the social sciences more broadly, the agency/structure debate has been summed up as a dichotomy of determinism, which treats human action as totally derived from the configuration of structures in which people are embedded, and voluntarism, where social structures are constituted by human action which occurs as a result of rational, thinking agents who have the capacity to make choices. Homelessness scholarship has adopted this dualism; indeed, the role of agency and social structures in the production of homelessness clearly have a long history encapsulated by an ongoing tension between individual (minimalist) and structural (maximalist) accounts detailed above (Jacobs *et al.*, 1999). Yet, how agency is conceptualised in homelessness research is rarely clear (McNaughton Nicholls, 2009) and despite the tendency to assert the overall primacy of structural factors in contemporary homelessness discourse, “the concept of a ‘social structure’ remains ill-defined” (Fitzpatrick, 2005: 2). To complicate matters further, the issue of causation within this discourse “is a matter of complex ontology and epistemology” (Fitzpatrick, 2012b: 369).

Broadly speaking, those within the postmodern or post-structuralist traditions who challenge assumptions of causality typically assert that there are no incommensurable structures, nor is there a single causal mechanism (such as capitalism, patriarchy or inequitable housing markets) that causes “unavoidable homelessness [among] identifiable hapless victims” (Neale, 1997a: 52). Using this Foucauldian stance, some contest the existence of grand societal forces governing human actions that could explain homelessness. Instead, they locate themselves in a social constructionist or interpretivist paradigm which stipulates that any explanation must be situated at the level of the individual and within the context of social processes (that is, the rules we use to interpret the social world) that are subjective, discursive and in flux. However, it has been argued that this perspective and its explicit focus on individual agency can, in turn, lead to “the power of (macro) social structures being neglected” (Fitzpatrick, 2005: 9).

More structuralist-leaning explanations, on the other hand, tend to adopt a Marxist skepticism of individualistic solutions to systemic problems, positing instead that homelessness is “*inflicted* on powerless people by forces that were, literally beyond their control, or as a function of individual pathology [emphasis in original]” (Pleace, 2016: 21). Proponents of this conceptualisation of homelessness typically fall under the umbrella of positivism insofar as there is an implicit assumption that homelessness can be explained by ‘real’ structurally-oriented causes, often reconceptualised as risk factors, that are inherently deterministic. However, as mentioned previously,

the problem therein is that to assume that individuals experiencing homelessness are nothing but powerless to pathology and/or structural forces is to also assume that they are entirely passive entities who exert no individual agency (McNaughton Nicholls, 2009). In this way, neither perspective can adequately address the ways in which agency *interacts with*, or *relates to*, social structures; a pursuit that arguably lies at the heart of the quest to unlock the complexities of homelessness causation.

Drawing attention to the “distinct lack of a coherent framework” in which to examine the nature of the interaction between structural forces and individual agents in homelessness theory, David Clapham (2003: 120) proposes the ‘pathways’ approach as a means by which to bridge this gap. Whilst not a theory *per se*, the pathways approach has been deployed more so as a metaphor in homelessness research to facilitate deeper understanding of the ways in which people move through homelessness, with most of this research focusing on adult and youth populations (Anderson and Tulloch, 2000; Chamberlain and MacKenzie, 2006; Clapham, 2002, 2003; Cloke *et al.*, 2003; Fitzpatrick, 2000; Hutson and Liddiard, 1994; Johnson *et al.*, 2008; Mallet *et al.*, 2005; May, 2000; Mayock *et al.*, 2008; McNaughton Nicholls, 2009). Put simply, a pathways approach provides a biographical perspective that seeks to “map out and explain patterns (and changes) in the experience of homelessness over time” (O’Sullivan, 2008b: 93). Underpinned by social constructionism, the framework challenges positivistic analyses of homelessness by foregrounding the study of the practices through which people interpret, negotiate and respond to experiences of ‘house’ and ‘home’, thus giving “due importance to [...] subjective meanings” (Clapham, 2005: 34). Circumventing a common criticism of strong social constructionism that questions its tendency to overlook structural dimensions of experience, Clapham acknowledges the existence of ‘real’ social structures that are mediated through social processes. In so doing, he argues that the pathways approach can facilitate an analysis of “the interaction between households and the structures that influence the opportunities and constraints they face” (Clapham, 2005: 239).

Studies that have adopted this approach have made major contributions to analyses of homelessness by providing valuable insights into the temporal dynamics of homelessness as well as the diversity (and indeed, patterning) of homelessness experiences (Anderson, 2001). However, Clapham (2005) himself notes that pathways analyses often fail to properly deal with the *interaction* between structure and agency in the production of differing homelessness trajectories⁴⁴. Noting both the value and the potential of the pathways approach, Somerville (2013) and Farrugia and Gerrard (2015) level similar critiques, drawing attention to its strengths in terms of identifying the relevant risk factors associated with particular homelessness pathways but also to its weaknesses in terms of

⁴⁴ Citing one particular study as an example of what he considers to be a broader issue of ‘undertheorising’ in most, though not all, of this body of work, Clapham (2003: 121) writes: “the analysis followed the usual method of describing structural factors as constraints and treating them independently from the biographical factors” adding that “the focus is [therefore] on the behaviour of the individual and not on the structural factors which may have influenced this”.

not being able to provide a meaningful analysis of the relationship between the two⁴⁵. For Somerville (2013: 397), this points to the “general fuzziness” of the pathways metaphor that results from a tendency to not connect the findings more explicitly to social theory. For this reason, he likens pathways to an epidemiological approach in which “homelessness continues to be understood as a one-dimensional dependent variable” (Somerville, 2013: 391). Building on this argument, Farrugia and Gerrard (2015: 7) add that the kind of agency that is recognised in this framework is thus somewhat limited, insofar as it refers only to “the process by which causal factors are realized and, in practice, translated into different individual biographies”. Notwithstanding the criticisms discussed above, the pathways approach has contributed to understanding of homelessness in two ways: firstly, by reinforcing the importance of focusing on the perceptions, motivations and agency of those experiencing homelessness and, secondly, by offering a framework that can potentially consider the interplay of structure and agency through an analysis of how discourse and responses shape the different paths that individuals take through homelessness.

More recently, Suzanne Fitzpatrick (2005) has sought to address deficiencies in the new orthodoxy’s understanding of causation by proposing an explanatory framework underpinned by a Critical Realist ontology (after Bhaskar, 1975, 1989). From a philosophical standpoint, a Critical Realist approach views reality as imperfectly understandable - since it is not always directly observable nor is our interpretation of it infallible - and knowledge as both socially constructed *and* influenced by overarching societal mechanisms (structures). What this means is that Critical Realism does not deny the importance of human interpretation of meaning, as is common amongst positivist positions, whilst also ‘rescuing’ “causality from the dismissal of interpretivists” (Fitzpatrick, 2005: 3). Importantly, however, a Realist’s account of causation does not rely on notions of prediction, empirical regularities and linear relationships (that is, A causes B with little regard for the mechanisms which link them) (Wynn and Williams, 2012). Rather, a Realist asks the question: what is it *about* A that could *tend* to cause B in some situations, but not others? From this perspective, social systems are ‘open’ and interconnected, meaning that causation is: 1) *contingent*: the same factors “will [not] necessarily *always* lead to that outcome, for *all* people [emphasis in original]” (McNaughton Nicholls, 2009: 70); and 2) *complex*: mechanisms are not mono-causal or deterministic, instead they “operate across a wide range of societal ‘strata’, with no one strata assumed to be logically prior to the other” (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2011b: 15). Although “complex and messy at times” (McNaughton Nicholls, 2009: 70), this ontology allows for a “view of causality that denies any simple symmetry between explanation and prediction” (Bassett, 1999: 36).

The Critical Realist principle of multiple causal determination is crucial to theorising homelessness, specifically, since it means that there is no unified underlying cause or “single trigger that is either ‘necessary or ‘sufficient’ for it to occur” (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2018: 2); rather,

⁴⁵ Taking May’s (2000) finding concerning the link between homelessness and unemployment as an example, Somerville (2013: 389) argues that a pathways approach can tell us “how that unemployment is perceived by the homeless [...] and how exactly the experience of unemployment fits in to their own life history” but that “unemployment in itself tells us little about how homelessness is ‘caused’ [emphasis added]”.

homelessness is a process that arises from complex *interactions* that happen between an array of distinct, yet interconnected, causal mechanisms, the balance of which differ “over time, across countries, and between demographic groups”. These causal mechanisms are hypothesised to exist on several levels including: economic and housing structures (macro level); interpersonal structures (meso level); and personal attributes (micro level) (Fitzpatrick, 2005, 2012a)⁴⁶. Fitzpatrick (2005: 15) explains that because of this:

It is unnecessary for those adopting a critical realist stance to ‘smuggle’ individual factors into the analysis as merely making individuals susceptible to the more fundamental structural causes - these personal factors can be causes of homelessness in their own right without undermining the importance of structural conditions in other cases.

Underpinned by this Critical Realist stance, McNaughton Nicholls’ (2009) research, for example, demonstrates the importance of considering transgression (as an act of agency, and indeed, power, that also stems from structural context) in explaining homelessness as it can increase the so-called ‘weight of the weighted possibility’ of homelessness in a variety of ways. Notably, this emphasis on actions and behaviour, as Peace (2016: 25) points out, “brings individual characteristics to the fore, making understanding homelessness a matter of understanding individual choices to a much greater extent than is suggested by the new orthodoxy”. In other UK-based work adopting a Critical Realist position, statistical analyses of long-term and recurrently homeless populations (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2011a) and the social distribution of homelessness (Bramley and Fitzpatrick, 2017) have also revealed distinct causal tendencies, whilst acknowledging that protective factors can always intervene. Thus, although Fitzpatrick’s (2005) lack of precise elaboration of causal mechanisms and how exactly they might explain homelessness has been challenged (see, for example, Batterham, 2019; Somerville, 2012, 2013), such findings are arguably significant for advancing understanding of homelessness causation since they lend empirical weight to assertions concerning its “*predictable* but far from *inevitable* nature [emphasis in original]” (Bramley and Fitzpatrick, 2017: 18).

It is clear that the matter of homelessness causation and the role of agency/structure is far from settled; indeed, as has been noted, social theory in relation to homelessness remains underdeveloped while the effects and capacity of agency, in particular, “continue to be [...] little understood” (Somerville, 2012: 294). Nevertheless, the review presented here has demonstrated that the debate has evolved from a strict either/or argument about whether purposeful social action or underlying social structures are more salient when it comes to explaining homelessness, to a discussion of how social processes leading to homelessness are mediated through the interaction of both. Thus, an important upshot of this theoretical discussion for this study is that explanations of homelessness that emphasise either structural forces or individual action, without due regard for the other, are insufficient; rather, a synthesis of both perspectives is needed.

⁴⁶ Edgar (2009) proposes a very similar four-category classification framework. Like Fitzpatrick (2005) he describes causes of homelessness as being ‘structural’, ‘relationship-based’ and ‘individual’ but adds ‘institutional’ structures (that is, the availability of services and institutional procedures) as a separate stratum.

3.3. A Complex Systems Theoretical Approach

The previous section demonstrated that a number of theoretical perspectives on homelessness have been developed which have opened up new and important ways of thinking about various aspects of homelessness, including those related to its dynamic nature and the interaction of structure and agency in its production. Importantly, however, the empirical literature detailed in Chapter 2 on families' distinct shelter system trajectories has not, hitherto, been accompanied by a coherent theoretical framework capable of explaining how and why these patterns *emerge*. Complex systems (or complexity) theory offers a potentially unifying perspective that can contribute to the development of more robust theorising by bridging together a number of key features of homelessness causation outlined earlier in this chapter. The following discussion describes the metatheoretical language and conceptual tools provided by the complexity paradigm which, it will be argued, can facilitate a theoretically-informed explanatory framework for the analysis of the dynamics of family homelessness and the drivers of families' trajectories through, out and sometimes back into homelessness services over time. As a starting point however, a brief overview of Systems Theory and complexity theory is presented.

3.3.1. Systems Theory and the Birth of Complexity

A flock of birds sweeps across the sky. Like a well-choreographed dance troupe, the birds veer to the left in unison [...] The flock is organized without an organizer, coordinated without a coordinator. Bird flocks are not the only things that work in this way. Ant colonies, highway traffic, market economies, immune systems - in all of these systems, patterns are determined [...] by local interactions among decentralised components (Resnick, 1997: 3).

Conceptualising the intrinsic nature of the world, system theorists assert that there is order and organisation at all levels (biological, physical, social). In essence, there is an assumption that many phenomena may be conceived of as 'systems' in the abstract; that is, an "interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves *something* [emphasis added]" (Meadows, 2008: 11). Systems approaches have a long history and encompass a broad literature that goes far beyond the scope of this work, including the genesis of multiple streams and developments that span a wide range of disciplines⁴⁷. While early articulations can be traced to a tradition of thought linked to the dialectic of Hegel and Marx, it is often Karl Ludwig von Bertalanffy (*vis-à-vis* the development of General Systems Theory) that is cited as establishing Systems Theory "as a major scientific movement" (Capra, 1996: 46).

⁴⁷ This includes, for example: Cybernetics, pioneered by psychiatrist Ross Ashby and the mathematician Norbert Wiener; Dissipative Structures Theory, originated by the Nobel Prize winning chemist, Ilya Prigogine; System Dynamics, associated with the work of computer engineer Jay Forrester; Soft Systems Methodology, developed by management scientist Peter Checkland; Living Systems Theory, *via* the contributions of biologist James Miller; Critical Systems Thinking, originated by philosopher and social scientist Werner Ulrich; and Social Systems Theory, from sociologists Talcot Parsons, Walter Buckley and Niklas Luhmann. For a detailed overview of the history of Systems Theory see, for example: Capra (1996).

Although system thinkers emerged from a diverse range of schools, they are allied through their shared understanding of systems as irreducible wholes. Central to this perspective is the notion of *relatedness* and *interdependence* among a group of elements (or actors) working together to produce the characteristics and behaviours that constitute *a system*; which, to use the old adage often linked to Aristotle, is greater than the sum of its parts. Urry (2005: 5) makes a useful clarification here by adding that, “it is not that the sum is greater than the size of its parts - but that there are system effects that are *different* from their parts [emphasis added]”. Challenging the cause-effect determinism of reductionist science, the unifying principle of systems approaches is that systems can only be understood by examining them as holistic entities. In other words, they cannot be fully understood by examining each component or ‘part’ in isolation. It is the identification, theorising and understanding of systems and the *effects they produce*, rather than the parts themselves, that become the object of scientific knowledge. As Capra (1996: 37) puts it, “what we call a part, is merely a pattern in an inseparable web of relationships”. Systems Theory, as Morçöl (2012: 45) writes, thus attempts to explain “how these elements are related to each other, how they together constitute a whole, and how this whole relates to other wholes”. In this way, systems thinking means *thinking in context*.

Borne from the discovery of open systems - that is, systems which interact and exchange information with their environment (Von Bertalanffy, 1968) - the concept of ‘chaos’ (typically associated with the Prigogine school), later termed ‘complexity’ (typically associated with the Santa Fe Institute) was developed during the 1970’s and 1980’s to describe *non-linear* relations and *temporal change* observed in systems dynamics (Mingers, 2014). Rooted in the natural and physical sciences, including biology, chemistry, engineering and mathematics, complexity theory represents the culmination of a body of work in which researchers successfully challenged a number of fundamental assumptions about the predictability, stability and linearity of natural (and later social) systems (Eidelson, 1997). Put simply, evidence demonstrated that systemic interactions can produce emergent behaviour that is dynamic and non-reductive, indeterminate but structured; it is *complex*.

Importantly, complexity is not synonymous with randomness; rather, complexity occurs at the “edge of chaos” (Kauffman, 1993: 30), a critical state where order and disorder coexist and adaption is optimised, leading to qualitative changes in kind concerning the transformation of systems from one ‘state’ to another. Moreover, this shift in perspective represents an acknowledgement of the importance of examining not only objects but *relationships* and not only structures but *processes* in the production of these patterns of organisation; an endeavour that often requires a sophisticated methodological approach (Capra and Luisi, 2014). Complexity, then, is a property of systems; complexity *theory* refers not to a theory of causation *per se* (Byrne and Callaghan, 2014) or a unified body of scholarship (Thrift, 1999; Mitchell, 2009), but rather provides a conceptual framework for understanding *how* complex systems ‘work’.

To summarise, complexity theory (known variably as complex systems theory, complex adaptive systems theory and dynamical systems theory) is a collection of work that addresses

fundamental questions on the nature of systems and their changes. It offers a new way of thinking about or seeing the world that advocates an analytical shift from the individual parts of a system to the system as a whole; as a network of *interdependent* components that interact in *unpredictable* (though not unexplainable) ways to produce *patterns* of systems-wide behaviour.

The implications of complexity theory have reverberated through almost every discipline, tentatively breaking down the boundaries between the natural and human sciences and providing a potential corrective to the “disciplinary silos” of contemporary academic scholarship (Byrne and Callahan, 2014: 3). Advocates describe complexity theory as a new scientific paradigm as it “marks a [...] revolutionary break from the ‘reductionist’ approach to science” (Mitchell, 2009: x), directly challenging, as Morçöl (2012: 7) calls it, “the human tendency to simplify”. This ethos meshed well with those studying human societies, resulting in what Urry (2005: 2) has described as the “complexity turn” in the social sciences. The ideas of complexity have gained much traction amongst social scientists in recent years, evidenced by a number of important contributions that have significantly developed complexity and systems concepts as well as complexity-informed methodological approaches for the social sciences more broadly (see, for example, Byrne, 1998; Byrne and Callahan, 2014; Byrne and Uprichard, 2012) as well as in the fields of Public Policy/Administration, more specifically (see, for example, Morçöl, 2012). Byrne (2007: 160) provides a succinct overview of the utility of complexity theory for the social sciences which offers a useful prelude to the forthcoming discussion:

The great advantage of a complexity take is that it denies that the future is unknowable even if it is not simply determined [...] Things may stay much the same. Things may change. There are a range of possible future changed states. Which state comes to be depends - is determined by - the interaction of a set of control parameters in which human agency, both collective and individual, both purposeful and not purposeful, plays a crucial part. And complexity as a scientific approach offers us something else. It offers us a way in which we might understand how our actions can be shaped in given contexts to produce particular outcomes.

3.3.2. *Defining ‘System’*

An important question for any study of social systems is that of “who defines a system and how?” (Morçöl, 2012: 45) or as Byrne and Callahan (2014: 32) put it, “how can we say something useful about how [systems] are constituted, maintained *and* known? [emphasis in original]”. The definition offered by Meadows (2008) above is useful as it asserts that systems consist of three things: elements, interconnections and a function or purpose. From this perspective, individuals themselves are systems as are families, homelessness services and policies, all of which are interacting with and/or within a broader homelessness system. However, this broader homelessness system deserves more precise elaboration. It might first be useful to clarify some distinctions between what we are referring to here as ‘system’ and the classic sociological concept of ‘structure’. Following Morçöl (2012), the work of Anthony Giddens (1976, 1984) is helpful in this regard. According to Giddens, structures are not empirically observable but denote macro-level social phenomena or underlying sets of rules

and resources (norms, ideologies, discourses) that govern social action. Systems, on the other hand, are comprised of “situated activities of human agents, reproduced across time and space (Giddens, 1984: 25) and “should be studied as systems of interaction” (Giddens, 1976: 121)⁴⁸. To be considered a *system*, then, actors have to be related or connected in some way. Moreover, as Holland (2014: 539) reminds us, given that it is people that constitute systems, we can only measure, empirically, the *effects* of these systems and not the systems themselves.

Social systems are thus sets of social practices patterned in time and space and layered to form institutions. But to what extent are these relationships systemic? And to what extent is there a system? Morçöl (2012) suggests that Giddens’ (1984: 28) concepts of ‘social integration’ - where there exists “reciprocity between actors in contexts of co-presence” - and ‘system integration’ - where there is “reciprocity between actors or collectives across extended time-space” - are effective tools to answer these questions. Using the example of a policy system, for instance, Morçöl, (2012: 59) argues that one is delineated insofar as the “activities of individual actors and organizations are integrated [reciprocated and reproduced]”, primarily through the process of resource interdependence. Equally, there has to be a degree of stability or durability among these relationships at least for a while. In this way, systems are defined in relational terms: “to the extent that the relations of actors in a given situation are interdependent and to the extent that they are sustained, we can say that they are integrated and that there is a system” (Morçöl, 2012: 59).

The broad checkerboard of homelessness and housing assistance in Ireland outlined in Chapter 1 seems to reasonably fit within this conceptualisation of ‘system’. Indeed, there exists a vast network of interdependent components (including individuals, services, organisations and agencies) by which a country operationalises its institutional responses to homelessness, namely through service provision in the statutory and voluntary sector (Fowler *et al.*, 2019; Ravenhill, 2008). As Farrugia and Gerrard (2015: 4) point out, since homelessness is increasingly recognised as a ‘complex’ issue, “policy interventions have become more diverse, specialised and targeted, with a range of homelessness specific services emerging to address the ‘complex’ needs of the homeless population”. These services are evident across many jurisdictions and include, for example: short-term emergency accommodation (hostels, refuges, shelters); private emergency accommodation (hotels, B&Bs); medium-term or transitional housing programmes; long-term supported housing; Housing First initiatives; and resettlement services. Returning to Giddens’ (1984) concepts of social and system integration, then, it seems reasonable to suggest that both apply here since there is a strong degree of relationship interdependence that is sustained *via* both direct and non-direct contact between those experiencing homelessness and those charged with meeting their needs.

As Luhmann (1995: 29) reminds us, however, “systems have boundaries” and these boundaries serve the dual purpose of connecting and demarcating a system from its environment.

⁴⁸ Structures and systems are also interconnected in that structures can influence the behaviour of a system by influencing the behaviour of actors. In this way, social systems can exhibit structural properties that are “both the medium and the outcome of the practices that constitute those systems” (Giddens, 1979: 69).

These boundaries are not necessarily *physical* perimeters and can also be “functional, behavioural, and communicational” (Zeleny, 1996: 133). Although social systems have holistic (irreducible) emergent properties, they are also open systems, the boundaries of which are not clear cut; rather, they are “fuzzy and permeable” (Mingers, 2014: 144). That precisely where a boundary is placed is a theoretical assumption that did not exist *a priori* is commonly asserted. From this perspective, system parameters are based solely on the subjective judgements of actors, observers or both (Gerrits *et al.*, 2009). In the case of social scientists, then, as Gerrits *et al.* (2009: 137) explain further, the boundaries are defined by the scope of the problem and researchers’ “analytical questions” or “focus of attention”⁴⁹. This forms the basis for the so called ‘problem of the observer’, discussed in much of the systems literature which suggests that “to measure aspects of a system - to observe it even - is to alter the system so measured and observed” (Beer: 1966: 96). It follows that the identification of systems in the world outside ourselves is therefore a subjective matter and so “two people will not necessarily agree on the existence, or nature, or boundaries of any systems so detected” (Beer, 1966: 243). Accordingly, it remains up to us, as researchers, to reflect on the implications of what we ultimately choose to keep in and, more importantly, leave out, of our analyses.

3.3.3. Defining ‘Complex’

Complexity theory’s potential to unlock the dynamics of homelessness arguably lies in its ability to reconceptualise individuals’ differing homelessness trajectories as a product of their interactions with and within *complex* systems. While there is considerable variation in the way complex systems are defined (Ladyman *et al.*, 2013; Turner and Baker, 2019), there is nevertheless some consensus about the key features that make a system *complex*, namely: inter-relatedness, co-evolution, self-organisation, non-linearity and emergence (Morçöl, 2012). Generally speaking, complex systems consist of multiple **inter-related agents** (Holland, 1995; Mitchell, 2009). An agent may be an individual, such as a mother or father accessing homelessness services or part of a collective, such as a family unit or homelessness organisation, that is networked based on interests, identities or both. The complex character of systems thus arises from their interactions; that is, interactions between agents and each other, between agents and systems and between systems and other systems “with which it intersects, within which it is nested, and with which it may share interpenetrating components” (Byrne and Callahan, 2014: 173).

⁴⁹ In the fields of public policy and political science, for example, systems have been conceptualised variably as local schools, social housing projects, larger public administration systems and international systems. Similarly, Blackman (2013: 336) asserts that how systems are defined may be *empirically-driven* (such as the operational definition of a household or local economy), *theoretically-driven* (such as a comparison of national welfare regimes) or *policy-driven* (such as administrative units, professional groups or service users). While the *nature* of system boundaries remains a relatively contentious issue (Mingers, 2014), there is general consensus amongst contemporary complexity theorists that striving for ‘completeness’ in *applied* systems research - that is, research that seeks to empirically observe real world settings to bring about change - is somewhat unproductive. In these situations, as Mingers (2014: 143) explains, “we are often in the role of setting rather than observing boundaries”.

Through their communication of meanings, systems self-reproduce through agents' creation of their own definition of themselves and their environment as well as their perception of what they want and how to behave in the context they are in; in other words, they are self-referential (Luhmann, 1995). As discussed earlier in this chapter, individuals employ strategies and engage in meaning-making processes in order to manage, cope with and negotiate their homelessness. From this perspective, homelessness is not simply an event that is devoid of human agency and experience; instead, it too is interpreted by those who inherit a homeless 'status' in different ways and is "related to the environment in which they find themselves" (Somerville, 2013: 401). Given their fundamental interconnectedness and ability to adapt, as agents interact - whether individually or collectively - they therefore **co-evolve** with their environment.

In their study of families accessing transitional housing in New York, Gerstel *et al.* (1996), for instance, found that in the context of ill-informed policies, budgetary constraints and scarce resources, homeless families and service providers were "engaged in an active and strategic scramble for resources" (p. 566) as they sought to achieve their specific goals, resulting in them "actively shaping and reshaping policies as well as each other's responses to them" (p. 544). That is to say, families responded to service- or state-level policies that were enacted through their interactions with staff and other residents by developing alternative strategies to navigate the service system; at the same time, institutional policies evolved in response to the actions and behaviours of families. This, in turn, led to unsatisfactory outcomes whereby "the homeless remained in the program for longer [...] and services ultimately undermined what fragile social networks they had previously devised to survive" (Gerstel *et al.*, 1996: 543).

Likewise, a similar study conducted 20 years later by Trillo *et al.* (2016) detailed how families accessing homelessness services in the same State developed numerous strategies in response to shifting shelter policies. The findings revealed how the sudden availability of county-allocated permanent housing units meant that those who were deemed 'housing ready' by service staff were more likely to result in a successful application. Because of this, "the shelter clients who were most goal oriented not only became dedicated to service participation, they also adopted the rhetoric of the administration" (Trillo *et al.*, 2016: 12). The authors concluded that:

This mastery of the rhetoric became a part of the resident culture, with older residents instructing newer ones in their proper usage of the terminology and in the appropriate targets for various appeals. Eventually most residents accepted both participation and rhetoric as an effective element in the broader strategy to get decent, affordable housing for their families.

What this suggests is that, insofar as the structural properties of homelessness systems enable or constrain families' behaviour, families simultaneously shape and constitute these systems through their responses to their environment in an ongoing hermeneutical cycle. This process of families adapting and evolving in order to 'survive' is also illustrative of **self-organising behaviour**, whereby agents draw on collective knowledge to respond to change in their surroundings, resulting in spontaneous patterns or regularities; in other words, there is no centralised control but behaviour is

not random. In such instances, those experiencing homelessness may or may not have similar life experiences, but through their interactions with their environment and other agents, information is circulated, modified and returned such that the outcome of one cycle becomes the basis for future actions (or indeed, inactions). These actions are then dampened or amplified *via* negative or positive feedback loops, respectively, the latter of which reinforces these systems-wide patterns of behaviour over time.

Non-linearity is in the very nature of complex systems. What this means is that changes at the policy- or service- level, for example, can cause radically divergent behaviour since agents interact with, and respond to, their environment in unpredictable ways. Because of this, it is not uncommon for small changes to have surprisingly big effects (and *vice versa*) and for effects to come from unanticipated causes. Under these conditions, the patterning of families' service use can reach 'bifurcation points' where it converges into qualitatively distinct shelter system trajectories based on families' repeated actions and interactions with homelessness (and other related) systems of intervention. These non-linear dynamics have been documented by homelessness researchers such as McNaughton Nicholls (2009), who highlighted complex systems characteristics without explicitly using the language of complexity. In her qualitative longitudinal study that followed 28 individuals experiencing homelessness over a one-year period, McNaughton found that participants' pathways out of homelessness were shaped by 'edgework' (that is, voluntary risk taking), resource availability and the quality of social networks. While some were able to successfully exit homelessness, she explains, others continued to "spiral into further divestment passages" or became "trapped in this space on the edge" (McNaughton Nicholls, 2009: 175). Transferring these insights into complex systems terminology, it could be said that those navigating the homelessness service system experienced periods of relative stability and periods of change where, dependent upon how individuals related to their environment, their lives bifurcated along different paths. That is, they moved from one system 'state' to another which, in the case described above, refers to those who remained in homelessness service systems and those who did not.

Finally, the qualifier 'complex' is also deployed to describe systems that, due in large part to the combination of the features listed above, exhibit incommensurable emergent properties. While there is no unified definition within complexity theory, the most oft-cited conceptualisation of **emergence** comes from the philosophical thinker, Lewes, in which it is considered to be a "process whereby the global behaviour of a system results from the actions and interactions of agents" (Sawyer, 2005: 2)⁵⁰. Emergence, then, can be understood as the unpredictable but ordered macro-level patterns that arise from (complex) micro-level interactions occurring between those operating

⁵⁰ Although the concept of emergence is not unique to complex systems theory, it has nevertheless been argued that complexity theorists offer a more nuanced and fleshed out understanding of the *process* of emergence (Morçöl, 2012; Sawyer, 2005; Walby, 2003).

within (and coevolving with) homelessness service systems⁵¹. Families' distinct patterns of shelter use are therefore reconceptualised as emergent *system effects*; that is, trajectories that only occur when the parts of the shelter system interact in a wider whole and converge into differing housing and service outcomes (Byrne and Uprichard, 2014). For families experiencing homelessness, such outcomes would include, for example, securing a lasting exit from EA (transitional), being unable to exit EA (chronic) and exiting but and falling back into EA (episodic). All of these outcomes represent 'phase shifts' concerning the point at which families' trajectories move into a wholly new location in 'state space' (that is, the infinite range of possible states that a system might occupy).

From this perspective, systems have the propensity to change (or not change) in particular ways to produce distinct shelter system trajectories among families; however, above all, emergence so conceived is as Holland (1998: 121-122) writes, "a product of coupled, context dependent interactions". In other words, macro-level or systems-wide patterns emerge within the specific circumstances (known as 'fitness landscapes') in which agents and their actions are embedded. As Clapham (2003: 123) points out, those experiencing homelessness "do not construct their life in a vacuum"; rather, "homeless people, like everyone else, are primarily social beings, with specific histories, living in specific environments and relating to those environments and to other (homeless and non-homeless) people, and also to themselves, in different ways" (Somerville, 2013: 408). It follows that in order to understand why certain trajectories emerge over time, an in-depth understanding of the lives of those who constitute families, including their experiences both prior to and since entering homelessness services, matter. Moreover, as Morçöl (2012) argues, *emergent* macro-patterns (as opposed to *non-emergent* macro-patterns) will persist and endure; they are robust despite "continual turnover in their constituents" (Holland, 1998: 7).

3.3.4. *Complex Systems Theory Meets Social Theory*

A common point of agreement among social theorists is that the social world is complex; it involves the interdependency of many people and is mediated by a seemingly growing number of networked groups, organisations and institutions (Sawyer, 2005). Many classic sociological theorists evoked some kind of concept of a social system in their early works, including at the level of capital (Marx, 1954); society (Durkheim, 1966); nation-states (Giddens, 1984); and world religion (Weber, 1958). Equally, the relationship between the individual and the collective, and the intersection of these systems to explain non-linear behaviour, is "a concern that has been the prevailing analytical focus in sociology" (McDermot. 2014: 185). For this reason, it is perhaps unsurprising that the complexity paradigm is increasingly influential in social theory (Byrne, 1998; Walby, 2003, 2007), particularly given its capacity to explain the nature of social *processes* (that is, the nature of social systems and their changes), which some have argued is an aspect of social theory that has been largely neglected

⁵¹ As Morçöl, (2012: 89) reminds us, these behaviours "do not have to be 'rational' in any sense of the word for a complex system to emerge". Some canonical examples of emergent social phenomena include, for example, mob behaviour, language, political revolt or how the price of a good emerges from many exchanges among individuals in a free market.

(Sawyer, 2005). Walby (2007: 450) goes as far as to say that “complexity theory offers the toolkit with which a new paradigm of social theory is being built” adding that through this approach “a new concept of social system is possible that, linked with a range of linked concepts, more adequately constitutes an explanatory framework”.

While there have been long-standing debates about ‘structure’ and ‘process’ in the classic sociological sense - referring to the ways in which Compe, Durkheim and Weber focused on how social structures were held together; while, on the other hand, Marx, for example, focused on understanding the mechanisms of social change - the complexity perspective combines “system *and* process thinking [emphasis in original]” (Urry, 2005: 3). The concept of complexity - when sufficiently qualified to take into account the shaping of human actions, values and motivations - can thus provide an account of the social world that transcends the limitations of Parsonian structural functionalism and reductionist science. It features a sophisticated conceptual repertoire that can, in theory, open the proverbial black box of causality by facilitating an examination of the inner workings of systems driving social change. The complexity paradigm is therefore a promising vehicle for social science theorising because of its distinct ability to explore social reality’s own fundamental *dynamics*.

In this way, adopting a complex systems theoretical framework departs from prevailing homelessness research trends which have tended to prioritise the identification of risk factors or causal determinants at the expense of process, in what is perhaps an understandable policy effort to render it “a discrete, calculable and governable social problem” (Farrugia and Gerrard, 2015: 3). This is despite the fact that, as discussed in Chapter 2, contemporary understandings of homelessness have increasingly highlighted the importance of conceptualising it as a fluid and changeable experience that can occur once or multiple times in the lives of individuals and families (Anderson and Christian 2003; Clapham, 2003, 2005; Kuhn and Culhane, 1998; Culhane *et al.*, 2007). Homelessness, then, is dynamic and as Byrne (2005: 5) writes, “once we go dynamic, we must go non-linear [...] we are dealing with emergence, bifurcation, complexity, and the possibility of willed alternatives”; that is to say, we are dealing with emergent system effects in the form of different system states or *possible* trajectories *through time*. What this means, is that as sudden change occurs in a system, it may lead to different paths of development; thus, “rather than there being one universal route [...] there may be several path dependent forms” (Walby, 2003: 12). System trajectories are therefore inherently evolutionary, historical and context dependent and, because of this, they evolve in a unique way that cannot be reversed, repeated or predicted.

The broader implication here is that the positivist search for statistical regularities to predict the trajectories that individual and families take through homelessness service systems can be called into question, lending further weight to the arguments put forward by those researchers discussed previously who contended that such an approach cannot capture the true complexion of homelessness (Bassuk, 2007; Trillo *et al.*, 2016). Byrne (2011: 2) explains that, from a complexity perspective, “the nonlinear emergent character of social and other significant systems means that we can never

establish general non-contextual laws”, thus rendering “the quantitative account itself [as] simply, but very usefully, a way of describing local contexts and transformation of systems as a whole”. Put differently, statistical relationships between variables can provide us with important ‘traces’ of emergent system effects but further investigation is required to understand *why* a family’s shelter system trajectory, for example, changes from one state to another (Byrne and Uprichard, 2012).

For this reason, one could argue that it is not that homelessness research that seeks to *explain* the dynamic patterning of shelter use amongst families *via* the use of quantitative analysis alone is wrong but “rather that it is limited in its rightness“ (Byrne and Callahan, 2014: 19). This is because such research, Byrne and Callahan (2014: 173) argue, remains “trapped in a language of discrete variables” that cannot, therefore, interrogate *why* some families exit homelessness services rather quickly, while others go on to experience repeat or prolonged shelter stays. Importantly, as Reed and Harvey (1992: 363) point out, the non-linear nature of trajectories within complex systems does not mean that these patterns preclude reasoned explanation; instead, they assert that “we can [...] reconstruct the particular constellation of structured choice and accident that led to the present reality”. To do so, however, requires going beyond quantitative analyses by implementing a “reflexive return to informants to assess their views about qualitative descriptions of *processes of change* [emphasis added]” (Byrne, 1997: 4).

Complexity, then, represents a shift away from a variable-based approach towards a case-based approach (Blackman 2013; Byrne and Uprichard, 2012), which seeks to understand *complex* phenomena and thus, *complex causation*. That is, where there is not *one* single cause, but rather multiple and interacting causes, operating “in any and all directions” (Byrne and Callahan, 2014: 190). Indeed, it was established earlier in this chapter that the causes of homelessness are complex and cannot be reduced to simple cause-effect logic whereby a certain mechanism is presumed to always cause homelessness in any given context (Pleace, 2016; Fitzpatrick, 2005). Blackman (2013: 335) explains that within a complexity-informed world-view, social systems are open and therefore consist of multiple interactions, that under different conditions and within various contexts, produce a whole range of possible outcomes. He writes that a variable can have “a different effect on an outcome depending on what combination of other variables it is part of, and this varies from case to case”, thus posing the question: “what causal power can a ‘variable’ have when variables have no existence beyond the cases in which their particular values are embodied?” (Blackman, 2013: 334).

Likewise, Rosen (1987: 324) argues that *complex* systems involve a process of causation in which causal categories are deeply intertwined and contingency is central, thus “no dualistic language of state plus dynamic laws can completely describe it”. This notion of nested possibilities has significant implications for the way we think about homelessness as it explicitly asserts that “there is no ghost in the machine and there is no first mover” concerning its onset (Williams, 2001: 3). By approaching system effects in this way, we are adopting a Critical Realist understanding of causality (Byrne and Uprichard, 2012) and this conceptualisation is therefore very much in accord with Fitzpatrick’s (2005) important delineation of a Critical Realist account of homelessness

causation; that is, where causation is *bidirectional* in that a variable can be both the cause and effect of homelessness and that there is no one single cause that is both *necessary and sufficient* for homelessness to occur.

A complexity-informed approach therefore has the potential to weave three fundamental aspects of contemporary homelessness theorising together into a coherent framework insofar as it accounts for: 1) the *non-linear nature* of homelessness; 2) the *temporal dynamics* of homelessness; and 3) the *complex causality* of homelessness. By fusing Critical Realism and complexity theory in this way, Byrne (2011: 89) argues that “we are dealing with effects understood as [differing] system states and understand these system states to be the product of complex and multiple generative mechanisms”. Critical Realism, as Sayer (2000: 14) reminds us, seeks to identify “causal mechanisms and how they work, and discovering if they have been activated and under what conditions”. A core objective of an approach that combines these two theoretical lenses, then, is to infer plausible theorising of underlying causal structures and generative mechanisms which, in particular contexts, can be activated to produce distinct and divergent system trajectories (Byrne and Callahan, 2014; Mingers, 2014). Or, as Teisman and Klijn (2008: 288) put it perhaps more poetically: to tease out the causal mechanisms with which to explain “storylines through time [that are] different from place to place and evolving in an often surprising way”.

While this may sound similar to that of Clapham’s (2003, 2005) pathways approach, complexity theory goes beyond the simple identification and abstraction of key features or characteristics of homelessness that illustrate core issues impacting on an individual’s or family’s housing instability. Rather, it focuses on the “changing characteristics of the complex social order within which those trajectories occur” (Byrne, 1998: 70-71). From this perspective, shelter system trajectories are “understood as descriptions through time of the nature of systems and *hence* as accounts of relative stability and change in the systems” [emphasis in original] (Byrne and Callahan, 2014: 174). With analysis placed firmly on the interactions and relationships *between* families, and the other components of homelessness systems of intervention, a complexity-informed analysis can therefore be used to *explain* the dynamic patterning of service use. In other words, it can help to explore social processes in terms of how and importantly *why* they may produce diverging causal paths towards particular outcomes including, in this case, patterns of short-term (transitional), long-term (chronic) and repeat (episodic) shelter use.

Notably, the pathways approach has also been critiqued for neglecting complexity and dynamism (Furlong, 2013), for its inability to be disentangled from a social constructionist paradigm and for its focus on individual values and agency at the expense of broader structural processes (Beer *et al.*, 2011; Jacobs and Manzi, 2000; King, 2002; Pleace, 2016). A framework that synthesises Critical Realism and complex systems theory concepts, on the other hand, foregrounds the study of *emergence* - that is, patterning at the macro-level that occurs over time due to complexity at the level of individual actors - and, perhaps even more crucially, “the relationship between agency and social structure” (Byrne and Callahan, 2014: 41). Equal footing is therefore given “to both material and

cultural factors” (Reed and Harvey, 1992: 366) by combining an understanding of both ‘the individual’ and ‘society’ in the production of differing trajectories through shelter system. In doing so, Walby (2003: 2) argues that research can surpass old polarisations through “the development of ontological depth that is not at the expense of explanatory power”; or rather, by adopting an approach that “does not deny the significance of the self-reflexivity of the human subject while yet theorising changes in the social totality”.

To reiterate, then, the fusion of Critical Realism and complexity theory offers a novel framework with which to study the temporal patterns of continuity and change that produce system effects in the form of distinct shelter system trajectories amongst families. The emergent character of these system effects means that they are greater than the sum of their parts, thus rendering a wholly reductionist approach insufficient. What is required instead is a move beyond standard correlation statistics to examine these trajectories, with dedicated analytic attention paid to the *interactions between* families and the other components of (complex) homelessness systems to help explain the patterns of service use observed.

3.3.5. *Complexity, Power and Agency*

Complexity theory has been critiqued for offering neither a conceptualisation of agents nor any elaboration of the nature of agency and power relations and how they might interact with social structures (Pollitt, 2009). Yet such omissions are unsurprising given that complexity theory had its roots in the natural and physical sciences and, for this reason, one might reasonably question its applicability for social (human) systems (Morçöl, 2012). Contemporary system theorists agree that natural systems are fundamentally different to social systems (Sawyer, 2005). Unlike strings of computer code or molecules, human agents, either individually or collectively, demonstrate meaning-making processes that could influence their behaviour or motivations and agentic capacities that might lead them to break or subvert rules (Minger, 2014). In this way, the values and desires of humans themselves can shape system dynamics or trajectories and it is here that “the human system finds its specificity” (Nicolis and Prigogine, 1989: 238). Referring to Giddens’ (1984) writings on the ‘double hermeneutics problem’, Teisman and Klijn (2008: 290) provide a useful elaboration, stating that “social systems are characterized by self-reflecting agents who try to understand the social systems they themselves are in”. Social systems are therefore messy, historical and contextual; imbued with meaning, norms and culture and modulated by time and space (Morçöl, 2012). For this reason, there is now general consensus that the study of human systems requires “a wholly different, hermeneutic approach” (Mingers, 2014: 6) and needs to adopt insights and concepts of compatible social theories that allow us “to explain the specialities based on the specifically human ability of active, conscious and intelligent decision-making” (Hinterberger, 1994: 38).

This paved the way for the development of an ontology-founded framework that bridged the divide between social constructivism (‘soft’ systems thinking) and positivism (‘hard’ systems thinking) in complex systems theory known as ‘complex realism’ (after Reed and Harvey, 1992).

This approach fuses the scientific ontology of complexity with Bhaskar's (1975, 1989) philosophical ontology of Critical Realism (see also Byrne, 1998; Byrne and Callahan, 2014; Byrne and Uprichard, 2012; Mingers, 2014). Reed and Harvey (1992: 369) argue that these ontologies are compatible due to their conceptualisation of systems as open, structured, complex and non-linear and that an approach which combines them can provide "an excellent middle range heuristic that can be used by social scientists to bridge the abstract tendencies of a theory of dissipative [complex] social systems and the real social relations that constitute society". Here, society is considered to be an external reality composed of relatively enduring structures (social conventions, processes, principles) which exist independently of any one individual but govern social action and day-to-day-life, such as that which would be experienced by families moving through homelessness service systems. This reality is, in turn, (re)produced by human agency and *praxis* and the extent to which these actions adhere to societal norms or not. Acknowledging the ontological reality of social structures, Bhaskar recognises that they must be linked to human action *via* a mediating system of 'positioned practices'; that is, combinations of roles that can be filled and practices that are then engaged in. Thus, we cannot ignore the role of structure in the production of social knowledge; but equally, an understanding of the context in which social interactions take place is crucial.

In the area of homelessness research, specifically, a number of authors, including Neale (1997a), Clapham (2005), Fitzpatrick (2005), McNaughton Nicholls (2009) and Johnson and Jacobs (2014) have argued that Giddens' (1979, 1984) Structuration Theory is also a promising framework to connect human action with structural explanation, with some arguing that Structuration Theory is in fact highly compatible with, and indeed complementary to, Critical Realism. Drawing on the work of Stones (2001), Fitzpatrick (2005: 10) explains that "realism provides a more convincing account of 'meso' and 'macro' structural levels than structuration theory but can be enhanced by the more 'hermeneutically informed' concept of duality employed by Giddens". According to Giddens, structure and action (agency) are inextricably linked insofar as all social practices have both structural and agentic dimensions. He refers to the 'duality of structure' to express this mutual dependence, asserting that social structures are generated by human action but, at the same, human actions are both enabled and constrained by those structures in an ongoing hermeneutical cycle. From this perspective, structures consist of rules and resources that must be understood in the historical development of social institutions and as recursively implicated in practices.

Similarly, Mingers (2014) proposes that the ontological implications of Structuration and Realism in the context of systems-informed thinking can be reconciled and synergistic. He argues that this can be achieved by supplementing Bhaskar's notion of structure - that is relational systems of 'positioned practices' and the rules and resources that underlie them - with Giddens' "substantive theorizing about how such complex and stratified structure interacts with praxis" (Mingers, 2014: 104). In particular, Mingers points to the ways in which Giddens' take conceptualises neither structural rules nor structural constraints as being causally determinative; in other words, although structural principles prescribe how people *ought* to interact with others, agents are knowledgeable,

conscious actors who have the capacity to exercise reflexivity and make considered choices about whether to ‘comply’ or not with structural principles. As a result, structures can be changed or transformed, rather than just reproduced.

In this way, Giddens’ concept of Structuration can accommodate a meaningful discussion of not only change but of power and agency by suggesting that “all individuals, even those who seem to be without much control and authority (such as homeless people), have some power and ability to resist” (Neale, 1997b: 56). Although Giddens acknowledges that power structures constituted at the macro level place limits on the range of options available to individual actors in any given situation, “it is only in very exceptional circumstances that individuals are ever completely constrained” (Neale, 1997b: 56). This point is particularly relevant to this study as it recasts families experiencing homelessness as active agents who are not simply powerless when subjected to structural constraints or rules embedded in homelessness service systems. In this way, it can provide an important lens through which to examine “how the less powerful manage resources in such a way as to exert control over the most powerful in established power relationships” (Giddens, 1979: 374).

Because an agent could almost always “have acted otherwise” (Giddens, 1976: 75), Structuration allows for the possibility of flexibility and creativity in individual and group action. This, too is important because the level of diversity and complexity among those who experience homelessness reminds us that what happens to people when they are faced with structural constraints is not pre-determined (Fitzpatrick, 2005). Families, for example, negotiate unemployment, poverty and family dissolution in different ways and also respond variously to housing problems and experiences of homelessness. Neale (1997b: 47) therefore asserts that by using this more sophisticated and theoretically-grounded framework to combine structure and agency in analyses of homelessness, those experiencing homelessness cannot be simplistically “defined as either deserving or undeserving, entirely responsible for their problems, or victims of circumstances beyond their control”. By synthesising Structuration and Realism in a complex systems framework, Mingers (2014: 106) concludes a new conceptualisation is brought to bear in which:

Social structures, consisting of position-practices, rules, and resources, are generating mechanisms that, through their complex interactions, enable and constrain observable social activity which in turn reproduces and transforms these structures. Society is then a particular combination of both praxis and structure that is historically and temporally located.

3.4. Theory and Its Implications for Homelessness Policy and Service Provision

The way we talk about homelessness (that is, the way in which the ‘problem’ is defined and framed in discourse, discussion and debate) has significant implications for the way we respond to homelessness. Earlier in this chapter, prevailing theoretical perspectives on the fundamental causes of homelessness were outlined. By way of brief summary, these conceptualisations can be divided into three broad strands that centre on: 1) moral failings and culpability; 2) personal pathology; and 3) structural inequalities. Numerous typologies have been deployed to characterise these dominant images and representations of homelessness, including Rosenthal’s (2000) ‘unwilling victims’,

‘slackers’ and ‘lackers’; Seal’s (2005) ‘sad’ (victim), ‘bad’ (deviant) and ‘mad’ (ill); and Gowan’s (2010) ‘system talk’ (inequalities), ‘sin talk’ (moral offense) and ‘sick talk’ (pathology). These authors outline how each respective depiction conjures contrasting stories about the root causes of homelessness, all of which propose distinct and divergent strategies to address the issue that are saturated with political and moral meanings. Gowan (2010: 28) elaborates further:

Each discourse on homelessness shares with its related construction of poverty the same fundamental strategies for managing the disruly poor. The moral construction and sin-talk are primarily tied into strategies of *exclusion and punishment* (although there is also the possibility of redemption for the more deserving); the therapeutic construction and sick-talk look to *treatment*; and the systemic construction and system-talk urge *social regulation or even transformation* [emphasis added].

According to Gowan (2010: 28), the fundamental aspects of this discourse have remained “markedly consistent” between Europe and North America over the last five centuries. However, varying “epistemic currents” have fed into these theoretical debates over time and ultimately challenged the old characterisation of the ‘pathological sinner’ which was gradually replaced “but by no means defeated, by notions of sickness and system” (Gowan, 2010: 27). She argues that, to-date, the fundamental causes of poverty are “found in the same character defects, and the primary strategies of control remain punishment and exclusion” (Gowan, 2010: 28). European researchers agree, indicating that the notion of individual pathology “remains prominent in policy circles” (Pleace, 2016: 34; see also O’Sullivan, 2020).

Over the years, dominant cultural images or representations of those experiencing homelessness as ‘service-needy’ coupled with understandings of homelessness causation being linked to individualistic explanations, has greatly influenced welfare, housing and policy responses as well as the development of homelessness service systems. In particular, as Neale (1997a: 49) writes, responses have thus espoused, to varying degrees, notions of deservingness, excluding “all but the most [...] desperate of people”. Homelessness policy then, as Gerstel *et al.* (1996: 567) argue, becomes a “politics of containment” in which those who are homeless and deemed “‘truly needy’ (and therefore ‘worthy’)” are officially differentiated from those experiencing poverty more generally in order to justify their receipt of targeted, expensive services. The ways in which policy and practice are continually (re)shaped by ideological (and often gendered) categorisations of those who are ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ of assistance provides some insight into why (and how) families may experience different service use patterns and housing outcomes.

For instance, Reppond and Bullock (2020: 100) point out that “classed, raced, and gendered conceptualizations of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ motherhood are reified in US shelter regulations (e.g. strict rules governing parent and child behaviour, curfews, mandatory participation in parenting classes) that seek to ‘reform’ homeless mothers”. Examining the implications of this ideological structuring of service provision, Passaro (1996) interviewed 178 women as part of her multi-site ethnography of homelessness in New York City. She found that the paternalising approach that governed homelessness services meant that women who embodied traditional gender roles were often

‘rewarded’ with sympathetic and preferential treatment. In other words, women who ‘complied’ with certain conditions and conformed to normative ideals of femininity - including motherhood, youth and an absence of complex needs - tended to report more positive experiences, interactions and relationships with service personnel and, in turn, were more likely to be prioritised for local authority or subsidised housing. Conversely, women whose children were not in their care as well as those who reported needs related to substance use and/or mental ill-health, did not fit the expected construct of what a ‘good’ service user or, indeed, mother *ought* to be. As a consequence, they were less likely to form supportive relationships with service staff and negotiate a route out of homelessness (see also Gordon *et al.*, 2019; Sznajder-Murray and Slesnick, 2011)⁵².

A further implication of prevailing individualistic explanations of homelessness is that homelessness service systems have evolved with distinct functions, which Parsell (2018: 116) contends, are “predicated on assumptions of homeless people as not only different but also deficient”. Thus, the purpose of services is to make individuals and families ‘housing ready’; that is, to monitor, control and/or ‘fix’ them (*via* training or treatment) so that they can be successfully re-integrated back into mainstream society. Drawing on the work of Erving Goffman (1963: 3), the ascribed status of a ‘homeless person’ could thus be said to reduce the holder from a “usual person to a tainted, discounted one”; they are labelled, set apart and linked to undesirable characteristics. Put differently, by officially delineating homelessness as some kind of “extraordinary malfunction”, normative distinctions are drawn between ‘the homeless’ and ‘everyone else’ (Farrugia and Gerrard, 2015: 12). Importantly, as O’Sullivan (2020: 24) reminds us, therapeutic responses “often conceal a punitive dimension [...] and punitiveness has the capacity to resurface in surprising places and at different times”. In extreme cases, for example, homelessness systems for families have been shown to be reminiscent of Goffman’s ‘Total Institution’ (Stark, 1994) whereby families are bestowed “dual identities of victim and deviant” (Bogard, 1998: 231). However, this dualism in the underlying ideological assumptions of service provision is perhaps most notably encapsulated in what Gerstel *et al.* (1996) coined the ‘therapeutic incarceration’ of homeless families.

⁵² Fitzpatrick (2005: 9) argues that “gendered (including patriarchal) social relationships” can also disadvantage homeless men. While under-researched (Paquette and Bassuk, 2009), studies focusing on the experiences of homeless fathers, specifically, draw attention to the fact that gender restrictions within certain homelessness accommodations can result in men not being permitted to stay alongside their partner and children. There is also some evidence to suggest that homeless men are not always supported as fathers within service settings (Löfstrand, 2005; Schindler and Coley, 2007). This lack of attention to homeless men with children, and a reluctance to engage with them as caregivers, indicates a ‘gender bias’ within homelessness policy that serves to marginalise men’s experiences and negatively impact their identities as fathers (Schindler and Coley, 2007). In the UK, Cramer (2005: 748-749) conducted participant observation in three different homelessness assessment sites to examine interactions between housing officers and homeless men and women (either accompanied or unaccompanied by children) and found that “in actions and sympathies [...] housing officers sought to protect women more within the framework of the homelessness system [...] and routinely made more of an effort to support and progress their case”. In this way, women were considered to be more ‘deserving’ and worthy of help and support due to, for example, their perceived vulnerability associated with the loss of a home and greater childcare responsibility. Men, on the other hand, were often treated with suspicion regarding their parental status or propensity for violence and less tolerance when it came to ‘problem’ behaviour. Research has also suggested that fathers also experience additional stigma and discrimination when seeking public assistance because of their perceived failure to protect their families (Schindler and Coley, 2007).

While some linear or staircase models of service provision that require an individual or family to demonstrate ‘housing readiness’ before progressing to more independent living arrangements have been found to be relatively effective (Pleace, 2008; Rosenheck, 2010), O’Sullivan (2008b: 77) notes that, in other cases, those who break the rules or are unable to meet pre-defined outcomes can “remain marooned in a secondary housing market with little likelihood of a successful exit”. Indeed, homelessness services’ inability to address the needs of those who do not conform with the expected construct of what a homeless person *ought* to be like is said to be a key driver of service failure (Bogard *et al.*, 1999; Dordick, 1996; Gowan, 2010; McNaughton Nicholls, 2009; Ravenhill, 2008). In a service system so conceived, when a family does not present with any need for treatment, homelessness services are therefore, at best, of limited value (Gerstel *et al.*, 1996) and at worst can have the opposite effect of “institutionalisation, secondary adaption and stigmatisation” (Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin, 2007). This approach is in stark contrast with the bulk of homelessness research and commentary that has emerged over the past decade, which asserts that user-led services that use “coproduction and personalisation models” and value dignity and choice “are the only effective solution to long-term and recurrent homelessness” (Pleace, 2018: 128; see also Padgett *et al.*, 2016a).

These internal contradictions in homelessness systems of intervention are perhaps unsurprising, however. Indeed, Fish and Hardy (2015: S104) assert that traditional linear cause-effect thinking evident in policy-making similar to that outlined above, “leads to unintended consequences” and is “often counter-productive”. This is because social phenomena are messy and characterised by uncertainty, heterogeneity and ambiguity concerning the nature of the problem as well as how it should be addressed. Therefore, policies that seek to ‘control’, without due regard for *context*, are destined to be unsuccessful (Chapman, 2004). However, it is precisely this kind of policy paradox that complex systems theory is well placed to examine, providing a crucial conceptual toolkit to understand empirical data about system states and asking the question: why do well-intentioned reforms fail to elicit the intended outcome? As Caffrey and Munro (2017: 465-466) write, a systems approach focuses on “explanations of the *process* of how policy works (or fails) and how it is interpreted as it interacts with other systems, producing [...] local variation and emergent effects [emphasis added]”. In this way, an important policy-relevant goal of this research was to adopt a complexity perspective to not only explain *why* families might experience different trajectories through, out and back into homelessness service systems, but to also shed light on *how* and *when* to intervene to ensure better housing outcomes.

It is generally acknowledged that theoretically-oriented research can be policy relevant (and *vice versa*); however, the theoretical chasm within contemporary homelessness literature is significant, not least because, as Neale (1997a: 59) points out, “if policy and provision continue to be used in an untheorised way [...] less than optimal solutions seem likely to persist”. Put differently, policy-relevant research needs to have a strong theoretical grounding if it is to adequately explain phenomena such as the dynamic patterning of families’ shelter use and guide the development of

effective interventions. Rather than seeking clear-cut answers, a complexity frame of reference disrupts “the dominant top-down approach, striving [instead] for humility and learning rather than espousing certainty and control” (Caffrey and Munro, 2017: 474). As Holland (2014: 548) writes:

Ideally, any inconsistency between expectations and actual results should lead us to revise the theory that informed the intervention; the revised theory should, in turn, become the basis for a new policy of intervention so that we have a process of dialectical reasoning in which theory informs practice and practice informs theory.

3.5. Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed the dominant theoretical perspectives within homelessness research and scholarship. A core argument presented was that there is a need for an explanatory framework that can overcome the strict agency/structure divide about causation whilst also building in the crucial dimension of *time* to attend to the dynamic and temporal nature of homelessness as a *process*. Complex-realism - whereby complexity theory is underpinned by a Critical Realist ontology - has been proposed as a novel theoretical approach with which to understand the dynamics and drivers of families shelter system trajectories. There are three fundamental aspects of this theoretical framework that are of particular relevance to this study: 1) it recognises that both homelessness service systems as well as the reflexive human agents that constitute them are *complex* systems; 2) it considers that both systems and agents are fundamentally interconnected, co-evolving and mutually adapting in response to each other and to changes in their environments; and 3) it takes the position that empirical regularities in the social world are not ‘law-like’ but rather situated and context-dependent.

While it is acknowledged that complex systems theory is an emerging framework rather than a single theory to be adopted holistically, it nevertheless offers the opportunity to yield analytical leverage in an investigation of families’ movements in and out of homelessness services over time. It does so by providing a means with which to develop useful (meso-level) middle-range theory that focuses analysis on emergent (macro-level) patterns that arise from (micro-level) interactions and relationships that by no means ignores the individual. One of the most common critiques of complex systems theory is that there appears to be “a trade-off between advanced theoretical underpinning and thorough empirical testing” (Gerrits and Marks, 2015: 544). This study seeks to redress this imbalance by extricating complexity theory from abstract discussions and applying it to empirical data to advance understanding of families’ progressions through homelessness systems of intervention in the Irish context. The following chapter outlines how precisely this was done and provides the broader methodological justification for this work.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Introduction

Taken together, Chapters 2 and 3 have sought to build an argument which asserts that the social world is replete with multiple interacting systems from which complex social issues like persistent or recurrent homelessness amongst families emerge. This level of complexity demands methods that are “able to investigate a problem from multiple viewpoints, with flexibility to adapt to changing situations, yet able to produce credible results” (Bazeley, 2018: 4). As such, this work employed a mixed methods sequential (explanatory) design to generate a rigorous and contextualised account of the dynamics of family homelessness in the Dublin region. The central aims were to advance understanding of *how much* variation there is in families’ shelter utilisation as well as the contexts, experiences and mechanisms that help to *explain* the patterns of variation observed. More specifically, the research objectives of the study were to:

1. Determine to what extent patterns of short-term, long-term and recurrent shelter use exist in the Irish context.
2. Identify risk and protective factors related to families’ prolonged and repeated shelter stays as well as those which facilitate lasting exits to alternative housing.
3. Generate in-depth understanding of the individual, contextual and structural drivers that influence families’ differing shelter system trajectories over time.

This chapter outlines the methodological justification for this work. It begins by detailing the ontological and epistemological orientation, research design and methods chosen to meet the stated aims of the study. Attention then shifts to a comprehensive discussion of the practical elements of ‘fieldwork’ (quantitative and qualitative), including data collection, analysis and ethical considerations. The chapter concludes with a discussion of two critical methodological considerations in mixed methods research: achieving integration and establishing rigour *via* the development of quality inferences.

4.2. Critical Realism as a Philosophical Paradigm: Ontology and Epistemology

Distinct from the theoretical perspectives which informed this study’s understanding of homelessness causation detailed in Chapter 3, the paradigm or world view in which this research is situated has direct implications for its ontological and epistemological positions⁵³. This study’s (and

⁵³ While the precise definition of ‘paradigm’ remains a contested topic (Shannon-Baker, 2015), this study draws on Morgan’s (2007: 49) conceptualisation which states that it refers to “systems of beliefs and practices that influence how researchers select both the questions they study and methods that they use to study them”. Put differently, it represents a particular ontological and epistemological package of agreed-upon principles and assumptions that inform the methodology and research design and with which researchers can ground their work and align their choices with their values. As Najmaei (2016: 23) writes, a paradigm therefore “guides the way we perceive, think and act during our daily research activities”.

indeed, my own) approach to ‘knowing’ is grounded in the philosophical paradigm of Critical Realism (Bhaskar, 1975, 1989; Lawson, 1997; Sayer, 1992, 2000). By way of clarity, Critical Realism (CR) as referred to here is not a ‘theory of science’; rather, as Gorski (2013: 660) asserts, it is a “*philosophy of science, a theory of what (good) science is and does [emphasis added]*”. Following Danermark *et al.* (2002), adopting a Critical Realist position means that this research is led by ontology as opposed to epistemological considerations concerning methodological preferences or disciplinary lenses. Put another way, this study puts theory before method; the nature of reality determines how we can and *ought* to gain knowledge of it. To demonstrate this fundamental relationship, the key tenets and philosophical assumptions of CR are first presented before discussing the methodological implications that a Critical Realist perspective holds for this work.

4.2.1. *The Core Principles of Critical Realism*

Born from the post-positivist crisis that occurred towards the end of the 20th century, CR emerged as an alternative paradigm that sought to do away with “the search for ‘general laws’ without simply abandoning the goal of causal explanation” (Gorski, 2013: 659). Critical Realists hold two primary assumptions that bridge the long-held philosophical divide between their interpretivist and positivist peers: first, in agreement with the former, they assert that because society is constituted by thinking and reflexive agents, social phenomena are therefore concept- and context- dependent; and second, in agreement with the latter, they argue that the criterion for existence is one of causal efficacy, meaning that rules, norms and structures are no less real for being unobserved or unobservable (Bhaskar, 1997). CR, then, represents a means by which to overcome the traditional dualism concerning objectivism and subjectivism in scientific research and it does so by distinguishing between ontology (what reality is) and epistemology (how we come to know about it).

In its simplest terms, CR proposes that an objective reality operates and exists beyond our conscious knowledge of it, but that we can only come to know about this world through our (wholly fallible) interpretation of social phenomena *via* direct observations. In other words, our knowledge is relative, subject to change and context-specific; we are also involved in the process of ‘knowing’, which, in essence, modulates what is known. In this way, CR recognises that our knowledge about reality is always socially determined as well as historically and culturally mediated while, at the same time, acknowledging that the social world has inherent, overarching structures that exist ‘out there’ and cannot necessarily be perceived, isolated and studied.

In this way, CR rejects universal claims to truth as well as approaches that reduce reality to experiences that are empirically observable and this perception ultimately hinges on the idea that the social world is stratified. More specifically, a Critical Realist approach assumes a three-stratum reality (see Figure 3): the level of ‘*the empirical*’, referring to our tangible experiences of social phenomena (that is, events which we can see and observe); the level of ‘*the actual*’, referring to all events (both observed and unobserved) that are activated (or not) under certain conditions; and the

level of *'the real'*, referring to the generative (causal) mechanisms, to use the language of CR, that produce all such events (Lawson, 2006; Pawson and Tilly, 1997; Sayer, 2000)⁵⁴.

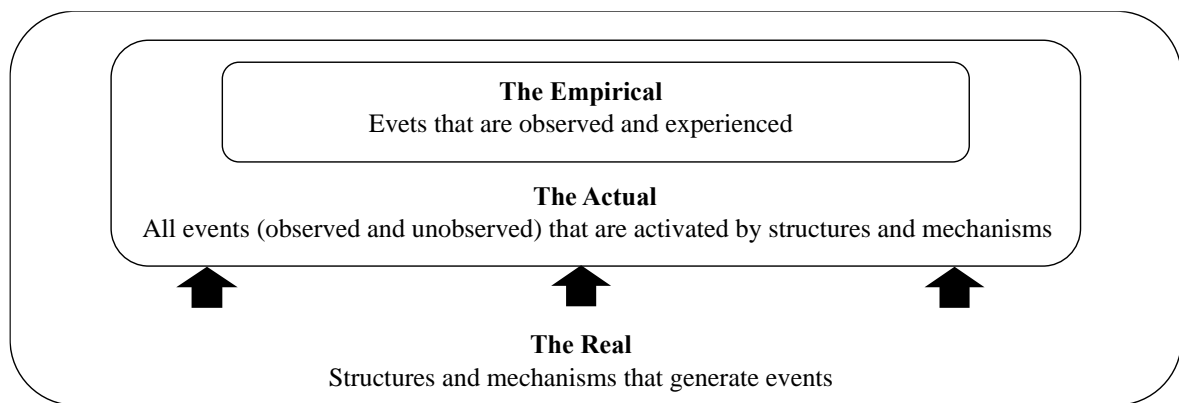


Figure 3: Critical Realism's Stratified Reality (adapted from Bhaskar, 1975)

CR's layered ontological reality means that the objective of any Critical Realist inquiry is not simply to identify empirical regularities or describe the lived experience of social actors; rather, it is to "develop a deeper level of explanation and understanding" (McEvoy and Richards, 2006: 29). It is this explanatory focus on a deeper dimension - on uncovering the underlying mechanisms that produce social phenomena - that differentiates CR from positivist and interpretivist philosophical traditions. As this level of reality, 'the real', is not always directly observable, a core goal of Critical Realist research is to *theorise* the best plausible explanation of the mechanisms that generate events and to discover "if they have been activated and under what conditions" (Sayer, 2000: 14). Through a process of conceptual abstraction and empirically grounded theory-building, Critical Realists thus propose mechanisms that "*if they existed*, would generate or cause that which is to be explained [emphasis in original]" (Mingers, 2014: 20).

Crucially, however - as discussed previously in Chapter 3 - within CR, causation is not viewed in the traditional positivistic sense (in which *event A + event B always = outcome C*); rather, it is acknowledged that the world is comprised of complex open systems in which causation is situated, generative and contingent. Reality, then, is 'multiply determined' (Bhaskar, 1975); many factors can combine, under various conditions, to cause social phenomena, yet these factors do not necessarily always lead to the same outcome for all people. This is not to say that the search for cause is a futile one; instead, an analysis of causal mechanisms makes it "possible to conduct a well-informed discussion about the potential consequences of mechanisms working in different settings" (Danermark *et al.*, 2002: 2). From this perspective, "causal laws must be analysed as *tendencies*, not as universal empirical regularities [emphasis in original]" (Danermark *et al.*, 2002: 203). Accordingly, the equation of causation as delineated by CR thus becomes: *mechanism + context = outcome* (Pawson and Tilly, 1997). It follows that the role of a Critical Realist is not to predict

⁵⁴ To be clear, these domains are overlapping such that "the empirical is a subset of the actual, which, in turn, is a subset of the real" (Holland, 2014: 531).

occurrences but to identify such mechanisms and describe: 1) how they are manifested in different contexts; and 2) how they counteract or reinforce each other so that the outcome varies.

4.2.2. *Critical Realism and its Implications for Methodology*

CR does not commit to a single research method or approach and endorses a broad spectrum of quantitative and qualitative techniques. CR's vertical and horizontal ontological depth does, however, necessitate 'critical methodological pluralism' (Danermark *et al.*, 2002: 176); that is, a process by which research decisions are "grounded in metatheoretical consideration" whereby intensive (qualitative) and extensive (quantitative) approaches are used to generate "different levels of abstraction of a multi-layered world" (Zachariadis *et al.*, 2013: 11). In other words, methodological tools cannot be used indiscriminately; meta-theory defines the limits of how and when to use different procedures which, in turn, "correspond to different issues and needs" (Danermark *et al.*, 2002: 176).

Within a Critical Realist framework that posits a complex stratified ontology, for example, wholly reductionist science, and thus, the notion of linear causation, is rejected. Under such assumptions, statistical analyses and correlations cannot and do not speak to the *causal status* of a relationship between variables; rather, they are operationalised to generate "descriptive summaries" of mechanisms as opposed to being used as "predictive tools" (Zachariadis *et al.* 2013: 8)⁵⁵. For this reason, extensive (quantitative) measures are deployed in Critical Realist inquiries to provide vital statistical information to *identify* and *describe* 'demi-regularities', that is, semi-predictable, re-occurring patterns of association in empirical data which indicate that there is, in fact, one or more generative mechanisms at work (Danermark *et al.*, 2002). Although these observable patterns are not law-like in the traditional sense, they nevertheless provide evidence of mechanisms since they 'hold' to such a degree "that *prima facie* an explanation is called for" (Lawson, 1997: 204).

The role of intensive (qualitative) approaches within CR, on the other hand, is more profound. This is because, as mentioned earlier, Critical Realists contend that society is constituted by individuals who act consciously and with purpose. It follows that both intentions and human interpretation of meaning "must therefore be regarded as causes and be analysed as tendencies" (Danermark *et al.*, 2002: 164). The implication therein is that an in-depth process-oriented account of the acting individual in their causal contexts is necessary to *explain* the social world (Sayer, 2000). Insights generated by qualitative analyses of narrative data, which focus on people's constructions of their experiences, are therefore considered to be a fundamental means by which to facilitate "situated analytical explanations" that reveal a *nuanced understanding* of the role of mechanisms, structures and agency in generating observable events (Zachariadis *et al.* 2013: 7).

⁵⁵ Quantitative techniques can be used, for instance, to empirically characterise the phenomenon under study, serving as a "quantitative measure of the numbers of objects belonging to some class or a statement about certain common properties of objects" (Sayer, 1992: 100).

From a Critical Realist perspective, both modes of inquiry are considered to be crucial and represent “indispensable features of the research process” (Danermark *et al.*, 2002: 175). Thus, while an ‘either/or’ methodological approach can be useful to advance understanding of particular aspects of a phenomenon under study, a mixed method model (that is, a ‘both/and’ approach) is considered to be the gold standard in Critical Realist research (Danermark *et al.*, 2002; Zachariadis *et al.* 2013). Situated in a Critical Realist paradigm, this study therefore sought to incorporate understanding from both intensive (qualitative/micro/agency) and extensive (quantitative/macro/structural) perspectives to examine the dynamics of family homelessness *as a whole* and generate comprehensive, in-depth answers to complex policy-relevant questions about the distinct trajectories that families take through, out and sometimes back into EA over time.

This section has laid bare the philosophical orientation of this work and, correspondingly, a theoretical justification for steering a course between positivism on the one hand, and interpretivism on the other to address the study’s research objectives. Importantly, it has also presented a cognitive framework (comprising a distinct set of principles and assumptions) in which quantitative and qualitative paradigms can be feasibly linked and related to each other for the purposes of theorising to better explain patterns of EA use amongst families in the Irish context.

4.3. Designing the Study

4.3.1. The ‘Why’: An Empirical Case for a Mixed Methods Approach

Mixed methods research (hereafter MMR) is an evolving form of methodological inquiry (Tashakkori and Creswell, 2007) that is increasingly recognised as a third major scientific approach or movement that stands alongside quantitative and qualitative paradigms (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003). The defining feature of MMR is, of course, the purposeful integration of differing qualitative and quantitative sources, methods and/or approaches *into a single study* that is achieved in such a way as to “become interdependent (a two-way process) in reaching a common theoretical or research goal” (Bazeley, 2018: 10). Yet, it is generally acknowledged that MMR is not a panacea given that methods are only strong or weak in *relation to the particular purposes they serve*; thus, MMR should only be considered “when the contingencies suggest that it is likely to provide superior answers to a research question or set of research questions” (Johnson *et al.*, 2005: 19). With this in mind, the following discussion outlines the empirical justification for the selection of a mixed methods approach for this work.

The integration of methods is generally considered pragmatic, whereby the advantages of one approach can be used to offset the weakness of the other (Bryman, 2006; Creswell *et al.*, 2003). Indeed, one of the core strengths of MMR is its distinct ability to develop robust “analytical density or richness” by extending the ‘reach’ and rigour of quantitative techniques with the depth and nuance of qualitative understanding (Fielding, 2012: 124). In this study, for example, it is acknowledged that although the systematic interrogation of large-scale administrative datasets of families’ movements in and out of EA can yield rigorous analyses and ‘broad brush’ findings, what is lost is the *context*

and *experiences* from which the data were drawn and derived. Likewise, it concedes that while qualitative inquiry and narrative data can generate rich, in-depth and context-specific insights into the processes, dynamics and lived experience of shelter use among families, the results are unlikely to produce policy-relevant inferences due to the small sample sizes typical of such study designs.

However, following Culhane and Metraux (1997: 357), it is argued that by ‘mixing’ these two types of data sources “both basic research and more in-depth issues” can be explored systematically. Put simply, knowledge of both a general and a contextual kind can be obtained. This point is an important one since the impacts of family homelessness are experienced on both individual and societal levels. Adopting an approach which synthesises inductive and deductive techniques thus offers an opportunity to provide “stronger and more accurate inferences” than using one method alone (Doyle *et al*, 2009: 178) whilst also facilitating creative ‘outside the box’ thinking when it comes to “theorizing beyond the macro-micro divide” (Mason, 2006: 5). This kind of study design therefore enables both empirical breadth and analytical depth to be used to produce detailed and nuanced insights about the dynamics and drivers of families’ shelter systems trajectories. As Miles *et al.* (2014: 43) explain:

The careful measurement, generalisable samples, experimental control, and statistical tools of good quantitative studies are precious assets. When they are combined with the up-close, deep, credible understanding of complex real-world contexts that characterise good qualitative studies, we have a very powerful mix.

Perhaps on a more fundamental level, MMR offers a means by which to “tap into different facets or dimensions of the same complex phenomenon” in order to generate “broader, deeper, and more comprehensive social understandings” (Greene, 2007: 101). From this perspective, quantitative and qualitative data are ‘inextricably intertwined’ insofar as “an element of qualitative, lived, observed experience lies at the heart of every number” (Bazeley, 2018: 176). Indeed, as was argued in Chapter 2, when it comes to homelessness, numbers do not always tell the full story. That is to say, while exploratory statistical analyses of administrative data can indicate the extent of recurrent and prolonged homelessness among families, for example, they are unable to tell us *why* these problems exist or *how* they might be resolved. However, by bringing together two fundamental ways of thinking about families’ movements in and out of EA *via* the linkage of a *variance-oriented approach* with *process-oriented strategies*, complementary insights about the temporal dimensions of family homelessness can be produced to ensure a more holistic and contextualised explanatory account (Fielding, 2012; Maxwell, 2012; Yin, 2013).

4.3.2. *The ‘How’: An Explanatory Sequential Mixed Methods Design*

There are an almost infinite number of ways various methods, concepts and approaches can be combined, sequenced and weighted in a meaningful (or indeed, unmeaningful) way to address differing research goals. However, Fielding (2012: 126) asserts that responding to complexity by using MMR “*always* requires epistemological clarity and sophistication [emphasis in original]”

which, in turn, necessitates a considered research design. As Tunarosa and Glynn (2016: 5) similarly argue, rather than being ‘parenthetical’ or simply something to ‘be added’, theory in MMR “is more foundational [...] providing a touchstone for shaping *how* methods are integrated in the construction of a compelling chain of explanation [emphasis added]”.

In the case of this work, then, it became clear that to fully answer the study’s research objectives, it was first necessary to use quantitative techniques to interrogate large-scale administrative datasets comprising information on families’ exits and (re)entries to EA to ascertain whether, to what extent and amongst whom, any distinct patterning exists. Following this, a qualitative approach comprising the conduct of in-depth interviews with parents would be required to facilitate a causal analysis of *how* and *why* such patterns are produced in the lives of families interacting with homelessness service systems. Thus, given the philosophical foundation and corresponding explanatory aim of this study, a *sequential explanatory* design (Creswell *et al.*, 2003) in which the two phases were equally weighted concerning their priority status (denoted as QUANT → QUAL) was considered the most appropriate MMR typology to implement.

The sequential explanatory design consists of two distinct phases of data collection and analysis that are conducted successively and connected in the intermediate and later stages of the research. According to Bazeley (2018: 78), in a sequential MMR model, integration occurs as one method is either contingent on or enriched by the analysis of data from the other, meaning that data from both phases “will mutually inform the results of the study”. Adopting a sequential *explanatory* approach, then, means that quantitative results, specifically, inform a subsequent qualitative phase to ensure that the ‘right kind’ of narrative data is collected to more accurately explain, elaborate and contextualise the statistical results (Bryman, 2006). Figure 4 demonstrates how this design was operationalised for this study.

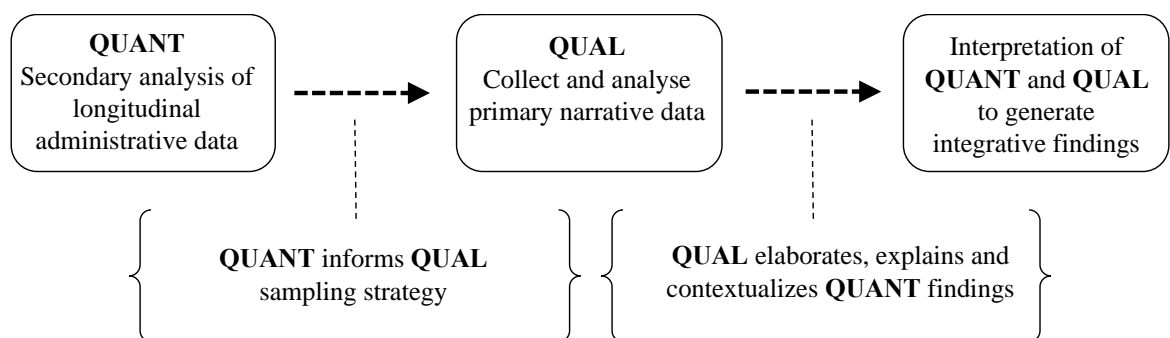


Figure 4: This Study’s Sequential Explanatory Mixed Methods Design

The overarching rationale for selecting this MMR design was not to generalise or confirm findings; rather, it was to allow for the development of the qualitative arm to *elaborate and extend* understanding of the mechanisms that drive families’ distinct shelter system trajectories over time. As such, the quantitative results provided the broader contextual picture in which to locate the qualitative data and fed directly into the development of the qualitative sampling strategy to inform the selection of theoretically interesting cases (families) for interview. Rich, concrete understanding

generated *via* in-depth interviews with these parents then helped to uncover the causal mechanisms driving the patterns of homelessness service use observed. This, in turn, facilitated the production of integrative findings that extended the breadth, depth and explanatory power of the research.

4.3.3. *The 'Who': A Typology of Homelessness for Classification and Comparison*

Underneath all our questioning lies the implicit acceptance of the axiom that no difference exists without a cause (MacIver, 1964: 28)

As mentioned earlier, this research sought to produce in-depth knowledge about the distinct and dynamic patterning of family homelessness in the Irish context. Classification, then, was a core plank of this work and, indeed, a fundamental step in the process of 'doing' science more broadly (Aldenderfer and Blashfield, 1984; Everitt *et al.*, 2011; Sokal and Sneath, 1963). While classification - referring to the ways in which we distinguish the similar from the dissimilar - is particularly useful for descriptive purposes, Byrne and Uprichard (2012) argue that it can also facilitate the teasing out of causality through an exploration of *difference*. To give an example, if three families were placed in EA for the first time and, over a number of years, they experienced three distinct trajectories where they either exited from, remained in or returned to, shelter, it stands to reason that there must exist some underlying causal tendencies that drove these differing service and housing outcomes.

It follows that by *comparing* these cases in their real-world contexts, one can more readily discern - or at least point to - the mechanisms that must be in place for a particular event to occur under certain conditions, but not others (Danermark *et al.* 2002). Typologies, then, can support the construction of theories to better understand the complexity of families' pathways through homelessness systems and provide important opportunities to gather critical evidence to inform policy and service development (Rog *et al.*, 2007). Indeed as Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007: 224) point out, "*not* examining the extent to which the voice should be disaggregated can lead to certain research subgroups being marginalized [emphasis added]". For this reason, this work incorporated a classification system from the outset that was used to facilitate a meaningful comparison of cases throughout the quantitative and qualitative stages of the study.

As Fitzpatrick (2005: 12) explains, what is required here are "overlapping, shared (but not necessarily identical) experiences which give rise to similar impacts on individuals (that is, similar emergent attributes and causal tendencies)". To offer a more valuable contribution to the discipline, this research set out to maintain consistency with the wider homelessness research literature by following Denis Culhane and colleagues by utilising a typology of homelessness that groups families based solely on their shelter utilisation patterns (Kuhn and Culhane, 1998; Culhane *et al.*, 2007). More specifically, it was planned that the key variables of interest with which to facilitate a comparative analysis throughout all phases of the research would relate to the frequency and duration of their recorded stays (or episodes) in EA. Divided into three sub-groups, these shelter use profiles are defined as follows:

- 1) ‘*Transitional*’ (low number of episodes in EA but each of a relatively short duration);
- 2) ‘*Episodic*’ (high number of episodes in EA but each of a relatively short duration); and
- 3) ‘*Chronic*’ (low number of episodes in EA but each of a relatively long duration).

Although this time-*aggregated* approach to typologising homelessness service use has not escaped criticism⁵⁶, alternative time-*patterned* approaches run the risk of producing categories so unwieldy that they preclude meaningful theoretical or practical analysis. As Pleace (2016) writes, “enough complexity in data may cause a breakdown in existing taxonomies, which [...] can collapse in the face of enough intricacy”. Moreover, the theoretical basis for employing Kuhn and Culhane’s (1998) original typological approach to homelessness service use is supported by the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, which has consistently confirmed the existence of these three broad service user profiles across varying jurisdictions and time-frames. This, in turn, provides reasonable grounds on which to assume that these groupings or patterns of service utilisation are indeed real and not merely imposed by any particular method or by any particular researcher(s).

4.4. Selecting the Research Methods

4.4.1. Secondary Analysis of Longitudinal Administrative Data

The quantitative phase of this study required large-scale administrative data on families’ EA usage to examine their movements in and out of homelessness service systems over time. As discussed in Chapter 2, a noteworthy body of contemporary homelessness research has emerged based on analyses of longitudinal administrative data on shelter utilisation. This data revolution can be largely attributed to the development of electronic administrative systems designed to track homelessness service use for the purposes of record-keeping by government and voluntary organisations in a growing number of countries, including the US, Denmark, Scotland, Wales, Ireland and France as well as several provinces in Canada (Culhane, 2016). More recently, in Australia, an innovative and globally unique approach to using longitudinal administrative data to explore pathways in and out of homelessness was established via the *Journeys Home* study (Johnson *et al.*, 2015, 2018; Scutella and Johnson, 2012; Wooden *et al.*, 2012)⁵⁷. Generally speaking, however, homelessness administrative systems typically comprise basic computerised data on registered shelter users, including demographics and the exact timings of their entries to and exits from EA. This has led to the generation of robust longitudinal data archives of cumulative client-level data on homelessness service utilisation that “do not rely on self-report and are population-based” (Culhane, 2016: 111).

⁵⁶ It has been argued, for example, that this typology may overlook more nuanced patterns of shelter use and important insights into the sequencing of shelter (and non-shelter) stays (McAllister *et al.*, 2010, 2011).

⁵⁷ Unlike other administrative datasets, this six-wave national panel survey integrated a rich array of data from multiple sources for a diverse and representative sample of Australian welfare recipients (n = 1682) who were either experiencing homelessness or considered to be at risk of homelessness at baseline, thus enabling longitudinal multivariate analyses of housing and other outcomes over time (Johnson *et al.*, 2018; Ribar, 2017).

The ability to collect and interrogate such data has not only enabled systematic monitoring of homelessness trends at both local and national levels but also “a new perspective from which to *research* homelessness [emphasis added]” (Metraux *et al.*, 2001: 346). Indeed, these data infrastructures offer wide coverage and scale through large sample sizes or full censuses of service users in some cases (Connelly *et al.*, 2016) and facilitate the collection of detailed information on marginalised and ‘hard to reach’ populations *via* unobtrusive means (Jay *et al.*, 2018). They also provide an opportunity for large-scale *longitudinal* analyses with little loss to follow-up that is rare in homelessness research due to the immense resources typically needed to implement a prospective longitudinal study requiring primary quantitative data collection (Bryman, 2004). Finally, such breadth and scope offers an opportunity to identify comparison groups and enable subgroup analyses typically unavailable through traditional research methods (Culhane, 2016).

Yet, mobilising administrative data for research purposes brings with it its own unique set of challenges. Later sections in this chapter detail the practical issues and processes related to gaining access, repurposing administrative data for statistical analyses and important ethical considerations that must be addressed in research that utilises data drawn from administrative systems. However, perhaps the most critical problems they pose for researchers is that: 1) they are *non-exhaustive* and *service-centric*, since those outside the remit of official homelessness services are underrepresented; and 2) they are *decontextualized*, since these systems are designed to measure service contact and not service *experience* (that is, they tell us about people’s movements through service systems but not about *the people* using services) (Connelly *et al.*, 2016; Culhane, 2016). It is for this reason that it has been argued that administrative data on shelter use can only “supplement, not supplant, other methods for gathering primary data” (Culhane and Metraux, 1997: 357).

Despite these limitations, administrative data present a rare opportunity for rigorous research that helps to shed light on the *prevalence* and *duration* of shelter use amongst families as well as the dynamic patterning of the trajectories they take through and out of EA. This not only offers unprecedented insights into social processes but also allows for the generation of research evidence that has a “high level of external validity and applicability for policy making” (Harron *et al.*, 2017: 1). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that harnessing the evidentiary power of administrative data has become “the most prevalent, comparable, systematic, and timely means” for generating comprehensive knowledge of the features, trends and characteristics of homelessness service users (Metraux *et al.*, 2001: 346).

4.4.2. *In-depth Qualitative Interviewing*

Objectifying sciences give us second-order understandings of the world, but qualitative research is meant to provide a first-order understanding through concrete description. (Brinkmann, 2020: 287)

As noted previously, the qualitative arm of this research was designed to produce enriched understanding and contextualised explanations of the statistical findings derived from the preceding

quantitative component. More broadly, qualitative research methods use open-ended questions to obtain information of a non-measurable nature and provide access “to the meanings people attribute to their experience and social worlds” (Miller and Glassner, 1997: 100). The purpose of a qualitative interview, then, is to understand an individual’s motivations, perceptions and behaviours by examining experiences that are *felt* and *lived*. Unlike quantitative methods that necessarily strip data of their complexion in order to generate testable variables at the macro level, qualitative methods focus explicitly on *the individual*; they adopt a ‘whole person’ and dynamic approach that preserves the quality of reflexive human beings in their real-world settings which “can only be captured via intensive engagement” (Padgett, 2012: 3). Rather than seeking generalisation, this method facilitates the production of rich, in-depth and meaningful insights into the “lived textuality” and contextual complexity of specific cases (Denzin, 1995: 197). Indeed, in her work on sociological biographies, Stanley (1993: 45) argues that:

From one person we can recover social processes and social structure, networks, social change and so forth, for people are located in a social and cultural environment which constitutes and shapes not only what we see, but also how we see.

In comparison to standardised surveys or more structured forms of qualitative methods, in-depth interviewing allows for a degree of conversational versatility in exploratory real world research with which meanings and interpretive frames can be thoroughly explored “rather than hiding behind a preset interview guide” (Brinkmann, 2020: 286). Acting as a ‘conversation with a purpose’ (Webb and Webb, 1932: 130), this technique facilitates a (semi)structure that is flexible enough for participants to guide the direction of the interview (allowing for elaboration of topics deemed personally significant) whilst also ensuring that the major domains of experience are covered over the course of the discussion (Kvale, 1996)⁵⁸. This distinct focus on personal accounts permits the intensive exploration of participants’ own understanding of events as well as a fine-grained view of ‘turning points’ in their lives (Hermanowicz, 2013). While in-depth interviewing bears particular issues - such as those related to recall and the tendency towards selective memories - these concerns are tempered since qualitative data are not viewed under a post-positivist framing of the search for objective social ‘facts’; rather, they are valued (and indeed, are valid) “for the express purpose of understanding people’s interpretations of their world” (Presser, 2009: 9).

Importantly, the term ‘trajectories’ in this work delineates a focus on generating narrative descriptions of how things change or stay the same with the passing of time. As Clausen (1998: 196) asserts, “when our focus is on developmental processes, it is the path itself that we wish to describe along with the influences that shape it”. It was therefore planned from the outset that a carefully reconstructed event history of families’ service use contact, as well as their subsequent residential

⁵⁸ Cook (2008: 423) describes this process as a conversation that “oscillates among the researcher’s introduction of the topic under investigation, the participant’s account of his or her experiences, and the researcher’s probing of these experiences for further information useful to the analysis”. This, in turn, provides the researcher “with in-depth information on the topic of interest without predetermining the results” (Cook, 2008: 423).

pathways (where relevant), would be collected *via* a retrospective account. This approach allowed for “the causes and consequences of change to be understood ‘backwards’, from the vantage point of the present” (Neale *et al.*, 2012: 5), thus facilitating a process-orientated analysis that focused on the important dimensions of ‘transition’, ‘continuity’ and ‘change’ in order to “examine the process of becoming” (Byrne, 1997: 4). By exploring the multi-dimensional layers of meaning and experiences associated with families exiting, remaining in or returning to EA, a more textured understanding of *why* and *how* these processes unfold in families’ lives was possible.

4.5. Conducting the Research

4.5.1. The Quantitative (Extensive) Phase

The first phase of this research was designed to address the first research objective: that is, to *determine to what extent patterns of short-term, long-term and recurrent shelter use exist in the Irish context*. This section outlines how this was achieved by detailing the processes of identifying, accessing and assembling the dataset; the activities undertaken to deal with missing values and to prepare the data for analysis; the statistical procedures employed; and the ethical issues considered.

4.5.1.1. Identifying the Administrative Database

Operated by the DRHE since 2011 and rolled out nationally in 2013, PASS is a shared electronic homelessness management system that collects real-time information regarding homelessness presentation and bed occupancy across the four Dublin local authorities (Dublin City, Fingal, Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown and South Dublin) as well as basic demographic data pertaining to each service user. PASS was therefore identified as a suitable administrative system that could act as the primary source for the study variables for the quantitative phase of the research. In other words, PASS was deemed capable of generating a longitudinal dataset to characterise the population of families utilising EA in the Dublin region and enable statistical calculation of the duration and frequency of their shelter stays.

While these data provide universal coverage and a full consensus of all State-funded homelessness services in the region, which account for approximately 90% of all emergency beds (Waldron *et al.*, 2019), it is important to note that they do not provide a complete enumeration of family homelessness in Ireland. There are a number of reasons for this. First, although mothers and children escaping DV in refuges were initially included in PASS, they were subsequently transferred to the auspices of Tusla, The Child and Family Agency, from 1st January 2015 and have not been recorded in the system since that time (O’Sullivan, 2016a)⁵⁹. Second, the system does not collect information on families living in the small number of homelessness services that are *not* publicly funded (accounting for under 200 emergency beds nationally) or those in situations of hidden

⁵⁹ For reference, there are a total of 21 State-funded residential DV services in Ireland with an approximate bed capacity of 250 (Allen *et al.*, 2020). Although no official statistics are provided by Tusla, national aggregate figures collected by a representative body in the period from 2012 to 2018 suggest that between 1,138 and 1,875 women (as well as 1,667 and 2892 children, respectively) were accommodated in a refuge during this time (Safe Ireland, 2012-2018).

homelessness or sleeping rough, though it is highly unlikely that families are experiencing street homelessness to any great extent in Ireland (O’Sullivan, 2016a)⁶⁰.

PASS also excludes families who are supported by systems of intervention that operate under different governmental departments or funding streams, such as the Department of Justice and International Protection Accommodation Service. This means that those who are seeking asylum or have been granted ‘refugee’ status or ‘leave to remain’ in Ireland but remain accommodated in DP reception centres for international protection applicants are not currently recorded. As of June 2018, this included some 780 persons who were unable to leave DP due to a lack of affordable housing and approximately 900 persons who had been placed in commercial hotels and B&Bs due to capacity constraints in DP facilities (O’Sullivan, 2020).

Finally, it is worth noting that in 2016, an unspecified number of families who would have typically been referred to EA in previous years were diverted from accessing homelessness services as they were directed straight towards the PRS with rental subsidies. Between January 2017 and June 2019, however, “approximately 3,700 households received this enhanced support and, as result, did not enter emergency accommodation” (O’Sullivan, 2020: 90).

Despite these limitations, PASS nevertheless provides the most “timely, detailed, reliable and consistent” minimum estimate of the extent of homelessness in the country (O’Sullivan, 2016a: 17) and “allows for an exploration of [homelessness] trends with a degree of accuracy that is uncommon” in a European comparative context (O’Sullivan, 2020: 53). Moreover, compared with the more comprehensive National Census figure for homelessness, it has been noted that the PASS figure for individuals residing in EA - when adjusted for differences in methodology and definition - was almost identical, suggesting that PASS data “are a reasonably robust, albeit imperfect, indicator of trends in the numbers in emergency accommodation in Ireland” (O’Sullivan, 2020: 52).

4.5.1.2. *Accessing and Assembling the Dataset*

Meetings were sought and held with representatives in the DRHE (i.e. the data ‘controllers’) to request access to use PASS data for this study. This resulted in an understandably complex and lengthy negotiation and governance phase that took place over a 17-month period (see Appendix B) and is typical of studies that legally require agency consent to utilise public administrative data for a given research project (Connelly *et al.*, 2016; Culhane, 2016). This process culminated in formal permission to use PASS data being granted and a Memorandum of Understanding being signed once ethical approval for the conduct of the research had been obtained from the Research Ethics

⁶⁰ Allen *et al.* (2020) point out that data from consistent point-in-time counts on rough sleeping conducted by the DRHE in Dublin twice a year have recorded an average of 108 individual adults experiencing street homelessness over the past decade, with the highest number recorded being 184 in November 2017. Of those sleeping rough, a majority also used EA, with only 20% not accessing EA over the period 2012-2016. While at the time of writing there were no exact figures on hidden homelessness in Ireland, national data have been collected *via* the housing needs assessment conducted by local authorities since 2013, which indicate that between 35,000 and 40,000 households (including families, couples and singles) have been assessed as being eligible for social housing support due to living in ‘inappropriate’, ‘unfit’ or ‘overcrowded’ accommodation.

Committee, School of Social Work and Social Policy, Trinity College Dublin. The characteristics of the administrative dataset generated for the purposes of the study are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Characteristics of the Study’s Dataset

CHARACTERISTIC	DESCRIPTION/DETAILS	
Population	Adults (aged 18 years or over) with accompanying children residing in State-funded emergency accommodation	
Area	All four Dublin local authorities (Dublin City, Fingal, Dun Laoghaire - Rathdown and South Dublin)	
Observational period	January 1 st 2011 – December 31 st 2016 (6 years total)	
Variables	<i>Service-level</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entry date(s) to emergency accommodation • Exit date(s) from emergency accommodation • Accommodation name • Accommodation category (STA, PEA, TEA)
	<i>Demographics</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Date of birth • Gender (male, female) • Country of origin • Ethnicity
	<i>Family-level</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Household type (one-parent, two-parent) • Number of accompanying children
	<i>Database-level</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unique identification code (UIC) • UIC of linked client (in the case of two-parent families)

More specifically, the longitudinal dataset comprised all adults with accompanying children residing in State-funded EA located in the Dublin region during a six-year observational period spanning from 2011 to 2016. The years selected for analysis were based on data that were readily available at the time of the study. Moreover, since the exposure period spanned several years, it can be reasonably assumed that a considerable proportion of families who may have initially experienced hidden homelessness prior to presenting to services were included⁶¹.

Personnel in EA are required to update PASS following each contact an individual has with the homelessness service system. The **service-level** variables were therefore derived from the exact timings of each individual’s recorded stays in State-funded EA; that is, the dates of every admission into, and subsequent departure from, STA, PEA and TEA services in Dublin. The **demographics** were self-reported following an on-site assessment and included the following variables: gender, date of birth, country of origin and ethnicity. For the purposes of this work, specific **family-level** data were purposefully retrieved and prepared by data processors in the DRHE to create additional variables on the number of accompanying children and household type (one-parent, two-parent). And finally, the **database-level** variables included a unique anonymised identification code (UIC) linked

⁶¹ Although administrative data systems only collect information on those accessing designated homelessness services, Metraux *et al.* (2001) point out that, *over time*, most individuals who experience other forms of hidden homelessness will access official support systems at one point or another.

to service users' State-issued Personal Public Service number - a personal identifier used to access public welfare in Ireland - that was used to control for duplicates as well as a 'linked client' variable using UICs in the case of two-parent families, which facilitated the grouping of family units⁶².

Once the various data files were combined, a master dataset was established which, following the removal of duplicate entries, contained 29,519 rows of data, each representing a separate service contact corresponding to 3501 unique individuals (that is, adults not yet grouped into family units).

4.5.1.3. Treatment of Missing Data

Frequencies and manual inspections were conducted on the dataset to establish the coding pattern and profile of missing data for each variable, which, overall, was relatively low. A majority were located in the 'exit date' variable where 1111 of 29,519 cells (3.7%) were blank. Exploratory data analysis, whereby data were manually reviewed on a case-by-case basis, and consultation with internal data processors in the DRHE revealed that these missing data were blank due to the individual still being in the PASS system at the end of the observational period. In these instances, blank cells were filled with the end-date of the observation period (that is, 31st December 2016), though it is acknowledged that the true duration of some individuals' final recorded episode may have been longer. For other variables, the missing values once the dataset was aggregated were as follows: 'number of accompanying children' (0.03%, n = 1); 'date of birth' (0.1%, n = 3); 'country of origin' (1.8%, n = 48); and 'ethnicity' (1.8% n = 46). These values were coded as missing in *The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS), which was used for all analyses, and were therefore excluded on a pairwise basis from the calculation of correlations⁶³.

4.5.1.4. Data Preparation

A major challenge associated with the secondary analysis of longitudinal administrative data is the interpretability, coherence and accuracy of data items. Indeed, by virtue of the fact that such administrative systems are not purposefully designed to collect data for research, the data produced are typically voluminous, complex and considerably messy (Cheng and Phillips, 2014; Connelly *et al.*, 2016; Culhane, 2016). As a consequence, data management practices are always necessary to

⁶² Household 'type' or composition can be fluid over time as some relationships form, dissolve and/or are re-constituted; moreover, it may be the case that the same individual stayed in EA with a partner in one instance, but without a partner in another. Thus, it should be noted that those categorised as 'two-parent' or 'one-parent' families may not have necessarily remained stable over the entire course of the observational period. However, these administrative decisions were made prior to the data being transferred by appointed internal data processors who also had access to detailed but confidential case notes on each individual client to assess what classification was most accurate. Similarly, as the number of accompanying children may change over time, a standardised procedure was put in place whereby the maximum number of children recorded in the system was listed for each client at all time points. Essentially, this means that those children who were not *living with* or in the care of the parent(s) were not recorded in the PASS dataset.

⁶³ It is possible that missing values in the 'country of origin' and 'ethnicity' variables could be related to an individual not wishing to disclose their migrant status to a case worker during their assessment. That is to say, it is possible that individuals not born in Ireland were more likely to leave this question blank. However, as these data could not be imputed, it was considered more appropriate to code them as missing and exclude them from the analysis.

verify data consistency and enhance data quality. To this end, substantial exploratory data analysis was undertaken to familiarise myself with the data and effectively organise, clean and prepare them for statistical analysis⁶⁴.

First, a number of variables were recoded to better meet the purposes of the analysis (see Appendix C). Next, since PASS records each contact an individual has with EA regardless of whether or not they stay overnight in any given service, all entries for which an individual did not spend at least one night in services were deleted, resulting in the removal of 1762 rows of data. Following Kuhn and Culhane (1998) and Benjaminsen and Andrade (2015), it was also deemed necessary to restrict the dataset at the beginning and end of the observational period to minimise censoring bias as failing to do so could depict service utilisation that is either less or more intensive than is the case “by missing unrecorded days and episodes” (Kuhn and Culhane 1998: 213)⁶⁵. However, while the size and scope of Kuhn and Culhane’s (1998) study (which included some 137,657 individuals over a seven-year time-frame in the case of their New York sample) allowed them to censor all data falling within three years on either side of their exposure period without significantly reducing the overall number of cases, this work follows an approach similar to Benjaminsen and Andrade (2015) by applying a less restrictive criterion.

This served two purposes: first, it preserved the study’s sample size, thus allowing for meaningful statistical sub-group analyses to be conducted; and second, it helped to ensure that the number of families who experienced long-term and recurrent patterns of homelessness service use were not underestimated in the research. For left-censoring, the dataset was therefore checked to identify individuals who were in the PASS system over the one-month period between 1st January 2011 and 30th January 2011 but did not subsequently return. Although 11 individuals were in the PASS system during this time, all had multiple subsequent entries and so were retained in the dataset. For right censoring, 345 individuals were identified as being in the PASS system between 1st of December 2016 and 31st December 2016; of these, 50 had no previous entries and were removed from the dataset.

Since PASS data on service utilisation were presented in multiple entries (whereby each row of data corresponded to the dates of one individual intake) they needed to be reshaped in order to be useable in further analysis. As such, two new variables that represented the *total number of cumulative nights* spent in EA and the *total number of episodes* in EA during the observation period were created for this purpose. The former was calculated by tallying the total number of nights each family had spent in EA over the six-year time frame. The latter necessitates specification of what is

⁶⁴ This was a long and complex process that was significantly aided by establishing an ongoing ‘relationship of trust’ (Stiles and Boothroyd, 2015) with internal data processors in the DRHE who provided invaluable assistance by answering queries on how the variables were measured, collected and defined on PASS to ensure more accurate understanding, interpretation and meaningful use of the data.

⁶⁵ Put differently, it was necessary to ensure that the analysis did not include families who had just entered the PASS system towards the end of the exposure period (that is, families whose homelessness service system trajectories had presumably just begun) as well as families who were recorded once at the beginning of the exposure period but did not return over the course of the six-year time-frame (that is, families whose homelessness service system trajectories were presumably just ending).

considered to be an ‘episode’ of EA usage. While Kuhn and Culhane (1998) employed a 30-day gap criterion between shelter stays to demarcate a defined episode of homelessness, this study follows Benjaminsen and Andrade (2015) whereby episodes were separated (that is, considered distinct) when a family spent one or more nights out of shelter. This means that stays separated by a *minimum of one day* were collapsed into a single discrete episode.

There were a number of reasons why this approach was considered to be most appropriate for this work. First, it follows more recent methodological developments in the field (Benjaminsen and Andrade, 2015); second, it arguably represents a conceptually more appropriate representation of the topic under study, that is: *service utilisation* as opposed to homelessness more broadly; and finally, as it is not possible to accurately infer from the data whether a family’s housing problems were in fact resolved once they had exited EA, this approach does not simply assume a defined homelessness spell that is bookended by periods of housing stability. As Benjaminsen and Andrade (2015: 867) explain, “artificially lowering [the] number of shelter stays by imposing a longer period as an exit criterion may not only depict [a] pattern of shelter use as being more stable than it actually is but also make distinguishing this group in the statistical analysis more difficult”.

Once the variables were finalised, the data were reshaped from one family split across several rows to one row per family to ensure that analysis could take place on an individual level. First, it was necessary to establish a family reference person (FRP) that would act as a reference point or proxy for producing further derived statistics and to characterise the household as a unit (Martin and Barton, 1996). To avoid the outmoded sexism inherent in traditional ‘breadwinner’ approaches to defining heads of household, I followed Martin (1995) and Martin and Barton (1996) by removing sex as a determining criterion. Instead, a two-step process was implemented to identify the FRP amongst those categorised as two-parent families. This selection was based on the following criteria and data available: 1) whichever parent had spent the greatest number of days in EA with their children⁶⁶; and 2) if both parents recorded the same number of days in EA, then the oldest of the two was selected.

Finally, after randomly selecting 10% of cases to be inspected for data accuracy, a decision was made to standardise the immutable data elements (such as gender and ethnicity) among multiple entries for the same FRP across the dataset by choosing the values found on the most recent record (Rothbard, 2015). Following this process, the final dataset consisted of a total of 2533 families comprising 3451 individual adults.

4.5.1.5. Cluster Analysis

As mentioned, this study adopted Kuhn and Culhane’s (1998) widely recognised typology of homelessness service use and, as such, it also followed the authors by applying a confirmatory (as

⁶⁶ In some instances, for example, one partner had stayed in EA alongside their children more than the other who presumably stayed elsewhere during that time. For the purposes of this study, it was therefore deemed important that those included in the analysis were those who spent more time in homelessness service systems as a family unit.

opposed to an exploratory) cluster analysis to test this typology using Irish data on families in EA. In its broadest sense, cluster analysis is an umbrella term for a wide variety of multivariate statistical procedures that facilitate the identification of natural structures or groupings within a dataset of similar cases based on particular input parameters (Everitt *et al.*, 2011). This empirical classification system calculates distances (by proximity or degrees of (dis)similarity) between all pairs of variables being considered and “attempts to reorganize these [cases] into relatively homogenous groups” that are well separated (Aldenderfer and Blashfield, 1984: 7).

Although this statistical procedure is at its core fundamentally simple, it represents a valuable tool in the exploration of multivariate data and has strong merit for use in applied social research (Aldenderfer and Blashfield, 1984; Everitt *et al.*, 2011; Uprichard, 2009). This is because the approach can help to organise large datasets into meaningful sub-groups which can help us to better understand a phenomenon by providing “insights into the structure of the data, the nature of the units, and the processes generating the variables” (Doreian, 2004: 128)⁶⁷. In the case of homelessness research specifically, Kuhn and Culhane (1998: 214) explain that cluster analysis therefore provides “robust divisions between the groups in the shelter population which might not be picked up on by an exploratory analysis”.

Although a number of different clustering models and techniques were considered, including two-step and hierarchical cluster methods, the *k*-means (non-hierarchical) clustering algorithm was deemed most appropriate for the purposes of this research. This decision was made to not only maintain consistency with Kuhn and Culhane’s (1998) approach, but also because: 1) the number of clusters were theoretically derived and known *a priori*; and 2) the sample size was relatively large ($n = 2533$) (Everitt *et al.*, 2011). A *k*-means cluster analysis was then performed using SPSS (version 25), whereby the observations (n) were assigned to a user-specified number of clusters (k) using nearest centroid sorting based on a measurement of simple Euclidean distance (that is, the square root of the sum of squared distances).

Following Kuhn and Culhane (1998), a three-cluster model was applied to produce three distinct groups of homelessness service utilisation among families based on the Z scores of the two continuous variables: 1) *total number of cumulative nights* in EA; and 2) *total number of ‘episodes’* in EA⁶⁸. Using these user-specified constraints and input information, the *k*-means procedure started by randomly assigning all cases to the three clusters. Following this, the algorithm iteratively reassigned each case to the nearest centre of the associated cluster (that is, the centroid) with the aim of minimising the within-cluster variation (that is, the squared distance of each case to the centroid). If the reallocation of a case to another cluster decreased the within-cluster variation, this case was

⁶⁷It is worth noting that while clusters are sometimes clear, they are often ‘fuzzy’ or ill-defined; that is to say, it is not an exact science. As Everitt *et al.*, (2011: 3) remind us, “some classifications are more likely to be of general use than others”, however, they add that “a classification of a set of objects is not like a scientific theory and should perhaps be judged largely on its usefulness, rather than in terms of whether it is ‘true’ or ‘false’”.

⁶⁸As these variables used different measures (i.e. nights versus episodes), they were re-scaled and standardised prior to analysis such that the mean was zero and the variance was one.

reassigned to that cluster. The *k*-means procedure then repeated this process until convergence was achieved and there was no change in the cluster affiliations.

The cluster analysis therefore produced three distinct clusters with the *minimum* total sum Euclidian distance between the cases and their own cluster centres; or, put simply, a set of three distinct clusters of homelessness service utilisation among families that were *homogenous within* and *heterogeneous across*. Following Kung and Culhane (1998), these clusters were categorised and defined as follows: 1) *transitional* (low number of episodes and low number of cumulative nights); 2) *episodic* (high number of episodes and low number of cumulative nights); and 3) *chronic* (low number of episodes and high number of cumulative nights)⁶⁹.

As Breckenridge (2000: 261) reminds us, “cluster analysis can create as well as reveal structure”. Once the clusters had been finalised, the validity of the clustering solution was therefore examined by comparing the groupings in terms of variables that were *not* used to construct them (Aldenderfer and Blashfield, 1984). To implement this external validation procedure, cross-tabulation analysis and Chi-Square tests of independence were performed to explore statistically meaningful differences between the clusters with regards to FRPs’ demographic, family-level and service background characteristics. All of the tests were conducted at an alpha level (α) = .05 (Field, 2009) and Cramer’s V was used to interpret the strength of association between variables.

4.5.1.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the conduct of this research was sought and obtained from the School of Social Work and Social Policy’s Research Ethics Committee, Trinity College Dublin, in May 2017. As mentioned earlier, formal permission to access and use PASS data for the purpose of this work was granted by the data controller (that is, the DRHE) prior to the data being provided. As part of this process, a strict data-sharing protocol and communication strategy was developed in consultation with the DRHE to ensure the data were protected from improper disclosure at all stages of the research process. This included agreements related to data security and access; data-protection site-visits; and security incident and disaster recovery procedures (Stiles and Boothroyd, 2015).

A primary concern was to effectively guard against “potential re-identification or re-disclosure of personal information” (Culhane, 2016: 119). ‘Harm’ in this sense refers to a breach of confidentiality which may lead to an individual being stigmatised or incurring socio-economic costs as a result (Stiles and Boothroyd, 2015). For this reason, all data were pseudonymised on-site by an appointed internal data processor prior to being transferred *via* a secure online file-sharing mechanism (Connolly *et al.*, 2016). These data were stored in an encrypted folder on a password-protected computer. This computer was not a shared drive station and was located in a locked office

⁶⁹ It is worth noting that the concept and terminology of ‘chronicity’ as applied to homelessness is contested in the literature due to the pathological irreversibility it implies. It has been argued, for instance, that caution should be exercised when “describing as ‘chronic’ (for life)” a solvable issue that “is strongly related to socioeconomic factors” (Calvo *et al.*, 2020: 7). While this is an important consideration that warrants further discussion and debate, for the purposes of this work, the terminology used to describe the emergent clusters is consistent with the original model for the sake of continuity, clarity and cohesion throughout this thesis.

in a secure building with restricted researcher access to protect the data from unauthorised alteration, disclosure or destruction as well as accidental loss or destruction (Stiles and Boothroyd, 2015).

4.5.2. *The Qualitative (Intensive) Phase*

The qualitative phase of the study sought to address the second and third stated research objectives: *to identify risk and protective factors related to families' prolonged or repeat stays in homelessness services as well as those which facilitate successful exits to alternative housing and to generate in-depth understanding of the individual, contextual and structural drivers that influence families' differing shelter system trajectories over time.* This required a Gestalt switch whereby the lens of interest shifted from an outward macro-level focus on identifying broad patterns and trends in shelter use among families, towards an inward micro-level search for deep understanding and meaning that could help to *explain* the patterns observed. This section outlines how this was achieved by describing the qualitative sampling design and sampling scheme; the processes of accessing, recruiting and interviewing participating parents; how these data were analysed; and the most salient ethical considerations relevant to this phase of the research.

4.5.2.1. *Sampling Design*

MMR necessitates careful consideration and a degree of creativity when developing a sampling design that connects the quantitative and qualitative components of the research (Teddlie and Yu, 2007). As it was not possible to use the administrative dataset as a sampling frame for the qualitative component due to concerns expressed by the data holder about contacting individuals who may have been disengaged from homelessness services for some time, this work adopted a sampling approach in which the relationship between the quantitative and qualitative phases was considered 'parallel'. This means that the families who generated the study's quantitative and qualitative data were not directly derived from the same sample, but were "drawn from the same underlying population" (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007: 292). To this end, several criteria for inclusion were established to ensure a qualitative sample that was consistent with the quantitative component of the research. To participate in the study, an individual of any gender therefore had to be part of a family unit - that is, one or more adult(s) with one or more accompanying child(ren) - that was living in Dublin and was either currently residing in, or had exited from, State-funded EA⁷⁰.

4.5.2.2. *Sampling Scheme*

In addition to identifying an appropriate sampling design (that is, the framework within which the sampling took place), it was also necessary to develop an effective sampling scheme (that is, the specific strategies used to select participants) (Onwuegbuzie and Collins, 2007). Purposive sampling techniques (Patton, 2002) were considered appropriate to generate a *stratified qualitative sample* in

⁷⁰ As outlined earlier, all State-funded homelessness services are required to update PASS following each contact an individual or family has with EA. This means that there was an extremely high likelihood that the families recruited for the qualitative component were also recorded on PASS.

which families were strategically selected on the basis of being a representative case for each cluster or sub-group of homelessness service use - that is, transitional, episodic and chronic - identified during the quantitative phase. This approach was underpinned by the belief that these families were experts that were especially knowledgeable about the circumstances that shaped their patterns of EA use given their first-hand experience of remaining in, exiting from and returning to, homelessness service systems over time (Patton, 2002).

As mentioned previously, the purpose of the qualitative phase in this study was not to generalise but to produce ‘thick’ context-specific descriptions (Geertz, 1973) to provide crucial explanatory insights into the drivers of families’ distinct trajectories through, out and back into homelessness services that are not readily available from administrative data systems. As such, fewer cases were preferred in order to facilitate intensive engagement as well as deep case-analysis within the time available (Fusch and Ness, 2015; Sandelowski, 1995). Equally, however, it was deemed important to ensure that the qualitative sample was not so small as to preclude the telling of a rich story, often referred to as ‘informational redundancy’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Following the recommendations of Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) and Braun and Clarke (2013), it was therefore reasoned that it would be sufficient to recruit a *minimum* of three cases to represent each of the three cluster sub-groups to capture the depth of experience required, while a *total* sample of between 15 and 30 would enable the identification of themes across the data. As Figure 5 demonstrates, a staged approach to sampling was undertaken following which a total of 26 families were recruited, including parents that reported transitional (n = 7), chronic (n = 12) and episodic (n = 7) service use histories.⁷¹

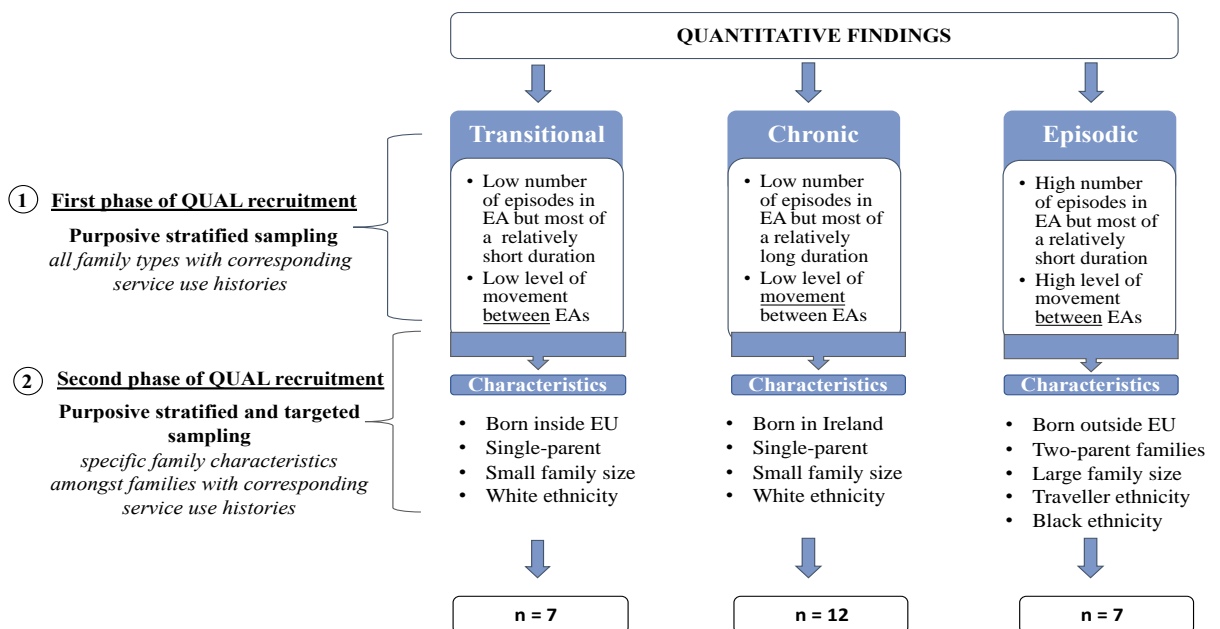


Figure 5: The Study’s Qualitative Sampling Strategy

⁷¹ A decision was made to oversample for families who fit the chronic service use profile since, as discussed in Chapter 2, this particular sub-group represents a relatively low proportion of shelter users yet consumes a disproportionately high level of resources.

Since the purpose of generating a stratified purposeful sample is to “capture major variations rather than to identify a common core, although the latter may also emerge in the analysis” (Patton, 2002: 240), the initial weeks of qualitative recruitment centred primarily on the aim of achieving diversity and avoiding over-representation of families from any demographic group or service population. To this end, all family types (one-parent/two-parent; large/small; male-headed/female-headed; born in Ireland/born outside Ireland) living in a range of living situations (including STA, PEA and TEA as well as private rented, local authority or AHB housing in the case of those who had left services) were considered when recruiting families whose shelter use histories corresponded to the transitional, chronic and episodic clusters. In keeping with the emergent and flexible nature of qualitative inquiry, the cases selected for interview were examined and monitored *via* a recruitment log to ensure that the recruitment process was adjusted and refined accordingly to represent the complexity of lived experiences (Obwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007).

During later months, targeted sampling techniques (Watters and Biernacki, 1989) were introduced in a decisive attempt to: 1) generate a qualitative sample that was consistent with the demographic make-up of the study’s quantitative sample; and 2) include important categories of families whose attributes were found to be statistically associated with cluster membership; findings that will be presented and discussed in much more depth in Chapter 5. For this reason, a second round of qualitative recruitment was undertaken to locate and reach families with specific characteristics in each sub-group to ensure that the experiences of these cases were represented in the study’s analysis. Although this approach to sampling was less rigorous than random sampling it nevertheless enabled the collection of “systematic information” to meet the assumptions of the research design (Watter and Biernacki, 1989: 420). Table 3 presents the demographic profile of the qualitative sample broken down by sub-group and displayed alongside the corresponding characteristics of the study’s quantitative dataset for comparative purposes.

Table 3: Demographic Breakdown of the Qualitative Sample, by Sub-group

	FRPs in QUANT SAMPLE N = 2533	FRPs in QUAL SAMPLE N = 26	TRANSITIONAL n = 7	EPISODIC n = 7	CHRONIC n = 12
GENDER					
<i>Female</i>	73% (n = 1855)	85% (n = 22)	6	5	11
<i>Male</i>	27% (n = 678)	15% (n = 4)	1	2	1
AVERAGE AGE					
<i>Years (mean)</i>	31.3 years	31.8 years	34 years	28.7 years	32.4 years
AGE-GROUP					
<i>18-29 years</i>	50% (n = 1267)	42% (n = 11)	2	3	6
<i>30-49 years</i>	46% (n = 1171)	54% (n = 14)	5	4	5
<i>50+ years</i>	4% (n = 90)	4% (n = 1)	0	0	1
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN					
<i>Ireland</i>	74% (n = 1836)	54% (n = 14)	4	5	5
<i>Outside EU</i>	18% (n = 455)	35% (n = 9)	2	2	5
<i>Inside EU</i>	8% (n = 184)	11% (n = 3)	1	1	1
RACE/ETHNICITY					
<i>White</i>	73% (n = 1806)	42% (n = 11)	5	1	4
<i>Black</i>	17% (n = 415)	31% (n = 8)	2	1	5
<i>Traveller</i>	8% (n = 211)	19% (n = 5)	0	4	1
<i>Asian</i>	0.5% (n = 14)	4% (n = 1)	0	1	1
NO. OF ACCOMPANYING CHILDREN					
<i>Average (mean)</i>	2.09	1.96	2.1	1.2	1.6
<i>1 child</i>	42% (n = 1057)	42% (n = 11)	0	5	6
<i>2 Children</i>	30% (n = 752)	35% (n = 9)	4	1	4
<i>3 Children</i>	15% (n = 385)	15% (n = 4)	1	1	2
<i>4+ Children</i>	13% (n = 338)	8% (n = 2)	1	1	0
FAMILY-TYPE					
<i>One-parent</i>	64% (n = 1621)	73% (n = 19)	5	4	10
<i>Female-headed</i>	94% (n = 1528)	96% (n = 18)	5	4	9
<i>Male-headed</i>	6% (n = 93)	4% (n = 1)	0	0	1
<i>Two-parent</i>	36% (n = 912)	27% (n = 7)	2	3	2

As can be seen, the quantitative and qualitative samples demonstrate proportional similarity in the categories of gender, age, number of accompanying children and family type⁷². Since families' cluster membership was found to differ significantly on the basis of migrant status (that is, those born in EU and non-EU countries) and race/ethnic minority background (that is, Black and Traveller), attempts were made to include a greater proportional share of parents with these particular traits, resulting in an overrepresentation of migrant participants by 20% as well as those who identified as ethnically Black or from the Traveller community by 14% and 11%, respectively.

Finally, among those categorised as *episodic* service users, at least one two-parent family, larger family (that is, with four or more accompanying children) and parent who identified as having a non-EU, Traveller and Black ethnic/cultural background was interviewed. Among those categorised as *transitional* and *chronic* service users, at least one single-parent family, smaller family (that is, with between one and three accompanying children) and parent who identified as ethnically White were included in both sub-groups while at least one parent from a country within the EU was recruited to the former and at least one born in Ireland was recruited to the latter.

4.5.2.3. Access and Recruitment

Negotiating access to facilitate recruitment was an incremental process. First, meetings were sought and held with a host of personnel in the homelessness service sector who either worked directly with (or had access to) families with experiences of homelessness. This included team leaders and members of the family HAT⁷³ as well as project managers and key workers in several homelessness services. This process unfolded over several months and allowed me to gain valuable local knowledge about services and their service user profiles (with regards to age, gender, ethnicity and so on); inform staff about the nature and purpose of the research; and engage with gatekeepers to negotiate access to recruitment sites⁷⁴.

Second, as the study aimed to recruit families with distinct service use histories and demographic attributes, I worked directly and intensively with service professionals to discuss whether they might know of any families that met the study's eligibility criteria, ensuring that no

⁷²Although attempts were made to oversample for *couples* with children and larger family sizes following the results of the statistical analysis, these particular groups proved difficult to locate and access; nevertheless, a total of seven two-parent families and two families with four or more children were recruited to the study.

⁷³As mentioned in Chapter 1, the family HAT is the principal service that assesses each family that presents as homeless in the Dublin region.

⁷⁴During these initial and subsequent meetings, the research, sampling strategy and what participation would involve for participants was explained in great detail with the aid of: 1) a *Recruitment Brief for Service Providers* (see appendix D) that was tailored to each service depending of the particular family characteristics and service-use patterns that were being targeted at any given time; 2) a detailed *Information Sheet for Service Providers* (see appendix E); and 3) a detailed *Information Sheet for Families* (see appendix F). All agreed to assist with recruitment and granted access/permission to use their services as recruitment sites *via* an agency consent form, where relevant (see Appendix G).

names or other identifying information was disclosed at this juncture⁷⁵. Gatekeepers then made initial contact with prospective participants to briefly inform them about the research, distribute the participant information sheet and ascertain whether the individual would like to be contacted to learn more about the study. In cases where an individual expressed an interest in taking part, their permission was obtained to have their contact details forwarded, at which point I called them to verbally explain the research and what participation would involve in more detail. If the individual chose to participate, an interview was then scheduled at a time and place of his/her choosing. Although complex and time consuming, recruitment was completed over a three-month data collection period that took place between May and July 2019.

4.5.2.4. *The Interviews*

In-depth interviewing's detailed yet conversational and exploratory orientation enabled the development of an open-ended and flexible interview schedule (see Appendix H) that was used as an *aide-memoire* to ensure that certain topics would not be forgotten while still allowing me to depart from the guide, jump between topics smoothly and respond to unforeseen topics as they emerged (Denzin, 1970). In keeping with the recommendation of Miles *et al.* (2014: 70), the questions posed were iteratively developed and refined over the course of the research to maximise the integrity and explanatory power of the data. A combination of techniques such as the use of probing, clarifying and follow-up questions were also deployed, where appropriate, to establish a more nuanced and textured understanding of the lives and experiences of the participating families.

After obtaining formal written consent, each participant was asked to start by describing their current living situation and life circumstances, including their family background and broader experiences of education and employment to make the participant feel more at ease. As rapport developed, they were invited to provide a retrospective account of their homelessness and housing histories. As mentioned earlier, this process was aided by a diagrammatic 'housing history' timeline similar to Clausen's (1998) 'life chart', that was completed during the interview (see Appendix I). Participants were asked to first plot a temporally ordered list of the different places they had lived as a family unit, including any private rented or owner occupied housing; periods spent living informally with friends, family members or in insecure living arrangements; and all homelessness accommodation, refuges or times spent sleeping rough. Participants were then given an opportunity to think about each living place and transition in-depth and to consider the personal contexts that preceded and characterised those points in their lives *via* the use of several prompts.

Although some degree of overlap was both inevitable and expected, particular attention was then focused on distinct aspects of participants' experiences of moving through the homelessness

⁷⁵ As data collection progressed, it became apparent that those with transitional service use histories (that is, those who had left EA and not returned) were invariably more difficult to access because many had subsequently disengaged from official homelessness service systems. To address this issue, I contacted a home-school liaison officer to assist with the recruitment of this particular sub-group. Following the same protocols and procedures already mentioned, this individual provided vital assistance in terms of connecting me with families who had previous experiences of homelessness but since moved to alternative housing.

service system depending on which cluster sub-group of homelessness service utilisation they represented. For example, in the case of those who had experienced transitional and episodic stay-patterns in EA, the interview focused on the *process* of exiting homelessness services including discussion of key turning points, facilitators and barriers to the exiting process, and the impact that transitioning out of - or indeed, returning to - services had on their family relationships as well as their personal and physical well-being. In the case of families who exhibited patterns of chronic service use, participants were invited to discuss the impact of prolonged stays in EA as well as their experiences of seeking housing including any (formal or informal) assistance they were receiving as well as any events or experiences that served an enabling or, alternatively, disabling function.

During the latter stages of the interview, and only if they were comfortable to do so, participants were invited to discuss any adversities or difficulties they experienced throughout *their own* lives that they felt might be personally significant. This question was left broad and open-ended; however, participants typically mentioned prior episodes of homelessness or housing instability that they experienced as single adults or as children; experiences in ‘out of home’ care during childhood or adolescence; and/or personal experiences of violence or victimisation. Finally, participants were encouraged to reflect on their interactions with, and understanding of, homelessness service and policy systems, including whether their perspectives had changed over time; their thoughts and concerns about the future; and their participation in the research process. To close the interview, basic demographic data were collected *via* a brief supplementary questionnaire (see Appendix J).

The interviews were scheduled in consultation with the participant and typically took place in the independent living arrangements of the individual or in a private meeting room that was either based in the service in which they were residing or located in the research office. With the participants’ permission, all interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed *verbatim* as soon as possible before being de-identified and stored on a password protected computer. These interviews ranged in time from approximately 40 minutes to 2.5 hours. While some individuals cancelled their initial appointments or failed to turn up on the day due to personal crises or illness, in all cases these interviews were successfully re-scheduled. Moreover, a lack of access to childcare services meant that parents’ availability was limited or that they had their young child(ren) or infants present. In these instances, some parents understandably opted to cut the interview short and a second date and time was arranged.

4.5.2.5. *Thematic Analysis*

This study employed thematic analysis (hereafter TA) as the principal analytic tool to facilitate systematic yet meaningful organisation, interrogation and engagement with the participating parents’ narratives. Although TA has been poorly branded and somewhat ill-defined until the last decade or so, its utility, theoretical flexibility and methodical approach to managing and abstracting meaning from qualitative data should not be understated (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As Hatch (2002: 148) puts it, “data analysis is a systematic search for meaning” and TA represents a straightforward, uncomplicated and foundational method for any such qualitative inquiry. Put differently, it offers a

means by which to enable the rigorous identification of patterns, themes or stories of shared meanings across a sample that help us make sense of data and produce meaningful research evidence (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2012, 2013; Braun *et al.*, 2014; Guest *et al.*, 2012; Miles and Huberman, 2002).

This study incorporated a branch of TA known as ‘reflexive’ TA (Braun and Clarke, 2019a). According to Braun and Clarke (2019a: 593), reflexive TA is distinct as it explicitly reflects the values of the qualitative paradigm by centralising the researcher’s role in the production of knowledge, foregrounding researcher subjectivity in the organic and recursive coding process and emphasises “the importance of deep reflection on, and engagement with, data”. Themes, then, do not passively ‘emerge’, but are actively created and constructed at the intersection of theoretical reflection, analytic labour and the data themselves (Braun and Clarke, 2019a). This approach also sits comfortably within a study philosophically underpinned by CR which asserts a mind-independent social world but views all knowable reality as concept- and context- dependent, thus valuing the human interpretation of meaning (Sayer, 2000). In this way, CR can enhance the interpretive power of reflexive TA by providing a theoretical framework in which to “anchor the analytic claims that are made” (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 97).

While there is no definitive set of rules for ‘doing’ TA, I relied primarily on a series of practices and strategies for TA outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) to guide the study’s qualitative data analysis. First, I immersed myself in the data by transcribing all interviews *verbatim* as soon as possible and preparing a case summary for each participant which entailed noting key biographical details/events, the nature and extent of the participants’ housing and homelessness trajectory and my initial impressions about the interview. I then subsequently revisited each transcript so that it could be re-read in “an *active* way [emphasis in original]” (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 87) by logging any noticeable patterns, emerging concepts or observations that struck me as significant or interesting.

Next, with the assistance of the qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, I inclusively coded the dataset whereby all important features and relevant extracts were labelled and subsequently collated into meaningful groups using both semantic (explicit, surface-level) and latent (implicit, underlying meaning) codes. To facilitate this iterative and recursive process, I incorporated a range of coding methods outlined by Saldaña (2015)⁷⁶. This, in turn, led to the development of a set of coding categories related primarily to conceptual and theoretical constructs that were emergent and grounded in the data rather than generated *a priori* (Miles and Huberman, 1994). At this point, I began interrogating the codes to abstract higher-level themes and patterns of meaning united by a central concept (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2013, 2019a). I utilised a number of visualisation techniques broadly related to TA, including conceptual/cognitive mapping (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and within-case and cross-case displays (Miles and Huberman, 1994) to enable comparative analysis

⁷⁶ This included, for example, descriptive coding (e.g. social environments, conditions, contexts, interactions); causation coding (e.g. attributions or causal beliefs about *why* a particular outcome event/pathway occurred); emotion/value coding (e.g. attitudes, beliefs/worldview, feelings, perspectives); process coding (actions/experiences intertwined with the dynamics of time); and versus coding (e.g. competing goals within, among, and between participants).

between cases. To consolidate my understanding of the themes, I identified connections between concepts and categories, reflected on how these relationships might relate to the wider literature and returned to the data to see if these observations could be confirmed.

This process allowed me to sort, focus, discard and organise data to ensure themes were consistent, coherent and distinctive. It was guided by several analytic and interpretive questions provided by Braun and Clark (2006) to refine and finalise theme development (such as, for example, ‘what does this theme mean?’; ‘what are the assumptions/implications underpinning it?’; ‘what conditions are likely to have given rise to it?’ and ‘what is the overall story the different themes reveal about the phenomenon?’). Following Braun and Clarke (2019b), I did not rely on the traditional concept of data ‘saturation’ nor the frequency or consensus of codes to assess the quality and relevance of the developed themes⁷⁷. Instead, I reflected on the relevance of the themes for the purpose and goals of the analysis, asking: ‘do they tell a compelling, coherent and useful story in relation to the research questions?’ and ‘do they offer useful or novel insights that speak to the topic in relation to the context and the sample?’ (Braun and Clarke, 2019b).

4.5.2.6. *Employing Retroductive Inference*

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Critical Realist research necessitates conceptual abstraction that can be achieved *via* a process of retroduction, defined here as a “mode of inference in which events are explained by postulating (and identifying) mechanisms which are capable of producing them” (Sayer, 1992: 107). Recognising that knowledge in a complex reality cannot be reduced to observable events, employing retroductive inference prompts the researcher to work backwards from the effects to the cause, asking such questions as: ‘what are the fundamental conditions under which X occurs?’ and ‘what structures/mechanisms makes X possible?’ Comparative analysis is especially useful for this purpose as it “provides an empirical foundation for retroduction, a foundation to sort out contingent differences in order to arrive at the common and more universal” (Danermark *et al.*, 2002: 105). Comparing sub-groups therefore helps us to more readily discern different generative mechanisms that are apparent under different conditions. It does so by provoking researchers to construct the best plausible explanation as to why one situation is different or the same as another by enhancing their capacity to understand how relationships may exist between discrete cases.

To this end, I followed Kidd *et al.* (2016) by adapting Clausen’s (1998) life review approach to conceptualise families’ distinct trajectories of homelessness service use in terms of turning points,

⁷⁷ Braun and Clarke (2019b) argue that the concept of data ‘saturation’ is arguably at odds with the fluid and organic coding process of reflexive TA when it is used to analyse rich, complex and messy data generated by qualitative in-depth interviewing. As they explain: “coding quality in reflexive TA stems not from consensus between coders, but from depth of engagement with the data, and situated, reflexive interpretation. And this process-based, and organic, evolving orientation to coding makes saturation [...] difficult to align”. From this perspective, meaning does not passively reside in a dataset, waiting to be fully excavated; rather, “meaning requires interpretation” and on this basis “new meanings are always (theoretically) possible” (Braun and Clarke, 2019b: 10). It is up to the researcher’s judgement, then, to make an interpretive decision about when to move on from each stage of the analysis.

stages and life events as they related to experiences of housing (in)stability. In a technique influenced by process-tracing (George and Bennet 2005) and event sequence analysis (Heise, 1989), I drew on the coded narrative data and housing history timelines generated during the interviews to identify key stages, antecedents and mediating factors for each participant to consider the progression of events that may have led to each outcome or causal path. These temporally ordered case-based descriptions were then examined and compared by sub-group, enabling me to consider alternative paths and conditions through which the outcomes could have occurred. Put differently, the same outcome was theorised according to different pathways to tease out salient differences and similarities within and between the groups to produce “broad and well-founded knowledge” of plausible generative mechanisms at work (Danermark *et al.*, 2002: 100).

4.5.2.7. Ethical Considerations

Families experiencing homelessness are often considered a ‘vulnerable’ group by virtue of their socio-economic disadvantage and marginalised status as well as their reliance on the State for financial or other forms of assistance⁷⁸. Central to ethical qualitative research is therefore ensuring respect for an individual’s autonomy through voluntary participation, informed consent and privacy. In this study, I spoke over the phone or met informally with all prospective participants to provide them with a verbal and written overview of the purpose and rationale of the research as well as a detailed and clear account of why I wanted to hear about their experiences, what their participation would involve, the potential risks and benefits and the topics that would be covered during the interviews (see Appendix F). This initial meeting also provided a space where families could ask questions, seek clarifications or voice any concerns they might have, during which time I informed them about the study’s confidentiality and anonymity protocols and reminded them that they should feel under no obligation to participate.

Once written informed consent was obtained (see Appendix K), a number of steps were taken to off-set the potentially unequal power dynamics during the interview process due to my position as a white, middle-class university researcher (see Appendix L). To ensure data protection and to protect confidentiality, all soft and hard copies of interview transcripts and any other research documents were stored on a secure, password-protected computer or in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher’s office. Disclosure risks were assessed on a continuous basis and a data anonymisation procedure was established prior to data collection whereby all identifiers, both direct (e.g. name, address, phone number) and indirect (e.g. place names, friends’ names, workplace) were removed from all archiving and dissemination of the research. Study participants were also assigned a unique

⁷⁸ The concept of vulnerability is a contested one in the realm of social science and policy research, largely for its lack of clarity (Brown *et al.*, 2017a) but also because of its potential to label or stigmatise individuals or groups due to its connotation with “victimhood, deprivation, dependency or pathology” (Virokannas *et al.*, 2018: 2). Cognisant of the need to ensure that the agency and capabilities of the participants were recognised, whilst also acknowledging structural issues of inequality and power that may affect their lives, this study therefore follows Virokannas *et al.* (2018) by adopting a relational view of vulnerability. From this perspective, families were not seen as vulnerable *people* but rather, people *experiencing* vulnerable life situations generated by social processes located in the interactions between individuals, society and institutions.

code and pseudonym at the outset that was used in all written and oral presentations of the research findings and is also used throughout the remainder of this thesis. Finally, in keeping with previous research on family homelessness (Rufa and Fowler, 2017; Walsh and Harvey, 2015) participants received a €40 gift voucher at the end of the interview as a token of appreciation for the significant time and effort that they had invested in the study.

4.6. Achieving an Integrated Mixed Methods Analysis

Integration is at the heart of mixed methods research; it is both its greatest advantage and arguably its greatest challenge (Tunarosa and Glynn, 2016: 1)

As discussed earlier, MMR includes a mix of pre-determined (closed-ended, quantitative, extensive) and emergent (open-ended, qualitative, intensive) methods in a single empirical study. The role of the researcher, then, becomes one of a ‘bricoleur’, tasked with inter-weaving these differing data sources to generate coherent and meaningful research evidence (Bazeley, 2018). In a mixed methods study, the quantitative and qualitative findings are mutually informative; rather than talk past each other, “they will talk *to* each other, much like a conversation or debate, and the idea is then to construct a negotiated account of what they mean together [emphasis added]” (Bryman, 2007: 21). Yet determining *how*, *when* and the extent to which integration *should* occur is contested (Greene, 2007; Bryman, 2007). For instance, while some have argued that, at the very least, MMR should be integrated in the discussion of results (Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2011), others, like Yin (2006), assert that for a study to be genuinely integrated, ‘mixing’ must occur at all stages of the research process: from question setting and design to sampling and analysis.

By and large, however, such decisions inevitably hinge on the overall purpose a mixed methods approach serves in any given inquiry (Fielding, 2012). As discussed earlier in this chapter, the integration of methods in this study sought to achieve *analytic density* by extending the breadth, depth and scope of understanding, as opposed to confirming or generalising results (Fielding, 2012). Drawing on the work of Fetters *et al.* (2013), this research therefore comprised several key points of integration where qualitative and quantitative components and/or phases intersect (see Figure 6).

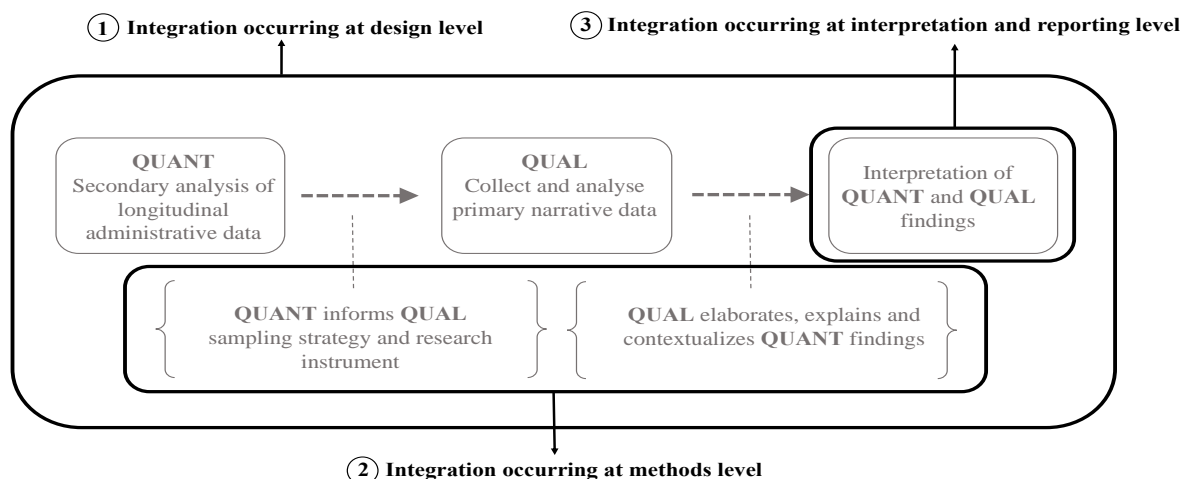


Figure 6: Key Points of Integration in this Mixed Methods Study

More specifically, integration occurred at *the design level*, whereby the linking of the quantitative and qualitative phases for the express purpose of explanation (QUANT → QUAL) was built into the overarching conceptualisation, research objectives, and philosophical foundation of the study; at *the methods level*, through the quantitative results informing the qualitative sampling strategy and, in turn, the qualitative phase contextualising and explaining the statistical findings; and finally, at *the interpretation and reporting level*, where data were analysed together using matrices, visual displays, and brain-storming sessions before being woven together and presented alongside each other in a complementary style, where relevant.

Designing and implementing the study in this way permitted an integrated and synthesised understanding of the dynamics of family homelessness in the Irish context that respected the epistemological precepts underpinning the different methods (Fielding, 2012), whilst also facilitating the development of generative insights or ‘meta-inferences’ (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003); that is, jointly constituted research evidence or understanding (a whole) that is greater than the sum of its (qualitative and quantitative) parts. This, in turn, offered an opportunity to generate a coherent, sophisticated and analytically deep understanding of families’ shelter system trajectories than would have been possible from using one method alone⁷⁹.

4.7. Establishing Quality in Mixed Methods Inquiry

Quality assessment, transparency and validation of the methodological procedures used, and inferences drawn, is an integral part of any research inquiry. This process holds significant implications for the degree to which one can trust the knowledge claims or ‘warranted assertions’ being made while also recognising the limits of the research evidence (Bazeley, 2018; Greene, 2007). A number of umbrella terms such as ‘validity’/‘reliability’ and ‘trustworthiness’ have been developed to frame quality in quantitative and qualitative research, respectively (see, for example, Campbell and Stanley, 1963; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2004; Shadish *et al.*, 2002). However, when it comes to MMR, these indicators are not sufficient to establish rigour in an integrated study, for which inferences must go beyond the quantitative and qualitative components alone. For this reason, quality in mixed methods research is often framed in terms of *inference* quality as this concept arguably both permeates and transcends the individual quantitative and qualitative strands (Plano Clark and Ivankova, 2015; Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2008; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009).

⁷⁹ On reflection, the processes of writing, drawing and creating visual displays to link the data sources and refine my analytic thinking, played an integral role in the development of my understanding throughout the research process. It provided an “avenue for deep reflection” and became a “method of inquiry, a way of knowing, and of discovery and analysis” in its own right (Bazeley, 2018: 291). Indeed, thoughtful interrogation of data and interim findings between the quantitative and qualitative phases as well as after all data had been collected, allowed me to articulate, organise and exercise my thoughts; explore possible or rival explanations; detect gaps, connections and contradictory findings; and identify ‘leads’ or ‘threads’ to follow up with an open mind, even though not all of these hunches were ultimately significant (Greene, 2007; Yin, 2013). As such, this process facilitated the generation of inferences that could not have been possible if the statistical and narrative data had been analysed and interpreted separately.

In developing justified inferences in mixed methods studies, Onwuegbuzie and Johnson (2006) argue for a *process-oriented* ‘legitimation’ approach in which continuous evaluation of the study procedures is undertaken to ensure consistency between the research purpose and emergent inferences. In keeping with their guidelines, the preceding systematic research protocol was developed through which rigour was established by the following measures: 1) explicitly stating and justifying the study’s paradigmatic position and corresponding logic assumptions as well as ensuring alignment between epistemology, research objectives and methods; 2) giving due regard to all stages of the design process to ensure that the strengths of each approach would compensate the weaknesses of the other to better answer the study’s research questions; 3) presenting a comprehensive account of the study procedures, data management strategies, emergent issues, methods of analysis and limitations of the quantitative and qualitative components; and 4) demonstrating a systematic framework in which to not only facilitate smooth Gestalt switches between quantitative and qualitative lenses over the course of the research, but also the integration of these viewpoints into a meaningful negotiated account.

Onwuegbuzie and Johnson (2006) identify three additional legitimation indicators that require further elaboration: *sample integration*, which refers to the extent to which the relationship between the quantitative and qualitative sampling designs yields quality inferences; *insider-outsider legitimation*, which refers to the degree to which one accurately presents, utilises and balances the views of objective ‘outsiders’ (i.e. trained observers) and subjective ‘insiders’ (i.e. group members); and *political legitimation*, which refers to the degree to which MMR addresses the interests and values of the relevant stakeholders. In the case of *sample integration legitimation*, while the implementation of a ‘parallel’ as opposed to ‘identical’ sampling design could potentially impact the quality of the inferences drawn, Onwuegbuzie and Johnson (2006: 56) note that to the degree to which the qualitative participants are similar to the quantitative sample “the problem will be reduced”. As such, great care was taken to develop the study’s eligibility criteria and a robust sampling strategy that would enable consistency between the quantitative and qualitative phases. Moreover, this particular legitimation issue was mitigated, to some extent, as the quantitative dataset comprised approximately 90% of the target population (that is, all families in State-funded EA in the Dublin region).

To address threats to *insider-outsider legitimation*, a number of strategies were developed. First, a peer review process was implemented where regular discussions were held with colleagues and my supervisor to examine the interpretations and connections being made between the data and the emergent conclusions at early, interim and later stages of the research and analytic process. Second, I engaged in reflexive practices (both written and verbal) to enable introspection and self-reflection in understanding my positionality, assumptions and values and their potential effects on each stage of the research (Creswell and Miller, 2000). Indeed, as a researcher “you [...] serve as a filter through which information is gathered, processed and organised” (Lichtman, 2010: 268). In this way, documenting and reflecting on these thoughts throughout my engagement in the field and immersion in the data *via* memo-writing and journaling not only helped to reveal and work through

my biases and any emerging concerns, but also served as a critical audit trail of my methodological and analytic decision processes (Creswell, 2012).

Finally, in response to potential problems of *political legitimation*, I asked all participating families about their views on taking part in the study, what they would like to see happen with the research and if they had any suggestions about any additional questions or topics that should be addressed in the research. This approach sought to make participants aware that their voice was central to the study and improve trustfulness and accuracy in reporting data, whilst not making any unnecessary demands on participants' time or well-being. Additionally, I engaged in a number of dissemination activities such as presenting and receiving feedback on preliminary findings at meetings with representatives in the DRHE as well as at seminars convened by NGOs in the homelessness sector in Ireland and international conferences on homelessness that were attended by a range of service personnel, policy analysts and leading researchers in the field. By actively seeking a "pluralism of perspectives" in this way, the study sought to "generate practical theory or results that consumers naturally will value because the results answer important questions and help provide workable solutions" (Onwuegbuzie and Johnson, 2006: 60).

4.8. Conclusion

This chapter provided a transparent and systematic account of this work's methodological foundations and approach to research. It explained how CR shaped its ontological and epistemological position, thus providing a rationale for the development of a mixed methods sequential (explanatory) design. It also demonstrated how the integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches can facilitate a coherent and robust approach to causal description and explanation of families' trajectories through, out and back into homelessness service systems over time. A detailed account of the methods, strategies and procedures selected as well as the conduct of each phase of study was presented, including precise elaboration of *how* these components were synthesised during multiple stages of the research (including sampling, analysis and the development of meta-inferences). Throughout, I have endeavoured to make clear my commitment to a reflexive, honest and ethical approach, a core plank of which involved discussion of the methodological issues that were addressed as well as how rigour was established. All of this provides an essential framework with which the following findings chapters can be understood, interpreted and assessed.

5. FAMILIES' SERVICE USE PATTERNS AND SHELTER SYSTEM TRAJECTORIES

5.1. Introduction

This chapter presents analysis that provides a concrete description of families' homelessness service use patterns and shelter system trajectories in the Dublin region. To begin, an overview of the quantitative sample profile is provided by presenting the summary statistics of the selected FRPs accessing EA during the study's observational period. Attention then shifts to the core focus of this chapter: documenting the results of the cluster analysis performed to test to what extent Kuhn and Culhane's (1998) typology of homelessness service use among single adults fits similar Irish data on families. The key characteristics of the emergent clusters are described followed by a comparison of the results with similar research on adult and family shelter users in Ireland and the US. The final section presents the qualitative sample profile. Key demographics and dimensions of their socio-economic circumstances that were *not* available in the quantitative dataset - including: migration profiles and residency status; relationship status and parenthood; educational attainment and employment histories; and the proximate 'causes' of their entry to EA as a family unit - are first presented. The narratives of the participating parents are then interrogated to further unravel the complexity of families' homelessness service user profiles by providing rich, textured insights into the trajectories they take through, out and back into homelessness service systems over time.

5.2. Quantitative Sample Profile (N = 2533)

Table 4 presents the baseline characteristics of the sample of selected FRPs (N = 2533) accessing State-funded EA in the Dublin region between 2011 and 2016⁸⁰. These include: demographic data (related to age, gender, migrant status and race/ethnicity); family-level data (related to household composition, including family-type and family size); and service background data (related to the type of EA placement at first entry and the number of unique EA services accessed).

⁸⁰ See Appendix M for a demographic comparison of this study's sample of FRPs in Dublin-based EA with national figures compiled by the Central Statistics Office (CSO, 2017).

Table 4: Summary Statistics of FRPs in Dublin-based EA (2011-2016)

	N	%	TOTAL	VISUAL REPRESENTATION
GENDER				
Female	1855	73	2533	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Female Male
Male	678	27		
FAMILY TYPE				
One-Parent	1621	64	2533	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> One-parent Two-parent
Two-Parent	912	36		
MIGRANT STATUS				
Born in Ireland	1836	74	2485	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Born in Ireland EU Non-EU
Born outside EU	455	18		
Born inside EU	184	8		
ETHNICITY				
White	1806	73	2487	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> White Black Traveller Other Asian
Black	415	17		
Traveller	211	8		
Other	41	2		
Asian	14	0.5		
AGE at FIRST ENTRY				
18-29 years	1267	50	2530	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 18-29 30-49 50+
30-49 years	1171	46		
50+	90	4		
NO. of ACCOMPANYING CHILDREN				
1 child	1057	42	2532	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 2 3 4+
2 children	752	30		
3 children	385	15		
4+ children	338	13		
TYPE OF EA PLACEMENT at FIRST ENTRY				
PEA	2230	88	2533	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PEA STA TEA
STA	272	11		
TEA	31	1		
NO. of UNIQUE EA SERVICES ACCESSED				
1-5	2260	89	2533	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1-5 6-10 10+
6-10	203	8		
11+	70	3		

5.2.1. Gender and Age

A majority of FRPs were women (n = 1855, 73%) with men representing just over one-quarter (n = 678, 27%) of the total sample. The sample ranged in age from 18 to 84 (SD = 9.0, Mdn = 29) and was positively skewed with half of FRPs being under the age of 30 (n = 1267, 50%) and the mean age being 31.3 years. Those considered to be ‘early middle aged’ represented approximately 46% of the total sample (n = 1171) while those aged 50 years and over accounted for just 4% (n = 90) of families in EA during the six-year observation period.

Men tended to be slightly older than women, with the mean age for male FRPs being 33.8 years (range: 18-84, SD = 8.7, Mdn = 33) versus 30.4 years for female FRPs (range: 18-74, SD = 9.4, Mdn = 29). As Figure 7 demonstrates, 55% of women were under the age of 30, compared to 38% of men. Correspondingly, men were more likely to be in the older age ranges with 56% and 6% aged 30-49 and 50+, respectively, compared to 42% and 3% of women.

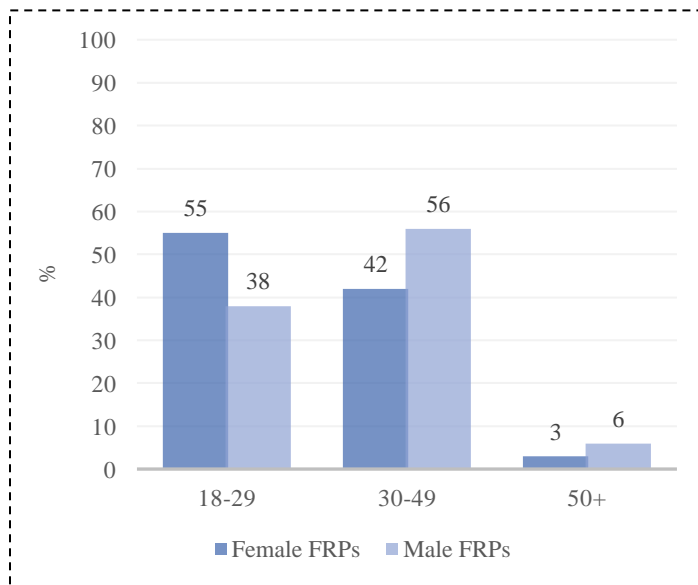


Figure 7: Age of FRPs by Gender

5.2.2. Family Type and Number of Accompanying Children

A majority (n = 1621, 64%) of FRPs were categorised as one-parent families while two-parent families accounted for just over one third of the sample (n = 912, 36%). Of those recorded as one-parent families, 94% (n = 1528) were headed by a woman, while 6% (n = 93) were headed by a man.

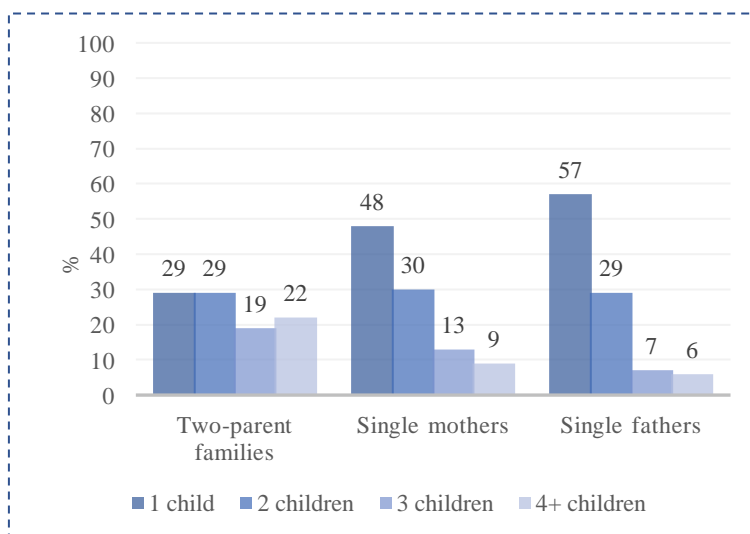


Figure 8 presents the number of children broken down by family type. Larger family sizes were most prevalent among two-parent households (n = 189, 22%), with a smaller proportion of single mothers (n = 134, 9%) and single fathers (n = 6, 6%) presenting with four or more children. The number of accompanying children living

Figure 8: No. of Accompanying Children by Family type

with FRPs when they accessed EA ranged from one to 10, with an average of two children per family. Just under three quarters of FRPs headed families that were considered to be ‘small’, with either one accompanying child (n = 1057, 42%) or two accompanying children (n = 752, 30%), while 15% (n = 385) were classed as ‘medium’ size families with three children present. Families categorised as ‘large’ (that is, having four or more accompanying children) were in the minority, representing 13% (n = 383) of the total sample. Among those classified as ‘large’ families, most had four accompanying children (n = 197, 51%), with a much smaller number reporting five (n = 93, 24%), six (n = 27, 7%), seven (n = 13, 3%), eight (n = 1, <1%), nine (n = 3, <1%) or 10 (n = 4, 1%).

5.2.3. Migrant Status and Race/Ethnicity

Almost three quarters of FRPs were born in Ireland (n = 1836, 74%) with the remaining FRPs being born outside of Ireland (n = 649, 26%), either in non-EU member states (n = 455, 18%) or, to a lesser extent, EU member states (n = 184, 8%). As demonstrated in Table 5, a majority of those with a migrant status reported that their country of origin was located in Africa (n = 391, 60%), followed by Europe (n = 195, 30%); Asia and Oceania (n = 47, 7%); South America (n = 9, 1%); and North America (n = 7, 1%).

Table 5: Migrant FRPs’ Region of Origin

	N	% OF MIGRANT FRPs	% OF ALL FRPs
AFRICA			
<i>Western Africa</i>	214	33	9
<i>Eastern Africa</i>	80	12	3
<i>Central Africa</i>	44	7	2
<i>Northern Africa</i>	34	5	1
<i>Southern Africa</i>	19	3	0.7
Total	391	60	16
EUROPE			
<i>Eastern Europe</i>	107	16	4
<i>Northern Europe</i>	63	10	2
<i>Southern Europe</i>	12	2	0.4
<i>Western Europe</i>	3	0.4	0.1
Total	195	30	8
ASIA AND OCEANIA			
<i>Southern Asia</i>	22	3	0.8
<i>Western Asia</i>	13	2	0.5
<i>Central and Eastern Asia</i>	8	1	0.3
<i>South-Eastern Asia</i>	4	0.6	0.1
Total	47	7	2
AMERICAS			
<i>South America</i>	9	2	0.4
<i>North America</i>	7	1	0.3
Total	16	3	0.7

Figure 9 plots these data on a geographical ‘heat’ map. As can be seen, a high number of FRPs who were born abroad originated from the African countries of Nigeria, Somalia and the Republic of the Congo; whilst, from Europe, the largest number of families relocated from Romania, Lithuania, Poland and the UK. Combined, individuals from these countries accounted for 64% of the total number of migrant FRPs in the sample.

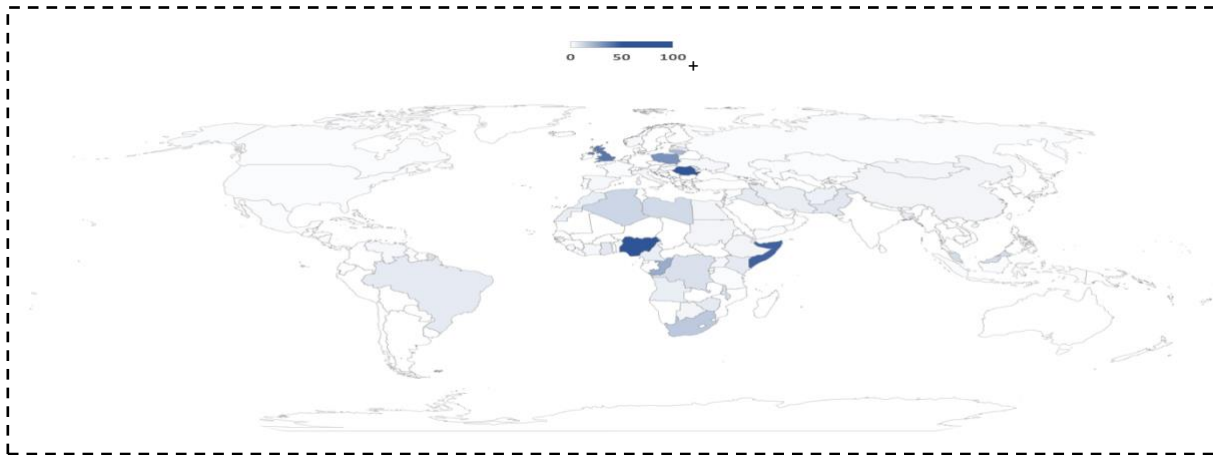


Figure 9: Geographical ‘Heat’ map of Countries of Origin amongst Migrant FRPs

The vast majority of FRPs identified as ethnically White ($n = 1806$, 73%), with smaller proportions indicating an ethnic-minority status, including those who reported a Black ($n = 414$, 17%), Traveller ($n = 211$, 8%) or Asian ($n = 14$, <1%) ethnic/cultural background. Those who reported ‘Other’ ethnic groups accounted for just 2% ($n = 41$) of the total sample.

5.2.4. *Type of Emergency Accommodation Placement at First Entry and*

As mentioned in Chapter 1, EA in Ireland is divided into three types: PEA (including commercial hotel and B&Bs); STA, which primarily refers to congregate facilities and family hubs with onsite professional supports; and TEA, which includes hostels with no (or minimal) supports. A vast majority of FRPs were *initially* placed - that is, at the point of first entry to services during the study’s observation period - in PEA ($n = 2230$, 88%), with much smaller numbers placed in STA ($n = 272$, 11%) and TEA ($n = 31$, 1%).

5.2.1. *Number of Unique Emergency Accommodation Services Accessed*

Most FRPs in the sample had accessed between one and five ($n = 2260$, 89%) unique EA services over the six-year observation period, with smaller numbers logging between six and 10 ($n = 203$, 8%) or 11 or more ($n = 70$, 3%) (range: 1-37, $M = 2.9$, $SD = 3.0$).

5.3. Identifying and Describing Clusters of Homelessness Service Use

The quantitative sample comprised 2533 unique FRPs who recorded a total of 442,244 individual over-night stays (range: 1-1284, $M = 174.5$, $SD = 174.5$) during the study’s observation period. These data were collapsed into a total of 9231 individual episodes of service use determined *via* a one-day

exit criterion (range: 1-66, $M = 3.6$, $SD = 5.1$). Utilising these two variables - that is, the total number of cumulative nights and episodes in EA - a cluster analysis was performed to test whether Kuhn and Culhane's (1998) typology of homelessness service utilisation could be meaningfully applied to Irish data on families' EA usage. By way of a brief reminder, Kuhn and Culhane's (1998) model comprises three distinct clusters or patterns of service utilisation: 1) *transitional*, characterised by relatively few episodes in EA that are typically of a short duration; 2) *chronic*, characterised by relatively few episodes in EA that are typically of a long duration; and 3) *episodic*, characterised by a relatively high number of episodes in EA that are typically of a short duration (see Table 6).

Table 6: Kuhn and Culhane's (1998) Typology of Homelessness Service Use

	LOW no. of <u>nights</u> in EA	HIGH no. of <u>nights</u> in EA
LOW no. of <u>episodes</u> in EA	<i>Transitional</i>	<i>Chronic</i>
HIGH no. of <u>episodes</u> in EA	<i>Episodic</i>	<i>N/A</i>

In further describing and theorising these clusters regarding single adult populations, Kuhn and Culhane (1998: 226-29) assert that transitional service users tend to only reside in shelter for a short time “presumably as a time to recover from a temporary emergency” and typically do not return post-exit; chronic service users, on the other hand, rarely exit the shelter system which, for these individuals, is “serving as a long-term housing arrangement” as opposed to emergency, short-term provision; and finally, episodic service users are said to frequently move in and out of homelessness accommodation “possibly alternating shelter stays with bouts of street homelessness, hospitalization, and incarceration”.

5.3.1. Cluster Characteristics

Table 7 presents the results of the cluster analysis, revealing three distinct clusters of homelessness service use amongst the Dublin-based sample of FRPs accessing EA between 2011 and 2016.

Table 7: Cluster Statistics

	TRANSITIONAL	CHRONIC	EPISODIC	TOTAL
Number of FRPs	1440	835	258	2533
% of all FRPs	57	33	10	100
Mean no. of episodes	2.3	2.2	15.3	3.6
Min. no. of episodes	1	1	8	1
Max. no. of episodes	8	11	66	66
Mean. no. of nights	78.2	331.9	203.3	174.5
Min. no. of nights	1	204	15	1
Max. no. of nights	203	1070	1284	1284
Mean no. of nights/episode	34	150.8	13.2	48.4
Total no. of nights (sum)	112,620	277,167	52,457	443,244
% of EA bed-nights used	25.4	62.6	11.8	100

The largest proportion of FRPs were grouped in a cluster that corresponds to the **transitional** category of shelter use, representing 57% (n = 1440) of families in the sample and accounting for one quarter (n = 112,620, 25.4%,) of all EA bed-nights consumed. The total number of nights families in this sub-group spent in EA ranged from 1 to 203 (SD = 60.5), meaning that the highest number of nights recorded by any one FRP in the transitional group amounted to 6.6 months. More specifically, 29% (n = 414) of families in this cluster resided in EA for under one month; 32% (n = 466) resided in EA for between one and three months; and 39% (n = 560) resided in EA for between three and 6.6 months. The total number of episodes ranged from one to eight (SD = 1.8), with over three quarters (n = 1244, 86%) logging between one and four episodes separated by at least one night out of EA over the study period. Looking at this cluster as a whole, these FRPs spent, on average, 78.2 cumulative nights (or 2.5 months) in EA prior to exiting, typically comprising 2.3 separate stays of a relatively short duration that spanned 34 days (or just under 1.1 months) per episode.

The second largest cluster comprised those who demonstrated service use histories that corresponded to the **chronic** category of shelter utilisation, accounting for 33% (n = 835) of all adults with accompanying children in the dataset and utilising the largest proportion (n = 277,167, 62.6%) of EA bed-nights recorded across the sample. The shortest and longest time any one FRP in this sub-group spent in EA over the observation period was 204 and 1070 cumulative nights, respectively, or 6.7 months and just under three years overall (SD = 115.8). Although the number of episodes recorded for this category ranged from one to 11 (SD = 1.8), FRPs demonstrated, on average, the same number of episodes as those in the transitional group; however, these episodes typically lasted for a much longer duration with the mean length of each stay lasting 150.8 days (or just under 5 months). Families in this sub-group therefore typically resided in EA for much more lengthy periods, with a mean of 331.9 cumulative nights (or approximately 11 months).

The third and final cluster is analogous to the **episodic** category of homelessness service utilisation, representing 10% (n = 258) of all FRPs and consuming the smallest proportion (n = 52,457, 11%) of EA bed-nights. These families resided in EA anywhere between 15 and 1284 nights or between just over two weeks and 3.5 years, respectively (SD = 172.7). While this cluster demonstrated, on average, a higher number of total nights in services than the transitional shelter users - amounting to 203.3 cumulative nights (or 6.6 months) - these families tended to spend half as much time in EA as those experiencing chronic patterns of service use. The most notable difference between the episodic sub-group and the preceding two clusters, however, is that these families demonstrated a markedly higher number of defined episodes in EA. The minimum number of episodes for any one FRP in this sub-group was eight, while the maximum recorded was 66 (SD = 8.8), though a vast majority (n = 237, 92%) logged between eight and 25 episodes over the study period. These episodes were typically shorter than those recorded in the chronic and transitional clusters, averaging 13.2 nights (or just under two weeks) per stay.

Using the data presented above, Figure 10 provides a graphical representation of the three clusters by their mean stay histories (that is, the average number of cumulative nights and episodes per sub-group) to facilitate a comparison of each pattern or cluster of homelessness service utilisation.

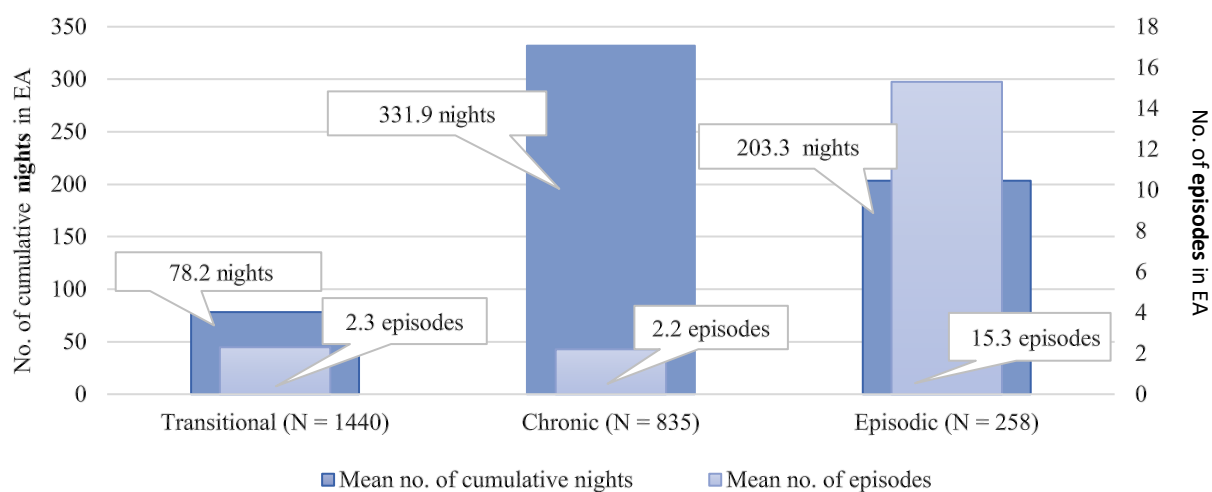


Figure 10: Comparison of Clusters by Mean no. of Cumulative Nights and Episodes in EA

The findings demonstrate that Irish data on families’ EA usage corresponds to Kuhn and Culhane’s (1998) typology of transitional, chronic and episodic homelessness service use. More specifically, three distinct sub-groups of shelter utilisation were jointly determined by families’ nights and episodes spent in EA, enabling the production of an adequately robust cluster model that maximised simplicity and differences (or separation) among FRPs in each grouping (Kuhn and Culhane, 1998). Mirroring Kuhn and Culhane’s (1998) analysis, the largest sub-group comprised transitional service users who appeared to secure a lasting exit from EA after a relatively short period of time. These families accrued a relatively low number of episodes and cumulative nights in shelter, suggesting that they faced fewer barriers to securing and maintaining a successful exit to alternative living arrangements. The remaining two sub-groups - that is, chronic and episodic service users - while both proportionally smaller than the first, together accounted for 74.4% of EA bed-nights occupied by families in the sample over the study’s observation period. These clusters exhibited a significantly higher number of nights spent in EA in the case of chronic service users (suggesting barriers to exiting) and shorter stays coupled with markedly higher rates of readmission in the case of episodic service users (suggesting barriers to residential stability post-exit).

5.3.2. Comparing Clusters by Stay Histories

Once the cluster analysis was finalised and each FRP had been assigned a distinct category of EA usage (transitional, chronic, episodic), FRPs’ stay histories were compared by cluster membership. As demonstrated in Table 8, a strong association was found in the case of total number of nights [$\chi^2(8) = 1788.182, p < 0.001$] and episodes [$\chi^2(8) = 1884.858, p < 0.001$] over the study’s observation

period. Transitional service users were the most likely to log under 100 cumulative nights with 64.9% of this sub-group recording anywhere between one and 100 over-night stays in EA compared to just 22.1% of episodic users. No FRPs in the chronic sub-group recorded under 100 cumulative nights in EA. The episodic sub-group was the most likely to feature FRPs that recorded anywhere between 101 and 250 cumulative nights in EA with such families accounting for 55.4% of this cluster, versus 35.1% and 23.5% of the transitional and chronic sub-groups, respectively. Finally, greater proportional shares of the chronic cluster were comprised of FRPs who logged more nights in EA. For instance, of those categorised as chronic service users, 25.4% spent over 365 nights in homelessness services compared to 11.2% of episodic service users and no transitional service users.

Table 8: Stay Histories, by Cluster

	Transitional N = 1440	Chronic N = 835	Episodic N = 258	Test Statistic	Cramer's V
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	(χ^2)	
TOTAL NO. OF NIGHTS					
1-100	935 (64.9) ^a	0 (0.0) ^b	57 (22.1) ^c	1788.182***	.594 ^d
101-250	505 (35.1) ^a	196 (23.5) ^b	143 (55.4) ^c		
251-300	0 (0.0) ^a	208 (24.9) ^b	16 (6.2) ^c		
301-365	0 (0.0) ^a	219 (26.2) ^b	16 (5.0) ^c		
< 365	0 (0.0) ^a	212 (25.4) ^b	29 (11.2) ^c		
TOTAL NO. OF EPISODES					
1-2	978 (67.9) ^a	602 (72.1) ^b	0 (0.0) ^c	1884.858***	.610 ^d
3-5	324 (22.5) ^a	169 (20.2) ^a	0 (0.0) ^b		
6-10	138 (9.6) ^a	63 (7.5) ^a	83 (32.2) ^b		
11-20	0 (0.0) ^a	1 (0.1) ^a	133 (51.6) ^b		
< 20	0 (0.0) ^a	0 (0.0) ^a	42 (16.3) ^b		

Note: Each subscript letter – a, b, c - denotes a subset whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.

^d Denotes an effect size \geq Cohen's definition of "large"

*p < 0.05. ** p < 0.01. *** p < 0.001.

Looking at FRPs' total number of episodes, the chronic cluster was the most likely to feature a greater proportional share of those who recorded between one and two distinct stays in EA with these individuals accounting for 72% of this sub-group, compared to 67.9% in the transitional cluster and 0.0% in the episodic cluster. A similar proportion of transitional (22.5%) and chronic (20.2%) service users comprised FRPs who logged between three and five stays. FRPs demonstrating anywhere between one and five episodes did not feature at all in the episodic cluster while the largest proportional share of this sub-group (51.6%) consisted of those who recorded between 11 and 20 episodes (versus 0.1% and 0.0% of the chronic and transitional clusters, respectively)

5.3.3. Comparing Clusters by Demographic, Family-level and Service Background Data

The clusters were then compared by demographic, family-level and service use background characteristics of FRPs - that is, variables that were *not* used to construct the groupings - to validate the clustering solution (Aldenderfer and Blashfield, 1984) (see Table 9).

Table 9: Demographic, Family-Level and Service Background Characteristics, by Cluster

	Transitional N=1440	Chronic N=835	Episodic N=258	Test Statistic	Cramer's V
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	(χ^2)	
GENDER					
Female	1072 (74.4)	607 (72.7)	176 (68.2)	4.513	.042
Male	368 (25.6)	228 (27.3)	82 (31.8)		
FAMILY TYPE					
One-parent	967 (67.2) ^a	537 (64.3) ^a	117 (45.3) ^b	45.199***	.134 ^d
Two-parent	473 (32.8) ^a	298 (35.7) ^a	141 (54.7) ^b		
MIGRANT STATUS					
Born outside EU	261 (18.6) ^a	123 (15.0) ^b	71 (27.6) ^c	27.686*	.075 ^d
Born inside EU	126 (9.0) ^a	52 (6.3) ^b	16 (6.2) ^b		
Born in Ireland	1020 (72.5) ^a	646 (78.7) ^b	170 (66.1) ^c		
RACE/ETHNICITY					
White	1022 (72.6) ^a	635 (77.2) ^b	149 (58.2) ^c	42.471***	.095 ^d
Traveller	120 (8.5) ^a	53 (6.4) ^a	38 (14.8) ^b		
Black	236 (16.8) ^a	114 (13.9) ^a	65 (25.4) ^b		
Other	21 (1.5)	18 (2.2)	2 (0.8)		
Asian	9 (0.6)	3 (0.4)	2 (0.8)		
AGE AT FIRST ENTRY					
18-29	718 (50.0)	433 (51.9)	118 (45.7)	5.390	.033
30-49	665 (46.3)	379 (45.4)	127 (49.2)		
50+	54 (3.8)	23 (2.8)	13 (5.0)		
NO. of ACCOMPANYING CHILDREN					
1 child	629 (43.7) ^a	336 (40.2) ^b	92 (35.7) ^b	19.197**	.062 ^d
2 children	403 (28.0) ^a	279 (33.4) ^b	70 (27.1) ^a		
3 children	220 (15.3)	118 (14.1)	47 (18.2)		
4+ children	187 (13.0) ^a	102 (12.2) ^a	49 (19.0) ^b		
TYPE OF EA PLACEMENT AT FIRST ENTRY					
PEA	1325 (92.0) ^a	694 (83.1) ^b	211 (81.8) ^b	83.802***	.129 ^d
STA	108 (7.5) ^a	131 (15.7) ^b	33 (12.8) ^b		
TEA	7 (0.5) ^a	10 (1.2) ^a	14 (5.4) ^b		
NO. OF UNIQUE EA SERVICES ACCESSED					
1-5	1353 (94.0) ^a	763 (91.4) ^b	144 (55.8) ^c	470.919***	.431 ^e
6-10	73 (5.1) ^a	70 (8.4) ^b	60 (23.3) ^c		
> 10	14 (1.0) ^a	2 (0.2) ^b	54 (20.9) ^c		

Note: Each subscript letter – a, b, c - denotes a subset whose column proportions do not differ significantly from each other at the .05 level.

^d Denotes an effect size \geq Cohen's definition of "small"

^e Denotes an effect size \geq Cohen's definition of "large"

*p < 0.05. ** p < 0.01. *** p < 0.001.

5.3.3.1. Age and Gender

No significant differences between the clusters were found with regard to age [$\chi^2 (4) = 5.390, p = .250$] or gender [$\chi^2 (2) = 4.513, p = .105$]. In other words, neither the age nor gender of parents appeared to influence the type of shelter system trajectory a family experienced once they entered EA. This is somewhat surprising since, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, homeless women (with or without accompanying children) are often prioritised for housing over men, which should result in them having comparably shorter shelter stays. This finding suggests, however, that mothers and fathers of any age in EA were placed on equal footing, to some extent, in terms of their access (or lack thereof) to housing. From this perspective, it could be argued that although the complex interplay between structural forces and gender detailed in Chapter 2 likely precipitated many female-headed households' pathways *into* homelessness services, which is supported by the fact that female FRPs accounted for between 68.2% and 74.4% of each cluster, it is not necessarily gender that influenced their trajectories *through, out and back in* to service systems over time.

5.3.3.2. Household Composition: Family Type and Family Size

Attributes related to household composition were found to be statistically associated, albeit somewhat weakly, with families' patterns of homelessness service use, including family type [$\chi^2 (2) = 45.199, p < .001$] and family size [$\chi^2 (6) = 19.187, p = < .004$]. Looking first at family type, the results show a sharp disparity between FRPs in the episodic cluster when compared to those experiencing transitional and chronic shelter stays. Indeed, episodic service users were statistically more likely to present as two-parent families with such households accounting for 54.7% of this sub-group (versus 35.7% and 32.8% in the chronic and transitional clusters, respectively). Correspondingly, one-parent families represented a statistically greater share of the transitional (67.2%) and chronic (64.3%) clusters in comparison to those experiencing episodic patterns of EA usage (45.3%).

Turning to family size, episodic service users were also more likely to present as larger families than the other two clusters, with those with four or more accompanying children accounting for 19% of this sub-group (versus 12.2% and 13% in the chronic and transitional sub-groups, respectively). Conversely, transitional service users were more likely than chronic and episodic service users to feature families with one accompanying child (who accounted for 43.7%, 40.2% and 35.7% of each cluster, respectively), while chronic service users were more likely than transitional and episodic users to feature families with two accompanying children (who accounted for 33.4%, 28.0% and 27.1% of each sub-group, respectively)⁸¹. Put simply, episodic service users were more likely to have larger families and comprise two-parent households than the other clusters while

⁸¹ There were no significant inter-cluster differences found among families of a medium size (that is, with three accompanying children).

families in the chronic and transitional clusters were more likely to have fewer children and be headed by one parent than those in the episodic cluster.

5.3.3.3. *Migrant Status and Race/Ethnicity*

FRPs differed significantly by migrant status [$\chi^2 (4) = 27.686, p = >.05$] and race/ethnicity [$\chi^2 (8) = 42.471, p = >.001$] regarding cluster membership, though the effect sizes were relatively small in both instances. In the case of migrant status, considerable diversity was evident *within* the migrant sub-population. To be precise, those from countries *outside* of the EU were the most likely to exit services and subsequently return, accounting for 27.6% of episodic service users (compared to 18.6% and 15.0% of the transitional and chronic clusters, respectively). On the other hand, those from countries *within* the EU (excluding Ireland but including the UK) were the most likely to exit services and not return over the study period, representing the highest proportion of transitional service users relative to their share of the total dataset standing at 9% (compared to 6.2% in the episodic cluster and 6.3% in the chronic cluster). Finally, those born in Ireland were the most likely to experience patterns of prolonged service use, accounting for 78.7% of chronic service users, while being statistically less likely to feature in the transitional (72.5%) and episodic (66.1%) sub-groups⁸².

Similar trends were recorded with regard to FRPs' race/ethnicity. For example, families with at least one parent who identified as ethnically White were more likely to be featured in the chronic (77.2%) and transitional (72.6%) clusters than the episodic cluster (58.2%). By contrast, those with a non-White ethnicity were statistically more likely to exit at a faster rate but return to services post-departure; more specifically, FRPs who identified as having a Traveller or Black ethnic/cultural background represented 14.8% and 25.4% of the episodic clusters, respectively, while experiencing transitional and chronic patterns of EA use at a much lower rate in both instances⁸³. These findings suggest that there may be certain factors or circumstances driving Traveller or Black parents' routes out of services more quickly than other FRPs but that these families also experienced significant challenges in achieving residential stability *following* their exit from the homelessness service system. Moreover, taken together, the findings presented here indicate that migrant status and race/ethnicity may operate separately, to some extent, in terms of shaping families' shelter system trajectories; that is to say, whether a migrant is ethnically White or non-White could influence their service use patterns in different ways.

That such striking differences were found amongst the episodic cluster in comparison to the other two regarding household composition and race/ethnicity was initially surprising; however,

⁸² It is worth noting that these findings challenge a dominant narrative in Irish society that suggests migrants are placing undue strain and increasing demand on homelessness support systems by opting to wait for prolonged periods in EA to secure a social housing allocation, which, as mentioned in Chapter 1, can take many years to obtain. Rather, these results indicate that migrant FRPs (whether from EU or non-EU countries) exited services at a significantly faster rate than Irish service users, while also accruing fewer cumulative days in EA overall.

⁸³ No significant inter-cluster differences were found amongst those who reported 'Other' or Asian ethnicities.

subsequent analyses revealed that there could be an interaction effect occurring between the variables due to cultural trends within ethnic/racial minority groups related to marriage or household structure and family size (Platt, 2009; Berthoud, 2010), particularly in the case of Travellers in Ireland (CSO, 2017)⁸⁴. Since the purpose of this analysis was to establish whether the clusters were meaningfully distinct and not to identify factors that may have an independent effect in predicting cluster membership, regression modelling was not undertaken in this work. However, Chi-square tests of independence were performed to examine the relationship between having an ethnic-minority background and: 1) household composition (one-parent; two-parent); and 2) number of accompanying children (1-3; 4+). Statistical significance was reached in both cases respectively [χ^2 (1) = 33.257, $p = >.001$] and [χ^2 (1) = 104.050, $p = >.001$], indicating that FRPs with an ethnic-minority background were more likely to be living in two-parent households (45.2%) and have larger family sizes (25.4%) than those with non-White ethnicity in the sample (where the percentages were 32.4% and 9.4%, respectively). This suggests that race/ethnicity may be a contributing factor to families' frequent moves in and out of EA over time.

5.3.3.4. *Type of Emergency Accommodation Placement at First Entry*

Significant inter-cluster differences were found with regard to the particular type of EA (PEA, STA, TEA) families were placed in at the beginning of the study's observational period [χ^2 (4) = 83.802, $p <.001$]. Chi-square analysis revealed that FRPs placed in PEA were the most likely to feature in the transitional sub-group (92%), accounting for a smaller proportional share of those utilising EA on a chronic (83.1%) and episodic (81.8%) basis. Those placed in STA, on the other hand, were more likely to feature in the chronic (15.7%) and episodic (12.8%) sub-groups than the transitional sub-group (7.5%). Finally, FRPs placed in TEA - while comparatively low across the sample as a whole - were the most likely to feature in the episodic cluster (5.4%), accounting for a significantly lower proportion of both chronic (1.2%) and transitional (0.5%) service users.

These findings suggest that the context and institutional settings in which family homelessness occurs could influence their subsequent trajectories through the homelessness service system (Culhane *et al.*, 2007; Gerstel *et al.*, 1996; Trillo *et al.*, 2016; Wong *et al.*, 1997). It is perhaps worth reiterating the differing operational structures of these particular services in Ireland. STAs, for example, are often service-intensive environments with on-site professional supports that offer longer-term placements of up to six months while an individual or family becomes 'housing ready'. This, in turn, could result in these families accruing more cumulative nights in EA and experiencing fewer shelter stays of a longer duration. TEA, on the other hand, typically operates on a short-term weekly/monthly basis or as ONO accommodation⁸⁵. This could potentially lead to a higher number

⁸⁴ The 2016 Census data revealed, for example, that Traveller's reported a larger-than-average household size nationally, standing at 5.3 persons (compared to 2.7 persons in the general population) with over 25% recording six persons or more (compared to less than 5% in the general population).

⁸⁵ 'One-night-only' accommodation requires families to find new accommodation every day but only after they have demonstrated to their local authority that they are still experiencing homelessness.

of episodes by way of nights spent in alternative living arrangements on occasions where a family was not able (or, did not want) to (re)book an emergency placement. What is perhaps less clear, however, is why families placed in PEA experienced comparatively fewer and shorter stays before securing a lasting exit.

5.3.3.5. *Number of Unique Emergency Accommodation Services Accessed*

The largest statistically significant effect size observed for cluster membership was related to the number of unique EA services accessed by each FRP [$\chi^2(4) = 470.919, p < .001$]. A clear distinction between the episodic cluster and the other two clusters was revealed. Families experiencing episodic patterns of homelessness service use were by far the most likely to have accessed a high number of individual EA services over the study's observation period, with 23.3% recording over-night stays in anywhere between six and 10 different service settings (compared to just 8.4% and 5.1% in the chronic and transitional clusters, respectively). Moreover, 20.9% of episodic service users recorded over-night stays in 11 or more different service settings (compared to just 0.2% and 1.0% in the chronic and transitional clusters, respectively). Correspondingly, FRP's categorised as transitional and chronic service users were more likely to have resided in fewer unique service settings overall, with those logging between one and five EA services representing 94% and 91.4% of these sub-groups, respectively, compared to just 55.8% in the episodic cluster.

While these results are unsurprising given how the groupings were constructed during the cluster analysis, it is important to note that they nevertheless suggest that families in the episodic category did not seem to return to the *same* services following their exits from homelessness systems of intervention. Rather, they demonstrated frequent movement *between* a high number of *different* service settings. This could mean that these individuals experienced much more unpredictable and unstable trajectories through the service system than other families in EA, presumably characterised by high levels of transience as they repeatedly moved between one service and another⁸⁶. This finding may also be partially explained by certain policies or practices upheld in the homelessness service system in Ireland, such as 'self-accommodation' and ONO accommodation; however, they could also point to a potential reluctance among these families to return to certain services (Culhane *et al.*, 2007) or situations whereby a premature termination of a family's placement resulted in involuntary departures or barring orders from particular service settings (Fogel, 1997).

A summary of the statistically significant inter-cluster differences found along six of the eight external variables tested - including those related to demographic, family-level and service-level data - is presented in Table 10.

⁸⁶Notably, for instance, 5.8% of FRPs in the episodic cluster logged 20 or more unique EA placements over the six-year observational period, whilst no FRPs in either the chronic or transitional cluster utilised this amount of individual services during this time-frame.

Table 10: Summary of Significant Inter-cluster Differences, by Background Characteristics

	N (%)	DEMOGRAPHIC	FAMILY-LEVEL	SERVICE-LEVEL
TRANSITIONAL				
<i>Relatively few episodes in EA that are typically of a <u>short</u> duration</i>	1440 (57%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Born inside EU • White ethnicity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-parent • Small family size (1-2 children) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initially placed in PEA • Low no. of unique EA services accessed (1-5)
CHRONIC				
<i>Relatively few episodes in EA that are typically of a <u>long</u> duration</i>	835 (33%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Born in Ireland • White ethnicity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One-parent • Small family size (1-2 children) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initially placed in STA • Low no. of unique EA services accessed (1-5)
EPISODIC				
<i>Relatively high number of episodes in EA that are typically of a short duration</i>	258 (10%)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Born outside EU • Black ethnicity • Traveller ethnicity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two-parents • Large family size (4+ children) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initially placed in STA • Initially placed in TEA • High no. of unique EA services accessed (6+)

5.4. Comparing Irish and International Research Findings

Table 11 provides a detailed overview of the results of the cluster analysis presented in this study alongside previous research on homelessness service utilisation conducted in the US (in the cities of Philadelphia and New York) and Ireland (in the Dublin region). It also includes a breakdown of studies of family shelter use in the case of Culhane *et al.*, (2007) or, alternatively, studies of single adults accessing EA in the case of Kuhn and Culhane (1998) and data on all adults accessing EA (including those accompanied by children) in the case of Waldron *et al.* (2019) in the Irish context. While differing methodologies, sample sizes, timeframes and contextual factors (such as differences in local homelessness service systems and policies) preclude any definitive conclusions or pooling of results, some broad trends are evident that merit further discussion.

Table 11: International Comparison of Cluster Statistics: Families and ‘Adults’

			TRANSITIONAL	CHRONIC	EPISODIC
N (%) OF INDIVIDUALS					
FAMILIES	This study (2021)	IRL, DUB	1440 (57%)	835 (33%)	258 (10%)
	<i>Culhane et al. (2007)</i>	US, PHIL	1207 (72 %)	335 (20%)	131 (8%)
	<i>Culhane et al. (2007)</i>	US, NYC	7681 (73%)	2251 (21%)	529 (5%)
ADULTS	<i>Waldron et al. (2019)</i>	IRL, DUB	9915 (78%)	1567 (12%)	1252 (10%)
	<i>Kuhn and Culhane (1998)</i>	US, PHIL	59,367 (78%)	7196 (10%)	6700 (12%)
	<i>Kuhn and Culhane (1998)</i>	US, NYC	5415 (81%)	677 (10%)	805 (9%)
MEAN NO. OF NIGHTS IN EA					
FAMILIES	This study (2021)	IRL, DUB	78	331	203
	<i>Culhane et al. (2007)</i>	US, PHIL	52	327	202
	<i>Culhane et al. (2007)</i>	US, NYC	139	552	385
ADULTS	<i>Waldron et al. (2019)</i>	IRL, DUB	73	638	236
	<i>Kuhn and Culhane (1998)</i>	US, PHIL	20	252	72
	<i>Kuhn and Culhane (1998)</i>	US, NYC	57	637	263
MEAN NO. OF EPISODES IN EA					
FAMILIES	This study (2021)	IRL, DUB	2.3	2.2	15.4
	<i>Culhane et al. (2007)</i>	US, PHIL	1.1	1.4	3.5
	<i>Culhane et al. (2007)</i>	US, NYC	1.1	1.3	3.3
ADULTS	<i>Waldron et al. (2019)</i>	IRL, DUB	1.3	2.0	5.9
	<i>Kuhn and Culhane (1998)</i>	US, PHIL	1.1	1.5	3.8
	<i>Kuhn and Culhane (1998)</i>	US, NYC	1.3	2.2	4.8
MEAN NO. OF NIGHTS PER EPISODE					
FAMILIES	This study (2021)	IRL, DUB	34	150	13
	<i>Culhane et al. (2007)</i>	US, PHIL	47	259	60
	<i>Culhane et al. (2007)</i>	US, NYC	131	467	118
ADULTS	<i>Waldron et al. (2019)</i>	IRL, DUB	54	306	39
	<i>Kuhn and Culhane (1998)</i>	US, PHIL	17	164	18
	<i>Kuhn and Culhane (1998)</i>	US, NYC	42	280	54

Perhaps most striking is that when looking across all of the studies and jurisdictions listed, compared to both single adults and the general population of adults accessing EA, families appear to represent a larger proportion of those experiencing chronic patterns of service use and a smaller proportion of those in the transitional cluster. Of particular interest is that this difference is most pronounced in the Irish data, with 33% of families in Dublin categorised as chronic shelter users (compared to 10–21% across all other sites) and just 57% categorised as transitional shelter users (compared to 72%–81% across all other sites). Notably, there is little variation between the proportional share of those experiencing episodic patterns of service use when the populations of families and adults more broadly are compared across studies; indeed, families and adults in Dublin-based EA exhibit equal rates of frequent movement in and out of services, with episodic service users representing 10% of all service users in each respective sample.

With the exception of Philadelphia, families categorised as chronic service users across the studies listed spent, on average, half the length of time in EA than their counterparts in the general population of adults accessing homelessness services. That is to say, for families, ‘chronic’ service use was characterised by logging around 11 months total in EA; while, for adults, it was characterised by logging just under 2 years of emergency bed use. This suggests that, among those remaining in homelessness services for prolonged periods, families tended to exit at a faster rate than other

adults⁸⁷. Looking at the Irish data specifically, however, it is worth noting that families experiencing *transitional* patterns of service use appeared to reside in EA for the same approximate length of time, overall, as the adults more broadly in EA (that is, logging an average of 78 and 73 total cumulative nights, respectively). This suggests that families who are transitional shelter users exit services at the same rate as the general population of homeless adults.

Finally, the data demonstrate that families in Dublin appeared to record a higher number of discrete episodes in EA across all clusters compared to almost all of the other studies listed (including those focused on families *and* single adults). This disparity was most pronounced among the episodic cluster whereby families in Dublin accrued an average of 15.4 episodes in EA over the observation period, compared to just 3.3–5.9 stays across all other sites. However, the extent of this divergence is most likely explained by the less restrictive exit criterion used for defining separate stays in this study (that is, one night) versus the more restrictive exit criterion used in the research discussed here for comparative purposes (that is, 30 nights)⁸⁸. Yet, notwithstanding these methodological differences, when taken together, the Irish data on episodic service use indicate that both families and the general population of adults experience more frequent stays in homelessness services (standing at 15.5 and 5.9 episodes, respectively) than their American counterparts, either with accompanying children (3.3–3.5 episodes) or as single adults (3.8–4.8 episodes).

5.5. Qualitative Sample Profile (N = 26)

As outlined in Chapter 4, 26 adults with at least one accompanying child were interviewed during the qualitative phase of the study. All of the participating parents were either accessing or had previously accessed State-funded EA in the Dublin region and were recruited on the basis that they exhibited shelter use histories that corresponded to the clusters observed during the quantitative analysis. Drawing on the participants' narratives, the following sections elaborate on the preceding discussion by presenting rich contextual qualitative data that foregrounds the complex biographies of the parents interviewed. More specifically, some key demographic and background information not captured by administrative data systems at the time of study are documented before a more nuanced account of the nature and shape of their service use patterns and shelter system trajectories is presented.

⁸⁷ In the Irish case, this pattern is likely explained, to some extent, by Government policy that was active during the observational period (2011-2016), which saw homeless families (that is, adults with accompanying children) prioritised for social housing over single homeless adults.

⁸⁸ It is perhaps worth noting that despite the use of different exit criteria to determine shelter stays, families and adults more broadly in homelessness services in Dublin also logged a markedly similar number of episodes of service use in both the transitional (2.1 and 1.3, respectively) and chronic clusters (2.2 and 2.0, respectively). Looking at the average number of nights per episode for each sub-group, however, demonstrates that adults' episodes were substantially longer for both cluster types than those of families (that is, 54 versus 34 nights in the transitional clusters and 306 versus 150 nights in the chronic clusters, respectively).

5.5.1. Demographics

The 26 parents interviewed during the qualitative phase of the study included four fathers and 22 mothers, representing 15% and 84% of the sample, respectively. The participants ranged in age from 21 to 51, with an average age of 31.8 years (Mdn = 30). Of these, 11 (42%) were aged between 18 and 29; 14 (54%) were aged between 30 and 49; and just one was aged over 50. There was a relatively equal spread of Irish-born parents (n = 14, 54%) and parents born outside of Ireland (n = 12, 42%) in the qualitative sample. Of those with a migrant status, nine were from regions outside the EU - including countries in Western Africa, South East Africa and South East Asia - and three were from EU countries, all of which were located in Eastern Europe⁸⁹. Just over half of the qualitative sample (n = 14, 54%) identified as having an ethnic-minority background - including ethnicities described by participants as Black (n = 8), Traveller (n = 5) and Asian (n = 1) - with the remaining individuals self-reporting that they were ethnically White (n = 11, 42%) (see Table 3 p. 101 for a detailed demographic breakdown of the qualitative sample profile)

5.5.2. Migration Profile and Residency Status

Amongst those born abroad, the amount of time these mothers and fathers had lived in Ireland ranged from four to 17 years, with an average of 10.2 years across the sub-sample of migrants as a whole. While some had arrived in Ireland during their late teens with their families of origin, others migrated in early adulthood alongside a spouse/partner and/or their children. Additionally, three of the migrant parents had sought asylum and lived in DP in the past, with all of these participants reporting chronic patterns of service use at the time of interview. Migrant participants' accounts of their reasons for moving to Ireland were diverse and often overlapped but several discussed their hope for personal and/or economic advancement, study and employment, while a smaller number described issues related to their safety and well-being being compromised in their country of origin.

The residency status of the participating migrant parents varied. Four had acquired Irish citizenship since their arrival and four non-EU nationals had been granted humanitarian Permission to Remain in Ireland (formerly 'Leave to Remain') which guarantees almost all of the rights and entitlement of Irish citizens. However, two non-EU nationals - both categorised as chronic service users - were in the lengthy process of applying for immigration permissions to remain in the State following the expiry of their visas and, as a result, were in a form of legal limbo whereby they had no right to work or study and were also not eligible for social housing supports or to receive social welfare assistance⁹⁰: *"I'm still waiting. I have no saving, no income, no nothing. No social welfare, no job seeker allowance, nothing"* (Ahlam, chronic). The complicated and arduous process of

⁸⁹ The precise country of origin from which participants relocated to Ireland from is not listed here as such information could potentially be identifying given the small sample size.

⁹⁰ These individuals were, however, entitled to seek an emergency payment of €100 per week, awarded at the discretion of the local Community Welfare Officer, which meant that they had to make a convincing case that they were in need of financial aid.

acquiring a valid immigration status while receiving minimal social protection and navigating the homelessness service system was a source of acute stress for these parents, both of whom described the experience as debilitating and dehumanising. As one mother put it: “*I didn’t know that this paper [referring to immigration documentation] is making me a human. I have to bring it everywhere to prove that I am a human. If not, I’m nothing. I don’t exist*” (Jana, chronic). Finally, of the two remaining EU nationals, one did not satisfy the Habitual Residence Condition (HRC) meaning that they were not eligible to claim social welfare benefits; however, this individual’s partner and children were Irish-born which meant that they could apply for social housing support as a family unit⁹¹.

5.5.3. Relationship Status and Parenthood

Just over one quarter (n = 7, 27%) of participants classified themselves as two-parent families, three of whom were married, with a majority (n = 19, 73%) describing themselves as one-parent families, including 18 single mothers and one single father. Of those in two-parent families, four couples were living together and the remaining three parents stated that their partner/spouse lived elsewhere. In one case this was due to their spouse living in their country of origin; however, for two young mothers, this was due to particular rules and procedures operating in their current EA whereby one partner had been evicted due to ongoing tension with staff and another was temporarily staying in the home of a parent as they were in the process of applying to access EA as a couple: “*We [referring to partner] want to be together it’s just the staff here [in STA] separated us, they just didn’t want to let him back in anymore*” (Sophie, episodic). Of those who identified as one-parent families, three women stated that although they were in a long-term relationship with the father of one or more of their children, their partner was incarcerated at the time of interview. As a consequence, these partners had not been able to provide significant supports (emotional, financial or otherwise) for several months or even years. The remainder of those parenting alone stated that they had been married but were now separated (n = 4); were in a relatively new relationship but that their current partner lived elsewhere (n = 3); or were single when they took part in the study (n = 9).

The 26 participants were parents to a total of 51 accompanying children (that is, children who lived with them at the time of interview), who ranged in age from two weeks to 17 years ($M = 5.8$ years). Just under three quarters of participants were categorised as having small families and living with one (n = 11) or two (n = 9) children. Four parents had three children in their care while two were considered to be heading large families that comprised five resident children in both instances. Crucially, nine parents (35%), including seven mothers and two fathers, reported that they had additional child(ren) living elsewhere. These children were either over the age of 18 and legally considered adults (n = 7) or under the age of 18 and living in State/relative care or remained in the care of an ex-partner (n = 15). Taking this information into account brings the total number of

⁹¹ Introduced in 2004 in response to EU enlargement, the HRC determines access to social welfare entitlements, which is based on the following considerations of each applicant: the length and continuity of the applicant who has lived in the Irish State, the nature and pattern of the applicant’s employment, and the future intentions of the applicant (FLAC, 2010).

children (that is, those who *were* and *were not* living with their parent(s)) across the sample to 73. This finding is consistent with international evidence that indicates that a large number of homeless families report children living in alternative living arrangements (Shinn *et al.*, 2005). Importantly, it also suggests that PASS does not currently provide an accurate picture of all children’s whereabouts, or the specific housing supports (such as those related to facilitating family re-unification and visitation) that may be important for these particular parents. As one such mother expressed: “*More than anything I want my kids to come back to live with me [...] but it’s complicated because I don’t have job and I don’t have a house. I cry every single day for them*” (Anika, chronic).

5.5.4. Educational Attainment

Table 12 presents an overview of the participating family members’ highest degree or completed level of education. Overall, educational attainment was relatively low across the sample, with eight parents reporting that they did not have any formal educational qualifications and six progressing to Junior Certificate level (or its equivalent) before leaving school. However, 10 participants went on to complete their Leaving Certificate (or its equivalent) and an additional two reported that they had obtained a third-level diploma.

Table 12: Highest Level of Educational Attainment, by Cluster

	TRANSITIONAL	EPISODIC	CHRONIC	TOTAL
Third-level diploma	0	0	2	2
Leaving Cert level	5	2	3	10
Junior Certificate level	1	2	3	6
No State examinations	1	3	4	8

Reports of discontinuities in schooling were commonplace among those in the episodic and chronic service use clusters, with a total of 12 parents in these two sub-groups (46%) stating that they had left school prior to completing their second-level education. Of these, 10 had left before the age of 16 and would therefore be classified as early school leavers, with two (both non-EU migrants) reporting no or extremely limited schooling during childhood or adolescence: “*My mum died very early, and I have many siblings so I had to take care of the junior ones. That’s why I stopped school when I was maybe eight or nine years old*” (Zuri, chronic). Notably accounts of disrupted schooling very frequently overlapped with early adverse life experiences that were often related to care-based disruptions and high levels of residential mobility during childhood: “*I left school in first year when I was about 14. As I said I was in care so I ended being dragged around so I didn’t really have any stability in education*” (Elaine, episodic).

5.5.5. Employment Status

Table 13 provides an overview of the participants' employment status by cluster. Four parents, two of whom were in the transitional sub-group, were either employed full-time (n = 1) or part-time (n = 4), the latter of which averaged at less than 16 hours a week. Just under one quarter (n = 7), all of whom were classified as either episodic or chronic service users, worked casually on a temporary or seasonal basis that was often depicted as highly irregular: *"They give me few hours here, a few hours there. Just to survive"* (Lauren, chronic). The remaining parents (n = 18) were unemployed at the time of interview with a relatively even rate across the three clusters. However, of those who had not worked for a period of three or more years, a clear majority (n = 8 out of 10) reported episodic or chronic patterns of homelessness service use.

Table 13: Employment Status, by Cluster

	TRANSITIONAL	EPISODIC	CHRONIC	TOTAL
EMPLOYED				
Full-time	1	0	0	1
Part-time	1	1	1	3
Total	2	1	1	4
WORKING ON A CASUAL BASIS				
Temporary/Seasonal work	0	1	4	5
Total	0	1	4	5
UNEMPLOYED				
Out of work for > three years	2	5	3	10
Out of work for < three years	2	0	2	4
Never worked	1	0	2	3
Total	5	5	7	17

Importantly, three of those who were unemployed were in two-parent families and told that their partner was engaged in some form of employment and five parents, all single mothers, had previously worked in full- or part- time positions but explained that they had to reduce their hours and ultimately give up their job upon learning of a pregnancy, giving birth or entering homelessness services: *"I used to work part-time before but when we first went homeless and we were moving from one place to another I had to give it up"* (Simone, chronic). Crystal, for example, had worked full-time in the area of social care for almost a decade prior to having her first child; however, upon entering homelessness services she ultimately had to leave her job: *"Between working, trying to find a place and someone to mind the baby everything just got on top of me. I didn't have a choice, so I quit"*. In the following excerpt, she described the negative impact that the transition to unemployment has had on her both psychologically and financially:

I haven't been without a job in years. That was the only stable thing in my life, was a job, to be honest. You need something stable in your life. I have nothing now. I'm just on Lone Parent [welfare payment] now too, which is tough because I was getting three times that when I was working! (Crystal, chronic)

Others reported a more transient or sporadic work history that typically involved working in low-skilled jobs or casually for friends or family members. Just three reported that they had never been employed, all of whom were young mothers in their early 20s who were actively pursuing a higher educational degree with the aim of entering the labour market following the attainment of this qualification: “*I haven’t ever had a job, I’ve been a mother since I was 18! I’m going to college first to get a degree in something and then I’ll go from there*” (Roz, transitional). At the time of interview, then, almost all of the participating parents were financially dependent on social welfare payments and/or other State financial assistance, which was sometimes supplemented by financial contributions from friends and/or family members.

5.5.6. Proximate ‘Causes’ for Families’ Entry to Emergency Accommodation

During interview, participants were asked to explain their living situations prior to first accessing EA and to discuss the primary reason for their homelessness at that juncture. Notwithstanding the complex pattern of experiences and processes that typically contribute to an individual’s or family’s pathway into homelessness over time, Table 14 presents an overview of the specific circumstances identified by parents as precipitating their official entry to the homelessness service system. These proximate ‘causes’ are grouped into the following categories: PRS related issues; family circumstances; and long-standing homelessness and housing precarity.

Table 14: Proximate ‘Causes’ for Families’ Entry to EA, by Cluster

	TRANSITIONAL	EPISODIC	CHRONIC	TOTAL
PRS-RELATED ISSUES				
Property removed from market	3	0	3	6
Overcrowding	1	0	0	1
Sub-standard accommodation	0	0	1	1
Served notice to quit	1	0	4	5
Total	5	0	8	13
FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES				
Intimate partner violence (IPV)	2	0	1	3
Relationship breakdown	0	1	0	1
Overcrowding in family home	0	2	1	3
Family conflict/feud	0	1	1	2
Total	2	4	3	9
LONG-STANDING HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING PRECARITY				
Sleeping rough	0	1	0	1
Accessing EA for single adults	0	1	0	1
Hidden homelessness	0	1	1	2
Total	0	3	1	4

A majority (n = 13) stated that their family’s homelessness was directly linked to conditions and issues they faced in the PRS. Notably, no episodic service users featured amongst this group; rather, *all* demonstrated chronic or transitional service user profiles, many of whom reported

relatively stable renting histories and successful tenancy agreements that had lasted for many years prior to being pushed out of the rental market: *“I was living in [PRS] for six years, never had an issue. But rent kept going up and new rules came in and me and my children were made homeless”* (Lauren, chronic). In fact, several explained that although they had moved between multiple PRS properties in the past, they had previously been able to source alternative private rented accommodation relatively easily⁹². Amara, for instance, had successfully maintained three separate rental properties with her children over a five-year period until, in the case of each, her landlords issued her with a notice to quit. Despite these setbacks, she, like others, explained that the process of sourcing and securing PRS tenancies had been relatively straightforward *“back then”*, suggesting that worsening housing market conditions was the primary driver of these families’ paths into EA:

He [landlord] gave us three months to find a new place. I found a place quickly. It was easy back then, once you had your money, your deposit, it was very good. Anybody that is ready, you get a house. That was 2010/2011 - we got a place straight away each time! It is very different now. (Amara, transitional)

Some 35% of participants (n = 9), with a relatively even spread across the three sub-groups, reported a range of events associated with family circumstances, including DV, relationship breakdown, overcrowding in their/their partner’s family home and conflict with a family member(s), as precipitating their entry to homelessness services: *“I suffered from domestic violence, he [ex-husband] was a drug abuser and a drink abuser so we actually had to move away. I went to a women’s refuge then got on to the council and was put straight into the hotel”* (Debbie, chronic). While the familial contexts and situations varied, these home-based difficulties resulted in families either being asked or forced to leave their residence in an effort to escape circumstances that had become increasingly difficult to endure. Sophia, for instance, told that her last stable living place was in the home of her partner’s family where she had lived for almost seven years. However, following the birth of her child the house became overcrowded and, following a prolonged and unsuccessful search for housing in the PRS, they were left with *“no choice but to go homeless”*. She went on to elaborate on how her family’s homelessness came about: *“It wasn’t fair on his parents, the house was already full and his mam wasn’t well. So we didn’t really have any other option at the time, we couldn’t stay where we were and we were having no luck finding our own place so ever since then it’s just been B&Bs and hotels”* (Sophia, episodic).

Finally, four participants - including three categorised as episodic service users and one categorised as experiencing chronic service use - reported that they had experienced various forms of homelessness and housing precarity for prolonged periods immediately prior to their entry to EA either while pregnant or as a family unit. Elaine, for example, had been cycling through the single adult EA system and also experienced a sustained period of ‘rooflessness’ with her partner for almost one year; Cheyanne had been sleeping on a floor in overcrowded accommodation for over two years;

⁹²In some cases, families told that they had experienced brief periods of hidden homelessness where they had stayed temporarily with a family member or friend immediately following the loss of a PRS tenancy and prior to sourcing another PRS tenancy.

Miguel had been accessing EA for single adults with his partner for two years ; and Crystal had been moving between EA for single adults, ‘sofa surfing’ and living in sub-standard sub-lets with no security of tenure for seven years: “*I was staying here, there and everywhere. Sleeping in cars and sofas and all, everything. And when I was seven months gone [pregnant], they finally put me in the [family] hub*” (Crystal, chronic). While specific events or crises acted as a trigger for these individuals’ initial experiences of residential instability, their accounts indicated that, without sufficient supports, they had been unable to resolve their housing-related issues over time. The driving force behind these individuals’ eventual entries to EA with their children was thus linked to long-standing housing precariousness which had placed them on trajectories marked by multiple transitions and residential displacement prior to establishing a family.

While each of the three categories discussed here has distinctive features, there were also many shared experiences across the qualitative sample. As mentioned, several reported adverse or traumatic life experiences as well as disruptions that served to create multiple vulnerabilities. Early school-leaving, home-based difficulties and experiences of ‘out of home’ care during childhood were commonly reported. Labour market participation was also relatively low, with a majority reporting few educational qualifications that would enable them to find a path to employment. Also worthy of note is that prior to presenting as homeless, all of the participating parents were either welfare-dependant and in receipt of housing assistance payments and/or on the social housing waiting list. Most, then, had experienced some degree of socio-economic disadvantage or financial hardship as children that continued, to some extent, into later life. For instance, when Lauren was asked if she had experienced poverty growing up, she simply replied: “*Yeah. Still am*”, while a number of others told that they had accessed EA or DV refuges alongside their parents during childhood, with two women stating that they had, in fact, returned to the very same services with their own children many years later. Kim’s account - although a more extreme example - details family homelessness occurring across four generations, demonstrating the intergenerational transmission of structural disadvantage and housing exclusion:

Before they got their [local authority] house, my parents were homeless for not being able to pay their rent. That’s why when I was being made homeless my mam was heartbroken, she was constantly crying because she couldn’t help me, you know? And because of everything she went through, she didn’t want the same for me and her grandkids. And that’s how I feel now about my own daughter and granddaughter being homeless, you just don’t want them to go through that kind of hardship and you feel like you should be helping them, giving them a home, but you can’t and you just feel heartbroken over it. (Kim, transitional)

5.5.7. Families’ Emergency Accommodation Profiles

As mentioned in Chapter 4, the qualitative sampling strategy was informed by the quantitative results. To this end, families were recruited on the basis that their service use histories broadly corresponded to the clusters of service utilisation observed. While there was considerable diversity in the extent to which families had moved in and out of homelessness services, data derived from their housing and homeless timelines helped to consolidate and confirm their categorisation into the

sub-group that was most representative of their experiences⁹³. By allowing these parents to speak for themselves, the analysis presented here aims to build upon the quantitative descriptions of families' service use patterns presented earlier in this chapter. It does so by characterising each distinct pattern of homelessness service use in a way that permits richer understanding of the nature and 'shape' of the trajectories that they take through, out and sometimes back into EA over time.

5.5.7.1. Transitional Service User Profiles (n = 7)

Families in the transitional sub-group, including six mothers and one father, typically reported a lower amount of time spent in EA compared to those categorised as chronic and episodic service users, averaging an approximate 331.9 nights or 10.9 months overall. Although this average seems somewhat high, many of these participants explicitly referenced the Irish housing crisis and talked about how the private rented landscape had changed dramatically in recent years, leading to longer stays in homelessness services. Kim, for instance, described herself as "*one of the lucky ones*" since she had exited homelessness services to a local authority tenancy after a nine-month period. Likewise, Roz - who had spent 10 months in EA prior to being allocated an AHB tenancy - explained that she had previously accessed homelessness services alongside her mother during childhood. In the following account, she compared her own experience of seeking housing with that of her mother several years previously:

[Were you there [in EA] with your mum for long?]

No. Because back then there wasn't really a crisis for houses, we were only there for six months and then my mam was offered a [local authority] house. Whereas now it's just loads of people homeless and it was nearly a year before I was housed, but that actually feels quick now! (Roz, transitional)

These families typically demonstrated a **linear shelter system trajectory**, reporting very few or, in many cases, no nights spent outside of EA during their time in services (all of which were brief and permitted stays in in the home of parent or partner); they also tended to report low levels of residential mobility, having stayed in between one and three unique EA services prior to securing alternative living arrangements. Crucially, all families classified as transitional service users had also been able to successfully exit services and were housed in independent accommodation for between one and four years at the time of interview and reported no returns to EA since their departure. In terms of where these families were living, two had acquired a short-term tenancy in the PRS *via* HHAP and five had been allocated a social housing tenancy either provided by their local authority (n = 2) or an AHB (n = 3). Although experiences varied considerably based on the type of housing secured, as will be discussed in some detail in Chapter 6, almost all talked at length about the sense of safety and stability that typically accompanied a relatively speedy exit from services to

⁹³ It is important to note that the number of residential transitions assigned to participating parents is, in some cases, an approximation. This is because it was difficult to precisely quantify the number of times these families had moved between different housing and EA settings owing to very high levels of residential instability over the course of their lives.

independent accommodation. Clodagh and her two children, for instance, had been living in their AHB-managed tenancy for around one year when she took part in the study. Her account is illustrative of others in this sub-group who viewed the transition from EA to housing as enabling them to re-claim a sense of control, ownership and certainty over their daily lives and futures:

The hotels were a nightmare. But now that I have this housing sorted since last year, it means everything else can fall into place. The panic is gone now because without the housing, I wouldn't have been able to focus on anything else. That was the most urgent thing. (Clodagh, transitional)

5.5.7.2. Chronic Service User Profiles (n = 12)

Families categorised as chronic service users, including 11 mothers and one father, also reported relatively few nights out of EA (that were typically permitted leave to the home of a partner, family member or to give birth to a child in hospital) as well as a low level of movement between services, with most reporting that they had stayed in just one EA service setting (n = 7) and a small number noting that they had moved between three (n = 2) and four (n = 3). However, in keeping with the statistical results, what differentiated these parents from those in the transitional cluster was that they had spent more than twice the amount of time in EA, averaging an estimated 702.6 nights or just under two years in total. Indeed, two of the women in this sub-group, both single mothers, told that their children (now toddlers) had been born while living in EA, meaning that they had spent their whole lives living in the same homelessness service setting: *“They transferred me from hospital to [family hub] after I had my baby. They told me that I'd be there for between three and six months and I'd get a place. But then it became two years and we still have nowhere”* (Keandra, chronic).

All of the families categorised as chronic service users were residing in EA at the time of interview, including placements in STA (n = 8), PEA (n = 2) and TEA (n = 2). Importantly, none had been able to secure a lasting exit to alternative independent living arrangements since their official entry to homelessness services. Despite constant efforts to source and secure housing, the families in this sub-group thus experienced an **uninterrupted shelter system trajectory**, with all demonstrating an acute awareness of time passing while living in EA as well as considerable anxiety about the enduring nature of their homelessness: *“I'm here [in STA] way longer than what I should be [...] It's isolating and you start to feel like you'll never get out”* (Lauren, chronic). Zuri, for example, had been living in a family hub with her daughter for just under two years. Her account is reflective of the abiding sense of stasis and uncertainty that characterised the day-to-day thinking of these families as well as the frustration they felt owing to a lack of progress and prolonged stays in homelessness service settings:

It's slow. I don't know if it's going to be five more months or five more years. When you're told six months, you expect six months but, in this situation, there's no date, no time, no year. We don't know. When you're living a life without hope you feel very bad. Living in this place feels like you have no future. (Zuri, chronic)

5.5.7.3. Episodic Service User Profiles (n = 7)

Families who exhibited episodic patterns of shelter use, including five mothers and two fathers, reported stay histories that differed significantly from those in the preceding two sub-groups. Specifically, these families described markedly higher rates of movement between services, with four reporting that they stayed in approximately 15 different EA services as a family unit at the time of interview and the remaining three reporting that they had resided in between three and five. Lottie's account gives a sense of the level of transience and residential mobility that characterised these families' lives as they cycled through the homelessness service system. In the following excerpt, she described a period of several years when she and her children had transitioned between multiple EA service settings, including placements in TEA, PEA and finally STA, where she had been living for three months when she took part in the study:

Well to be honest, there's been about 15, 16 places [referring to EA]. When I went homeless first I was in a B&B with two small kids, myself and my partner. Then we were moved from B&B to B&B. A night here, a night there. We were in a hotel for a while [...] We were out in another one out in [area name], we were there for one night and we were brought back into the city. Then I moved from there down to [area name], we were down there for a year, that was the first stable place we had. Then we were thrown here and there for two to three weeks, and then the one [hotel] in [place name], we were there for a year. Then we came here [referring to current STA]. (Lottie, episodic)

The families in this sub-group had also spent considerably more nights out of EA; however, unlike those categorised as transitional and chronic service users, a number reported periods where they had relinquished their EA placement unexpectedly with no alternative accommodation in place. As a consequence, these 'exits' were often not to secure living arrangements but rather referred to periods spent in precarious living situations - including situations of hidden homelessness where they stayed temporarily in the homes of friends and/or family members, often without their own bed - before returning to services. Moreover, several mothers who fit this service user profile told that they had temporarily exited EA to other institutional settings, such as acute hospital, due to periods of mental or physical ill-health while a smaller number, like Elaine quoted below, told that they felt they had no choice but to leave EA and sleep rough on multiple occasions during their pregnancies due to safety-related concerns in EA environments:

I've been put into [TEA] and, you know, I had to leave late at night, because of drug users being violent or whatever, and I was pregnant so I'd have to go out onto the street. So, yeah, I've gone from being where I was supposed to be in my hostel to being sleeping on the street anyway. (Elaine, episodic)

Importantly, a smaller number of parents in this sub-group reported relatively stable exits from EA to housing in the PRS that extended over a prolonged period of time, sometimes spanning several years. However, in all of these instances, these exits subsequently broke down, resulting in multiple readmissions to homelessness services. A good example is Jess who had recalled three unsuccessful exiting attempts from EA with her children over a 13-year period, including one to the

home of her partner as well as to two separate HHAP tenancies: “*It felt devastating to leave another home behind, knowing that we were going back into the hotels, it was like ‘Jesus’, the kids have to go through all that again*” (Jess, episodic). Families in this sub-group were thus experiencing **circuitous shelter system trajectories**; while some reported independent exits where they experienced temporary periods of stability before returning to shelter, others reported precarious exits where they demonstrated continued patterns of homelessness and housing instability that occurred *outside* the remit of EA. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that when these participants were asked to estimate the total duration of their family’s homelessness, the average was higher than those in the chronic sub-group, standing at approximately 886.4 cumulative nights or over two years (with the highest recorded being three and a half years in total). Almost all (n = 6) of these families were living in STA at the time of interview; however, one mother (not Jess quoted above) had recently been re-housed for one month in what was her second HHAP tenancy in the PRS.

5.6. Conclusion

This chapter presented findings that sought to determine the dynamic patterning of families’ shelter use in the Dublin region and identify the trajectories that they take through homelessness service systems over time. The results of the cluster analysis revealed three distinct sub-groups of service use amongst families in the Irish case that fit the dominant typology of transitional, chronic and episodic service utilisation developed by Kuhn and Culhane (1998) and Culhane *et al.*, (2007). Most obviously, perhaps, it was shown that the paths families take through EA are clearly dynamic, varied and complex; some appeared to experience a relatively straightforward route out of EA while others demonstrated a multiplicity of changing ‘states’ and statuses over time or remained stuck in a system designed for short-term, emergency use (Culhane *et al.*, 2007; Gerstel *et al.*, 1996; Kim and Garcia, 2019; Weinreb *et al.*, 2010; Wong *et al.*, 1997)⁹⁴.

The results also lend weight to the growing consensus that a majority of those accessing shelter, including families, are in fact infrequent users of EA who tend to exit relatively quickly and not return. Rather, as was demonstrated here, the bulk of resources appear to be consumed by smaller proportions of families experiencing prolonged or recurrent shelter stays (Kuhn and Culhane, 1998; Culhane *et al.*, 2007). Comparing the findings with similar Irish and US-based research evidence, however, pointed to some notable trends in the case of Irish families. In particular, the FRPs in this study accounted for a far greater proportional share of chronic service users than has been found in studies of adult and family shelter users reported elsewhere (Culhane *et al.*, 2007; Kuhn and Culhane, 1998; Waldron *et al.*, 2019), which provides an important platform for further exploration throughout the remaining chapters in this work.

⁹⁴ It is perhaps worth reiterating that, as discussed in Chapter 4, the quantitative analysis of data presented here was not undertaken for the purposes of prediction, testing hypotheses or unearthing so called absolute ‘truths’ regarding families’ shelter utilisation; rather, they were intended to draw attention to emergent *patterns* in the data that warrant further elaboration and exploration.

Quite apart from establishing an empirically robust and data-driven account of what the dynamics of shelter use amongst families ‘look like’ in the Irish context, the quantitative stage of the research enabled an exploration of differences (and similarities) among the sub-groups in terms of FRPs’ background characteristics to validate the robustness of the cluster model (Kuhn and Culhane, 1998). As was shown, no statistically significant inter-cluster differences with regard to the age and gender of FRPs were revealed. However, inter-cluster differences *were* found on the basis of household composition, migrant status, race/ethnicity, type of EA placement at first entry and the number of unique EA placements accessed by families over the study period. Yet, perhaps most striking was that transitional and chronic service users demonstrated a relative degree of similarity across several of these metrics, whereas the distinction between these two sub-groups and episodic service users was much more pronounced in almost all instances.

Finally, by drawing on the study’s interview data and integrating parents’ accounts of their broader life circumstances and articulations of their service use histories not captured in the administrative dataset, families’ service use patterns were located in, and not isolated from, other critical dimensions of experience (Bassuk, 2007; Pleace, 1998). Moreover, contextualising the quantitative descriptions of the clusters with qualitative insights from families’ narratives of exiting from, remaining in and returning to EA, allowed for a more textured picture of their service user profiles to emerge. This facilitated the identification and development of three corresponding shelter system trajectories - linear, uninterrupted and circuitous - to represent the experiences of families in this study. The next chapter builds upon and broadens the analysis by interrogating the study’s qualitative data to examine, in-depth, the circumstances, factors and processes involved in *driving* these distinct shelter system trajectories over time.

6. THE DRIVERS OF FAMILIES' SHELTER TRAJECTORIES: A MACRO-LEVEL SYSTEMS ANALYSIS

6.1. Introduction

Drawing primarily on the study's quantitative (administrative) data, the preceding chapter identified three distinct clusters of service use amongst families accessing EA in the Irish context - transitional, chronic and episodic - that corresponded, respectively, to what were described as three shelter system trajectories: linear, uninterrupted and circuitous. This is the first of two chapters that draw on the study's qualitative (interview) data to further interrogate these patterns by presenting findings that shed light on the conditions - that is, the *'how'* and the *'why'* - under which these trajectories emerge. Guided by a complexity-informed analysis, attention is placed firmly on families' *macro-level interactions* with homelessness (and other related) systems - including homelessness policy systems, public and private housing systems, broader health and social care systems and linear models of homelessness service provision - to identify experiences that shaped parents' differing service use patterns over time.

The analysis commences with the accounts of families categorised as 'transitional' service users, detailing particular experiences that differentiated them from the remainder of the sample. Several mitigating factors that appeared to protect these families from the constraining structural forces that contributed to chronic and episodic service use - including their greater ability to leverage access to the PRS and navigate service and housing systems - are discussed. Next, attention turns to those categorised as 'chronic' service users who, despite presenting with very similar background characteristics to their transitional counterparts, confronted formidable barriers of access in the private rental market that resulted in prolonged shelter stays. Finally, the analysis focuses on the accounts of those categorised as 'episodic' service users. Here, evidence of precarious tenure-types (O'Donnell, 2019), cumulative adversities (Padgett *et al.*, 2016b) and complex trauma (Bassuk, 2007) are uncovered, all of which appeared to influence these families' movements in and out of as EA as well as *between* different service settings over time.

6.1. Linear Trajectories and the Process of Exiting: The Experience of Transitional Service Users

The quantitative analysis revealed that a majority of families (57%) were categorised as transitional service users who recorded very few stays and a low number of cumulative nights spent in EA. Moreover, this cluster was characterised by very low levels of mobility within the shelter system since almost all (94%) had accessed just 1-5 unique EA services over the six-year observation period. This section examines how the seven participating parents with transitional service use histories secured a lasting exit to independent housing. Divided into two parts, the first details the process of 'getting out' of EA, with specific analytic attention paid to the circumstances that appeared to facilitate speedier access to housing as well as the mechanisms that buffered against the negative

effects of shelter stays. The focus then shifts to the process of ‘staying out’ of EA by exploring families’ experiences *in* housing, including the factors that enabled them to sustain an exit as well as those which have prevented their longer-term housing need from being met.

6.1.1. ‘Getting out’: The Dynamics of Securing a Speedy Exit

6.1.1.1. Leveraging Access to the Private Rented Sector

Like all parents in this study, those in the transitional sub-group who had exited to the PRS *via* HHAP spoke explicitly about the difficult and stressful process of trying to secure a private rental tenancy in a high-cost and competitive market: “*For six months I was every week going to viewings like seven, eight, nine, 10 apartments; it’s madness, you know?*” (Antoni, transitional). However, what differentiated these families from others in the sample was what they frequently referred to as *sheer luck* in terms of finding a sympathetic landlord after a relatively short period. Critically, as the following accounts demonstrate, these parents also acknowledged the vital role that their keyworkers played in bolstering their chances in the PRS by providing intensive housing assistance. This included direct communications with private landlords during which they ‘vouched’ for families as tenants, explained families’ situations and reassured landlords about the HHAP scheme:

We were very very lucky. Out of 35 other families the landlord chose us and that’s because [keyworker] explained to her about HHAP and our situation. (Antoni, transitional)

And then finally I went to one [viewing] and because my keyworker went with me and explained to the landlord what me and my son were going through and that we keep the house clean, we got it. I started crying because I just couldn’t believe it. (Stacy, transitional)

Amongst those who experienced transitional patterns of service use, family support systems emerged as another important enabler to securing a PRS tenancy, and, for some, facilitated a speedier shelter exit. Parents who had positive relationships with parents and siblings, in particular, reported fundamental supports related to childcare (including babysitting and the dropping-off and collection of children to and from crèche or school) and transportation: “*My sister would drive me because she has a car. Sometimes, if I had an appointment and I couldn’t have my baby in crèche I would just call my sister and she’d come to help*” (Amara, transitional). In the following excerpt, Clodagh, like others in this sub-group, explained that her time in PEA “*didn’t impact me as much*” since she had strong family support that helped to mitigate the effects of hotel-living, noting that other parents in EA are not so “*lucky*”:

Being in the hotel didn’t impact me as much because my family were a massive help. I’m lucky in that way because a lot of people don’t have that. So for me, it was obviously stressful looking for places while living there but all in all, with my ma and my two sisters everything was ok, like it wasn’t as bad as it can be for other people. (Clodagh, transitional)

For these families, their capacity to exit quickly *via* the PRS was strongly influenced by happenstance; or rather, ‘being in the right place at the right time’ (Blunden and Flanagan, 2021). Importantly, however, making sure that they were able to *be there* was significantly bolstered by

keyworking supports that enabled them to be more competitive rental applicants and strong support networks that helped to protect them against the negative impacts of shelter-life by providing concrete assistance that allowed them to attend viewings more frequently (Lindsey, 1996).

6.1.1.2. Navigating 'The System'

In relative terms, the accounts of families who had secured speedy exits from EA also suggested that parents in this sub-group were either initially placed in, or quickly moved to, EA service settings that were better aligned with their family's preferences and needs. Clodagh, for example, explained that she and her children were first placed in ONO TEA where they experienced high levels of stress and anxiety related to the transience that characterised their day-to-day lives: "*It was horrible, you weren't guaranteed your room each night so we had to check in [to TEA] at 8pm and then pack our bags and leave at 9:30 every morning*". However, she sought advice from friends who had "*just been through the same thing*" and began directly contacting her local authority to request access to a more stable placement in STA: "*We were only there [in TEA] for two weeks, thank god, because I just went into the corporation every morning telling them that I wasn't happy. That's when we got the [STA]*". In the following excerpt, Clodagh identified the process of achieving a degree of residential stability as a crucial enabler to her family exiting homelessness since she was better able to manage their daily activities and focus her efforts on securing housing:

Getting into [STA] finally meant we had a bit of stability, you know, not having to worry constantly about whether we'd get a place there that night. Even though they had some rules and things like that at least we weren't having to jump from hotel to hotel. So we were lucky because that made things a lot easier for us anyway. (Clodagh, transitional)

Similarly, Roz spoke about how she felt "*lucky*" in comparison to other families since she and her daughter had avoided the process of 'self-accommodating' and ONO placements as well as what she had heard were the "*strict*" and regimented environments of family hubs, all of which she felt would have hindered her progress in securing an exit from EA. During interview, she explained that a low level of residential mobility in a less interventionalist service setting had facilitated her smoother transition to independent accommodation:

Thank god I never had to hop around the place or have to take one of the hubs which are meant to be even worse than the hotels, like I could not deal with the strictness I would've gone mad [...] So I was lucky, because the refuge got us the hotel, then from there we got [STA] and then from [STA] I got here [local authority tenancy]. (Roz, transitional)

In other cases, parents' accounts suggested that they had mobilised longer-term strategies, including the timely activation of formal resources; that is, where they had both applied, and been deemed eligible for, social housing at a date that long-preceded their first experience of family

homelessness⁹⁵. Clodagh, for example, had applied for social housing 10 years prior to entering EA for the first time with her three children after her landlord decided to ‘sell up’, Stacy had been eligible for six years before she presented as homeless due to PRS-related issues and Kim - a single mother with long-term health problems - had been on the social housing list for almost two decades when she first accessed EA after her family’s PRS tenancy broke down and they could not secure another rental agreement. Faced with what they perceived as a dehumanising numbers-based social housing allocation system, these parents responded by adopting differing approaches in an attempt to get their application over the line. Some, like Stacy, described how they sought to bolster their chances of becoming housed by contacting council representatives directly to make themselves more ‘visible’ in what was considered to be an otherwise faceless system:

Once you do that, then you’re on the system all the time, your name is constantly popping up. They know you’re eager to get out of the hotel, you’re eager to get somewhere. (Stacy, transitional)

Others demonstrated an awareness of a particular set of assumptions that surrounded them in homelessness services where they were expected to ‘behave’ in a certain way to get the help they needed (Sahlin, 2005). To this end, several spoke about how they presented themselves in a manner that was “most likely to elicit sympathy and support” from service providers; or rather, in a manner that suggested that they were “in synchronisation with expected constructs of homelessness” (Pleace, 2018: 129). In the hope of securing a speedier exit, then, several of these parents responded accordingly. As one mother recalled: “*I never caused trouble at all, whereas some people who have caused trouble get blacklisted. And they get suspended. So that’s why they’re homeless longer*” (Roz, transitional). Hope explained that she deliberately demonstrated compliance with shelter rules and adopted a passive stance in her interactions with service personnel because she felt that “*all those things feed into the system*”. In the following account, she positioned professionals in homelessness services as housing ‘gatekeepers’ and identified playing the part of the ‘good’ and ‘dutiful’ service user as having been crucial to her relatively smooth and speedy route out of EA:

No matter how these people [referring to management in family hub] treated me, I respected them. People that will fight or make trouble, limits their chances of getting housed because whoever is going to house you is going to be like, ‘who is this person, what is her character like, is she an anti-social person?’ When I was angry I always tried to calm myself down and talk to my keyworker one on one and say, ‘this is what’s going on’. So in that way, I would say that my attitude played a big part. (Hope, transitional)

Likewise, Kim attributed her short stay in PEA to her being “*a good girl*” who “*sat down and kept my mouth shut*”. This ‘messaging’ was reinforced and (re)produced in her interactions with her keyworker who explicitly identified her ‘good’ behaviour as playing a significant role in her

⁹⁵ Each local authority can determine the order of priority that applies to their social housing waiting list. Currently, most operate on a chronologically ordered system whereby preference is given to those who have been on the list the longest. As lettings become available, applications are reassessed concerning their needs and properties are allocated “taking account of all the relevant circumstances” (The Housing Agency, 2018: 13).

securing an exit to local authority housing: *“My keyworker was brilliant, he tried his best and he said to everyone, ‘she never put pressure on me, didn’t swear at me, if everyone was like her we’d have an easy job and that’s why I think she got her house so quick, because she didn’t give anybody bullshit’”*. In contrast to Stacy, the accounts of Roz, Hope and Kim illustrate alternative strategising whereby parents sought to ingratiate themselves to service providers and government officials *via* displays of gratitude, submission and passivity to secure speedy routes to housing. These parents had therefore endeavoured to become “socialised in the shelter dynamics” and formed positive relationships with staff, thus building “a record of cooperation, and polishing their image as a deserving ‘housing ready’ client” (Trillo *et al.*, 2016: 19).

6.1.2. ‘Staying out’: Exploring Security in Housing

6.1.2.1. Housing as Stabilising

Parents spoke at length about the transformative effect of exiting EA to living arrangements that offered greater security and predictability in housing - particularly long-term local authority and AHB leases - signifying a narrative shift from ‘homeless’ to ‘home’, in many cases: *“I can finally, breathe. I feel good [pause] I feel everything is going to work out”* (Clodagh, transitional). A majority spoke about reclaiming a sense of independence since they no longer had to reside in service environments that were experienced as stigmatised spaces where they felt their autonomy and independence had been undermined: *“Freedom. It feels like freedom. It’s a life now for me and the kids instead of people watching us and being told what we can and can’t to”* (Kim, transitional). Like others, Roz’s account conveyed the notion of a reformulated self that was able to focus on steering her family’s future, rather than simply surviving day-to-day:

Now that our housing’s sorted [referring to local authority tenancy], it means everything else can fall into place, I can start planning ahead, you know? Like I was able to say ‘right, I’m definitely putting [daughter’s] name down for the school here because I’m definitely going to be here’. I’m not just making sure we get through each day. (Roz, transitional)

In addition to the positive impact on parents’ sense of ‘place’ and ‘position’, the steadying effect of having a stable base permeated many accounts. Alongside substantial improvements in both their and their children’s mental health and well-being, parents explained that their children were also no longer missing school and several had either successfully (re)entered - or were actively pursuing - employment or educational opportunities, primarily because they had easier access to childcare: *“Being here [in social housing tenancy] means I can focus on other things now because people can come down to mind the baby instead of me having to travel to get a child minder to go to work and then bring her home and then do it all again, day after day”* (Clodagh, transitional). These routes to economic self-sufficiency not only yielded greater financial security and independence but also rekindled parents’ sense of purpose, self-worth and personal direction: *“I can finally get excited about the future again, you know? I’m even starting to think about going back to college and getting*

my degree” (Roz, transitional). Access to stable and *long-term* subsidised housing in and of itself, then, was both necessary and sufficient for almost all of these families to exit EA and remain residentially secure (Bassuk *et al.*, 2014; Gubits *et al.*, 2015; Gubits *et al.*, 2016; Shinn, 2009).

6.1.2.2. Support Infrastructures as Scaffolding

The narratives of parents in the transitional sub-group indicated that achieving long-term housing stability was substantially bolstered by help they received from personal connections and social networks. Crucially, exiting to stable housing replenished their support systems by providing a space in which they could restore, repair and maintain their connections with friends and family. This was particularly important for those whose social connections had been interrupted or severed during their time in EA, an issue that will be discussed in much more depth in Chapter 7. However, housing stability also enabled them to establish *new* relationships that positively impacted their socio-emotional health. Roz, for example, stated that being able to spend more time with family has “*strengthened*” her; Stacy asserted that she would be “*lost*” without the support she is receiving from her new partner; and Kim told that she had developed a close bond with her neighbours who “*always help each other out*”:

These informal networks also provided critical assistance (financial, material, emotional) to parents at the point when they moved to housing. Like others, Clodagh spoke about how her family and friends helped her with moving/transporting her belongings and furnishing the property⁹⁶: “*I got a sofa from a friend who also helped me with all the deliveries. Then my cousin gave me a bed. I literally got so tired but then a friend of mine came over and sorted everything out for me, like everything was done. I was delighted!*”. She went on to note that without this support, she would have felt “*overwhelmed*” and unable to successfully navigate the transition to independent accommodation: “*Getting help was so important. Just to have people there, it just, like, makes you feel so much better. I probably would’ve had a breakdown otherwise!*”.

Likewise, Roz told that she was initially worried about moving to independent housing since she had two children - one of them a new-born baby - and her partner was incarcerated. However, she identified the support she received from her partner’s family as the primary facilitator of her smooth transition to housing and successful resettlement experience: “*Being on my own with him [partner] being away [in prison], it’s not as hard as I thought it was going to be. I thought I was going to be in tears in the corner [laughs] but, honestly, with all the support I’m getting from his family, like it’s been grand*”. In the following excerpt, she compared her past experiences in housing with her ex-partner to her current circumstances, noting that she felt more able to “*cope*” since her support system had been significantly improved. Echoing the sentiments of many others, she

⁹⁶ Social housing is unfurnished and in a small number of cases, parents reported that their properties did not have flooring installed. It is possible to make an application to the Department of Social Protection for financial assistance towards the purchase of goods and appliances *via* an Exceptional Needs Payment. These payments are made under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme (The Housing Agency, 2018).

reiterated the importance of hands on help as well as simply knowing that unconditional support was “always there”:

It makes me feel like I can cope because I've got more people this time around to help so I know there's always someone there. Like his dad drops up shopping or if I asked, his sister would take the baby for a while or they'd come out and give me hand. Like I'd say 'could you come stay for the weekend?', or, 'I'm bolloxed and not feeling the best' and they'd be straight down to me. (Roz, transitional)

Notably, formal support systems - provided primarily *via* the Support to Live Independently (SLÍ) scheme⁹⁷ - appeared to play a less integral role than their social support networks in helping families in this sub-group achieve residential stability. While parents expressed gratitude and appreciation for the concrete assistance they received from SLÍ workers - in relation to, for example, filling in paperwork, utilities, applying for grants/social welfare payments and linking them in with educational programmes - particularly at the point of exit, a clear trend emerged whereby SLÍ support plateaued relatively early in almost all cases. This was because, as mentioned in Chapter 5, many of these parents had experience of living independently prior to their entry to EA and, significantly, none reported current or past histories of complex need (related to, for example, substance dependencies or mental ill-health that may require in-patient treatment). As one mother, Kim, put it:

It's nice to have but I don't really need it because I'm not really struggling much. She [SLÍ worker] was saying, 'jeez Kim you're on the ball, you don't even really need me'. And I said 'well I'd been renting for 17 years so I know all this stuff!' [laughs]. I think I met her twice and when she came she was like 'is there anything you need?' and I'd be like, 'no, it's all done'. (Kim, transitional)

Similarly, Hope told that her SLÍ worker eventually “moved on” because “they said there was nothing much to be doing, ‘you take good care of your children, they’re in school, you’re not drunk’ [laughs.] So they didn’t want to waste too much time on me”. Many families in this sub-group told that since their immediate (and only) problem - access to housing - had been solved, they felt they no longer required formal assistance from homelessness service systems. In the following accounts, Antoni explained that he had ceased his involvement with the SLÍ programme because he did not want to continue to consume resources unnecessarily while Clodagh recounted that she declined the support in the first instance because “housing was all we needed”:

We didn't need any more help because, you know, our problem was solved. And I know there's so many families in my situation so why should I have here a person who comes and chats if I don't need it? I don't want to take-up her [SLÍ worker's] time. (Antoni, transitional)

It [SLÍ] was offered, we just didn't want it.

[Do you still feel that way now?]

Yeah. We don't really need help with anything, we're getting on fine. Housing was all we needed. We didn't have any worries about it like, just couldn't wait to get in. Once that happened we stopped linking in with services. (Clodagh, transitional)

⁹⁷ SLÍ offers advocacy and practical assistance to families with the move out of EA and to maintain their housing. This is typically provided *via* weekly meetings with an allocated SLÍ worker over a period of six months, though this time-frame can be shortened or extended if necessary.

For the parents in this sub-group, social and family support systems emerged as the most important enabler to them achieving housing stability and tenancy sustainment once a long-term tenancy had been secured, due, in large part, to the nature and extent of assistance - financial, practical, emotional and parental (including childcare) - they provided. While these families appreciated and valued the formal supports they were offered and/or received, they appeared to have less of an impact on their *housing* outcome (Shinn and Khadduri, 2020). This suggests that housing itself was “a powerful intervention” that helped to foster improvements for transitional shelter users “even without special services” (Rog *et al.*, 2017: 8).

6.1.3. “I am housed but I do not have a home”: Negotiating Residential Uncertainty

All parents categorised as transitional service users had exited EA and not returned to shelter. However, there was evidence to suggest that for a small number - notably all of whom were migrant parents with limited support networks in Ireland - their longer-term housing *need* had not, in fact, been met. While these families were unlikely to return to homelessness services because they had been allocated social housing tenancies or reported positive tenancy relationships with private landlords, their accounts nevertheless indicated the presence of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ dynamics; that is, evidence of families being pushed out of housing because they want or had to leave or pulled towards housing because of the prospect of a better living situation (Rossi, 1980). As a consequence, these families were very likely to experience additional residential moves, thus precluding them from achieving a ‘true’ sense of housing stability, at least at the time of the study.

Antoni, his wife and three children, for example, had exited to a HHAP tenancy where they had lived for several years at the time of interview and experienced greater stability in almost all aspects of their lives: “*For the moment we are thankful for everything, you know. HHAP is helping us, we are good to [landlord], she is good to us. I have a job, we are healthy, the kids are in school*”. However, while their tenancy was not under any immediate threat, Antoni’s account nevertheless demonstrated strong awareness of the temporary nature of their tenure-type and was illustrative of the sense of insecurity that loomed large in the lives of those rehoused in the PRS. To this end, he had opted to remain on the social housing ‘transfer list’ and was anxious to move to a local authority or AHB-managed dwelling to ensure, beyond any doubt, that his family would not fall back into EA:

We are more than happy here but I’m not feeling secure because I know it’s still a temporary tenancy [...] We are so grateful for what we have but if we are lucky enough to get permanent housing soon it would be a huge relief, you know? So you don’t have the fear that something could happen with the landlord and because it’s too hard to find a new place, we’d be back homeless and in the same situation like three years ago. (Antoni, transitional)

In the case of two women, both single mothers, issues related to neighbourhood experiences of marginalisation and racially motivated violence and victimisation had, over time, severely compromised their sense of safety and security in their AHB-managed tenancies: “*The area is not safe for us, last year I almost died because of the stress. I can’t focus on the anything anymore because I am so worried every day*” (Amara, transitional). Unlike other parents in this sub-group,

these mothers talked openly about how they felt “*isolated*” from social supports and “*segregated*” or ‘targeted’ within their local communities, leading to experiences of social exclusion and a lack of control over their daily lives. These experiences had eroded their sense of ontological security in housing (Padgett, 2007) and also impacted on their ability to remain engaged in employment and educational programmes. As Hope put it: “*You cannot feel at ease in such an environment, I feel on edge, exhausted unsafe, it’s not secure [...] That’s why when people say to me, ‘oh you are housed!’ I say, ‘yes, I am housed, but I do not have a home*” (Hope, transitional).

For Hope and Amara, another move was inevitable; yet, despite the fact that both had requested a transfer, their situations were stymied by a lack of housing supply and bureaucracy related to their AHB tenancies that prevented them being able to leave in a timely manner: “*We will move but I don’t know how long we are going to be here, I was told [by local authority] you can only transfer after three years, so there’s nothing more I can do right now*” (Amara, transitional). Without other options, these women were resigned to their living situations and had no choice but to endure and “contend with unsafe conditions” (Lindsey, 1996: 213); however, as Hope lamented: “*but at least I know I won’t be losing this place to go homeless again*”.

There is little doubt that access to affordable housing is crucial to facilitate families’ exits from homelessness; however, these accounts suggest that in cases where experiences of social isolation and exclusion persisted, parents lacked the capacity to live a meaningful life (McNaughton Nicholls, 2010). While these families had secured a lasting exit from EA, they nevertheless struggled in the community to make ends meet and thus appeared to continue to “teeter on the edge of homelessness” (Bassuk *et al.*, 2014: 471).

6.2. Uninterrupted Trajectories and Constrained Access: The Experience of Chronic Service Users

The cluster analysis revealed that families experiencing chronic patterns of shelter use comprised the second largest sub-group in the quantitative component of the study, accounting for 33% of selected FRPs accessing Dublin-based EA over the six-year observation period. Like those in the transitional sub-group, the service use histories of these families were characterised by a low number of episodes in EA as well as a low level of movement between different service settings. However, they typically resided in EA for much more lengthy periods than their transitional counterparts, averaging over four times as many cumulative nights in total.

This section examines how the 12 families categorised as experiencing chronic service use patterns navigated a landscape where they confronted multiple barriers of access to alternative housing. Here, experiences of structural exclusion and a perceived disconnect between the type of interventions offered and parents’ personal sense of what they *needed* to secure an exit are shown to have prolonged families’ shelter stays. The ways in which parents responded to their situations are then explored, uncovering the strategies they employed in an attempt to reclaim control of their family’s housing circumstances.

6.2.1. *“It’s like a tunnel that you can’t get through”*: Seeking Private Rental Housing

In the context of limited social housing stock and a considerable waiting list for local authority or AHB tenancies, rental subsidies *via* the provision of HHAP were perceived by almost all families in the chronic sub-group as the only viable and ‘fast’ route out of EA. This was particularly the case since a majority had only applied and been deemed eligible for social housing either at, or shortly before, their point of entry to EA. As such, these parents, like most other families in the sample, spoke at length about their constant efforts to source and secure a PRS tenancy following their entry to homelessness services. However, while the accounts of transitional service users in this study revealed a number of protective and enabling factors that helped them to secure speedy access to the PRS, chronic service users told a somewhat different story about their interactions with private housing systems. In particular, their accounts demonstrated that, without these leverage points, they were more susceptible to a process of ‘structural exclusion’ (Hearne and Murphy, 2018); that is, where they confronted multiple constraints of access to a highly competitive rental market: *“I’ve been here [in family hub] for two years and single day I search for housing. There was a day I sat down and I cried because it feels like it could take 10 years for me to find that one landlord to accept me and until then I’m homeless?”* (Laila, chronic).

Families in this sub-group, particularly those parenting alone, were aware of their marginalised status relative to others in the rental market. Despite their constant efforts to source housing, many spoke about how securing a PRS tenancy was often contingent on being employed (or at least having the potential to secure a job) and having recent landlord references. Others explained that they were vulnerable to discrimination on the part of landlords against those in receipt of rental subsidies and with young children or on the basis of age, class or race/ethnicity: *“Some landlords just don’t want to accept you because you’re a Traveller. Like when I ring them they’d say, ‘Oh yeah come at such and such a time to view’ and then they hear your accent and they know straight away that they’re not giving it to you”* (Debbie, chronic). Like many parents, Zuri’s search for PRS accommodation was therefore couched in transactional terms, highlighting her disadvantaged position because of her limited capacity to negotiate and compete: *“They [landlords] get so many people in that if someone else comes in and offers more cash or looks better on paper or doesn’t have kids, they are going to pick them over you. business”* (Zuri, chronic). A smaller number told that they had opted not to enter a rental agreement in cases where the property was considered to be sub-standard or located in an area that was either not safe for their children or too far away from critical support systems; however, it is worth noting that in these instances, parents’ decisions were sometimes questioned or even challenged by service providers:

It [rental property] had a damp floor and lots of risk for a baby. The area as well, it didn’t feel safe as I am just me and my son . So I said, ‘no, sorry’. I don’t feel safe. When I went to [family hub], the manager said, ‘Anika, why did you refuse this place, this house is fine for you’. I said, ‘no, it’s not’. They say I refuse it. And I say, ‘no, don’t say that!’ This is HHAP, this is not council, if you don’t like it, you don’t have to take it. (Anika, chronic)

Because families' exit routes were bounded by these constraining structural and systemic conditions, parents spoke at length about how they felt that their "*hands were tied*" and that there was "*nothing they could do*" to resolve their family's situation. At the same time, their accounts indicated that there was a perceived mis-match between the supports they were receiving in EA and their personal sense of what *they needed* to help them secure an exit to PRS using the rental subsidies scheme. Indeed, all in this sub-group acknowledged the limitations of service-level interventions, noting that while they were grateful for any assistance they were receiving, they were also aware that "*when it comes to the [housing] system, they [service providers] don't really have any power*" (Jana, chronic). From this perspective, many shared the sentiments expressed by one mother, Lauren, when she said: "*They want to help, but they can't*". Nevertheless, parents' accounts revealed a number of discrepancies concerning what they understood as their 'presumed' versus their 'actual' needs in the context of homelessness service provision that were assessed as undermining, at least in part, their ability to secure a PRS tenancy.

First, several parents explicitly queried the logic of being placed in service-intensive environments that appeared to centre around the notion of 'fixing' personal deficits prior to being housed; an institutional feature commonly reported in service settings that evolved within linear or staircase models of homelessness provision (Sahlin, 2005). Like those in the transitional sub-group, at the point they entered EA no families categorised as chronic service users reported intensive complex needs - related to, for example mental ill-health or substance use - that would preclude them from being 'housing ready'. Moreover, as mentioned in Chapter 5, most also told that they had extensive rental experience or had spent many years 'running a home' and, as such, did not require any assistance with independent living: "*I've been married, been there done that and bought the t-shirt, so I know how to live [laughs]*" (Lauren, chronic). Acknowledging that some families may indeed require and benefit from more interventionalist service structures that seek to address issues of this kind, Sadhbh explained that she appreciated being offered a suite of parent-level supports in EA but felt that she did not need them to secure a successful exit. Like others in this sub-group, she stated "*it's just the housing I need*":

They're all really nice [referring to keyworkers in PEA] but I don't really need them because I don't have any drink or drug problems or anything. Like I was also offered counselling for mental health, if I needed help with Tusla [The Child and Family Agency] or anything, if I was in serious debt or needed help budgeting and if I wanted to go back to work and stuff. There's people out there that need that more than I would, if you get me. It's just the housing I need. (Sadhbh, chronic)

Notably, narratives in which parents expressed a sense that they did not 'fit' the criteria for supervised EA arrangements that appeared to be underpinned by a therapeutic logic were commonplace among those experiencing chronic patterns of service use. In these instances, parents' accounts demonstrated how their feelings of otherness, uncertainty and confusion were further compounded under such circumstances, as Lauren's excerpt illustrated:

I'm just lucky to be able to say [to service providers], 'I actually don't need your help much, I'm okay'. But that can also make it harder for me then because I don't need so much help so I'm like, 'I just need a house, I don't need to be here'. (Lauren, chronic)

Secondly, the accounts of parents in this sub-group revealed that keyworking supports related to accessing PRS housing were not experienced uniformly across different EA service settings. Most significantly, differences were evident regarding the nature and extent of housing assistance provided in family hubs (that is, a particular form of STA) and PEA, with the former generally being depicted in negative terms in comparison to the latter. As documented in Chapter 5, the quantitative analysis revealed an association between cluster membership and families' initial EA placement type. More specifically, a relationship was found between chronic service use and STA and between transitional service use and PEA. The following interview data may provide a partial explanation for these results.

Notwithstanding the diversity of experience across different service settings, those in family hubs typically described keyworkers adopting a more 'hands-off' approach and playing a more peripheral role in helping families to source PRS housing: "*They sit down and go through houses on Daft [rental property website] with you, but I can read, I can write, I can email, I know how to do that myself. For me, that's not really helpful*" (Debbie, chronic). One migrant mother, Laila, for instance, perceived incongruity between the housing supports she was receiving and her personal sense of what *she needed* to help her family source and secure a PRS tenancy:

I don't even know the function of the keyworker because I asked them in [family hub], and they told me that the keyworker is just there to help you find houses on Daft. I can do that myself. I work very well with computers. I thought that working with a keyworker is more than that because we are paying to live here. I thought it would be my keyworker going with me to search for the house and talking to the landlord. I think the landlord would respect the view of the keyworker because they come from an organisation. (Laila, chronic)

As mentioned previously, the notion of respectability highlighted in Laila's account and, in particular, having a 'trustworthy' or 'official' individual to explain the rental subsidies scheme and vouch for families by speaking with prospective landlords on their behalf was a theme that was frequently referenced in the narratives of all parents in this study. While several transitional service users told that they felt this kind of housing assistance had explicitly helped them to 'clinch' their rental contract, most in the chronic sub-group similarly felt that having a keyworker advocate for them would give them at least some leverage in a highly competitive rental market where, as discussed earlier, they perceived themselves as being at the bottom of the queue: "*I asked my keyworker [in family hub], 'please will you speak to this landlord' and they said 'no, it is not allowed'. But if keyworker call, the landlord would say, 'okay' because they will know about HHAP and that I'm a good person and just need a chance*" (Keandra, chronic).

By contrast, those in other PEA service settings, including commercial hotels and B&Bs, typically reported that when they had been allocated a keyworker - and the key worker 'showed up' - that this individual had been a critical source of support in their search for a PRS tenancy due to a

more proactive, direct and involved approach: “*My keyworker was great for HHAP. Like she linked me in with people and she was sorting out viewings and she was doing more of the talking with landlords and stuff*” (Sadhbh, chronic)⁹⁸. Significantly, parents indicated an awareness of these differing norms across services, with several noting that they had, in fact, sought an official transfer to move from a family hub to PEA in the hope of facilitating a faster route out of homelessness:

I have five friends who have been homeless in hotels and they have a house with HHAP. I asked them, ‘how do you do it?’, and they said, ‘my keyworker, every time they called for me, so lucky’. But here [referring to family hub] they say that is not allowed. So I ask for transfer, maybe that will help my situation. (Zuri chronic)

Despite the fact that, like transitional service users, all parents in this sub-group indicated that they were ready, willing and able to exit EA to independent accommodation, their accounts revealed that, unlike transitional service users, their efforts to secure housing were thwarted by their disadvantaged position in public and private housing systems (Blunden and Flanagan, 2021). In such cases, what would have likely in previous years been a relatively manageable acute housing crisis thus “turned into a prolonged event” (Walsh and Harvey, 2015: 24). As O’Sullivan (2020: 78) reminds us, insofar as rental subsidies, in theory, provide speedy access to housing, “in effect [they are] nonetheless a private rented sector tenancy”. Consequently, these parents were exposed to larger market forces that propelled them along a path of continued homelessness that only served to deepen their “disadvantage and social exclusion” (Hearne and Murphy, 2018: 25). For these families, then, their long-term shelter use was strongly influenced by macro- level factors related to broader market conditions which, coupled with the limited capacity of service-level supports to mitigate these circumstances, contributed to prolonged shelter stays over time.

6.2.2. The Complexity of Decision-Making and the Parameters of ‘Choice’

At the time the families in this sub-group took part in the study, they had been residing in EA for several years, in most cases, with all expressing that their housing futures were extremely uncertain. Significantly, the *longer* these families had resided in EA and interacted with homelessness service settings, the more their perceptions of, and responses to, their situations had started to change and develop over time. For example, parents’ continued lack of progress while living in EA resulted in marked deteriorations in their wellbeing, with many recounting periods where they experienced acute physical and mental exhaustion in their efforts to “*keep going*” which, in turn, further reduced their chances of a quick departure. In the following excerpt, Debbie, who had been accessing EA for over two years at the time of interview, described a process whereby she had transitioned from *hopeful* to *hopeless* with respect to her search for housing over the course of her shelter stay; like others, the

⁹⁸ It is worth noting that of those in the transitional sub-group who had exited to the PRS *via* HHAP relatively quickly with the help of housing assistance provided by their keyworker, both had been residing in PEA prior to securing a rental tenancy.

negative impact of repeated rejections and constrained access to private markets strongly permeated her account:

I remember thinking, 'this is it, I've just got to find a landlord that will accept HHAP', Never happened! It doesn't happen. Where are these landlords? When you try and you try and you try, you just start losing hope [...] The experience of it is horrible [...] and in this place it's hard enough never mind having to deal with that as well. (Debbie, chronic)

Experiences such as these were exacerbated by families' interactions with broader homelessness policy systems within which the PRS was positioned as the primary and, in some cases, *only* way out of homelessness. Significantly, this messaging was repeatedly communicated to parents by service providers and government officials. As one mother, Laila, recalled: "There was a time they sent some people from DCC to tell people that it's either HHAP, or you're going to remain here [in STA] forever, like 'we are not building [social housing] so HHAP is the only way you can get out of homelessness'. As years passed, however, such rhetoric cultivated a sense of disempowerment as parents' early optimism soon faded and was replaced by a sense of failure and feelings of despondency, all of which affected their ability to envision let alone carve out a path to residential stability. This process - whereby government policy shaped the meanings, perceptions and trajectories of families accessing EA - is reflected in the accounts of two migrant mothers, Zuri and Keandra, both of whom had been residing in family hubs for approximately two years:

They [staff] keep saying, 'there's no [social] houses so you must go and look for HHAP or you will be years homeless'. Then we told them that there is no HHAP, we are trying our best, but there is nothing coming up! It's frustrating, honestly, it's really, really frustrating. Now, I am thinking to myself, 'is this my fault?', or 'is there something wrong with me? It just makes you have no hope [...] I'm starting to forget myself in here. (Zuri, chronic)

They [staff] tell us HHAP is the only way, 'find HHAP or you'll never leave'. To be bombarding me with so much negativity. Like 'if you cannot move out of this place, you're going to remain here forever'. I've had enough of it. It's not as if I'm not looking for HHAP, I am always looking for places, it's just impossible to get one! It just makes you feel like you're failing; it makes you feel hopeless about the future. (Keandra, chronic)

The accounts of parents who had remained in services for prolonged periods also indicated that several had started to perceive a strong disconnect between what was being officially communicated to families and what they were observing *via* direct first- or second- hand experiences over time. For example, HHAP, as discussed in Chapter 1, is conceptualised as a 'social housing support' provided *via* the PRS prior to being allocated a permanent social housing tenancy for those who wished to remain on the social housing 'transfer list'. However, participants frequently stated that they had never 'heard of' or 'seen' anyone offered a social housing tenancy after entering a HHAP rental agreement. In fact, many explained that they had observed the exact opposite outcome occurring, reporting that they were aware of families who had exited to the PRS but encountered structural challenges that had ultimately led to them losing their property and returning to EA with their children: "My cousin had her own HHAP and now she's homeless because they sold up on her" (Lauren, chronic); "I had a friend who had a two year lease with HHAP and after the two years they

said 'you're out'. Back in homelessness, she was back where she started" (Debbie, chronic); "I heard from another girl in here [referring to PEA] that [the local authority] was late paying their share of the rent for HHAP and she ended up losing the place" (Sadhbh, chronic). Steph's account provided insights into how, with the passing of time, parents had come to view HHAP unfavourably through the lens of such observations since they had learned to equate it with another form or extension of homelessness:

So even if they [local authority] try and say, 'oh it's more secure', from what I've seen in here [referring to STA] it's genuinely not. It's still the same process and it's just never ending because you're still not sure how long you're going to be there. So, like, you're still kind of homeless; you could lose your place because you don't own your own home and then you're back to square one. (Steph, chronic)

These emerging concerns about HHAP were compounded, in many cases, by parents' frustration about the lack of clarity surrounding the rental subsidies scheme, including uncertainty about how their position on the social housing waiting list could potentially be affected. Simone, for instance, told that she had, over time, become hesitant to take up a PRS tenancy with HHAP since "there's nothing actually down on paper about exactly what it is, like I've started to realise that they [local authority] don't even know themselves exactly what it is". Like others, she was critical of what she now perceived as a lack of transparency which made it difficult to assess the PRS as a viable exit route from EA for her family: "Like, as far as I know, you go on a 'transfer list'. But what is the transfer list? And how long are you on it for? You see, none of it's clear. That's what I've learned". In a smaller number of cases, parents explained that they had, in fact, been advised by service professionals to discontinue their search for PRS tenancies. Sadhbh had been living in PEA for nearly two and a half years with her daughter when she took part in the study. She explained that her keyworker had steered her away from rental subsidies due to the insecurity of tenure associated with the PRS:

My key worker was asking me did I still want HHAP and I said 'I don't know'. And she goes, 'don't take it'. She was saying not to take it because I'm so far gone [referring to her place on the social housing list]. She said it would be like taking two steps forward and 10 back. So, I said I would just take her advice and stay where I am now. (Sadhbh, chronic)

Almost all families in this sub-group had initially viewed the PRS as a potential route out of EA when they first accessed shelter; however, their accounts suggest that prolonged exposure to structural exclusion in the rental market, coupled with a lack of progress, trust and clarity concerning their housing options, meant that many had become disillusioned by HHAP, with several stating that they had "lost faith" in the intervention. That is to say, the culmination of these negative experiences created feelings of confusion and helplessness which some parents sought to resolve by 'giving up' on the scheme:

I gave HHAP a thought, like I said, for the first while I was [in STA] I was applying for it constantly, but now I'm there over a year and that would just be a waste of time. So I may as well wait for another two or three years until I get something that's at least permanent for me and my daughter [referring to social housing tenancy]. (Crystal, chronic)

After getting nowhere with it and then hearing all the horror stories, I eventually stopped taking HHAP appointments. They [service providers] keep telling me that I'm going to be waiting 10 years for a corporation house. And that's what I said, I said "I'll wait. If I have to, that's what I'll do". I've got to put my kids first. (Debbie, chronic)

In the absence of any alternative housing options, parents like Crystal and Debbie had abandoned “their determination to quickly exit” and, instead, resolved to remain in the service system for as long as was necessary to obtain a more permanent tenure-type (Gerstel *et al.*, 1996: 567). Drawing on personal and collective knowledge that they had developed through their prolonged interactions with and within housing and homelessness systems, these families appeared to engage in a “complex calculus” that required “balancing both current and future risks versus opportunities” (Rufa and Fowler, 2018: 3). While parents’ ‘choices’ in such instances were clearly constrained and “hedged in by the service systems in which they are embedded” (Fisher *et al.*, 2014: 378), they nevertheless weighed up their options, made compromises and sought to pursue interventions that they perceived as being the best option to meet their family’s longer-term housing needs. While these strategies may have ultimately served to prolong their stay in EA, they *emerged* as a response to the larger structural and systemic barriers that they confronted in their attempts to assert control over their family’s housing futures.

6.3. Circuitous Trajectories and Threats to Stability: The Experience of Episodic Service Users

The quantitative analysis revealed that episodic service users - that is, those who recorded multiple stays in EA, each of a relatively short duration - were firmly in the minority, accounting for just 10% of all families in the dataset. Unlike transitional and chronic service users, these families moved in and out of EA frequently, logging an average of 15.3 episodes and 203.3 nights (or 6.6 months) in EA over the six-year observation period. These episodic users also moved *between* services at a much higher rate than their transitional and chronic counterparts, with a significant proportion (20.9%) having accessed more than 10 unique EA services during the same time-frame.

The accounts of the seven participating families recruited with corresponding service use histories provided rich data that enabled an in-depth examination of the processes that influenced their *returns* to and *movements between* homelessness services. First, the types of housing interventions utilised by these families - that is, short-term PRS tenancies acquired *via* HHAP - are identified as rendering them especially vulnerable to repeat shelter stays since they did not have the security of tenure provided by long-term AHB or local authority leases. Following this, an in-depth account of the biographies of the mothers and fathers in this sub-group is presented, paying particular attention to the ways in which cumulative adversities in their lives have contributed to a set of complex (and often unmet) needs over time. Finally, using the sensitising concept of ‘complex trauma’, the accounts of those who experienced unresolved homelessness and precarious exits are

interrogated to examine how their interactions with prevailing linear models of homelessness service provision shaped their distinct service system trajectories over time.

6.3.1. *Tenure-Type and the Precarity of the Private Rental Sector*

Among families in the episodic sub-group who had exited to tenancies, *tenure-type* at the point of departure emerged as a critical factor that influenced their subsequent returns to EA. More specifically, when families entered a private rental agreement *via* HHAP, they were more vulnerable to PRS-related difficulties and often had no choice but to return to EA to try and resolve their family's immediate need for shelter as well as their longer-term need for a more permanent housing solution. Some, like Cheyanne - a single migrant mother - had entered PRS housing at the lowest end of the quality spectrum in a desperate bid to escape homelessness services: "*I just took it because I felt like we had to get out of [hotel], we were desperate*". Throughout her interview she described a sub-standard and dangerous living situation characterised by the presence of anti-social behaviour in the neighbourhood, poor quality infrastructure and a lack of safety: "*People were drunk and on drugs. My neighbours they scream and people bang on the door [...] We didn't feel secure there, it was very very hard, I was scared with my son*". After several months, Cheyanne was asked to leave because her landlord was concerned for her safety in the property. Yet, despite receiving assistance from her SLÍ worker, she was unable to secure another rental property due to a shortage of supply that was compounded by an administrative HHAP rule which meant she could only be provided with one rental deposit at a time. As a consequence, she was left with no choice but to readmit herself and her child to homelessness services:

So then I say to my [SLÍ] worker, 'look, it's not safe here [in PRS property], I will take my deposit and go back to the homeless and I will find a new place from there. (Cheyanne, episodic)

Other parents told that that they had, on one or more occasions, secured an exit to PRS housing which had subsequently broken down as a direct consequence of violence and/or abuse occurring within the context of an intimate relationship⁹⁹. Jess, for instance, explained that she, her partner and her two children took-up a HHAP tenancy that had become available, admitting that she quickly became overwhelmed in her new living situation: "*We wanted to move away from all the stress and needed to get out of the hotel so we went into a house in [area name] and then when I went out there I was like, 'oh God'*". She went on to explain that her partner's abusive behaviours gradually re-emerged, resulting in a prolonged period of DV and problems related to rent arrears,

⁹⁹ It is worth noting that six of the seven parents in the episodic sub-group reported past experiences of violence and/or abuse within the context of a romantic relationship at some stage in their lives. For reference, just three of the 12 parents in the chronic sub-group and two of the seven parents in the transitional sub-group reported similar experiences. Importantly, while experiences of DV may have contributed to chronic and transitional service users' pathways *into* EA in some, though certainly not all cases, they were not directly implicated in these parents' accounts of their trajectories *through* or *out* of the homelessness service system over time.

neighbour complaints and poor tenancy relationships. The following account reveals the extent to which these home-based difficulties triggered a cascade of events that precipitated her return to PEA:

There was a lot of domestic violence, like I was in the hospital for a week and a half over it and then the [rental] payments weren't being met by me because my money wasn't being put into the bank. And then the landlord was, you know, obviously getting complaints about the noise with guards and stuff at the door [...] So we ended up losing that place, we split up, and me and the kids went back to the hotels. (Jess, episodic)

Reflecting on her experience, Jess identified the tenure-type at exit as directly implicated in her and her children's enduring residential instability at the time of interview. Indeed, when she was asked what, looking back, she would have liked to have happened differently, she responded by saying that she "would've never taken HHAP and gone down that road". Parents like Jess explained that they now faced significant additional barriers to housing. This included, for example, potential discrimination from landlords due to a poor rental history coupled with being removed from the social housing list and being placed on the 'transfer list', which, as discussed Chapter 1, is typically associated with longer wait times between allocations. PRS housing then, was not considered to be a tenable option by these families since their complicated home situations put them at increased risk of repeat homelessness by virtue of the fact that they were, as Jess commented, "still at the will of the landlords who can just ask you to leave". In the following account, she explained that major setbacks such as these had severely limited her family's chances of securing another exit from her current STA to a more permanent housing solution:

Three years down the line I'm thinking, 'how am I still here?' If I hadn't taken that [PRS] tenancy, I wouldn't be back where I am today. The whole thing has just delayed us getting housed properly, like in a [social housing tenancy] [...] There's so many people that I know that only became homeless last year or the year before and they're housed and all now and I'm still homeless after taking HHAP. (Jess, episodic)

Tenant-based subsidies provided an important form of social housing support that facilitated speedier access to housing as well as greater flexibility, mobility and choice for a number of those in the transitional and episodic sub-groups in this study (Hearne and Murphy, 2018; Parkinson and Parsell, 2018). However, the accounts of Cheyanne and Jess reveal that, despite availing of SLÍ support, housing market conditions and insecurity of tenure in the PRS significantly influenced their subsequent returns to EA with their children. While the experiences of these mothers represented a small number of parents, they nevertheless demonstrate that families are positioned precariously "in a rental market which functions by maximising returns and managing perceived risk to the landlord" (Blunden and Flanagan, 2021: 16). For at least some families, then, being placed in the PRS as opposed to a local authority or AHB managed tenancy, for example, was a key driver of their episodic patterns of service use over time (O'Donnell, 2019).

6.3.2. A Complex History of Care, A Complex History of (Unmet) Need

In keeping with the findings of Culhane *et al.* (2007), there was little evidence that the participating families categorised as transitional and chronic service users presented with complex needs that directly affected their shelter system trajectories and their capacity to exit EA¹⁰⁰. Rather, the incidence, duration and far-reaching negative impact of such experiences were reportedly greatest amongst those categorised as episodic service users, suggesting that these families had “more intensive service needs or personal barriers to housing stability” (Culhane *et al.*, 2007: 19). Unlike chronic and transitional service users, the parents in this sub-group talked openly about both their desire for - and when available, appreciation of - targeted parent-level supports in EA. Jess, for instance, stated that she was receiving support from her keyworker to prepare her for the move to independent housing, noting that she needs it “*now more than ever because I’m staying off the drink*”; Lottie - a Traveller woman who had been taken out of school at the age of 12 - told that her keyworker had helped her with completing various paperwork since she “*can’t read or write that well*”; Elaine told that she didn’t want to make “*any jumps into accommodation*” since she was “*still going through a lot*” and was actively seeking support for acute mental health problems; and Sophie explained that she was linking in with her drugs key worker since she’s “*hoping to stay clean, which I have been doing*”.

When these parents’ accounts were examined in greater detail, however, the most salient and unifying theme to emerge was that of early experiences of disruption within their families of origin and their subsequent placement in ‘out of home’ care during childhood or adolescence. Five of the seven in the episodic sub-group reported care histories while one father noted that his partner had had extensive contact with the care system in Ireland. These parents’ departures from the family home were typically precipitated by a range of long-standing family issues, including various forms and combinations of interpersonal conflict, physical or emotional neglect and violence or abuse in the family home that was often compounded by early residential instability or experiences of family homelessness as well as parental substance use and/or mental ill-health: “*I was in care my whole life, six months here, 10 months there, a year here, two years there. It would just depend on how sick my ma was*” (Jess, episodic). Without exception, these parents expressed awareness of how their early childhood experiences had profoundly impacted their lives. The following case study of Sophie, a single mother from the Travelling community, illustrates the multiple adversities that all care-

¹⁰⁰ Although a small number of parents in the transitional and chronic sub-groups discussed the presence of complex needs - to some extent - within their family unit at the point of entry to EA, they were not perceived as influencing their service use patterns more broadly. Rather, they were often depicted as an entirely separate issue, with several expressing a desire for, or ongoing engagement with, community-based treatment and support to address these challenges. As will be discussed in much more depth in Chapter 7, however, long-term exposure to EA settings in the case of those who were unable to exit quickly frequently contributed to rapid deteriorations in families’ overall mental-health and well-being over time. In these instances, the development of complex needs had occurred *after* entering EA and was further exacerbated by the experience of homelessness itself.

experienced families in this sub-group experienced and how these traumatic exposures shaped their housing and homelessness trajectories in adulthood.

Case Study: Sophie's Experience of Multiple Adverse Life Experiences

Sophie experienced sustained sexual abuse perpetrated by a family member during childhood and was subsequently placed in multiple foster homes until the age of 16 when she had her first child and entered PRS accommodation with her abusive ex-partner. Since that time, she moved between numerous rental properties, the homes of her partner's family and a local authority tenancy, punctuated by stays in domestic violence refuges, acute hospital and various EA settings. When reflecting on her housing/homelessness trajectory, Sophie described when she first *felt* homeless; her early residential instability came into sharp focus as she explained her ongoing difficulties with feeling “*settled*” in any new living situation:

To be honest, I've always felt homeless because I was never settled, like I was always moved from billy to jack between different foster carers and relatives so I always felt as if I was being dragged around. You just wish you had a home and that you were settled, you know, not waiting to be uprooted again and put into another place, which is how I feel now. That feeling never goes away.

Sophie's sense of 'place' was clearly in flux, underpinned by a legacy of residential transience and impermanence that was established during her formative years; however, her account also pointed to a lack of early intervention and barriers of access to other health and social care systems to help her address the negative impact of her early life experiences. Although she had been officially diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and was receiving treatment at the time of interview, she told that, prior to this, she had engaged in maladaptive coping strategies in response to her trauma: “*Because of the abuse, I became addicted to heroin [...] I used to take drugs just to blank out everything that ever happened to me*”. Sophie's initiation to drug-taking at an early age significantly impacted other areas of her life, leading to periods of incarceration and debilitating chronic health problems. In her interview, she pointedly discussed how these cumulative adversities had jeopardised her housing stability and placed her in an extremely disadvantaged position in comparison to other families in terms of carving a successful route out of EA:

I think it's great that you have the support of your keyworkers in here [referring to STA] but they [management] don't give you any hope. They just go 'oh, you've a criminal record so that's an issue' and 'oh, you had a drug problem, that's an issue'. It makes you feel like you're going to be the last to be looked at for housing. Like me and my child will probably be years waiting because of it. I've got [health condition] as well which means I'm not able to be going out and looking for places every day either.

Critically, like Sophie, a perceived lack of sufficient aftercare provision following their exit from the care system featured prominently in almost all of these parents' accounts. Luke, who was also from a Traveller background, was placed in State care when he was two months old, after which he “*was thrown from pillar to post*” between various foster homes, residential facilities, a detention centre and homeless hostels, all before he had turned 18 years of age. When asked what he considered to be the primary barrier to his family achieving housing stability at the time of interview, he directly linked their ongoing difficulties to the termination of his final care placement, which he depicted as largely unsupported: “*Well I'm in the care system all my life and I never got any support. I literally turned 18 and it was 'goodbye, see you later'*”. Similarly, Elaine entered care when she was seven

years old but, unlike others, reported a very stable long-term placement: *“I loved my foster family. Like I was with the same family the whole time”*. Nevertheless, when responding to a question posed about whether she felt her care experience had influenced her family’s homelessness and housing trajectory in later life, she explicitly criticised the care system, which she felt *“isolated me from [biological] family relationships that I never had and I won’t ever have now because you don’t have years to build that up”*. She elaborated further:

When you’re in care, Tusla [The Child and Family Agency] and everybody, all the organisations, they think they know what’s right for you as a child, you know, they’ve been your sole guardians or the people in control and making all the rules. But then when you turn into an adult and that’s all gone, it goes over their head that now that person is completely alone. (Elaine, episodic)

For these parents, then, the point of leaving care represented a critical turning point in their lives as they lacked the necessary safety net of personal, professional and community supports to ensure a successful transition from care to independence; and this, in turn, hampered their ability to achieve housing stability in adulthood. Notably, four reported periods of cycling through the single adult hostel system prior to having children: *“We’ve been in about six services as a family. But me on my own, its over 40”* (Luke, episodic); three reported significant mental or physical health problems and had spent time in acute or psychiatric hospital: *“I was completely on my own as I grew up in foster care, so I needed help”* (Elaine, episodic); three reported criminal justice contact and/or periods(s) of incarceration: *“Because I never had a stable home or pattern of things to do I was constantly going out and getting into trouble”* (Luke, episodic); three reported prior substance use dependencies and subsequent treatment and rehabilitation: *“It [being in care] affected me a lot and I became an alcoholic just to try and cope or just to try and, I don’t know [pause] forget”* (Jess, episodic); five stated that they had their first child during their teenage years, with four of these parents citing deeply traumatic experiences related to the subsequent placement of one or more of their own children in care: *“That was heart-breaking and at that time I just felt like doing away with [killing] myself”* (Lottie, episodic); and finally, as mentioned in Chapter 5, five reported early detachment from educational and/or training systems due to care-based disruptions, all of which combined to produce patterns of underemployment as well as labour and housing market exclusion.

Perhaps significantly, Luke expressed a desire for people to have greater contextual awareness to better *“understand”* how his and others’ interactions with ‘the system’ over the course of their lives had shaped their ongoing experiences of family homelessness:

I want people to have the chance to understand what we’ve been through, like not only from a ‘having a homeless family’ point of view, but, as I said, from being start to finish in the system. For someone to know that, I think it’s good. I think it would help them a lot more to understand, like to explain why we’re in the situations we’re in now. (Luke, episodic)

While care-experienced individuals are a heterogenous group, these findings suggest that, in some cases, cumulative adversities associated with early home-leaving, family ruptures and unresolved trauma contributed to long-standing personal challenges, including: a history of substance

use and mental ill-health (often undefined); physical health conditions; life-long housing precariousness; poor educational attainment; and criminal justice contact (Bassuk *et al.*, 1997; Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2013; Zlotnick, 2009). Importantly, however, although these complex needs manifested at the individual-level, an in-depth interrogation of parents' accounts revealed that they were strongly linked to structural forces and systemic failures - including a lack of early intervention and targeted aftercare support - which had created deep-seated ruptures in the lives of these mothers and fathers; ruptures that had followed them over time and, as will be shown in the next section, shaped their families' shelter system trajectories in later life.

6.3.3. *Unresolved Homelessness and the Paradox of the Service User Construct*

“There’s a lot of people that [homelessness services] do help and they’re happy to be living like this and comfortable and all that, but they aren’t good for everybody”

That the frequency and severity of adverse life experiences was most pronounced among the sub-group of episodic service users is significant, not least because it suggests that long-standing homelessness and trauma are “intricately interwoven” (Hopper *et al.*, 2010: 81). Critically, however, parents' accounts indicated that such experiences also impacted on their *interactions* with homelessness systems and, in particular, their relationship with linear models of service provision. Some, like Jess, for example, who reported a long history of family homelessness and strained service relationships, explained that she had eventually surrendered to the assumptions that surrounded her in her current STA in the hope that this would bolster her chances of achieving a route out of services: *“With the help of my keyworker I’m getting all the help I need now, like with the drink and all, so I’m a bigger, better stronger person than I was last year because I don’t do anything like that now”*. She went on to describe how she felt she had reached a point where she would be ‘rewarded’ by being helped to “*move on*” to independent accommodation:

She’s [keyworker] helped me a lot, like she’s put me on the right path. She’s actually in talks with me about moving forward from here over the next while because everything’s going according to plan. I have my college, I have my kids in school, I have them well-looked after and stuff. So the only thing that’s holding me back is getting a home. Which I’m hoping will happen because it’ll be the end to an era, a very very long era. (Jess, episodic)

Jess, then, was emblematic of the expected construct of what a service user ‘ought’ to be in linear models of homelessness service provision; she submitted to shelter policy, engaged in therapeutic interventions to treat or ‘fix’ her individual deficiencies and ultimately, over time, had worked her way up to becoming perceived as ‘housing ready’ (Busch-Geertseema and Sahlin, 2007; Sahlin, 2005). In a majority of cases, however, parents' narratives revealed how these ideals were more often experienced as *demobilising* since families felt ‘punished’ for not always meeting prescriptive service standards: *“I believe they [management in STA] will help you move forward but I’ve learned that the only way you’re going to get on is if you do what you’re told and not complain. But if you’re not able to do those things, then you just get left behind”* (Elaine, episodic). Like others,

Lottie was critical of a service infrastructure in which she felt “*judged*” for needing supports; she did not feel ‘listened to’, emphasising that having “*bad days*” was evidence that someone required care and compassion rather than scrutiny and criticism:

I just want to be able to get people to listen to me, not look down on me. Like people need support every now and then and services should give people support when they need support, when they're feeling at their worst. Not just judge people for having a bad day. (Lottie, episodic)

There is growing consensus that the impact of cumulative traumatic stress in the lives of a parent or family unit means that they often come to “see the world as unsafe and threatening and tend to develop insecure attachments” (Bassuk, 2007: 36). This, in turn, can create a sense of fear, helplessness and lack of control that “overwhelms a person’s resources for coping” in homelessness service settings (Hopper *et al.*, 2010: 80). In the homelessness research literature, these outcomes have been attributed to a process of complex trauma; that is, early and repeated exposure to multiple traumatic events and their far-reaching effects (Bassuk *et al.*, 2001; FEANTSA, 2017; Guarino and Bassuk, 2010; Guarino *et al.*, 2007; Maguire *et al.*, 2009; Padgett *et al.*, 2016b). Notably, unlike other families in the study, these experiences permeated strongly from the accounts of episodic service users and frequently featured in their narratives of not being able to ‘live up to’ service expectations while accessing EA. For instance, individuals with complex trauma histories may experience difficulties in accepting help due to past negative experiences of interacting with authorities in wider health and social care systems (FEANTSA, 2017; Hopper *et al.*, 2010). Indeed, almost all parents in this sub-group told that the homelessness service system was just one of many that they had cycled in and out of over the course of their lives, often without experiencing a sense of progress or resolution regarding the precarity of their housing (and other) futures.

As a result, most were already exasperated and fatigued by systems of intervention at the point which they entered EA with their children and often expressed ambivalence about relationships “built around an offer of care” (FEANTSA, 2017: 9). That is to say, their interactions with and within the homelessness service sector were almost always coloured by having spent years and, in some cases, a lifetime, feeling “*neglected*” by those charged with meeting their needs: “*It’s like, you don’t matter. That’s how it feels*” (Sophie, episodic); “*You just feel awful like, because like they’re the people that are meant to take care of you and if they’re not taking care of you, then you just feel hopeless*” (Elaine, episodic). Lottie, for instance, told that despite actively seeking help from multiple services, individuals and government officials to resolve her family’s residential instability, she felt “*like I’m being let down by everybody again*”. Similarly, Luke, described feelings of abandonment since he had been in the care of the State from an early age but was now “*just another number in the system*”. These parents were thus more likely to feel side-lined or ignored in the context of their interactions with EA, a perception that was often located in a broader and more fundamental “loss of a sense of order or fairness in the world” (Hopper *et al.*, 2010: 98).

Trauma responses may also negatively impact on parents' affect regulation and capacity to 'comply' with strict shelter rules since rigid regimes can evoke distressing past experiences characterised by an inability to feel safe and in control of one's environment (FEANTSA, 2017; Hopper *et al.*, 2010). Significantly, comparing the accounts of parents in the episodic sub-group with those of the transitional and chronic service users revealed far greater levels of 'resistance' to shelter regulations, with these parents also being more likely to verbally express their opinions to staff: "[Partner] speaks from the heart, if she sees wrong she'll be shouting, 'why this, why that!', you know, she doesn't hold back" (Miguel, episodic). Objections such as these were often framed as a way for these parents to manage feelings of fear and helplessness in service contexts; however, they sometimes led to serious service-level disagreements that resulted in one member or the whole family being evicted, barred or suspended from a particular service setting. Elaine, for instance, explained that her family "*kept getting moved around*" due to regular conflict with shelter staff while Luke stated that his family was "*kicked out from everywhere*" because they were not willing to accept shelter rules which they felt violated their privacy. In each case, both shelter rules *and* their consequences were depicted as indicating a lack of power and predictability and, therefore, an "increased need for control" (Hopper *et al.*, 2010: 98):

We just kept getting moved around because it would be stressful like living in places like that because sometimes you might have an issue with staff. And then because you talk back because you're trying to stick up for yourself, they'll just put you out. (Elaine, episodic)

We already have trust issues with staff, you know, And then because we were refusing for people to come into where we were staying without knocking, we started getting kicked out from everywhere. There was no stability in any of it. (Luke, episodic)

A small number told that, at certain points, specific experiences or events had led to them withdrawing or 'opting out' of EA entirely, at least for a period. In these instances, parents explained that the conditions created in and by EA environments had pushed them to consider alternative living arrangements in an attempt to rebuild a sense of control, safety and dignity in their lives. However, typically residing in unsupported 'doubled-up' living arrangements following an abrupt shelter departure, most continued along a path of extreme housing precariousness that ultimately led them back to shelter. Lottie, for example, told that she had relinquished her EA placement at a point which she had "*given up on services*". Yet, without stable accommodation in place at the point of leaving, she and her children entered into a situation of hidden homelessness for several months that proved untenable in the longer-term. Like others in this sub-group who reported precarious exits to insecure living arrangements, Lottie explained that her family eventually had no choice but to return to services: "*We ended up having to go back into the hotels and I knew it was going to be the same thing over and over again, another long stressful time ahead*" (Lottie, episodic).

Importantly, many experiencing episodic patterns of EA use felt that they had, over time, earned a bad reputation within services, having being "*blacklisted*", as several claimed. These parents routinely commented that service providers exchanged information and felt that this adversely

impacted on their service interactions. Miguel, for instance, observed that staff in homelessness services rotated regularly, leading him to conclude that his family was in a “*viscous cycle*” because “*it’s all the same staff and they don’t like us, or at least they don’t like one of us*”. Similarly, Elaine felt that she had been branded with a “*bad name*”, which had negatively impacted on her experiences in EA due to what she described as the *interconnected* nature of homelessness service provision: “*If you don’t have a good relationship with one service, you’re not going to have it with the next service because they’re all going to talk to each other. So if you have any issues it continues, and continues and continues*”. In this way, parents like Elaine and Miguel felt that they were being unfairly ‘targeted’ and treated differently to others because of a perception that they did not ‘fit’ service expectations which followed them through the shelter system as a whole.

Finally, Bassuk (2007: 38) asserts that “engaging homeless families and forming trusting relationships are often the linchpins of any effective intervention”. Yet, those dealing with the effects of complex trauma often describe difficulties in relating to others and “sustaining supportive relationships” (Hopper *et al.*, 2010: 98). The accounts of parents in the episodic sub-group demonstrated evidence of these relational complexities, with many recounting roadblocks in their efforts to form close bonds with service professionals. Such challenges were typically associated with fears that centred around a perceived lack of trust that was compounded by frequent movements between services and a lack of continuity in care. As one mother, Sophie, put it:

We’ve all got such complicated stories behind us [...] and then you’re constantly explaining your stories over and over again [to service providers], which is uncomfortable, and some are willing to help and some are, you know, not so willing to help. So I don’t feel comfortable to trust them or to interact with them anymore, or what’s the word they love to use? To ‘engage’ with them anymore. (Sophie, episodic)

In the absence of professional trust and consistency, a sense that they could rely on others and a belief that they would (or could) potentially ascend the ‘staircase’, most concluded that their families were falling through the gaps and had ultimately become lost in what was often referred to as simply, “*the system*”:

It just feels like I’m going around in circles [...] I’ve learned that you’ll never beat the system. You’ll never be anything better than the system. You can work your way to get out of the system but it’s going to be a long road to get out, it’s going to be a long and stressful and tiresome road. (Elaine, episodic)

Using complex trauma - a term that usefully “befits the concept of complex needs” (Padgett *et al.*, 2016b: 3) - as a sensitising concept rather than an essential characteristic of parents, the analysis presented here lends weight to a growing appreciation of how the long-lasting impact of cumulative adversities in an individual’s life can shape families’ interactions with and within homelessness service systems (Bassuk *et al.*, 2001; FEANTSA, 2017; Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2013; Maguire *et al.*, 2009). Critically, a complexity-informed analysis “filtered through the lens of trauma” has also revealed how the interplay between traumatic stress and homelessness can contribute to patterns of episodic service use over time (Bassuk, 2007: 30).

6.4. Conclusion

This chapter focused analytic attention on families' interactions with the wider environment of EA, including homelessness policy systems, public and private housing systems, health and social care systems and linear models of homelessness service provision. The findings presented therefore have implications that extend beyond localised contexts, highlighting how families' interrelationships with systems operating at the macro-level can serve to delineate and 'divide' them by affecting their trajectories through, out and sometimes back into shelter over time. Indeed, the data point quite clearly to three distinct 'stories' or sets of experiences, contexts and responses that converged to produce differing service and housing outcomes. These findings not only problematise the conceptualisation of 'homeless families' as a homogenous group, but also go some ways towards addressing the limitations of how families' exits (or lack thereof) from shelter systems have been explained in the literature more broadly.

Most notably, and unlike single adult populations, despite having markedly different lengths of stay in EA, those categorised as transitional and chronic service users demonstrated very similar background profiles with none reporting individual-level circumstances, 'behaviours' or intensive service needs at the point of entry that may have jeopardised their EA placement or acted as barriers to their exiting and/or achieving housing stability (Culhane *et al.*, 2007). Rather, what appeared to differentiate these families was a number of policy and programme factors that either enabled or constrained speedy access to housing, including: the length of time they had been on the social housing waiting list prior to accessing shelter and *sheer luck* in terms of securing a PRS tenancy in a high-cost competitive market that was mediated, in some cases, by the nature and extent of formal housing assistance provided and their capacity to mobilise informal support systems. As Culhane *et al.* (2007: 22) similarly point out, the general absence of intensive support needs amongst families in these sub-groups thus begs the question of whether their shelter stays "could be made even shorter if a different and possibly more efficient form of emergency assistance were available".

Among those who had exited to tenancies in the transitional and episodic categories, variations with regard to tenure-type (social housing versus private rental) and the associated issues of accommodation quality (acceptable versus poor) and tenancy relationships (strong versus weak) emerged as the most significant distinguishing features (O'Donnell, 2019). As demonstrated, even in cases where SLÍ support was provided to parents in the episodic sub-group, it was not sufficient to overcome structural issues in the PRS that rendered them especially vulnerable to repeat shelter stays. This was particularly the case where the presence of complex needs related to, for example, experiences of DV, increased the "weight of the weighted possibility" that a return to EA would occur (Fitzpatrick, 2005: 14). By contrast, those who secured social housing tenancies managed by local authorities and AHBs enjoyed security of tenure, which, even in cases where families reported strong concerns regarding the safety and appropriateness of their current accommodation (an issue that will be returned to in Chapter 8), protected them from falling back into EA (Johnson *et al.*, 2018).

Finally, and perhaps most striking was that, in comparison to other families in the sample, the accounts of those experiencing episodic patterns of service use provided strong evidence that they were dealing with the long-lasting impacts of *complex trauma* (Bassuk, 2007; Guarino and Bassuk, 2010; Hopper *et al.*, 2010; Padgett *et al.*, 2016b); that is, unresolved or ongoing trauma related to cumulative adversities in their lives. More specifically, it was shown that this sub-group faced greater challenges in fitting the expected construct of how service users *should* ‘be’ and ‘behave’ within linear models of homelessness service provision; that is, where progress and adherence to a strict set of rules is rewarded, while ambivalence and ‘disobedience’ can lead to sanctions or eviction (Sahlin, 2005). Consequently, these families reported distinct patterns of shelter ‘abandonment’ (McMordie, 2020) and exclusion from the very systems designed to resolve their homelessness and, as such, faced greater barriers in their efforts to “break the cycle of their complex lives” (Prestidge, 2014: 214).

7. THE DRIVERS OF FAMILIES' SHELTER TRAJECTORIES: A MICRO-LEVEL SYSTEMS ANALYSIS

7.1. Introduction

The preceding chapter examined the dynamics of families' shelter usage through an analysis of their interactions with homelessness and other policy systems operating at the macro-level. This chapter follows by focusing analytic attention on families' micro-level interactions within the homelessness service system, specifically, and *how* these interactions influenced the production of transitional, chronic and episodic service use patterns over time. Maintaining a complexity perspective, the analysis remains firmly on the *relationships* between the interacting components of the shelter system - including families, management practices and, importantly, service environments - rather than on the individual parts alone.

To begin, the chapter discusses the extent of families' homelessness service system contact with the aim of establishing a baseline understanding of service experience and shelter exposure amongst the three sub-groups. Qualitative case studies are utilised to illustrate key differences in this regard and, drawing on the accounts of transitional service users in particular, evidence of a 'punitive' approach underpinning homelessness service provision is presented. Next, attention shifts to the experiences of those categorised as chronic and episodic service users to develop understanding of how their trajectories were shaped by their prolonged and repeated shelter stay(s), respectively. The remainder of the chapter provides a detailed interrogation of these narratives and elaborates three key themes that permeated their accounts, including: a perceived loss of 'choice' and 'voice' in homelessness services; institutional control of access and the erosion of helping networks; and the complex relationship between environment and risk.

7.2. The Extent of Families' Contact with the Shelter System

While the negative impacts of homelessness on everyday life featured strongly in parents' accounts, participants also drew sharp attention to issues associated with the shelter *experience*, specifically. These narratives focused, in the main, on the regimes, cultures and environments of EA rather than on service professionals who worked in these settings, even if at times particular relationships and interactions were specifically noted. That parents articulated a clear distinction between individuals and 'the system' is significant. This is because a large number of parents frequently noted relationships with keyworkers that were positive, supportive and enabling whilst simultaneously delivering quite pointed critiques of the homelessness service system as a whole. As one mother, Jess, put it: "*My keyworker and all the staff here [in STA] are brilliant. But it's not about the workers, it's about how it's ran, you know? 'These are the rules and this is how it has to be'*" (Jess, episodic). In what follows, it is parents' accounts of their interrelationships with the shelter *system* that are examined in detail, paying particular attention to how these interactions contributed to the emergence of distinct patterns of transitional, chronic and episodic service use over time. Before presenting that

analysis, however, it is important to comment on the extent to which families in each of the three sub-groups were exposed to EA service settings.

As documented in Chapter 5, the quantitative analysis revealed that transitional service users represented the largest sub-group of families (57%) but consumed a relatively low percentage of EA resources (25.4%) during the study's six-year observation period. By contrast, episodic and chronic service users, combined, represented just 43% of all families accessing EA but utilised approximately three quarters (74.4%) of EA bed nights. Moreover, while transitional service users recorded an average of 78.2 nights spent in EA over the same time-frame, families experiencing episodic and chronic patterns logged more than double and triple this amount, respectively, standing at 203.3 and 331.9 nights. This means that families categorised as experiencing transitional service use patterns had demonstrably less intensive exposure to the shelter system compared to their episodic and chronic counterparts. Drawing on the study's qualitative data, Figure 11 presents three case studies corresponding to each sub-group to illustrate the extent of homelessness service contact amongst participating families¹⁰¹.

¹⁰¹ These case studies are based on all reported admissions and readmissions to EA *as a family unit* and do not include instances where parents may have accessed EA as a single unaccompanied young person or adult or when they may have accessed EA with their own families during childhood. They are also not limited to the six-year observational period stipulated by the quantitative analysis; rather, they commence with families' living situation immediately prior to their first official entry to EA and extend up to and including their current accommodation at the time of interview.

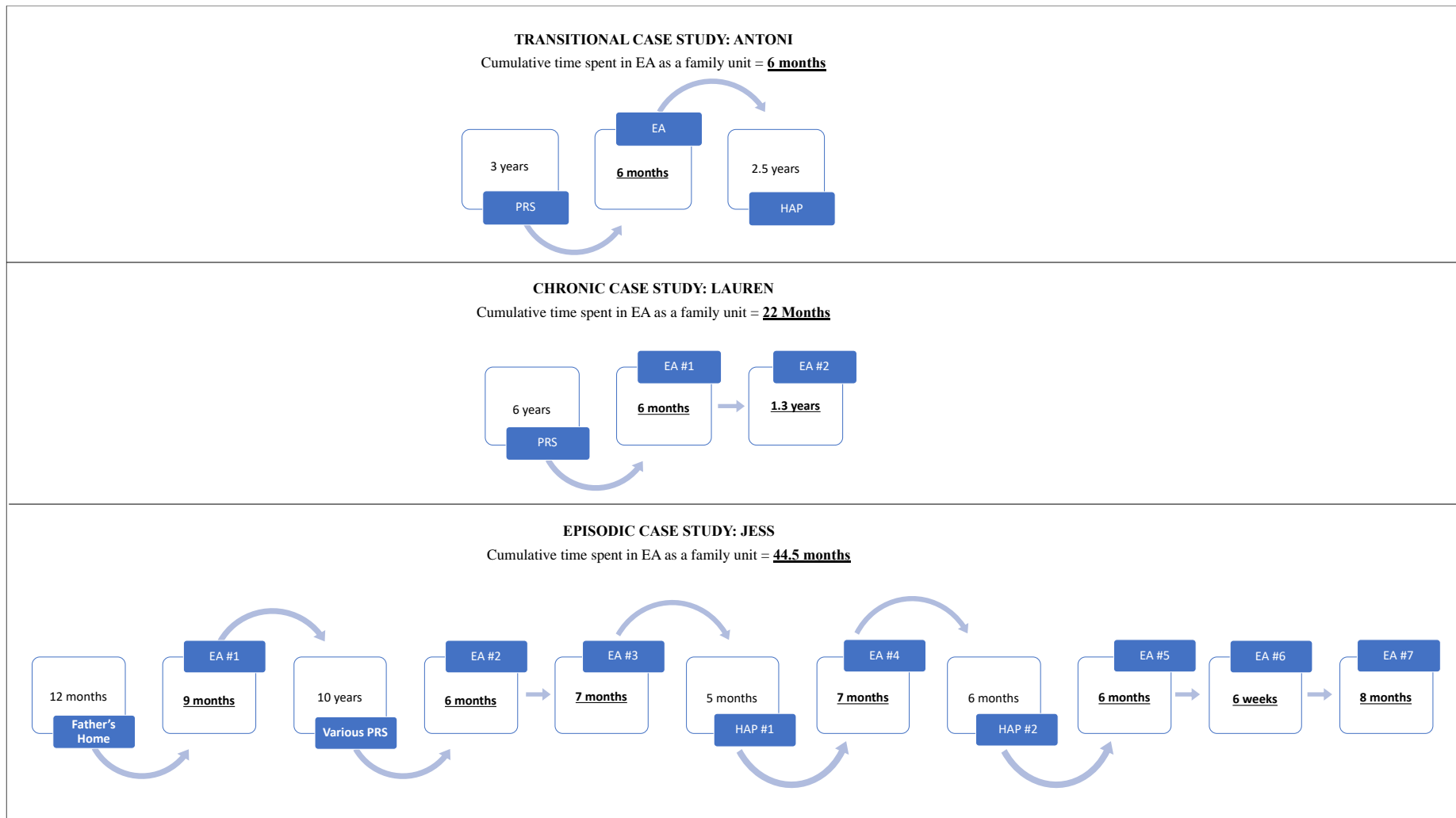


Figure 11: Service Contact Case Studies, by Cluster

Transitional service users, like Antoni, usually recorded one relatively brief ‘stint’ in a fixed EA placement that typically lasted up to six months and was bookended by significant periods spent in secure tenancies, most often in the PRS. As discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, these families’ trajectories through and out of homelessness service systems can be characterised as linear; importantly, however, because of this, those who reported transitional service use patterns also demonstrated the lowest levels of contact with EA service settings over time. Indeed, many who had secured a speedy exit and had not returned to homelessness services described themselves as “*lucky*”, “*blessed*” or “*fortunate*”, with a number expressing sympathy for those who remained in EA. Hope, for example, experienced a relatively short sojourn in a family hub prior to being offered an AHB-managed tenancy where she and her children had been living for over one year at the time she participated in the study. During interview, however, she lamented that “*the two women I met on my first day, they’re still there*”. Similarly, Kim explained that “*a lot of shit [referring to anti-social behaviour and criminality] had started happening*” in the commercial hotel where her family had been placed and felt that they were “*one of the lucky ones*” since they were allocated a social housing tenancy after a relatively short nine-month stay.

Significantly, parents who reported transitional patterns of service use typically framed their exit routes from EA as a last resort and as being driven by a strong desire to exit homelessness services as quickly as possible. As will be discussed in later sections of this chapter, parents almost always depicted EA - as a living *situation* or *environment* - in starkly negative terms, with very many expressing a need to flee these service settings to reclaim control of their housing (and other) futures. Stacy, for instance, was conflicted about whether the AHB-managed property she was offered was suitable for her family’s needs, but accepted it “*just to get me out of the hotel*”. Similarly, Hope explained that her ‘gut feeling’ was to not accept the AHB-managed apartment she was offered due to concerns about its location, but she ultimately took-up the tenancy because “*we felt like we had to get out of the hub, we were desperate*”. Finally, Amara told that she felt she had no other option but to accept an AHB housing offer in a property she felt was not appropriate for her and her children. In the following excerpt, she explained that she believed doing otherwise would have jeopardised her place on the social housing waiting list and resulted in a prolonged shelter stay:

There was damp floor and it was small apartment, not house like they said, and he [AHB representative] said ‘take it or leave it, if you’re not happy you can go back to the homeless and we will throw you out from the list’. I was afraid, so I felt like I had to take the apartment.
(Amara, transitional)

Accounts such as these provide evidence of a ‘punitive’ approach embedded within service-level infrastructures in Ireland; a feature that is often recognised as a defining (and enduring) characteristic of homelessness services underpinned by a staircase or continuum of care philosophy (Sahlin, 2005). While it has been suggested that this *modus operandi* in the Irish context may seek to avoid ‘perverse incentives’ by creating service environments that “deter all but the most desperate

of families from accessing the homelessness system” (O’Sullivan, 2017: 207), it could also be argued that policy makers and service providers are working under the assumption that “families in dire circumstances will be more motivated to find housing solutions” (Murphy, 2019: 258). Notably, parents demonstrated an awareness of this approach playing out around them, with one mother commenting: “*I think they [local authority] kind of just put you in the worst places to like, defy you to stay*” (Clodagh, transitional). Yet, while transitional service users in this study reported speedier exits and experienced less exposure to service settings as a result, an unintended consequence of these systemic conditions was that parents were making major housing decisions under pressured circumstances. While this resulted in lasting and successful exits to alternative housing in some cases, critically, as discussed in Chapter 6, it sometimes led to hasty moves from shelter to what was, upon reflection, assessed as untenable living situations. Thus, although these families had officially exited the shelter system and had not returned, their need for additional residential moves in the near future precluded their sense of long-term housing stability from being met.

Returning to the remaining two case studies in Figure 11, it is clear that there were marked differences regarding the extent to which transitional service users had been exposed to EA service settings compared to those in the chronic and episodic sub-groups. In Lauren’s example, we can see a pattern frequently reported by parents categorised as experiencing chronic patterns of service use whereby they entered EA from a relatively stable living situation - typically a PRS tenancy - and went on to experience lengthy, uninterrupted shelter stays. While these parents may have moved between services on one or two occasions, they continued to be officially counted as ‘homeless’, with their longest EA placement typically exceeding a period of one year and, in some cases, lasting up to two years or more. By contrast, Jess’ case study is illustrative of episodic service users since her EA contact history was precipitated by high levels of residential instability and characterised by multiple relatively short shelter stays that were punctuated by (longer) exits to housing in the PRS (both with and without HHAP). Yet, since her family was readmitted to EA on numerous occasions, the *cumulative* time that they had spent in shelter settings exceeded the amount reported by both Lauren and Antoni, standing at 44.5 months, compared to 22 months and six months, respectively.

The chronic and episodic sub-groups, then, demonstrated far higher levels of intensive shelter contact characterised by long-term or repeated stays in the environments created in and by homelessness service systems. Despite the fact that, as discussed in Chapter 6, these families were as equally determined and motivated to exit as their transitional counterparts, constraints of access in the private and public housing markets meant that they therefore became “locked into” the adverse conditions imposed on them by these service settings (Hearne and Murphy, 2017: 30). The remainder of this chapter examines the processes associated with families’ long-term and repeated exposure to the shelter system. In particular, it focuses on the ways in which parents’ continued interactions with and within homelessness systems of intervention impacted on their ability to access critical resources that have been shown to bolster shelter users’ chances of resolving their

homelessness. Importantly, attention is also paid to how such experiences had, over time, led parents to reassess their views on the role of services, as well as their family's position within them, which also influenced and reinforced their experiences of chronic and episodic service use over time.

7.3. Fostering Dependence: A loss of ‘Voice’, A Loss of ‘Choice’

Emergency accommodation settings - which included hotels, B&Bs, family hubs and other STA facilities - were governed by a particular set of rules, regulations and management practices, albeit that these protocols and procedures sometimes differed across individual services. As discussed in Chapters 1, 2 and 3, this almost always involved some form of monitoring, surveillance and/or training which carried implicit assumptions about individual and/or behavioural deficiencies and about parents' capabilities to live independently in conventional housing¹⁰². Correspondingly - as documented in Chapter 6 - compliance and conformity with expectations as to how families ought to 'behave' was also emphasised to ensure that the physical and social environment of EA operated efficiently, safely and, presumably, fairly¹⁰³. As a consequence, however, shelter bureaucracy often demonstrated "little respect for autonomy or individuality" (DeWard and Moe, 2010: 120) and was therefore "much less open for users' influence than other kinds of institution[s]" (Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin, 2007: 78). For parents, then, admission to EA was accompanied by a loss of independence, freedom and agency in exchange for the shelter, facilities and, in some cases, supports provided. Elaine and Zuri's accounts are reflective of others who expressed gratitude for their placement in STA but, equally, were critical of management practices assessed by them as constraining their ability to live the life they desired and valued. Put another way, these parents felt that assumptions were being made about their lives and decision-making capacities without consideration or acknowledgment of their personal preferences.

Don't get me wrong, I'm grateful for the help and being given a place to stay but I was surprised by how evasive they [management in STA] are and how they have so much control over the lives of people who come into services. The staff, you know, they become everything. Like, they tell you what you can and can't do and think they have the right to impose on your life and question how you raise your kids [...] It's to the point where it affects your life, because if affects [pause] if they want to they can affect, you know, you payments or who you see and where you go and what you do. (Elaine, episodic)

I asked for [financial] help [from voluntary organisation] because I need it but I didn't get my vouchers because they said that [management in family hub] says that I don't need it. I

¹⁰² With the caveat that rules were not uniformly implemented or enforced across all services, this sometimes included, for example: strict curfews and entry/exit protocols; routine room or bed checks and staff entering residences unannounced; rules related to a maximum amount of permitted overnight leave (typically three nights per month); and restrictions on movements in service settings (such as talking and running in corridors), interactions between residents (including the facilitation of childcare) and visitor access (including family members, friends and partners) in private quarters or, in some cases, any part of the residential facility.

¹⁰³ It is perhaps important to acknowledge that the measurement of 'progress' amongst service users *via* monitoring and observation is also sometimes implemented as a way to document the perceived needs of an individual or family experiencing homelessness whilst also generating data on the throughput and outcomes of the service.

got 20 euro instead of 80 and they said, 'yeah, they said they'd give you everything so you don't need the 80 euro'. I said 'who told you, I want to know, who told you they give us everything we need?' [...] The people that are supposed to help me, they don't help me anymore because the manager here [in family hub] says I'm doing okay. (Zuri, chronic)

From the perspective of these mothers and fathers, the paternalistic approach operational in most EA settings had recast them as service-dependents, arguably reducing them from an autonomous thinking agent to a “virtual child-like status, in that they [were] fully reliant on the institution” (DeWard and Moe, 2010: 120). As one mother, Cheyanne, put it: “*By yourself you can't do anything, everything has to go through your keyworker. Most places need keyworker to call or give letter to prove your [homelessness] situation*”. Similarly, Keandra explained that her attempts to liaise directly with her Local Authority to source HHAP properties were thwarted since she needed a keyworker to contact them on her behalf: “*I say, 'please, if you have any house can you send it to me'. The first thing they [local authority] would say is, 'where is your keyworker? I can't discuss anything with you about the house, you need to bring your keyworker'*. At the same time, many articulated strong awareness of the unbalanced power differentials governing these dynamics in EA, often recounting examples of having been reprimanded for ‘pushing back’ against or criticising management procedures. For instance, one mother depicted homelessness services as “*a law unto themselves*”, adding that “*if you disagree, you get called a 'trouble-maker'*” (Laila, chronic) while another drew attention to an absence of formal redress mechanisms, posing the rhetorical question: “*I'm just one person, you know, who am I to go against [homelessness organisation]?*” (Elaine, episodic). Equally, parents acknowledged that they often had no other option but to remain in EA to ensure that their children were not exposed to literal homelessness and further housing stress:

How can this be supported accommodation if when we raise an issue, it becomes an issue? So we're just forced to agree with certain things so my son can stay accommodated inside; I just have to agree even though I think it's wrong. (Miguel, episodic)

Under these institutional conditions, it is perhaps unsurprising that parents frequently stated that they felt they had “*lost themselves*”. Echoing the sentiments of many others, Elaine explained that families in EA “*are constantly placed in a position where we think that we don't have a voice or we're not allowed to speak up for ourselves*”, emphasising that “*we used to have our voice but we lost it in the process*”. This subversion of ‘self’ and, with it, parents’ inability to freely manage or affect change in their own lives on their own terms, was directly related to the rigid regimes underpinning homelessness services. This complex interplay between system dynamics and individual action was perhaps best captured in parents’ narratives of participation and ‘choice’ - or rather, a lack thereof - in their service or treatment plans, particularly in terms of keyworker relationships and EA placements.

When families reported a positive and supportive relationship with their keyworker, they typically experienced faster and smoother exits from EA to independent housing. Correspondingly,

in cases where parents were not satisfied with the nature and/or level of keyworking support provided to them in EA, they tended to experience prolonged shelter stays: “*You don’t know who you’re going to end up working with. It’s a gamble; you could find a person who cares and wants to help your situation or you could find one that they’re just doing their job to get paid, then you end up getting nowhere*” (Luke, episodic). Importantly, there appeared to be no formal mechanism in place whereby families could ask to be allocated an alternative keyworker if they felt they were not making significant progress. Cheyanne, for example, told that she felt she was not “*being treated fairly*” by her keyworker, who she said had “*forgotten*” to promptly contact a potential crèche to confirm her status as homeless, which resulted in the loss of the placement offer. Cheyanne also explained that her keyworker had not informed her of opportunities to meet with a dedicated service that directly linked families with HHAP landlords: “*I was there [in PEA] one year and I didn’t know that, she [keyworker] never tell me that. One day they ask me why I refuse to go see them and I said, ‘no I did not refuse! I was not told’*”. In the following excerpt, she recounted how her request to be allocated a keyworker who was more attuned to her needs went ‘unanswered’:

In my situation I needed help to find crèche to stay in college and I needed to find a house so I tried to change [keyworker] but no one answered me. I told them [homelessness organisation] the details but nothing happened.

[How did you feel about that?]

I was so disappointed, it was very difficult because I was trying so hard on my own but I couldn’t get nowhere.

[Do you think having a different keyworker would’ve made a difference?]

Yes. Definitely. It would’ve made big difference, because when I meet them with that service they gave me viewing and the landlord accept me! A good keyworker would mean you don’t stay one year homeless. (Cheyanne, episodic)

Parents also articulated a strong sense of what they (as individuals) and their families (as a unit) both *needed* and *could tolerate* in terms of the institutional features and norms governing differing service settings. For instance, some, like Clodagh, were more willing to accept the culture of surveillance and control that characterised service-intensive environments (such as family hubs and other STA) because they valued the greater degree of security and privacy these facilities typically provided¹⁰⁴. Others, like Jess, explained that they would rather reside in less interventionist EA facilities (such as commercial hotels and B&Bs) where although they faced challenges associated with sub-par amenities and living quarters, they nevertheless had a greater sense of autonomy:

I think it’s a lot harder in hotels and the B&Bs because you’re trapped in one little room in non-liveable conditions. I was kind of glad that I got the hub, even though there were rules

¹⁰⁴ It is worth noting that they *type* of accommodation offered to families varied considerably both across and within individual STA services (including family hubs), specifically. For instance, while some were provided with on-site self-contained houses or apartments, others were simply provided with one bedroom to be occupied by themselves and their children.

and you weren't allowed family members and things like. The kids still felt it was like a little home to them. Like we all had our own rooms, our own space. (Clodagh, transitional)

[In STA] you can wash, you can cook and clean, it feels an awful lot better being able to come and go and close the door behind me and not have to worry. But at the same time, I'd rather go back to the hotel than live here, because you're not questioned and watched all the time and you can come and go without any issues. (Jess, episodic)

Families identified several other institutional characteristics that appeared to impact their experiences in EA and influence their desire to either remain in or leave a particular service. These included: the availability of meals (which affected food security and nutritional well-being); rent requirements (which affected their ability to save¹⁰⁵); access to accommodation during the day or over weekends as well as cooking and laundry facilities (which affected efficient family functioning); substance misuse and anti-social behaviour among other residents (which affected exposure to risk); locations that were near children's schools (which affected transportation burden and costs); restrictions regarding visitation from family and other support networks (which affected access to childcare and emotional well-being); tenuous relationships with staff and/or other residents (which affected vulnerability to conflict, marginalisation and eviction); and - as documented in Chapter 6 - management practices regarding the nature and extent of housing assistance provided: *"I told them [local authority] that I need a transfer to leave [family hub] because they are not doing anything to help with the housing. In hotel, your keyworker help more and you don't pay [rent] either. But this place, we are paying to live in a place that's like a prison"* (Keandra, chronic). Yet, parents often told that they neither had a 'say' or felt they were adequately consulted or informed prior to being placed in a particular EA service setting:

At the end of the day I didn't know where we would go, we didn't have a choice. (Ahlam, chronic)

I didn't know anything about hubs or being homeless. They [local authority] said I would be fine, and I would probably like it there, it depends. So I said 'okay' because I had no other option. (Laila, chronic)

We were told it [STA] was drug and alcohol free but that's not how it actually is [...] They [management] should just be open about that and allow families to make up their own mind about whether they want to move in with their kids or not. (Sadhbh, chronic)

Moreover, once in EA, parents frequently spoke about how their local authority was either not willing or not able to readily facilitate transfers based on personal accommodation preferences due to increasing demand and limited resources, leading them to feel that their appeals were sidelined or ignored. Elaine explained that despite her request to move to an alternative EA due to the fact that she was not *"having a good relationship with staff"* and believed the service was *"not suiting*

¹⁰⁵ Notably, in a small number of cases, parents told that they were, in fact, paying higher rents in EA than they were paying in private rental accommodation with housing subsidies: *"I pay [amount] rent in here a week [in STA]. I wasn't even paying that in my own apartment on rent allowance!"* (Lauren, chronic)

my needs”, she was informed that “*if I leave I’ll have to self-accommodate*” which she felt was not a realistic option since she was pregnant at the time. Similarly, Simone described feeling deeply unhappy following her family’s pressurised move from a commercial hotel to a family hub because she was unaware of the extent of monitoring, control and surveillance governing everyday life in the service prior to signing her contract. Although she had been informed that she would need to request a formal transfer, she was also told that “*nothing is guaranteed*”:

I’m finding it very hard to cope, very hard. I’m becoming so stressed and depressed and just want to go back [to hotel]. You need your freedom; your freedom matters in life. Not to be treated like a criminal. (Simone, chronic)

Crystal had requested a transfer from her current family hub to another where her sister had been placed since it appeared to have less restrictive rules regarding family visitation: “*We were down with her [sister] every day whereas I can’t have them [family] down here at all [...] So, she felt like she had the support down there because we were all around her still*”. However, although she had been on the transfer list for 10 months at the time of interview, she was told that “*you’ll probably have a house before you get transferred there*”. Another mother, Jana, was accessing ONO TEA for several months with her son and baby where they were not able to store their belongings or access the service during the day. She requested a more stable placement so that her son, in particular, could rest since he was attending school; however, she explained that “*straight away they [local authority] say, ‘no, we can’t, we don’t have, that’s all we have’. I’m not going to fight with them you know, there’s no point in fighting. Just cry, what can I do?*”.

Like other families who signalled high levels of dissatisfaction with their current EA service setting, Lauren told that her concerns were largely dismissed by management: “*But when I tell them I need to get out of here it’s just like ‘what, back to a B&B?’ See, it goes against you, because they’ll tell you you’re giving up a home [referring to on-site apartment in STA]. So you can’t really win*”. Her account is reflective of all those discussed above whose prolonged stays in EA settings perceived by them as being inappropriate, unsafe or unsuitable resulted in high levels of uncertainty and distress. Indeed, these experiences were frequently reported to have traumatising effects, one of the most significant being a belief that it was impossible to escape, much less endure, the negative impacts of living for many months and often years in services that they felt were worsening rather than progressing their family’s situation. Characterised by a sense of panic and powerlessness, the following excerpt from Lauren demonstrates how, with the passing of time, residing in shelter settings that were experienced as intolerable and/or incompatible with their family’s needs had a profound impact on parents’ mental health and well-being:

You’re meeting management [in STA] to complain and there’s nothing being done about it. This is why I get annoyed and frustrated; this is why I don’t want to be here because it’s not doing me any good. I didn’t even want to come back the other day. I feel like screaming and shouting, ‘I do not get listened to!’. I need to get out of here or I’m going to lose my head, I

swear to god and I can feel my mental health deteriorating all the time [...] I was only in hospital again a few weeks ago. I need to get out of here soon because it's affecting me and my kids badly; I feel trapped [pause] I am trapped. (Lauren, chronic)

It is acknowledged that there is a tension within homelessness service provision in its aim to provide safety and control, on the one hand, and to provide interventions that align with the needs and preferences of individual service users, on the other (Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin, 2007). Nevertheless, the accounts presented here indicate that there was little evidence of a dialogue in families' interactions with service providers or government officials since they felt they were not encouraged to articulate their needs or concerns, much less influence their service, housing or treatment plan. This led to most parents feeling that their autonomy was diminished and also produced feelings of disempowerment, distress and exasperation; they felt they were being treated with indifference by a system which, simultaneously, had rendered them wholly dependent in terms of finding a resolution to their family's homelessness. Thus, despite general consensus that user-led interventions provide a more humane and durable solution to long-term and recurrent homelessness (Padgett *et al.*, 2016a), the perspectives of this study's families were not routinely sought nor were they treated with any great deal of urgency or consideration when offered. This, in turn, held critical implications for families' well-being and, correspondingly, their ability to secure a speedy exit.

7.4. Institutional Control of Access and The Erosion of Helping Networks

Prevailing definitions of homelessness conceptualise it as being precipitated by some form of social disaffiliation; that is, an absence of social ties (Shinn *et al.*, 1991). Yet, with the exception of a small number of participants who reported significant care histories and migrants who tended to have fewer 'anchor' relationships in Ireland, parents spoke at length about the nature and level of support they received from their personal connections - including, family, friends and their partner's family - both prior to and following their entry to EA: "*Any advice or support I get is from outside services, it's my partner's family that give me all that*" (Sophie, episodic). Equally, however, a majority acknowledged the limits of this support, often noting that it was either not appropriate, safe or possible to remain in the homes of these personal connections on a long-term basis.

A defining feature of homelessness service systems is what Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin (2007: 71) call "institutional control of access", where EA management - as opposed to service users - determine whether, how and when residents and/or visitors gain admittance to service settings. In this study, almost all participants recounted strict shelter regulations regarding visitation and the amount of time they could spend away from the service. While the safeguarding and risk-management rationale for these procedures was recognised and appreciated, parents categorised as episodic and chronic service users often spoke at length about the isolation they had endured during what had become increasingly long stays in EA. Stark (1994) contends that such protocols, with their emphasis on protection and control, inadvertently lead to role conflicts among those accessing

services, arguing that assuming the role of ‘shelter resident’ denies the individual’s ability to pursue “the most basic of human roles - those of friend, lover, husband, wife, parent and so forth” (Stark, 1994: 557). She goes on to say that this, in turn, thwarts their “efforts to leave the shelter and return to some semblance of the socioeconomic mainstream” (Stark, 1994: 561). Gerstel *et al.* (1996: 563) similarly suggest that the institutional regimes governing EA undermine “the very survival strategies” that families could mobilise to successfully exit homelessness services, namely through the erosion of social networks. This study’s findings lend considerable weight to these assertions.

As demonstrated in Chapter 6, family (and other social) support systems provided critical assistance to transitional service users during their time in EA, which not only helped to mitigate the adverse effects of shelter-living but also sometimes resulted in quicker and smoother exits to housing. However, many parents - particularly those who had spent several years, collectively, in EA - reported that their (previously close) connections with family and/or friends had, in fact, been negatively affected by their lasting shelter stay(s). This was particularly visible in narratives that articulated a marked deterioration in their relationships with kin and non-kin since they first accessed services and, significantly, was felt most acutely by mothers parenting alone: “*You can see the change in people when they come in here; you lose your family, you lose your friends [pause] you lose yourself*” (Sophie, episodic). Steph, who had been accessing STA for two years, told that the bond with her parents, in particular, had been “*totally destroyed*” due to the prohibition of on-site visitor access in her current accommodation: “*Since day one [in STA], my whole family unit is gone; I’ve gone from seeing them all the time to not seeing them at all*”. In the following account, she explained how these conditions had driven a wedge between her and her immediate family members, which had serious implications for the level of support she now received:

I barely talk to my ma now [...] She has to pay for a taxi up to come speak to me through a fucking gate. Especially when I need to see my ma or something when I’m not feeling well, you know, mentally, I’m left crying at a gate. Everyone’s staring at you. It’s horrible. I can’t even have a decent conversation with my ma [...] I have nobody, the only support I have in my life is my ma and da and my brother [...] When I was renting the support I got from them used to be huge. My ma used to be up to me every night, my da would be up to me all the time helping me with the kids. I had freedom, I had a social life. I have none of that anymore. (Steph, chronic)

Crystal recalled that while she was allowed to host visitors in an on-site common area in the family hub where she and her children resided, she was reluctant to ask her family members to comply with what she perceived as a highly stigmatising process of having to present personal identification: “*When the manager [in family hub] said visitors have to bring in IDs I said, ‘look they’re not going into a prison’. I said, ‘you’re okay, I’m not putting anybody down [on the list]’. So I never have any visitors*”. Like Steph, her previously strong and supportive relationship with her family had been significantly eroded by the introduction of distance and the removal of a space in which to participate in and maintain important family ties: “*I wouldn’t say I’m as close to them now*

because of it. Like I feel excluded because I'm not around them as much anymore". She went on to explain the impact that this reduction in family contact, coupled with limited overnight leave, has had on her mental health and her ability to cope in EA:

I find it hard because I've nobody to help. I'm doing it all on my own. Like yeah when I do go to my mam's I can have a lie down or take a shower. But that wouldn't be very often because you get given out to for staying out and told you'll lose your bed [...] Having a helping hand would make a huge difference, especially as a single mother. I wouldn't be stressed as much, or down as much. It's just very lonely, especially with a new baby. I suffer with depression and anxiety as it is already like [...] I don't have the support there that other people would have been getting in their own home [...] You're just left there, sitting in a four by four cell every day. (Crystal, chronic)

The negative relational impacts associated with long-term exposure to on-site and/or in-room visitor bans were not limited to family and extended to other dimensions of parents' social lives, thus blocking access to further supports that could help to facilitate a speedy exit. This included, for example, an inability to establish, foster and/or maintain romantic relationships: "*It is not helping us because two hands are better than one [...] Having somebody there that will lift you up, that will encourage you, it matters in life; it helps you to keep going*" (Zuri, chronic); and the interruption of co-parenting relationships with the mother/father of their child(ren): "*He [child's father] can only stay at the reception, he's not allowed to go in [to family hub] which doesn't make things easy*" (Simone, chronic). Critically, parents drew a sharp distinction between the nature and expectations of informal and formal supports. For many, family in particular offered unconditional care coupled with a shared history and sense of intimacy, responsibility, and loyalty that requires a lifetime to establish. Service professionals, on the other hand, were generally characterised as supportive and helpful but their interactions with families were often depicted as brief, instrumental and focused solely or primarily on housing; that is to say, such encounters did not typically incorporate discussion of parents' broader personal and social circumstances. This juxtaposition is made explicit the following excerpt from Lottie:

Well to be honest, she's [referring to keyworker] great now, she helps me out a lot. But it's not [pause], it's not the same as the kind of help you'd get from your own family. I think the place [referring to STA] should be opened up more to families because there's no families allowed, there's no visitors. You know, people like support off their own families. Like there's certain things you can only ask family to do or tell your own family. You know? They know you better than anyone. (Lottie, episodic)

Here, we see the emergence of a role conflict developing in Lottie's account; she is acutely aware that access to EA and access to family support are, by and large, mutually exclusive under the management practices operating in her service setting. In response, Lottie told that she had, on a number of occasions, felt she had no choice but to relinquish her EA placement in order to access family supports at critical points when she had experienced a personal crisis. At junctures such as these, Lottie rejected her 'shelter resident' role since she believed service staff could not offer the

type of help she needed to cope with her circumstances. However, without access to formal homelessness and housing supports in her alternative living arrangements - which typically involved 'couch surfing' in the homes of family and friends - these 'exits' eventually broke down, leading her and her children back to EA. On the other hand, in cases where individuals accepted - or rather, surrendered - to the role of shelter resident at the expense of their role as 'son', 'daughter', 'friend' or 'sibling', they became increasingly service-dependent. As one mother, Lauren, explained: "*It's so warped what's going on in here with staff [in STA], you know, because they become the be all and end all. So now I think all the time, 'what will I be like when I move out on my own? Will I manage?'*". In this way, these families' interactions with the service system forced them to choose one role over another, which contributed to the production of repeat (episodic) and prolonged (chronic) patterns of service use over time (Stark, 1994). In what was a cyclical and confounding process, increased contact with EA further eroded their social networks, which, in turn, "further reduced their chances of departure" (Gerstel *et al.*, 1996).

Importantly, the depletion of critical sources of emotional, practical and parental support brought about by institutional control of access affected families in another way: by undermining their capacity to mobilise informal resources to facilitate affordable childcare. This, in turn, affected parents' ability to secure or return to employment, which would significantly enhance their ability to carve a route out of EA (Gerstel *et al.*, 1996; Stark, 1994). More specifically, due to extremely high demand for what are costly crèche placements, many parents - particularly single mothers and fathers - relied entirely on personal connections for childcare support. However, rigid service regulations did not permit them to arrange for child minders to come to their residences, which constrained their ability to hold down a job but also, as a consequence, reduced their chances of securing a HHAP rental agreement. As discussed in Chapter 6, triply stigmatised as 'homeless', 'jobless' and 'families with children', many parents felt highly disadvantaged in the private rental market. For this reason, they believed that securing work would give them at least some leverage with landlords; however, as Laila and Keandra's accounts demonstrate, many did not feel supported by EA to do so. For these mothers, who were both migrant women, simply residing in EA was framed as the single biggest obstacle to exiting:

Right now, I am jobless and I know there is no way I am going to get HHAP until I get back to work. I am willing to go back to work. Getting a job for me is not difficult because I have a lot of things I can do. But I can't find a crèche and that's why living in [family hub] is dragging me down, because I can't even get a child minder to come into my room to mind my child. (Laila, chronic)

If you don't have a work reference the landlord would feel like he would not pay your part of the HHAP [...] If I got HHAP I would leave today, I don't want to stay in this place. But I need someone to be able to mind my baby or pick my baby up from crèche. I can't do that living here [referring to family hub]. If I wasn't living here I would be working because I know there would be support with my baby while I go to work. (Keandra, chronic)

Similarly, Crystal and Anika both told that they had been securely employed for many years prior to experiencing homelessness whereby their aunt and neighbour, respectively, had assisted with childcare during working hours. However, upon entering EA, these arrangements broke down and they were no longer able to draw on these informal support systems: *“The main thing is childcare. I can’t get a babysitter to come to [family hub] and mind my child, so I can’t go back to work and save to buy my own place or have more to offer a landlord”* (Crystal, chronic); *“I used to work before the homeless stuff. When I used to work my neighbour used to mind the children after school but now I live far away and nobody can take them [referring to STA]. That means I can’t go back to work, that means I won’t get HHAP”* (Anika, chronic). For others, the need to observe shelter rules regarding curfews and resident access interfered with their ability to remain employed. Miguel, for instance, explained that he was advised of the option to quit his job in order to continue availing EA services:

They [local authority] told me I had option to quit that job, ‘maybe it’s better if you quit that job’ because no hostels would take you after 12am. Now that comes from somebody who is supposed to help me move forward with my life. That person has told me, it’s better if I quit that job. (Miguel, episodic)

These parents had fallen off what Stark (1994: 559) described as “the tightrope stretched between their role as shelter residents [...] and their needs as employees”. By having to conform to shelter rules and regulations they also had to forgo the opportunity to achieve or retain self-sufficiency through employment and thus a perceived route out of EA. In so doing, these families’ sense of dependence on the system was reinforced and their capacity to exit was greatly diminished (Gerstel *et al.*, 1996).

7.5. Navigating the Complex Relationship between Environment and Risk

As parents reflected on their experiences with and within homelessness service systems, their narratives revealed the ebb and flow of how they perceived their shelter stay(s). Most acknowledged the relief they felt when their family was first offered a relatively stable EA placement and expressed gratitude for their immediate access to lodgings, facilities and (where available) the supports provided to both themselves and their children in these service settings. Here, they depicted EA as having achieved its intended purpose; that is, the provision of a short-term “safe space where people may engage, at some level, in preparatory activities for move on” (McMordie, 2020: 9). However, with the passing of time, almost all had come to re-frame their continued contact with EA as exacerbating - rather than ameliorating - their housing (and other forms of) exclusion. This was frequently communicated by mothers and fathers *via* the language of ‘hurt’, ‘regret’ and ‘loss’: *“This place is broken [referring to STA][...] I lost everything from coming in here”* (Elaine, episodic); *“Coming into this place [family hub] was the biggest mistake of my life, it’s damaged my life hugely”* (Sophie, episodic); *“The more you see, the more people that move in [to STA] on drugs, the more fights and you’re just like ‘what the fuck have I gotten us into?’”* (Crystal, chronic). Thus, with the

passing of time, parents assessed *long-term* and/or *repeated* EA use as personally damaging but also unavoidable if they were to keep their families housed. In this sense, many had entered into “a transaction that was necessary to obtain access to shelter yet fraught with potential for outcomes detrimental to well-being” (McMordie, 2020: 7). As a consequence, the longer families resided in EA, the more they were exposed to risks perceived by them as negatively affecting their ability to successfully exit and achieve residential stability (Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin, 2007).

In keeping with European homelessness research literature, environmental stressors were most frequently associated with EA that was sub-par quality, highly regimented or surveilled and/or large scale or congregate in nature (Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin, 2007; Mackie, *et al.*, 2017; McMordie, 2020; Watts and Blenkinsopp, 2020; Sanders and Reid, 2018). Service settings of this kind often engendered a strong sense of unpredictability, with many parents describing a perceived lack of control over their immediate environment and, in particular, whom they shared spaces with on a daily basis. Such conditions contributed to what Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin (2007: 77) call “the problem of sharing”, whereby communal living situations increased the potential for conflict amongst residents: *“Everyone’s just cracking up in here because you’re on top of each other, constantly just staring at one another”* (Lottie, episodic)¹⁰⁶. While parents recognised the need for services to accommodate and support a diverse range of families, many questioned the logic of facilities that “*forced*” parents and children - some of whom had high and complex needs or were vulnerable to bullying, intimidation and exploitation - to interact in confined spaces for many months or even years. As one mother, Steph, put it: *“Sometimes I feel like we’re all just little lab rats, it’s just like a big experiment to see how people mix in a place like this”*. Likewise, Jess told that under such circumstances *“the least little thing in here happens and it’s blown way out of proportion”*. In the following account, she contrasted the abnormal living situations created within her STA service setting with those on *“the outside”*, where the ability to create distance - to be in control of one’s environment - helps to diffuse potentially volatile interactions:

There was murder between the two of us [referring to a fight with another resident] [...] The staff were roaring shouting saying ‘we’re ringing the police on you’ [...] Like the situations created in here aren’t normal, they’re not like how they would be on the outside. Like you wouldn’t have chaotic families living on top of chaotic families. When you live on the outside, you can just walk away but when you’re living in a situation like this, you just have to deal with it. And it’s very hard sometimes, when you’re living in a confined place with people who you might not get on with, you know? Tensions build up and arguments happen. Like that wouldn’t have happened had I not been living here and because it was in front of the children, now I’m being reported to social workers [...] It boils down to the fact that you

¹⁰⁶ In light of recent global events concerning the transmission of infectious diseases, it is perhaps worth noting that several parents also called attention to instances where they, or their children, experienced repeated illnesses in congregate EA service settings. Stacy, for example, told that she lost her job because she *“constantly got sick in the hotel”*, emphasising that *“once there’s something going around, everyone gets it”*. Similarly, Crystal explained that chicken pox was *“rampant in my building because of the lack of cleanliness”*, adding that her child also recently had contracted hand, foot and mouth disease.

have to answer to people in here [...] which means you might lose your place. (Jess, episodic)

Reframing Jess's experiences through the lens of complexity, what she is describing is a perceptible change in her surroundings ("*tensions build up and arguments happen*"), that she linked directly to the conditions of her EA placement ("*chaotic families living on top of chaotic families*"). She identified a strategy that she would have ordinarily employed in non-service contexts ("*you can just walk away*") but acknowledged that this approach was not possible in her current circumstances, meaning she had to adapt and co-evolve with her environment ("*you just have to deal with it*"). For Jess, however, the management practices operating in EA ("*you have to answer to people in here*") resulted in a number of unintended consequences due to her 'behaviour' that could further undermine her ability to exit services in a timely manner, including criminal justice contact ("*'we're ringing the police on you'*"), social work intervention ("*now I'm being reported to social workers*") and potentially being evicted ("*you might lose your place*").

Like Jess, many others spoke about how being subjected to "high levels of professional scrutiny" (Shinn *et al.*, 2005: 6) in EA services that were obliged to implement child protection guidelines led, in some cases, to their capabilities or worth as a parent being questioned. This process was consistently singled out by parents as an acute source of stress, resentment and diminished feelings of self-worth: "*I never had one social worker until I moved in here but now it's just reports, reports, reports [...] I was totally accused in the wrong and it's not fair. I'm a good mother*" (Lauren, chronic); "*I was never, ever involved with social services until I became homeless [...] It's like they're intimidating us, 'you're not doing this right, you're not doing that right' [...] Do they have any idea how that makes us feel?*" (Lottie, episodic). For these families, then, residing in EA environments over prolonged periods was assessed as exposing them to a heightened risk of their children being forcibly removed from their care. This was articulated by several through expressions of fear, anxiety and distress, with many describing their children as "*what keeps me alive*", "*my only source of joy*" and "*the reason I keep going*". While all acknowledged the importance of child protection and intervention in cases of neglect and/or abuse, many felt they were being unfairly 'targeted' *because* they were homeless; or, more specifically, because of compounding vulnerabilities linked to their long-term or repeated shelter use. Laila, a single migrant mother, for example, told that her interactions with shelter staff left her feeling judged as an 'unfit' parent after she opened up about her mental health difficulties associated with her fourteen-month stay in EA:

You need to follow the rules [in family hub] but it's not easy obeying because sometimes you just want to talk to someone to release your pain. But that is not allowed, so it becomes depressing living in a place like this [...] If I tell a keyworker, social worker, whatever, about feeling down, feeling depressed about my situation, they start to want to monitor what's going on with you and your child. They don't think about helping me feel better, they think about if I should have my child. Do you think I'm going to harm my child because I'm feeling some kind of way about the situation that I'm in? I'm better than that. I should get more

credit as a mother. The way things are, you can't tell them anything [...] you are afraid to ask for help [...] Being homeless is stressful enough, then you now feel this tension and control from where you live and it's even more depressing. (Laila, chronic)

Here, it is again possible to identify a number of interactions which, inadvertently or not, may have contributed to Laila's prolonged shelter stay. First, she drew attention to her inability to mobilise previously successful coping strategies ("*talk to someone to release your pain*") that might have helped to mitigate the adverse effects of living in EA. She asserted that this was directly linked to the rules and regulations that governed daily life in the service setting ("*you need to follow the rules*", "*that is not allowed*"). Because of this, she reached out for help from service professionals but subsequently felt punished and judged for having done so ("*they start to want to monitor what's going on with you and your child*"). These perceived changes to her environment led to a process of adaptation whereby Laila assessed and developed a new response to protect herself and her son from the potential threat of parent-child separation ("*you can't tell them anything*", "*you are afraid to ask for help*"). Like many others, Laila had come to re-frame her experiences through social interactions within homelessness service systems; she no longer felt she could ask for the help she felt her family needed to both cope with the environmental and psychological stressors of EA and this, in turn, held implications for their capacity to secure a speedy exit ("*then you now feel this tension and control from where you live and it's even more depressing*").

Long-term or repeated exposure to unpredictable, unfit and stigmatising living conditions in EA was another environmental stressor routinely identified by parents in the chronic and episodic sub-groups. While experiences varied considerably across individual services, a large number reported being in close proximity to violence (domestic and/or otherwise), alcohol and/or drug use and anti-social behaviour on a regular basis: "*All around you [in B&B] it was drinking, noise, fighting going on, blood everywhere. Garda [police] being called*" (Jana, chronic). Others noted concerns about what they considered to be inadequate facilities, sub-par living quarters and unsuitable locations that inhibited efficient family functioning: "*I couldn't cope with the way things were [in the hotel], not being able to wash clothes or do my baby's bottle properly. Trying to get my son to school and then falling on top of each other in one room with a [teenager] and [infant]*" (Jess, episodic). Alongside the harms linked to the physical environment of these EA services, participants very frequently expressed a sense of shame or 'failure' as a person - and in particular, as a parent - that was engendered by their association with what were considered to be highly stigmatised spaces. Put differently, their otherness was amplified, reproduced and reinforced by services' physical architecture ('railings', 'gates', 'like a mental institution'), internal practices ('buzzing in', 'rules', 'being watched') and wider social standing in the community ('labelled', 'looked-down on', 'blamed'). For parents, then, as their interactions with, and dependencies on, EA endured, they were increasingly experienced as "'markers of mistakes', 'jail like', controlling and provoking fear and judgement" (Benbow *et al.*, 2019: 6). As one mother, Crystal expressed:

It's like you're in prison but we didn't do no crime. It's not our fault that we're there [in EA], so we shouldn't be penalised for it. Because it feels like you're doing something wrong all the time. But you're not doing anything wrong. You've done nothing wrong [...] Just being in a place like that makes me feel like a failure as a mother [...] There's no need to cage people in just because they're homeless. (Crystal, chronic)

As a consequence of these situational forces - that is, influences that did not occur from within 'the individual' but from their environment - those who experienced long-term or repeated episodes in EA noted marked changes in their children's behaviour; strong concerns about their children's physical, social and educational development; and in all cases, a significant deterioration in their family's overall mental health and well-being over time. A smaller number of parents, notably all of whom were episodic service users, voiced additional concerns associated with a perceived loss of independent living skills, the potential for relapse and, in instances where families had fled home-based violence and/or abuse, retraumatising themselves and their children over the course of their shelter stay(s). This led many to feel that the longer they remained in (or continued along a path of returning to) EA, the more they perceived their family's situations as deteriorating rather than progressing towards securing a lasting exit. Evaluations of this kind were frequently communicated *via* accounts that relayed a sense of time passing and, with it, unfavourable processual outcomes, including 'stagnation', 'regression', and 'degradation'. As demonstrated in the following excerpts, parents considered these longer-term effects to be a direct consequence of the adverse conditions created in and by service environments:

You're meant to be trying to do positive for yourself and your kids in this place but you can't because of what's going on around you. (Lauren, chronic)

The initial time I was living there was a bit okay, but the more you live there, the more it's becoming difficult and tough for you. (Zuri, chronic)

Being in here with the stresses of everything it can make you feel like you're going backwards rather than forwards, you know what I mean? (Jess, episodic)

You could have a normal person come in here and then end up leaving this place worse than when they came in. (Miguel, episodic)

Similar to Laila and Jess quoted earlier, parents' accounts indicated that, over time, they had developed strategies in order to cope with or 'survive' their shelter stay(s). For some, this meant remaining in their private quarters as much as possible in an attempt to mitigate their family's exposure to perceived environmental harms. However, this typically coincided with rapid deteriorations in well-being that were exacerbated by a heightened sense of loneliness, ennui and exclusion that occurred as a result. Miguel, for example, told that "*having nothing to do*" and "*no integration*" in STA led to him losing all motivation, adding that he had started "*forgetting about myself and not looking after myself correct*". Similarly, Lottie explained that "*when you're in a place*

like this [referring to STA], you don't want to be anywhere". Like Miguel, she had "lost interest in things [...] anything", emphasising that "this place just drags you down to be honest. Like you're in the humour for nothing [...] When the kids go to bed I just sit out the back, just thinking, thinking, thinking about what I'm going to do with my life". Others sought to counteract the adverse effects of shelter-living by eschewing EA environments entirely (in the case of episodic users) or limiting their exposure as much as they were able to do so (in the case of chronic service users). A good example of the latter is Jana, who explained that she was left feeling exhausted (physically, emotionally, financially) since she dedicated all her free time to ensuring that her children were able to "live a normal life" outside the confines of the B&B that they were booking weekly at the time of interview:

All the noise, the fights and just a bed in room. No toilet, no TV, no nothing for kids to entertain them, it's like prison [begins to cry] [...] They [children] feel alone, they feel scared, they feel different [...] I requested to move so many times but they [local authority] did not move me [...] This system does not think about these kids; when their childhood is gone it's gone, they cannot do this again. They need a place where they can live a normal life [...] Every second I have I try do things for them, like go to kid places, because I don't want them to lose their childhood [...] I've hardly been able to look [for housing] since becoming homeless, there's no time to go to internet. No time! [...] I'm so tired, my body hurts. At the end you just lie down, you don't want to feel nothing. (Jana, chronic)

Like others, Jana's survival in the shelter environment required her continual adaption in response to her surroundings. First, she identified the conditions of EA ("it's like a prison") as causing irreversible harm to her children's lives ("they [children] feel alone, they feel scared, they feel different"). Since Jana's request for an official transfer was denied ("they [DCC] did not move me"), she reassessed her family's situation and developed a new strategy to mitigate this perceived threat to her children's well-being ("every second I have I try do things for them, like go to kid places, because I don't want them to lose their childhood"). Yet between juggling work, moving between accommodations and enabling her children to have non-service-based experiences, Jana suffered 'burn out' ("I'm so tired, my body hurts"). Through experience, observation and her interactions with services over time, Jana had thus sought ways to minimise harm to her family at the expense of her own personal health. As a consequence, however, her capacity to source alternative housing and ultimately exit EA was significantly reduced, further prolonging her shelter stay ("I've hardly been able to look [for housing] since becoming homeless, there's no time").

The adaptive strategies employed by Jana, Lottie, Miguel, Laila and Jess emerged as a "rational and reasoned response" to what were perceived as unmanageable environmental changes in the form of stressors, threats and risks occurring at the individual- or service- level (McMordie, 2020: 3). Yet, an in-depth interrogation of their accounts revealed how these small changes likely contributed to wider systems-level behaviour; that is, collective patterns of chronic and episodic service use that emerged over time. From this perspective, rather than providing a space in which families could prepare for the transition to housing, the defining characteristics of EA sometimes

provoked “perverse and contra-productive effects” (Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin, 2007:76) and what has been described as ‘duration dependence’; that is, a process whereby “the longer people are homeless the less likely they are to exit” (Scutella and Wooden, 2014: 65). As has been demonstrated here, these effects became apparent through a complexity-informed analysis of how families attempted to preserve their identity and wellbeing whilst also conforming to their role as shelter residents; or put simply, of how they navigated and ultimately co-evolved with their immediate environment: the homelessness service system (Holland, 1998; Mitchell, 2009).

7.6. Conclusion

The analysis presented in this chapter has uncovered multiple complex dimensions of families’ experiences in EA, revealing parallels with what Benbow *et al.* (2019: 1) describe as the “contradictory nature” of the homelessness service system. The findings documented add depth and nuance to this conceptualisation, highlighting how complexity - whereby the constituent parts of a dynamic system *interact* - can create unintended consequences that influence patterns of transitional, episodic and chronic shelter use amongst families over time. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 3, homelessness interventions in Ireland typically operate under the principle of ‘treatment- (as opposed to housing-) first’ to assist families to become personally and economically self-sufficient before reintegrating into ‘mainstream’ society. Yet, as demonstrated here, the system of practices and rules that characterised EA, however well-intentioned, offered families little choice or room to manoeuvre and made it difficult for them to participate in critical social, employment and professional helping networks (Gerstel *et al.*, 1996). Put differently, the “intrinsic and contingent” features of the service environments in which families resided constrained their ability to mobilise strategies that might allow them to better navigate, survive and exit the shelter system (Watts and Blenkinsopp, 2021: 3). As a consequence, and particularly with the passing of time, parents faced considerable roadblocks in their attempts to reconcile their need to conform to shelter protocols with their need to feel in control of their family’s well-being and to access other fundamental supports they required *outside of services* to re-establish their lives (Stark, 1994).

These families were therefore navigating what Reppond and Bullock (2020: 102) describe as a “figurative tightrope” in that “challenging shelter rules [could] jeopardize access to resources or result in expulsion while adherence [could] reduce autonomy or undermine parental authority”. As Stark (1994: 561) pointedly concludes, within service systems of this kind “those who reject the role of shelter resident, as well as those who accept it, are seen as failures - people who are unable to empower themselves and to go forward with their lives”. What is implied by an underlying assumption such as this is that families need to be controlled to some degree in order to be ‘rehabilitated’ and reintegrated. Yet, as shown, it was the level of control exerted over families in EA, rather than any family characteristic, that had the most significant impact on their ability to

successfully transition to independent housing. This supports a long-held argument in the homelessness research literature which asserts that service settings “intended to create housing readiness actually dilute the resources that might contribute to an early exit”, thus subverting “the rehousing of the population for whom [they] were established” (Gerstel *et al.*, 1996: 563-565). Importantly, the findings presented here go further by advancing understanding of how families’ responses to these adverse system conditions emerged at the intersection of *temporality* and *agency*. The *longer or more frequently* parents interacted with EA environments, the more they came to reframe their experiences and develop adaptive strategies to counteract the stressors brought to bear by their position in homelessness services; as demonstrated, however, this almost always served to reinforce their marginality, further contributing to the production of chronic and episodic service use patterns over time.

8. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

8.1. Introduction

The opening chapters of this work demonstrated that family homelessness has increased globally, generating intense discussion and debate about the emerging nature of this phenomenon and how it can be explained. Over the past 20 years, in particular, homelessness research has focused increasingly on the temporal character of shelter utilisation by analysing large-scale and longitudinal sources of administrative data. Most notably, the seminal work of Dennis Culhane and colleagues in the late 1990s and early 2000's demonstrated that a majority of individuals and families in the US use homelessness services on a short-term basis, with much smaller numbers going on to experience prolonged or recurrent shelter stays. While statistical evidence of these three distinct service use profiles - referred to in the literature as 'transitional', 'chronic' and 'episodic', respectively - has since been found in shelter populations across Denmark, Canada and Ireland, understanding of *why* (and *how*) these patterns emerge has not been fully interrogated. Initiated in 2016 against a backdrop of exponentially rising numbers of families experiencing homelessness in Ireland, this study examined *the dynamics of family homelessness* in the Dublin region with the aim of advancing understanding of the experiences, contexts and mechanisms that drive families' trajectories through, out and back into EA over time. Adopting a mixed methods approach, the research aimed to fill a gap in knowledge by extending beyond a *descriptive* statistical account of families' shelter entries and exits, towards a deeper *explanation* of service use patterns derived from their lives as lived.

In this concluding chapter, I synthesise, interpret and extract meaning from the findings presented in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 by bringing them 'into conversation' with each other and with the theoretical and conceptual constructs underpinning this research. The bulk of this chapter develops and expands on the integrated understanding of the dynamics of families' service utilisation that can be drawn from the study findings when situated within a complex-realist theoretical framework. Following this, policy and practice implications are presented before concluding with a brief discussion of the study limitations and directions for future research. As a starting point, however, it is useful to reflect briefly on the methodological orientation of this research.

8.2. Capturing Complexity: Reconstructing Families' Service Use Patterns in Context

The contribution of studies that have harnessed the power of longitudinal administrative data to fundamentally change our understanding of the temporal nature of homelessness among individuals and families should not be understated. At the same time, a core argument presented in Chapters 2 and 4 of this work was that these data are limited in that they can only speak to service *contact* and

not service *experience* in analyses of families' shelter use patterns (Brush *et al.*, 2016). A central tenet of this thesis, therefore, is that relying primarily or only on quantitative insights - with their inherent focus on risk factors and prediction - can lead to the oversimplification of homelessness research evidence (Bassuk, 2007). Moreover, such findings can be overly pathologising since, in many cases, they cannot account "for determinants that operate at levels above and beyond individuals" (Blackman, 2013: 336), though there are some rare exceptions (see, for example, Johnson *et al.*, 2018). By contrast, this work conceptualises families' lives and the distinct trajectories they take through the shelter system as complex; and complexity, by its very nature, challenges "the human tendency to simplify" (Morçöl, 2012: 7). With the explicit aim of writing *context* back into the conversation, this study set out to combine the reach and rigour of administrative data with the depth and nuance of qualitative understanding to explain families' shelter use patterns "in ways that match [their] complexity" (Tunarosa and Glynn, 2016: 5). In so doing, it opens an active dialogue between empiricism and explanation which, when woven together, strengthens the potential theoretical contribution of the findings for homelessness scholarship more broadly.

Situated in a Critical Realist paradigm that validates the 'mixing' of quantitative and qualitative approaches in a single study, this work implemented a sequential (explanatory) mixed methods design. Starting from a position that viewed the description and explanation of complex phenomena as equally fundamental, the research sought first to (quantitatively) capture and then (qualitatively) explain families' distinct shelter use patterns in the Irish context. The rationale for selecting this mixed methods design was not to generalise or confirm findings; rather, it was to *expand* understanding of the contexts and mechanisms *driving* the variation in families' shelter use observed. As such, the quantitative results provided the broader 'picture' in which to locate the qualitative data and also fed directly into the development of the qualitative sampling strategy to inform the selection of theoretically relevant cases for interview. This, in turn, resulted in a qualitative sample that provided rich insights into the processes of change that produced distinct service use patterns over time. Critically, the sampling design also enabled an understanding of complex causation by facilitating a *comparison* of meaningful and verifiable sub-groups of families who, despite operating in contexts where the same kind of mechanisms were at work, experienced different service and housing outcomes (Blackman, 2013; Fitzpatrick, 2005; Pleace, 2005; Williams, 2001).

Perhaps above all else, this study demonstrates that context matters when explaining why some families exit EA relatively quickly and do not return, while others go on to experience prolonged or recurrent shelter stays. Families did not present to services as a blank canvas; rather, they had diverse histories that profoundly shaped the way they viewed and interacted with systems, as well as how systems viewed and interacted with them. Processes, it should be noted, that are not now - nor will they ever be able to be - fully captured by quantitative data or administrative records. By preserving the quality of reflexive individuals acting in their real-world settings, the analysis shows how the relationship between agency, 'choice' and constraint in families' interactions with

homelessness (and other related) systems of intervention can influence their service utilisation in ways that transcend a limited individual versus structure dichotomy. Incorporating the ‘voice’ of families also helped to reconcile the gap between “lives as talked about and lives as lived” (McNaughton, 2006: 150), illustrating what it is actually like to navigate shelter environments and the impact it can have on almost all aspects of families’ lives. While the bulk of previous research could only speculate about what may be affecting short-term, long-term and recurrent shelter stays, this study reveals the power of mixed methods research to produce an holistic understanding that identifies concrete drivers, contexts and mechanisms that are grounded in ‘thick’ descriptions generated by those with the deepest level of expert knowledge: families themselves.

8.3. A Complex-Realist Understanding of Families’ Shelter System Trajectories

This research mobilised a complex-realist explanatory framework that fused the ontology of Critical Realism with complex systems (or complexity) theory to advance understanding of families’ shelter use patterns (Byrne, 1998; Byrne and Uprichard, 2012; Fitzpatrick, 2005; Reed and Harvey, 1992; Williams and Dyer, 2017). As was established in Chapters 3 and 4, a Critical Realist perspective provides an ontological and epistemological position from which the complex and open nature of social, human systems can be theorised and researched (Fitzpatrick, 2005; McNaughton Nicholls, 2009; Sayer, 2000). Complexity theory is a family of theoretical concepts that aligns strongly with the ontological assumptions of Critical Realism (Byrne, 1998), providing a useful conceptual ‘tool-kit’ with which to explain complex phenomena *via* the interaction of stratified system components (Walby, 2007) as well as a “robust framework for understanding their complex interrelationships” (Fitzpatrick, 2012a: 23).

Through the synthesis of these approaches, a complex causal understanding of families’ differing shelter system trajectories emerged as they interacted with the other ‘parts’ of the homelessness service system (at the micro-level) and it’s wider environment (at the macro-level). Figure 12 sets out, diagrammatically, the integrated understanding of the dynamics of family homelessness that can be drawn from the study findings when situated within this framework.

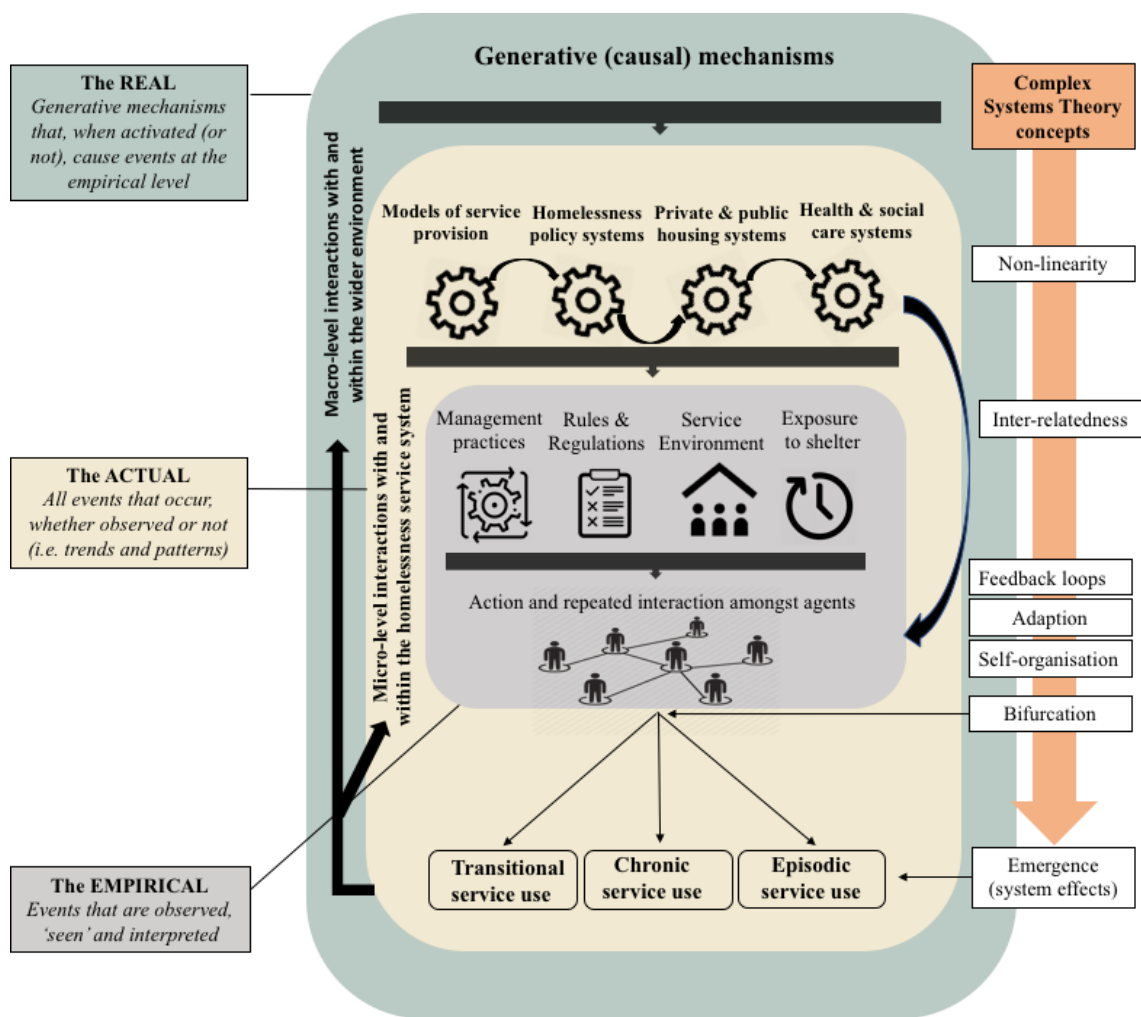


Figure 12: A Complex-Realist Understanding of Families' Shelter System Trajectories

Here, we can theorise that generative (causal) mechanisms, discussed later in this section, influenced how families interacted with systems operating at different levels. From a macro perspective, as discussed in Chapter 6, parents' narratives revealed that their families' distinct shelter system trajectories were strongly influenced by their interrelationships with and within several interconnected systems that constituted the wider environment of EA. This included how they were positioned in, and related to, dominant linear or staircase models of homelessness service provision; the ways in which evolving homelessness and housing policy affected their capacity to access and navigate public and private housing systems; and their experiences with broader health and social care systems throughout their lives. Turning to their micro-level interdependencies with the shelter system specifically, as discussed in Chapter 7, parents' accounts identified their interactions with shelter rules and management practices as well as their exposure to EA service settings as consolidating factors in their experiences of exiting, remaining in and moving *between* emergency accommodation(s) over time.

As a result of these repeated actions and interactions, families' journeys through EA 'bifurcated' over time. More specifically, as discussed in Chapter 5, they branched into distinct patterns of transitional, chronic and episodic service use, representing three corresponding shelter system trajectories: linear, uninterrupted and circuitous. Because these systems-wide regularities appeared to be governed by a process of 'downward causation' - whereby the underlying beliefs and assumptions of the generative mechanisms influenced macro-level systems in ways that affected families' capacity to exit - once formed, they persisted despite changes at the micro-level (Morçöl, 2012). Importantly, in what was a cyclical and compounding process, the findings indicate that the knowledge and implications of these patterns fed back into macro- and micro- level relations through complex feedback loops. This, in turn, appeared to affect policy and service-level interventions - as well as parents' experiences in, and responses to, the shelter system - in different ways so as to *reinforce* their families' trajectories through, out and back into homelessness services over time (Gerstel *et al.*, 1996).

The remainder of this section explicates and contextualises this integrated understanding of the dynamics of families' shelter use by incorporating an overview of the findings into a broader discussion of the theoretical inferences that can be drawn. As Fitzpatrick (2012a: 22) points out, "the challenge with respect to explaining any particular homeless groups or phenomena is to seek identifiable patterns [...] in this complexity". The discussion is therefore structured according to three core findings that emerged from the analysis: 1) conceptualising families' shelter system trajectories as (complex) system effects; 2) explaining change through the generative mechanisms of neoliberalism and pathologising responses; and 3) examining the non-linear relationship between interventions and (unexpected) outcomes in complex systems.

8.3.1. Conceptualising Families' Service Use Patterns as Complex System Effects

There is now general consensus that "whether homelessness is chronic, part of an acute crisis, or intermittent, it must be seen as a process" (Neil and Fopp 1993: 9). Mobilising a complex-realist approach, this thesis extends this conceptualisation by reframing the distinct trajectories that families' take through the homelessness service system as a process of "becoming" that is unpredictable, yet ordered: it is complex (Gleick, 1987: 5). Central to this understanding is that systems-wide patterns of shelter use amongst families arise from the repeated interactions between agents operating with and within homelessness (and other related) systems. While the sections that follow unpack this complex process of *emergence*, it is first necessary to discuss the study findings in relation to determining to what extent patterns of short term, long-term and recurrent service use exist amongst families accessing EA in the Irish case.

While empirical regularities cannot, in and of themselves, establish causality within a Critical Realist framework (Sayer, 2000), this stage of the analysis nevertheless formed an integral

plank of the research. Practically, it helped to provide a robust and representative statistical account of the dynamics of shelter use amongst families accessing Dublin-based EA, quantify the proportion of families experiencing each type of service use pattern and validate the cluster model; it also directly informed the qualitative sampling strategy. Theoretically, however, it provided vital statistical information that helped to identify and describe ‘demi-regularities’ that pointed to ‘traces’ of system effects (trajectories) that are the product of one or more generative mechanisms at work (Byrne, 2011; Byrne and Uprichard, 2012). That is to say, it helped to ascertain whether families’ shelter system trajectories diverged (or bifurcated, to use the language of complexity) to such a degree that an explanation was warranted (Danermark *et al.*, 2002; Lawson, 1997; Zachariadis *et al.* 2013). As Byrne and Uprichard (2012: 112) note, we can explore these trajectories by using techniques of numerical taxonomy, such as cluster analysis, as a “systematic process for establishing similarity and difference”. To this end, following the work of Dennis Culhane and colleagues, a simple yet theoretically informed cluster analysis was performed, revealing three statistically distinct clusters based on families’ shelter stay patterns that fit the dominant typology of service use: ‘transitional’ (low nights, low episodes) ‘chronic’ (high nights, low episodes) and ‘episodic’ (low nights, high episodes).

Although the clusters identified in this study broadly correspond with comparable research on adult and family shelter populations in Ireland, Canada, the US and Denmark (Aubry *et al.*, 2013; Benjaminsen and Andrade, 2015; Culhane *et al.*, 2007; Kneebone *et al.*, 2015; Kuhn and Culhane, 1998; Rabinovitch *et al.*, 2016; Waldron *et al.*, 2019), comparing the proportional share of clusters across studies revealed some important differences. Most striking was that families in Ireland accounted for approximately 13% more of the chronic cluster when compared to other family shelter populations and approximately 20-30% more of the chronic cluster when compared to adult shelter populations. Since little variation was evident when comparing the size of the episodic clusters across studies, it is reasonable to suggest that, in the Irish case, a greater number of families who would have otherwise been categorised as ‘transitional’ were unable to exit EA, thus leading to a greater number of prolonged shelter stays. Critically, contextualising the quantitative descriptions of the clusters with the qualitative insights from families’ accounts of their housing and homelessness histories allowed for a more textured account of the shelter system trajectories experienced by families in each sub-group to emerge than has been reported elsewhere. In what follows, the ‘story’ of each sub-group and their differing service system trajectories is presented¹⁰⁷.

Families in the transitional cluster represented the largest sub-group of shelter users (57%) who *almost always reported stable rental histories and very low, if any, levels of childhood trauma*

¹⁰⁷ The quantitative findings are merged here with qualitative insights that are denoted by *italics*. It is also important to note that while some clear differences between groups are discussed, the narrative data also indicated that, as discussed in Chapter 5, families across all sub-groups had experienced some degree of socio-economic disadvantage as children that continued, to different extents, in adulthood.

and/or complex needs prior to presenting to homelessness services. These families tended to experience one or two short episodes in EA over a period of several months *that were separated by brief (and permitted) overnight stays in the home of a parent or partner before returning to their EA placement.* These families typically experienced very low levels of movement between services before securing a lasting exit *to tenancies that were either short-term and managed by private landlords or permanent and managed by AHBs or the local authority.* The defining feature of this sub-group was that they did not return to EA over the study period. These families therefore experienced a **linear shelter system trajectory**; their homelessness was characterised by a relatively short yet stable shelter stay before securing a speedy and lasting exit to alternative housing.

Families in the chronic cluster represented the second largest sub-group of shelter users (33%), and like their transitional counterparts, *typically, though not always, reported stable rental histories and relatively low, if any, levels of childhood trauma and/or complex needs prior to presenting to homelessness services.* These families also spent very few nights out of shelter, usually logging one or two episodes *that were separated by brief (and permitted) overnight leave to stay in the home of a partner or family member and/or longer-term departures during times where they were admitted to hospital to give birth, for example, before returning to their EA placement.* These families also tended to experience very low levels of movement between services but much longer shelter stays, *with some families residing in one service setting for up to two and a half years.* The defining feature of this sub-group, however, was that they had not been able to secure a lasting exit to alternative housing at any point over the course of their time in EA. These families therefore experienced an **uninterrupted shelter system trajectory**; their homelessness was characterised by a stable yet lengthy period of shelter use that remained unresolved at the time of the study.

Finally, families in the episodic cluster represented the smallest sub-group of shelter users (10%) but, unlike the rest of the sample, *almost always reported high levels of often long-standing residential precarity as well as multiple experiences of childhood trauma and/or complex needs - related to, for example, prior substance use dependencies, domestic violence and chronic health problems (physical and psychological) - prior to presenting to homelessness services.* These families exhibited far higher levels of instability and unpredictability since they not only moved in and out of EA more frequently but, importantly, also moved between a high number of different service settings. *Exits amongst this sub-group fell into two broad categories - precarious and independent - during which time these families were no longer officially 'counted' as homeless. In the case of the former they typically relinquished their EA placement and resided in situations of hidden homelessness (staying with friends or family members) and in the case of the latter, they typically exited to tenancies in the PRS.* However, the defining feature of this sub-group was that *that these exits always broke down*, resulting in their eventual readmittance to EA. Families in this sub-group were thus experiencing a **circuitous shelter system trajectory**; their homelessness was characterised by

multiple and often unpredictable shelter stays punctuated by unsuccessful attempt(s) to exit to alternative living arrangements.

With the caveat that the qualitative descriptors preclude these shelter system trajectories from being generalisable, they nevertheless elaborate Kuhn and Culhane's (1998) original typology and theorising and help to build upon and refine their work to better reflect the experiences of families in this study. Moreover, they support the claim that families likely exhibit a profile that is "theoretically distinct" from single adults (Kuhn and Culhane, 1998: 214). Indeed, these data corroborate the later work of Culhane *et al.* (2007) by demonstrating that a proportionally small but highly vulnerable group of families experience significant instability and unpredictability in services, while families demonstrating transitional and chronic service utilisation - who, when combined, accounted for 90% of families in the dataset - were only differentiated, by and large, by the length of their shelter stays. Conceding that their findings only partially explained families' distinct shelter use patterns, Culhane *et al.* (2007: 26) concluded that, with the exception of some families in the episodic cluster, individual-level characteristics appeared to play a secondary role in determining shelter utilisation patterns, while "program and policy factors" - or rather, 'the system' - on the other hand, had a much stronger influence. Drawing on a complexity-informed analysis that integrates quantitative and qualitative data, this study contends that it is, in fact, the *interaction* of these micro- and macro- level experiences in particular *contexts* that produces differing service and housing outcomes amongst families, as will now be discussed in much more depth.

8.3.2. *Explaining Change: Neoliberalism and Pathologising Responses*

As mentioned earlier, this study synthesised complex systems theory with Critical Realism to enhance the *explanatory* power of the research and to account for social processes in human systems (Mingers, 2014). In order to be considered valid, then, a necessary function of this work was to theorise plausible generative mechanisms that, when activated under certain contexts, could produce the distinct patterns of families' shelter use observed (Morçöl, 2012; Pollitt, 2009). Two mechanism-based explanations were identified through a retroductive process of theory-building *via* the lens of complexity: 1) the marketisation of social housing within the context of a housing crisis; and 2) the construction of family homelessness as an issue of personal (rather than systemic) dysfunction within the context of a service-led response. These broad categories of political ideology in the form of economic and housing structures (Fitzpatrick, 2005, 2012a) and institutional structures (Edgar, 2009) are not presented as 'causes' of families' distinct shelter system trajectories *per se*; rather, they provide a 'best fit' explanation as to why these trajectories *tend* to develop under certain conditions

(and not others) over time¹⁰⁸. This particular theorising of causation is presented as: mechanism + context = outcome. However, I propose that in order to gain fuller understanding of why the patterning of families' service use *diverged* into three distinct groupings, we must also consider how "individual attributes and actions" at the micro level may have caused the activated mechanisms to produce effects such that families' service and housing outcomes varied (Fitzpatrick, 2012a: 22).

8.3.2.1. *The Marketisation of Social Housing ... in a Housing Crisis*

The accounts of participating mothers and fathers revealed that their homelessness service use patterns were structured by a neoliberal logic underpinning policy that positioned them variably within public and private housing markets. Specifically, parents' narratives of exiting, remaining in and returning to EA exposed the State's increasing reliance on the PRS to rehouse families *via* rental subsidies as an integral driver of their distinct shelter system trajectories. More broadly, as documented in Chapter 1, a core feature of the shifting neoliberal policy regime in Ireland has been State roll backs on public housing investment and development, leading to a chronic shortage of social housing supply. As a consequence, the parents in this study who experienced severe and unexpected housing shocks, from which they were not able to recover, were systematically disadvantaged in an already stressed social housing market and time-ordered social housing allocation system. Under such circumstances, families who had been eligible for local authority or AHB housing for several years at the point when they entered EA were more likely to secure a *permanent* tenancy after a short shelter stay where they experienced security of tenure and public housing's strong protective effect concerning housing stability (Johnson *et al.*, 2018). For others, however, access to the PRS *via* a rental subsidies model was the only available route out of the homelessness service system.

As discussed in Chapter 2, there is general consensus in the US that the provision of long-term rental subsidies is one of the strongest predictors of successful exits among formerly homeless families (Bassuk *et al.*, 2014; Gubits *et al.*, 2015; Gubits *et al.*, 2016; Shinn, 2009). Studies also suggests that this particular intervention can result in similar housing outcomes for some, though not all, families who present with high and complex needs (Rog *et al.*, 1995: 512) and can significantly reduce the probability of shelter readmission (Wong *et al.*, 1997). In a more general sense, rental subsidies are also said to facilitate speedier access to housing as well as greater flexibility, mobility and 'choice' with regard to housing options for individuals and families, though such choices are often, in practice, "contingent on cost, vacancy rates and availability, location and amenity" (Blunden and Flanagan, 2021: 15). Critically, however, there is mounting research evidence emphasising the

¹⁰⁸ Whether mechanisms are tangible (in the form of policies) or more abstract (comprising the underlying beliefs, assumptions and intentions of society) it is important to reiterate that since all knowledge is socially determined in a Critical Realist framework, we cannot present them as absolute 'truths'; rather, assuming that a mind-independent reality exists, it follows that our knowledge of mechanisms is always "more or less truth like" (Danermark *et al.*, 2002: 10).

challenges associated with housing individuals and families *via* the provision of tenant-based subsidies in countries such as Australia and Ireland, due to ongoing crises of housing affordability and availability (Blunden and Flanagan, 2021; Hearne and Murphy, 2018; O'Donnell, 2019; Parkinson and Parsell, 2018). In such instances, welfare-dependent families are priced out of a system that also favours tenants who are able to pay the highest market rents and are at lower risk of accruing rental arrears. Moreover, the bottom end of the PRS is often unpredictable regarding security of tenure and, because these properties are geared more towards short-term lets, the quality standards are often poor (O'Sullivan, 2020). This, theoretically at least, could also lead to the "concentration of the poorest and neediest groups in the least attractive neighbourhoods" (Fitzpatrick and Pawson, 2007: 176)

In this study, even those who had exited relatively quickly *via* HHAP described their search for housing as a period of acute stress and uncertainty. What differentiated the experiences of these families from their chronic counterparts, however, was what they frequently described as *sheer luck*; that is, being in the right place at the right time (Blunden and Flanagan, 2021). Their accounts also revealed several "protective factors" (Fitzpatrick, 2005: 15) that mitigated the constraining effects of economic and housing structures, including access to informal resources and intensive housing assistance provided by keyworkers who directly contacted landlords to 'vouch' for families and the HHAP scheme on their behalf. What differentiated these families from episodic service users who had exited *via* the use of rental subsidies, on the other hand, was higher quality rental properties and an absence of vulnerabilities related to, for example, mental ill-health and domestic violence. In cases where such complexities *were* present, families were positioned far more precariously "in a rental market which functions by maximising returns and managing perceived risk to the landlord" (Blunden and Flanagan, 2021: 16) which, for a number, resulted in repeated shelter stays (O'Donnell, 2019). This problematises the use of rental subsidies for re-housing and provides strong evidence that the private market will not be able to provide a durable solution for *all* families (Blunden and Flanagan, 2021; De Decker, 2002; Parkinson and Parsell, 2018: 51). Critically, however, this study goes further by demonstrating that the positioning of the PRS as the primary or only route out of EA was a key driver of chronic and episodic patterns of service use over time.

The findings therefore suggest that while short-term service use was influenced by happenstance and the presence of various protective mechanisms that might leverage their chances with private landlords, long-term and recurrent homelessness was driven primarily by what O'Flaherty (2004: 12) calls a "conjunction of bad circumstances"; or, more specifically, "having the wrong kind of personal characteristics in the wrong kind of housing market" (see also Curtis *et al.*, 2013; Johnson *et al.*, 2018). In all cases, then, a major conclusion that can be drawn is that it was not families' personal traits or circumstances in and of themselves that affected their shelter system trajectories and capacity to exit, but rather *the interaction* between their individual characteristics *and* market conditions that occurred *within* the broader social context created by policies moving

towards a socialised private rental model. From this perspective, it is reasonable to theorise that if this mechanism was not activated - for example, in contexts where public and private housing markets were functioning effectively - then a vast majority of those experiencing chronic and episodic service use patterns in the Irish case would be able to secure a lasting exit from EA, with very small numbers experiencing repeat shelter stays. The accounts of parents in this study therefore demonstrate how the provision of social housing through market mechanisms, an approach that has proven successful elsewhere, has perhaps “been inconsistently implemented in different contexts” (Parkinson and Parsell, 2018: 47).

8.3.2.2. *The Construction of Homelessness as Pathology ... in a Service-led Response*

The ways in which a policy shift towards neoliberalism enables or constrains families’ attempts to access public and private housing markets explains, to a large extent, why families could or could not exit EA in a timely manner and why some families, but not others, returned to shelter. However, it does not explain the phenomenon of intermittent EA ‘abandonment’ (McMordie, 2020) and frequent movement *between* service settings; two features that were found to be unique among the study’s episodic service users and served to shape and reinforce their pathways through, out and back into EA. In other words, the marketisation of social housing does not fully account for why (and how) the service and housing outcomes of these families bifurcated into a shelter system trajectory that was qualitatively distinct from those experiencing chronic and transitional patterns of service use. Rather, the accounts of families in this sub-group indicated that their movements in and out of services were also strongly influenced by their differing positions in, and responses to, prevailing linear or staircase models of service provision. The staircasing of services is an approach that has remained a core, if unarticulated, plank of Irish homelessness policy that is strongly connected to dominant political discourse that converge on individualistic explanations for homelessness on the one hand (O’Sullivan 2020) and the “enduring popularity” of a shelter-led response, on the other (O’Sullivan, 2017: 207)¹⁰⁹.

In this way, the shelter system in Ireland, as elsewhere, seems to have evolved with distinct functions which Parsell (2018: 116) contends, are “predicated on assumptions of homeless people as

¹⁰⁹ The dominance of individualistic explanations for homelessness in policy circles in Ireland is evidenced by the fact that those experiencing homelessness have frequently found themselves at the centre of national ‘blame games’ proffered by high-ranking Government representatives (O’Sullivan, 2020). For example, in 2018, the Chair of the Housing Agency reported to the Parliamentary Housing Committee that many families are ‘gaming the system’ to receive expedited social housing while, in 2019, the Chief Executive of DCC described homelessness services as “a magnet” (Murphy, 2019: 259). Moreover, the Director of the DRHE stated the following during a meeting of the Joint Policing Committee that took place the same year: “let’s be under no illusion here, when someone becomes homeless it doesn’t happen overnight, it probably takes years of bad behaviour, or behaviour that isn’t the behaviour of you and me” (FEANTSA, 2019: 40). It has been argued, therefore, that the introduction of family hubs represents the most recent iteration of an approach that merges pathologising discourse and policy since it seems a further “attempt to construct the issue as one of dysfunctional families rather than of a dysfunctional market” (O’Sullivan, 2017: 208).

not only different but also deficient”. Thus, the purpose of services is to make individuals and families ‘housing ready’; that is, to monitor and/or ‘fix’ them (*via* training and treatment) so that they can be successfully re-integrated back into mainstream society. Despite the policy rhetoric extolling the virtues of housing-led approaches to address homelessness detailed in Chapter 1, the accounts of almost all parents in this study were replete with references to service norms that appeared to be underpinned by a linear or treatment-first philosophy (Sahlin, 2005). Within this framework, TEA - including B&Bs with little-to-no support - represents what Busch-Geertsena and Sahlin (2007: 78) call the “lowest rung” in a staircase “system of sanctions”, which serves to “intimidate or motivate residents elsewhere to behave where they are”. In STA and PEA, however, this philosophy appeared to function as rule-bounded and authoritarian environments where families were confronted with a script about how they *ought* to ‘be’ and ‘behave’ in order to continue availing of services.

Available evidence on adult shelter populations indicates that this kind of service infrastructure invariably creates a hierarchy that is based on an individual’s ability to adhere (or not) to service rules and protocols. Some have argued, for instance, that interventionist models broadly divide shelter users into those *without* (or *who have recovered from*) complex needs who ‘cooperate’ with programme requirements and those *with* complex needs who become entrenched in, or excluded from, homelessness services because they are unwilling or unable to ‘comply’ with service standards (Benjaminsen, 2016; Kuhn and Culhane, 1998; Mackie *et al.*, 2017; McMordie, 2020). In this study, however, the continuum of care approach appeared to stratify families into three distinct groups that aligned strongly with their patterns of transitional, chronic and episodic service use, respectively, including: 1) those who ‘fit’ service expectations and were able to secure a public or private tenancy relatively quickly; 2) those who ‘fit’ service expectations but were unable to exit due to structural forces and thus felt “let down despite good conduct and patience” (Sahlin, 2005: 125); and 3) those who did *not* ‘fit’ service expectations and, as a consequence, demonstrated considerable movement in and out of, as well as between, service settings.

Yet an important departure from prior research is that, for families, the presence or absence of complex needs was not found to be necessary and sufficient to affect their shelter system trajectories such that they were unable to meet or ‘live up to’ service requirements¹¹⁰. Rather, a core finding to emerge from Chapter 6 was that the authoritarian conditions created by the staircasing of services appeared to systematically disadvantage those who may be experiencing the long-lasting impacts of *complex trauma* (Bassuk, 2007; Guarino and Bassuk, 2010; Hopper *et al.*, 2010; Padgett

¹¹⁰ There were, for instance, a small number of parents in the transitional and chronic sub-groups who demonstrated acute physical and/or mental health problems but who did not experience disrupted or recurrent shelter stays. Notably, similar findings were reported by Culhane *et al.* (2007: 20) who stated that although episodic service use was associated with intensive service needs, “relatively few of the families with such barriers [were] among the episodic cluster”. In fact, most households with intensive service needs were found among the transitional cluster, although the difference between the transitional and chronic sub-groups was not large.

et al., 2016b); that is, unresolved or ongoing trauma owing to cumulative adversities across the life course. Unlike other families in the sample, the severity, frequency and pervasiveness of traumatic exposures among those in the episodic sub-group - which almost always stemmed from a complex family background and history of unmet need - appeared to have profoundly impacted how they perceived, interacted with and responded to EA environments (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2013; Maguire, 2009). This was most evident in their narratives of trying to “manage their traumatic reactions” by seeking a sense of ‘control’ over their immediate surroundings in highly prescriptive, paternalistic and regimented service settings (FEANTSA, 2017: 3).

From this perspective, ‘resistance’ to shelter rules, lack of ‘engagement’ with service providers and instances of hostel ‘abandonment’ are conceptualised as “a rational and reasoned response” to what were considered to be unsafe, intolerable and potentially retraumatising spaces (McMordie, 2020: 3). Yet, within a service system underpinned by a staircase framework, these parents - in comparison to their transitional and chronic counterparts - were viewed as ‘failures’; their ‘difficult behaviours’ and lack of progress serving as confirmation to service professionals across the shelter system as a whole that “they were not capable of independent living and would not have managed in an ordinary home *without* special support and supervision [emphasis in original]” (Sahlin, 2005: 129). This arguably legitimised paradoxical practices whereby families with demonstrably higher levels of support need were more likely to experience disrupted shelter stays, a lack of continuity in care and to be excluded from the only systems of intervention capable of meeting their needs for shelter and housing assistance (Culhane *et al.*, 2007; Kuhn and Culhane, 1998; Weinreb and Rossi, 1995)

As discussed in Chapter 4, a key function of Critical Realist research is to not only identify mechanisms but to also examine how mechanisms *counteract* or *reinforce* each other so that the outcome varies. What this analysis suggests, then, is that in addition to the marketisation of social housing, families’ trajectories through EA were further consolidated by prevailing political discourse on the causes of homelessness that appears to have contributed to the development of a pathologising shelter-led response that manifests as an interventionist service system. As a consequence, *certain* families - by virtue of how their traumatic experiences have shaped their lives - were disadvantaged more so than others under the conditions created therein. Because of this, their ‘deep exclusion’ and inability to carve a route out of EA was perpetuated and compounded by their interactions with homelessness services, rather than addressed by them (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2013)¹¹¹. Again, it is therefore reasonable to theorise that if this mechanism was not activated - for example, in contexts where homelessness is effectively addressed *via* a housing-led or Housing First response - then very many of those exhibiting episodic service use patterns in the Irish case would *not* experience acute

¹¹¹ It is perhaps worth noting that critics of models underpinned by a staircase of transition approach claim that it typically takes a single adult approximately 10 years to progress to independent housing (FEANTSA, 2018).

disruptions to critical care and residential stability, which, in turn, could help them to secure and maintain a speedier and more durable exit from homelessness.

8.3.3. *Good Intentions ≠ Good Interventions: Complexity and Unexpected Consequences*

The preceding discussion proposed that generative mechanisms linked to neoliberalism and pathologising responses influenced families' interactions with macro-level systems in different ways based on their individual circumstances. Moreover, when activated, the data indicate that these structural and institutional forces were the most significant drivers (in terms of scale) affecting families' service use patterns in this study; in other words, if these mechanisms did not exist then it is likely that families' patterns of EA use would not appear as they do in the Irish context. Critically, however, the findings also point to the presence of intricate feedback loops occurring at the *micro*-level which, inadvertently or not, *reinforced* families' distinct shelter system trajectories. Feedback loops, where a system's output is returned as input, are a core feature of complex systems and are often the cause of 'non-linear dynamics'; that is, when small changes result in dramatically varying outcomes (Byrne, 1998; Fitzpatrick, 2005). This is because the open nature of social systems means that agents are constantly interacting with each other, and their environment, in unpredictable ways (Morçöl, 2012). As discussed in Chapter 3, well intentioned interventions that seek to protect or control without due regard for *context* can, therefore, lead to unintended consequences that are often counter-productive (Chapman, 2004; Fish and Hardy, 2015).

Drawing on this study's findings, a good example of this ongoing hermeneutical cycle between 'behaviour', policy development and how the interplay of the two can result in paradoxical outcomes, can be found in the Irish case. In a recently published article that tested Kuhn and Culhane's (1998) service use typology on a population of Dublin-based shelter users (including single adults and adults with children), Waldron *et al.* (2019) suggested that the presence of prolonged and uninterrupted (chronic) stays in EA were likely related to the increased number of families presenting as homeless. In the absence of qualitative data, the authors could only speculate that, due to an administrative function of HHAP that sees recipients moved to the social housing 'transfer list', a number of families may have been "incentivised [...] to voluntarily remain within homeless services rather than have their social housing application status changed" (Waldron *et al.*, 2019: 148). In response to claims and observations of this kind, DCC removed families' priority status for social housing provision and increased allocations to those on the transfer list in an effort to 'encourage' families to pursue housing *via* rental subsidies and to deter long periods spent in EA in order to receive a social housing tenancy (Waldron *et al.*, 2019)¹¹².

¹¹² It is worth noting that while data were not available on HHAP tenancies, specifically, figures indicate that just one quarter of *all* HAP tenancies closed by Q2 in 2019 (after an unspecified length of time) were transfers into social housing (23%), with the remaining tenancies being terminated on a 'tenant-led' (34%) or 'landlord-led' (29%) basis or because of compliance issues (14%) (Kilkenny, 2019).

Yet, the accounts of those experiencing chronic service use patterns in this study revealed that despite viewing HHAP as a less favourable route out of EA than local authority housing, the vast majority actively (and persistently) sought HHAP tenancy agreements following their initial entry to homelessness services. Although all of these parents indicated that they would have been willing, ready and able to maintain independent housing, their narratives point to formidable experiences of structural exclusion in the PRS - compounded by the limited capacity of supports in EA to mitigate these barriers - that prevented them from securing a timely exit. Critically, the *longer* these families interacted with shelter settings as they remained marooned there due to larger market forces, the more they began to feel despondent about their situations. As Fitzpatrick (2012a: 22) points out, “a relatively small change in complex relationships (such as deterioration in mental health), can have dramatic consequences”; and indeed, in this instance, this led several to reconsider their perspectives on HHAP as a viable route out of homelessness.

More specifically, the accounts of those in the chronic sub-group revealed that service providers frequently communicated to them that HHAP was ‘the only way out’ of EA. However, since these parents were already trying to secure a private rental agreement without success, this kind of rhetoric served to compound their sense of hopelessness and provoke internalised feelings of self-blame and failure, which, in turn, led to significant deteriorations in their mental health and motivation to ‘keep going’. Others explained that they had been residing in EA for so long due to repeated rejections by private landlords that they had seen or heard of several families who had either exited *via* HHAP but had not since been offered an allocation from the social housing transfer list after a number of years or, alternatively, had *returned* to EA with their children due to the insecurity of tenure associated with the PRS. As such, a number of these parents recounted feelings of confusion and helplessness which some sought to resolve by ‘giving up’ on the scheme.

What all of this suggests is that chronic service use among families was first and foremost driven by adverse public and private housing market conditions, with parents’ negative perceptions of HHAP as well as their expectations of, or preferences for, a permanent social housing tenancy playing much smaller and, importantly, contingent secondary roles that only developed and crystallised as their time in EA endured. These findings thus make a strong case for arguing that, in the current landscape, the removal of families’ priority status for social housing and increased allocations to those on the transfer list - without macro-level changes to address poorly functioning public and private housing systems - will have little-to-no effect on reducing systems-wide patterns of chronic shelter and could, in fact, exacerbate blockages in EA. Perhaps equally significantly, they also demonstrate the critical importance of integrating administrative and quantitative data (outcomes) with in-depth qualitative insights (process) to mitigate “the risk of mis-directing policy action to a less effective or ineffective [...] intervention” (Blackman, 2013: 336).

Adopting a complex-realist approach also exposed the ways in which the shelter system itself can unwittingly reinforce patterns of transitional, episodic and chronic service use. Non-linear

dynamics and self-organising behaviour - that is, where patterns form as agents interact and *adapt* to changes in their environment - also emerged strongly from parents' accounts. Among those experiencing transitional patterns of service use, for example, several revealed that in their haste to exit shelter environments that appeared to be underpinned by a punitive logic designed to motivate families "to work for other solutions" (Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin, 2007: 78), they had exited to properties that proved to be untenable. For these families, this exacerbated "a cycle of unsatisfactory housing situations" (Fisher *et al.*, 2014: 16) rather than providing a sustainable solution to their homelessness. Moreover, this self-organising behaviour is likely to be further reinforced (or amplified, to use the language of complexity) by positive feedback loops in that, theoretically, the more uncomfortable EA is designed to be, the more this unintended consequence will occur.

However, perhaps the most striking findings emerged from the accounts of those who had *not* been able to exit these EA service settings and, as a consequence, had remained there for many months and even years. In these cases, parents' continued interactions with the practices, features and systems of rules embedded in EA, prevented them from mobilising effective coping and survival strategies (whether this was being able to draw on informal resources for childcare support to facilitate a return to work, being able to feel in control of their environment or the ability to have a family member come over to visit or help). In this way, the authority exerted over families - which was presumably designed to ensure safety, protection and efficiency for all involved - inadvertently depleted the very resources that could have helped parents to resolve their homelessness. For most, this meant a long-term loss of autonomy across almost all aspects of their lives, including their housing futures. And this, paradoxically, resulted in their dependence on the system being reinforced and their capacity to exit being depleted over time.

What the findings of this study demonstrate, then, was that when EA was used frequently or on a long-term basis it resembled, in practice, what Gerstel *et al.* (1996) called the 'therapeutic incarceration' of homeless families. In the context of limited housing options, EA did little more than warehouse families in this study; attempting to 'monitor' and/or 'train' them, while being unable to address their need for a home. When a family did not present with any need for service-intensive treatment, homelessness services were therefore, at best, a queuing system for public or private housing (Culhane *et al.*, 2007) and at worst, had the opposite effect of institutionalisation, stigmatisation and exclusion as families adapted to, and co-evolved with, their environment over time (Busch-Geertsema and Sahlin, 2007; Gerstel *et al.*, 1996; Keenan *et al.*, 2020; Stark, 1994). Yet, as Bramley and Fitzpatrick (2018: 18) point out, this is precisely the level of complexity that "a critical realist causal interpretation of homelessness would lead us to expect" and, perhaps more fundamentally, it provides compelling evidence, if more were needed, that we need to focus on changing "inequitable systems" rather than changing the people within them (Parsell, 2017: 150).

It has been argued that understanding and learning from these kinds of unintended system effects is the key to formulating policy and service-level interventions that achieve their desired

outcomes without denying human sense-making and individual agency (Blackman, 2013). From this perspective, policy processes are also conceptualised as dynamic and unpredictable; new problems are created as others are solved and, thus, there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to addressing social problems (Morçöl, 2012). Assumptions of predictability are therefore rejected by explicit acknowledgment that even small changes can produce dramatic (unexpected) results. While generalisable laws cannot be extracted from such conclusions, they can nevertheless “enable us to discover what works in particular *contexts* [emphasis added]” (McDermot, 2014: 186). Put differently, we can discover ‘leverage points’ with which to more accurately inform homelessness policy and service provision (Byrne and Uprichard, 2012).

8.4. Complex Problems, Simple Solutions? Policy and Practice Implications

The preceding sections have gone some ways towards conceptualising families’ shelter system trajectories as complex phenomena while also highlighting the problems that arise when policy makers do not “recognise the complex nature of their policy environments” (Cairney, 2012: 348). Because of this, one might suggest that we are, therefore, “quite rightly uncertain how to respond” (Fish and Hardy, 2015: S101). Yet, there is general consensus that the solutions for homelessness are in fact rather simplistic in nature since they ultimately hinge on the provision of accommodation that is affordable and accessible. As Parsell (2018: 116) puts it, “the overwhelming majority of the [homelessness] service system would be unnecessary if we provided people with housing”. Indeed, this study’s findings indicate that almost all families would have success in moving directly to independent housing, with support provided in accordance with their needs. From this perspective, the important question in homelessness policy-relevant research becomes: “what type of housing is required” (O’Sullivan, 2020: 106). As a first attempt in the Irish context to examine families’ shelter system trajectories using a mixed methods approach, this section presents a number of key implications for policy and practice arising from the study.

In keeping with international studies, this research found little evidence to suggest that longer-shelter stays provided any kind of ‘treatment’ effect with respect to housing outcomes (Shinn *et al.*, 2005). On the contrary, those who secured a relatively quick exit were significantly advantaged in this respect due to their minimal exposure to EA service settings. Those who experienced prolonged or repeated shelter stays in STA, PEA or TEA, on the other hand, confronted a complex array of challenges, risks and constraints that negatively impacted their health and well-being and served to *reinforce* patterns of chronic and episodic service use over time. The findings thus strengthen a long-standing and compelling research base on the limitations of shelter system infrastructure to address individual and family homelessness and confirm the need for an holistic

housing-led strategy (*vis-à-vis* the Finnish model)¹¹³ that ensures that families' experiences of homelessness are "rare, short-lived and non-recurrent" (Allen *et al.*, 2020: 159). A central message arising from this study's findings, then, is the critical importance of rapid-rehousing solutions and Housing First approaches that are offered without preconditions to encourage speedy exits from the shelter system (Gubits *et al.*, 2016; Gubits *et al.*, 2018; Padgett *et al.*, 2016a). Supporting families to transition quickly from homelessness service settings must, therefore, be a policy imperative, though it is acknowledged that this "should not come at the expense of early intervention and prevention programmes" (Johnson, 2012: 187). Equally, families must be provided with *options* so that they are given the choices, dignity and support that they need (Shinn and Khadduri, 2020). The participating parents were clearly motivated and determined to seek a route out of EA, particularly at the point of entry, suggesting that efforts directed at enabling families to transition to housing at the earliest possible juncture will be effective.

While HHAP is one such intervention that, on paper at least, sits reasonably well within a housing-led approach, it's interaction with broader private housing markets - as discussed in the previous section - led to differing housing outcomes amongst the families in this study. In particular, families categorised as chronic and episodic service users - who accounted for some 43% of the FRPs in this study's dataset - experienced high levels of structural exclusion and instability in a high-cost and competitive rental market that is largely premised on the needs and rights of landlords to manage risk. As Johnson *et al.* (2018: 1089) point out, effective policies to reduce homelessness among individuals and families must also address the barriers that prevent them from exiting. For this reason, the provision of HHAP, to those who wish to reside in the PRS, *must* be paired with tenancy protections. This should include, for example, mechanisms that improve the standards at the 'lower end' of the PRS, enhance security of tenure and ensure stability in rent levels to help families access the PRS and also prevent them from falling back into EA (O'Sullivan, 2020).

Rental subsidies represent one exit route; however, if left unregulated, this study's findings show that private markets will be unable to provide longer-term housing solutions for more families than might have been expected, thus reaffirming "the centrality of housing policy in preventing and addressing this effect" (O'Donnell, 2019: 21). Moreover, as Shinn and Khadduri (2020: 118) remind us, there is also no randomised study, as of yet, which suggests that rental subsidies offer families the same "sort of radiating benefits" that more permanent tenancies provide. To this end, the large-scale provision of State-funded tenancies managed by both local authorities and AHBs must be prioritised as part of an overall strategy to rehouse families in which they are also restored to a

¹¹³ 'Housing-led' as referred to here, is a broad philosophy that takes the position that housing is a human right, meaning that responses to homelessness should *start* with a house and that those experiencing homelessness should have their agency and preferences respected (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2010). Housing First, on the other hand, is a particular housing programme that has a clearly defined role - to support long-term homeless people with complex needs - and can be "bolted onto an existing housing and homelessness system" (Allen *et al.*, 2020: 165).

“‘wider affordability role’, rather than ‘a safety net’ or ‘ambulance role’” (O’Sullivan, 2020: 115). The accounts of parents who had been allocated a social housing tenancy clearly demonstrate that this intervention, by virtue of the security of tenure it provided, was both necessary and sufficient for them to exit and, importantly, not return to shelter. Moreover, the transformative impact that this housing option offered families in terms of enabling them to re-establish their lives and relationships should not be understated. Critically, however, a smaller number of parents residing in AHB-managed tenancies, in particular, indicated that they had experienced difficulties *in-housing* despite receiving SLÍ support. This was frequently linked to a lack of community integration that was exacerbated by limited access to family or informal supports and, in the case of two migrant women, experiences of racism and intimidation in their local neighbourhoods.

These accounts point to the importance of *only* providing housing offers in safe and appropriate properties/locations and, where possible, in areas that are in close proximity to families’ social support systems to ensure that they do not remain isolated in permanent housing (Bassuk and Gellar, 2006), though it is acknowledged that some “trade-off between need and choice is [often] inescapable within social housing policy” (Fitzpatrick and Pawson, 2007:177). The accounts also expose a policy gap related to a lack of protective mechanisms to ensure that families can be transferred *quickly* to an alternative property in situations where their safety and well-being is seriously compromised. Insofar as it has been argued that housing interventions should not be expected to “solve all other problems afflicting low-income families” (Shinn *et al.*, 2005: 10), these findings, at the very least, should challenge us to consider the question of what actually *counts* as a successful exit (Hopper, 2003). While there is little doubt that access to housing is crucial to facilitate families’ exits from EA and to ensuring a measurable reduction in homelessness more broadly, these parents’ experiences provide a cautionary reminder to policy-makers who believe “that cases should be closed once housing is procured”; rather, this study’s data indicate that we need to “achieve both housing retention *and* community reintegration as core outcomes [emphasis added]” (Chamberlain and Johnson, 2018: 14-15). If current homelessness policy emphasis continues to be based on the *quantity* of exits rather than *quality* of exits in both public and private housing, then we arguably run the risk of neglecting to fully understand the “types of models implemented and the institutional changes required to ensure their effectiveness over time” (Parkinson and Parsell, 2018: 52).

Merging the insights gleaned from the quantitative and qualitative data, this study suggests that the interventions discussed above (with suggested adjustments) would facilitate the successful re-housing of up to 90% of families accessing EA in the Dublin region; that is, all those categorised as experiencing transitional (57%) and chronic (33%) service use patterns in the dataset. This assertion is bolstered by a significant evidence base that indicates that families who receive long-term subsidised housing are less likely to return to shelter (Shinn and Khadduri, 2020). Yet, in keeping with international research, this work found evidence of a proportionally small but highly vulnerable group (accounting for 10% of service users) for whom rehousing *via* a dedicated Housing

First programme (in the North American sense) may be another effective option, particularly in cases where the SLÍ scheme may not be sufficient to help them achieve tenancy sustainment. Housing First, which provides early access to housing in conjunction with intensive supports as needed, is becoming central to strategic responses to homelessness in Europe, Australia and the US and can play an important role in reducing long-term and recurrent homelessness among those with complex needs or who are multiply excluded as part of an integrated strategy (Benjaminsen, 2013; Bretherton and Pleace, 2015; Busch-Geertsema, 2013; Kertesz and Johnson, 2017; Tsemberis, 2010)¹¹⁴. Compared to Housing First for single adults, the research base on Housing First for families, specifically, is not well developed, though there is emerging evidence to suggest that it shows similar success rates for parents with accompanying children (Collins *et al.*, 2019). However, even among those enrolled in such services, there appears to be a very small number of families for whom “‘progress’ [...] may evolve in a circular and/or iterative, rather than linear fashion”, and it is this group, in particular, that requires further study (Collins *et al.*, 2019: 43-44).

Finally, this research exposed the shortcomings of the linear staircase approach to service provision which “attributes success to the system and failure to its clients” by sustaining “a system of control” that implies individual deficiencies, perpetuates dependence and undermines families’ autonomy and wellbeing (Sahlin, 2007: 129-130). Some have argued that this kind of service infrastructure has come to symbolise our “poverty of ambition” when it comes to responding to homelessness (Parsell, 2019: 94). This is true; however, it is worth noting that even with the goal of achieving a ‘functional zero’ in relation to homelessness, EA has a place in the overall system when it is used for its intended purpose: providing immediate access to *temporary* accommodation prior to an individual or family being rehoused. It is crucial, then, that homelessness services are (re)designed and operationalised such that, at the very least, they do not cause any further harm.

This would require several service-level developments that should not get lost in the broader policy debates, including: 1) a cultural shift towards valuing consumer preference, acknowledging the primacy of structural forces in the production of homelessness and starting from a position that views *all* people as having the competencies required to sustain a tenancy, with the right support; 2) re-directing attention towards, and standardising the provision of, intensive housing assistance to access the PRS as opposed to a ‘hands-off’ or ‘do it yourself’ approach; 3) a move away from ‘single-site’ (congregate) residential facilities towards ‘scatter-site’ own-door private accommodation in self-contained apartments or houses; and 4) a progression from simply being trauma ‘aware’ to being

¹¹⁴ Within the Housing First approach, as originally developed by Sam Tsemberis (2010), housing is viewed as a human right, not a privilege that must be earned through demonstrating ‘housing readiness’. Other core tenets include consumer preference (whereby residents are deemed the best judge of the type of sequence of services they need) and the separation of housing from services (meaning that service providers do not also have to enforce strict programme rules as would be the case in interventionist congregate facilities). All of this would help to develop a model of service provision that is more capable of providing trauma informed care, and as such, would arguably be an appropriate intervention for those experiencing complex trauma (Bassuk, 2007; FEANTSA, 2017; Guarino and Bassuk, 2010; Hopper *et al.*, 2010).

trauma *informed*. Based on this study's findings, this would likely help to develop a service system that would assist more families to secure a speedy exit by privileging autonomy, predictability and families' right to meaningfully participate in society, while also minimising stigma, long-term exposure to risk and re-traumatisation.

8.5. Study Limitations and Directions for Future Research

In all studies, researcher decisions invariably support and constrain the conclusions derived and the implications that can be drawn (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Throughout this work I have alluded to numerous limitations that flow from the methodological choices made over the course of this thesis. Several merit further attention here. First, both in the quantitative and qualitative phases, the homelessness service system trajectories studied were not 'complete' in the true sense of the word. For example, families may have gone (or will go) on to experience longer or repeated episodes in EA over time. Such issues are not uncommon in studies adopting a longitudinal perspective of this kind since it would be arguably impossible to measure homelessness service contact over the entire life course of multiple individuals (Anderson, 2001; Walker and Leisering, 1998). However, future research should endeavour to track families over a lengthier observation period in administrative data systems. Ideally, this dataset would be used as a sampling frame to which a stratified random sampling procedure - such as the one implemented in the Journeys Home study (see Wooden *et al.*, 2012) - could be applied to select (qualitative) cases for interview. Alternatively, if this was not possible, there would also be value in recruiting a larger sample of 'first-time homeless' families who were *prospectively* followed and re-interviewed over a number of years (Rog *et al.*, 2007)¹¹⁵.

Second, the quantitative phase of the research was limited, to a great extent, by the structure and operationalisation of the administrative data system from which the data were drawn. As mentioned in Chapter 4, PASS does not include data on a number of individuals who are defined as 'homeless' according to ETHOS, including: those in homelessness services that are not publicly funded; those living in Direct Provision; those residing in situations of hidden homelessness or sleeping rough; and those accommodated in refuges or domestic violence services (O'Sullivan, 2020), though it is worth noting that of the families interviewed, many had spent time in at least one of these living situations prior to, alongside, or after their first contact with EA. It is for this reason that this study bases its analysis solely on the patterning of State-funded *emergency accommodation*

¹¹⁵ For the purposes of this study, a prospective longitudinal design during the qualitative phase was initially considered but ultimately rejected. This was due to: 1) the time-sensitive nature of the study, which may have precluded an observation period that was sufficient to capture significant change; and 2) the fact that it could have led to critical complications since, theoretically at least, it could have emerged during follow-up that no families had been able to exit homelessness services, thus excluding the perspectives of those experiencing episodic or transitional homelessness service use. By developing a purposive stratified sampling strategy - which involved recruiting families according to the frequency and duration of their contact with EA - a diverse yet systematically selected sample was generated which facilitated a thorough investigation of the temporal dimensions of homelessness *via* retrospective accounts.

usage (as opposed to the dynamics of family homelessness more broadly). As such, it makes no claims concerning the entire population of families experiencing various forms of homelessness and housing instability in the Dublin region since those who did not access EA were unable to be included in the analysis. Future research should be directed towards establishing, maintaining and utilising more inclusive administrative systems to capture longitudinal data on homelessness in Ireland.

As Wong (1997) points out, in quantitative studies that focus only on service-using populations, ‘exits’ are restricted to discharges from shelter only and therefore may exaggerate the role of shelter policy in driving exit patterns. Rossi (1994: 358) makes a similar point, suggesting that since the existing operational definition of a ‘homeless family’ in many jurisdictions is literally a family residing in homelessness services, our understanding of family homelessness is influenced to a great extent “by shelter policies concerning admissions and lengths of stay”. That is to say, what is known about patterns of family homelessness through empirical research is, at least in part, “a ‘construction’ of the shelter system” (Rossi, 1994: 358). While this is an important consideration, this study’s inclusion of qualitative data goes some ways towards circumventing this challenge. This is because it facilitated an analysis of families’ residential patterns *outside* of their contact with shelter as well as their interactions with the *wider environment* of the homelessness service system such that their shelter trajectories varied, though it is acknowledged that the results are not generalisable in the traditional sense. Furthermore, as long as EA remains a significant plank of homelessness responses, an understanding of how the system itself can impact on families’ capacity to exit in a timely manner is arguably critical, particularly since, as Kuhn and Culhane (1998: 230) point out, the shelter stay is also “a time when the homeless can be reached”.

In a similar vein, a common limitation of the use of administrative data for research purposes is that one has to ‘make do’ with what they have (or what they are given) rather than generating tailored data that includes specific variables of conceptual interest to address a study’s research question(s) (Connelly *et al.*, 2016; Culhane, 2016). In the case of this work, for example, the inclusion of variables related to the presence or level of complex needs (related to mental ill-health and substance use), evidence of disability and child welfare-involvement would have enabled a useful comparative analysis with similar studies of families’ patterns of homelessness service utilisation in differing jurisdictions (such as Culhane *et al.*, 2007). At the time this study was undertaken, PASS did not systematically collect these data and, for this reason, they could not be included in the quantitative analysis; however, as was shown, these experiences were nevertheless captured and explored qualitatively as they emerged strongly from the study’s in-depth interviews with parents. Establishing robust and anonymised data linkage mechanisms between homelessness administrative systems and those related to housing, health, mental health, justice and State care, for example, should be prioritised and made accessible to researchers to provide “important ‘real time’ insights into the flows in and out of key institutional systems” (Johnson, 2019: 52).

Although the notion of prediction, specifically, was problematised within this study's complex-realist theoretical framework, some interesting patterns of association were found amongst the variables that *were* available that could be explored in future studies. For example, episodic service users were more likely than the other two sub-groups to be born in countries outside of the EU, have Black or Traveller ethnicity, have large families, be headed by two parents and be initially placed in TEA. Transitional and chronic service users, on the other hand, demonstrated similarities across several metrics as they were more likely than episodic service users to have White ethnicity, small families and be single parents; however, they also differed in that transitional service users were the most likely to be born in countries within the EU and chronic service users were the most likely to be Irish-born. Of note also is that chronic and episodic service users were equally likely to be initially placed in STA, while transitional service users were the most likely to be initially placed in PEA. Further qualitative research should be undertaken to examine these relationships in more depth to better understand the experiences and service use patterns of migrants, ethnic minority groups and different family types as well as how the nature of EA in which a family is placed may or may not impact on their shelter system trajectory.

Finally, this study's findings are based on data from the Dublin region and cannot, therefore, be assumed to be generalisable either to the rest of the Ireland (particularly smaller cities and towns) or to other jurisdictions (particularly those with differing welfare, housing and homelessness systems). Nevertheless, since relatively similar sub-groups and corresponding demographic profiles have been, and continue to be, found across the developed world, it is reasonable to suggest that comparable service system trajectories among families may well occur in other countries. To this end, rigorous comparative studies of this kind may be a fruitful avenue for further research on the nature and temporal dimensions of families' shelter use patterns. To achieve this, innovative methodological approaches that find ways to synthesis quantitative and qualitative data would help to balance the need for both scale and depth within research designs that aim to fully interrogate the causes, consequences and dynamics of family homelessness.

8.6. Concluding Comments: The Need for Systems Change

A central tenet of this thesis has been that the distinct trajectories that families take through, out and sometimes back into shelter emerge from complex interactions occurring with and within complex homelessness (and other related) systems. Indeed, a core goal was to go beyond using complexity as a metaphor towards advancing understanding of what this 'emergence' looks like in practice. However, complexity should neither be interpreted as, nor assumed to be, 'complicated'. As has been argued here, the solutions to long-term and recurrent stays in emergency accommodation among families are, in fact, markedly simple. What is needed, however, is a fundamental shift in thinking and radical reimagining of our housing and homelessness systems that can pave the way to get there,

and importantly, to stay there. Continuing to argue about ideology will not lead to progress; rather, a more pragmatic approach is necessary whereby evidence generated from families themselves is drawn upon to help better understand what works best for whom in different contexts and at particular points in time.

The complex-realist approach to understanding families' shelter system trajectories presented here offers a particular theorisation of why housing-led responses - including large-scale reinvestment in State-funded social housing - will deliver a more efficient, durable and humane response to family homelessness than shelter-led alternatives and well-intentioned, but ultimately insufficient, changes at the micro-level. Above all else, it is hoped that policy makers and service professionals are provided with insights that challenge them to reflect on the thinking and assumptions that underpin homelessness responses as well as the *longer-term* goals they are pursuing, rather than simply using the language of 'failure', or indeed 'success', in near-term retrospect. If we are to ensure dignity, quality of life and a place to call home for all families, it is our systems that need to change and learn *how* to engage all people, not the other way around.

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Appendix A: ETHOS Typology

Concept	Operational Category		Living Situation
ROOFLESSNESS	1	People living rough	Where people are living without shelter (e.g. on the streets or in public spaces)
	2	People staying in emergency accommodation (i.e. night shelters)	Where people with no usual place of residence are using emergency shelters on a night by night basis
HOUSELESSNESS	3	People in homeless accommodation	Where people are temporarily living in homeless hostels, temporary accommodation or transitional supported accommodation
	4	People in women's shelters (i.e. refuges)	Where women are temporarily accommodated due to experiences of domestic violence
	5	People in accommodation for migrants	Where migrants are living in reception centres or migrant workers accommodation due to their immigrant status
	6	People due to be released from institutions (i.e. prisons, residential drug/alcohol treatment, hospitals and children's homes)	Where people are at risk of homelessness due to support needs and a lack of suitable move on housing following their stay in an institutional setting
	7	People receiving longer-term support due to homelessness	Where people are living in long-term supported accommodation, or are unable to move on from supported accommodation, due to a lack of suitable housing
INSECURE	8	People living in insecure accommodation	Where people are residing in insecure living situations with no legal rights or (sub)tenancies (e.g. squatting, illegal camping, sofa surfing, sleeping on floors, staying with friends or relatives)
	9	People living under threat of eviction	Where legal orders for eviction from accommodation or repossession of property are operative
	10	People living under threat of violence	Where police action is taken to ensure a place of safety for people experiencing violence
INADEQUATE	11	People living in temporary/non-standard structures	Where people are residing in temporary or semi-permanent structures (e.g. mobile homes, make-shift shelters, huts, cabins)
	12	People living in unfit housing	Where people are living in accommodation that is considered unfit for habitation by national legislation or building regulations
	13	People living in extreme overcrowding	Where people are living in accommodation that exceeds the national density standard for floor-space or useable rooms

Source: adapted from FEANTSA (2007)

Appendix B: Data Negotiation and Transfer Timeline

DATE(S)	KEY MILESTONES
January – April 2017	Preliminary consultations with DRHE to negotiate access to PASS data
18 th July 2017	Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) finalised and signed by all parties following receipt of ethical approval from Trinity College Dublin.
21 st July 2017	Initial data transfer: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families in emergency accommodation: years 2015-2016
3 rd Aug 2017	Data Protection Site Visit
12 th Dec 2017	Subsequent data transfer: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families in emergency accommodation: years 2011-2014
15 th May 2018	Final data transfer: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ethnicity variable: years 2011 - 2016

In the early stages of the study, consultations were held with DRHE representatives over several months to discuss the rationale and potential value of the research as well as the proposed use of PASS data. These meetings served a number of important purposes: first, they provided a means by which to establish interagency trust and foster rapport between all parties; second, it facilitated in-depth discussions with those familiar with the database to learn about the ‘biography’, structure and organisation of the dataset and the administrative system from which it was generated; third, it sensitised me to potential technical issues with regard to repurposing the data for research; and finally, as external researchers cannot simply request a flat file with a defined set of variables, the consultations facilitated discussion about what data were appropriate, available and retrievable with regard to families.

Following the development of a transparent set of procedures for data access, transfer and storage to ensure data security and protection, the data files were subsequently anonymised and prepared in an Excel file format by a data processor(s) appointed by the DRHE before being transferred incrementally *via* a secure online transfer mechanism. A data protection site visit to the research office was also arranged to demonstrate how data security standards, procedures and practices would be adhered to throughout the research process.

Appendix C: Recoding of Study Variables

Original Variable	New Variable	Recoding Process
Date of Birth	Age Group	Following Benjaminsen and Andrade (2015), the age of each parent was calculated based on their date of birth at the time of their first entry to services during the study's observation period (that is, between 2011-2016). These ages were then grouped into three broad age-ranges to reflect differing life stages, including: 18-29 years (early adulthood); 30-49 years (early middle-age); and 50+ years (late middle-age/late adulthood).
No. of accompanying children	Family Size	Following the CSO (2016), and to denote a distinction between smaller and larger family sizes in the Irish context, families were grouped according to whether they had: one child; two children; three children; or four or more children.
Country of Origin	Migrant Status	Some 87 countries of origin were recorded in the administrative data and were collapsed into three categories: Ireland; countries within the EU (including the UK); and countries outside the EU. These classifications were chosen because whether a family is headed by an individual from within or outside the EU may have direct implications for rights and entitlements with regard to housing and homelessness supports in Ireland, though it is acknowledged that some of these families may have acquired Irish citizenship.
Ethnicity	Race/Ethnicity	The ethnicity variable in the data set was originally divided according to 'Irish', 'EU' and 'non-EU' distinctions (for example, 'Black EU', 'Black Irish', 'Black non-EU'). These were subsequently collapsed into five categories ('White'; 'Black', 'Traveller'; 'Asian' and 'Other') to examine whether an individual's race/ethnicity outside of their migrant status held any important implications.
Accommodation Name	No. of unique EA services accessed	Recoded into a continuous variable by calculating the total number of unique accommodation names that were associated with each parent over the six-year observation period.

Appendix D: Recruitment Brief for Service Providers (Example)

Below is an example of the recruitment brief used when specifically trying to reach families headed by an EU migrant who also experienced transitional service use patterns.

(Working) Study Title: Understanding the Dynamics of Family Homelessness in Dublin

Researcher: Sarah Parker, Trinity College Dublin

Funder of the research: The Irish Research Council

Deadline for recruitment: Friday, 19th July, 2019



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin



IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL
An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn

I (Sarah Parker) am a PhD researcher from Trinity College Dublin conducting a study under the supervision of Dr Paula Mayock, School of Social Work and Social Policy, which **aims to examine families' trajectories through and out of homelessness in the Dublin region.**

We are seeking your help and advice and hoping that you can help us to identify and connect us with one or two families (that is, one or more parent(s) with accompanying children), who are living in Dublin and who fit the following criteria:

1. **EU migrant(s)** who have been **housed** following a period of up to *six-eight months* living in emergency accommodation.

If you know of a family who fits this profile, **we would be extremely grateful if you could contact the family member(s) to ascertain whether they would like to take part or learn more about the research.** This would involve the following four steps:

1	Briefly state that the study is about families' experiences of homelessness in Dublin.
2	Note that participation is completely voluntary and would involve a private and confidential meeting with the researcher that would last approx. 1 hour (at a time and place that suits them).
3	Note that participants will receive a €40 voucher to thank them for their time and cooperation.
4	Ask if the the family member would be happy to have their phone number passed on to the researcher , at which point the researcher will call them to explain the research in more detail and discuss whether they would like to take part.

We know you are extremely busy so we want to thank you in advance for any help or assistance you might be able to give us in this instance, which is hugely appreciated.

Should you have any questions or concerns about the study, please feel free to contact the me at any time using the following details:

Sarah Parker (Researcher): TEL: 01-8964355 OR EMAIL: parkersg@tcd.ie

THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO READ THIS RECRUITMENT BRIEF

Appendix E: Information Sheet for Service Providers

Information Sheet for Service Providers

Study Title: Understanding Patterns of Family Homelessness

Researcher: Sarah Parker, Trinity College Dublin

Funder of the research: The Irish Research Council



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin



IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL
An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn

We would like you to assist us in conducting a research study on family homelessness which aims to better understand patterns of service use among families in the Dublin region. Before you decide whether you can help, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve for participants. Please take the time to consider the following information and contact us if you would like more information.

Who are we and why are we conducting this study?

I (Sarah Parker) am a PhD researcher from Trinity College Dublin and conducting a mixed methods study under the supervision of Dr Paula Mayock, School of Social Work and Social Policy, that aims to examine families' trajectories through and out of homelessness. There are two Phases to the research:

Phase 1: Quantitative analysis of administrative data on families in the Dublin region (from PASS and Local Authority housing lists) to identify 'clusters' of service use (long-stay, short-term and repeat) and characterise and compare the demographic profiles of these particular groups of families.

Phase 2: The conduct of interviews with families with one or more dependent children who have experienced these patterns of homelessness service use in order to help explain and contextualise the statistical findings in more depth.

We are seeking your help with PHASE 2 of the research, that is, help with accessing and making contact with families who have experienced homelessness and may be willing to participate.

Why contact your service?

You provide services to, and have direct contact with, families who have experienced homelessness. We are therefore seeking your help and advice in order to identify and connect us with individuals who are attending your services. **We would be grateful for any guidance or assistance you might be able to offer, particularly in terms of helping us to establish contact with users of your service who meet the study's eligibility criteria**, which will be families (i.e. one or more parents living with one or more dependent children) who:

1. Are living in Dublin; and
2. Are either currently homeless for at least 1 year or more; OR
3. Have recently been housed in the last 6-12 months following a period of homelessness.

How we are hoping you may be able to help us?

Given your work with families we would like to talk to, we are hoping you might be able to:

1. **Identify families who fit the study's eligibility criteria.**
2. **Distribute an Information Sheet to eligible individuals and very briefly explain the research verbally to these individuals.**
3. **'Connect' us with families who express an interest in taking part.** You can do this by asking individuals to contact us directly using the contact numbers provided OR, with the individual's consent, you can pass on his/her phone number to us. Individuals who are interested in participating should make the decision about how to make contact with us.
4. **Allow us to visit your service to make direct contact with prospective participants and to conduct interviews.**

What does taking part involve for participants?

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If an individual expresses an interest in participating in the study, the researcher will arrange to meet with one or both parent(s) at your service at a time that best suits them. When we meet with an individual, we will take them through the Information Sheet verbally and in detail to ensure that they understand the aims of the research and what participation involves. Prospective **participants will also be given an opportunity to ask questions** that they might have about the research.

At this point, we will tell the individual that they should take additional time to consider participation. However, if the family member states that they have made a decision and would like to be interviewed that day or in the coming days, the researcher will facilitate that. The interview will not take more than 60 minutes and, with their consent, the interview will be audio-recorded for the purposes of data transcription and analysis. **Participants will be made aware that they can change their mind about taking part at any time (even during or after the interview) without giving a reason.**

Will participants receive payment for taking part?

No, but all participants will be given a gift voucher to the value of €40 as a small token of appreciation for the time and effort that they have invested in the study.

What kinds of things will participants be asked about during the interview?

During the interview, we will discuss the following kinds of issues with participants:

- Family background in relation to housing, education and employment histories;
- Experiences of accessing homelessness and other support services;
- Experiences of and interactions with the homelessness service system;
- Experiences of seeking (and where relevant, sustaining) housing;
- Sources of social and community support;
- Any challenges that families have faced since leaving home;
- Views on their present and future needs as a family unit.

Participants will **not have to answer questions on any topic that they would prefer not to talk about.** Their privacy and choices will be respected at all times.

How will the data be handled?

What the participant says during the interview will be completely confidential and will not be told to anyone else unless they tell the interviewer that there is a risk of harm to themselves or any other person. This will be communicated to participants and they will be made aware that, if this was the case, the researcher will speak with them before telling anyone else. However, their permission is not needed to report a serious risk of harm to self or others.

With the participant's permission, we will audio-record the interview. We will turn off the recorder if there is any part of the interview that the person does not want to be recorded. The interview recordings will be deleted after the transcript has been prepared and transcripts will be destroyed after a maximum of five years. Interview excerpts used in oral and written dissemination of findings will be anonymised (that is, all identifying information will be removed) in order to protect the identity of participants.

Are there any risks or benefits to participating?

There is no risk to your service should you decide to participate. The name/identity of services who agree to having their service used as a recruitment site will not be named by the research team in any dissemination or discussion of the research findings.

The potential benefits of this research are difficult to anticipate and a direct benefit to your service cannot be guaranteed. However, we will communicate the findings of the study to you and your service in the form of a research report and, if deemed appropriate and helpful, in the form of a presentation of findings to service staff. It is our hope that the findings of the research will be of interest to your service and that they may help to inform future practice.

What will happen to the information gathered?

The findings of this research will be documented in a doctoral thesis and may also be presented in other publications or at conferences, seminars or briefings to relevant organisations. Findings from this research may be published in academic journals, the aim here would be to make the findings of the study available and accessible to a wider national and international audience. Real names of participants, of services or any information that might identify the participant or your service will not be used in any of these documents or presentations. **A summary document/overview of the research results will be made available to all participating services and to all of the study's participants when the study is completed.**

Contacting the researcher

Sarah Parker (Researcher): TEL: 01-8964355 OR EMAIL: parkersg@tcd.ie

Thank you for your time and consideration

Appendix F: Information Sheet for Families

Information Sheet for Families

Study Title: A Study of Family Homelessness in Dublin

Researcher: Sarah Parker, Trinity College Dublin

Funder of the research: The Irish Research Council



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin



IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL
An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn

You are invited to take part in a study about your experiences of homelessness as a family

We would like to speak directly with families to hear about your experiences since leaving home with your child or children, including what it has been like to access homeless accommodation or other support services you have had contact with as well as any difficulties or challenges your family has faced and things that might help you to access or remain in stable housing.

Before you decide whether you would like to take part in the research, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what speaking to us will involve. Please take time to think about the information provided here and contact the researchers any time if you have any questions about the study.

Who are we and what is this study about?

I (Sarah Parker) am a PhD researcher from Trinity College Dublin working with my supervisor, Dr. Paula Mayock, on a study that aims to **better understand and learn about what life is like for families who have experienced homelessness and housing instability in Dublin, Ireland.**

If you decide to take part in this research, you will have the opportunity to have your experiences heard. You will be able to tell us what it has been like for you and your child(ren) to experience homelessness. You will also have the opportunity to tell us about any other issues that are important to you because **we are focusing on your experiences and what you think.**

Participation is your choice and you should not feel that you have to take part. If you don't want to take part, that is completely ok. If you would like to take part, you can contact me by phone or pass on your contact details to us by telling a worker in your service that you want them to give me your contact details. After that, I will arrange to meet with you. You may decide after our meeting that you don't want to take part - this will not be a problem and your choices will be respected.

Who do we want to talk to?

We want to talk to parents with child(ren) who:

- a) Are over the age of 18; and
- b) Have stayed in homeless accommodation.

What does taking part involve?

If you agree to take part in this study, I (Sarah) will come and interview you at a time and place that suits you. The interview will take around 40 - 60 minutes. **If you decide not to take part, that is absolutely fine.** Not taking part will not have any negative consequences for you whatsoever. In other words, taking part is your choice.

What kinds of things will you be asked about in the interview?

During the interview, we will discuss the following kinds of issues:

- The places you've lived as a family and your current living situation.
- What services you've been in contact with and what your experience was like with them.
- Your experience of navigating the homeless service system.
- Your experiences of seeking or accessing housing.
- Any challenges or difficulties that you and your family faced after leaving your home.
- Your views on your family's current (and future) needs related to housing, employment, health/mental health, child-care and so on.
- Your children and any concerns that you may have about them.
- Sources of social support available to you and your family.
- Your hopes and expectations for the future.

It is important that you know that **you do not have to answer questions on any topic that you would prefer not to talk about.** If you feel at any point that you would prefer not to continue with the interview, then that is okay. We won't mind – you don't need to give a reason and there'll be no negative consequences for you if you decide to stop. It really is **your** choice.

Can you change your mind about taking part?

Yes. **You can change your mind at any time.** You have the right to stop the interview at any point without having to give a reason. You also have the right to decide to withdraw from the study, even after you have been interviewed. It is important that you know that **not taking part in this research will not affect your relationship with any service you are attending.**

Is what you say private and confidential?

Yes. What we talk about during the interview is confidential, this means that **we won't tell anybody else what you say unless you tell us something that means you or someone else is at immediate risk of harm.** Examples of a risk of harm would be if you reported that you or another person was in danger because of violence or abuse. But, if this does happen then we will discuss between us what will happen next and who else we will need to tell. If you tell us something that gives us reasonable concerns about the safety of a child then we must pass the information on to Tusla and act in accordance with Children First.

Will the interview be recorded?

Yes. With your permission, the researcher will tape record the interview. Doing this will help us to have an accurate account of what you say. The researcher will turn off the recorder if there is any part of the interview that you don't want to be recorded.

After we have finished our interview, the researcher will type up what we both said and this will be stored safely on a password-protected computer. The recording will then be deleted. We will do our best to make sure that people will not know who you are: you will be given a 'made up' name and we will remove all identifying information (such as names of any people and places that you talk about during the interview) from the typed up interview. **Your privacy will always be respected.**

Will you receive payment for taking part?

No, but all participants will be given a gift voucher to the value of €40 as a small token of appreciation for the time and effort that they have invested in the study.

Why we want to hear about your experiences

If you decide to take part in this study, **you will get the chance tell us about your experiences and have your opinions heard.** We believe that it is important to hear about your experiences of homelessness and that this may help other people, including service providers, to have a better understanding of your and your family's experiences and needs. It is our hope that this information will help to improve the services and supports offered to families who are accessing homeless services, although we can't promise that this will happen.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The information will be written up into a PhD thesis and may also be presented in other publications such as articles. We may also give presentations on the findings of the study to service providers and at conferences. Real names and any information that might identify you or any other person known to you will not be used in any of these publications or presentations. **A summary of the research findings will be made available to you when the study is finished.**

Contacting the researchers

Please feel free to contact me any time if you would like to discuss the study in more detail:

Sarah Parker (Researcher):
TEL: 01-8964355 OR EMAIL: parkersg@tcd.ie

Thank you for taking the time to read this Information Sheet

Appendix G: Agency Consent Form

AGENCY CONSENT FORM

..... [AGENCY/SERVICE NAME] voluntarily agrees to facilitate this research study.

- I understand that, although this service agrees to help now, permission for the researchers to recruit participants at the service can be withdrawn at any time.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that I, or other professionals working in the service, will assist, where possible and appropriate, with recruitment by: identifying potential participants, providing prospective respondents with the study's information sheet and 'connecting' the researcher with individuals who express an interest in participating.
- I understand that all data collected in this study (including the identity of clients and the service) is confidential and anonymous and will not be revealed in any written or oral dissemination of the study's findings.
- I understand that I am free to contact the researchers to seek further clarification or information at any time.

Signed _____

Date _____

(Agency Representative)

Signed _____

Date _____

(Researcher)

Contacting the researcher

Sarah Parker (Researcher): TEL: (086) 056 9698 / 01-8964355 OR EMAIL: parkersg@tcd.ie



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin



IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL
An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn

Appendix H: Interview Schedule

1. Current Living Situation

- a. Just to begin, could you tell me bit about where you're living at the moment?
 - i. Who are you living with? How long have you been there?
 - ii. How did this living situation came about? (probe details)
 - iii. How do you feel about living here? (likes/dislikes)
 - iv. Do you feel secure here? (explore feelings about this)
- b. Can you tell me what it's like, for you, being a parent living here? (positives/negatives)

2. Daily Life

- a. Can you tell me about your family's typical daily routine?
 - i. Is this different or the same to how it was before living here?
 - ii. Do you spend a lot of time together as a family?
- b. What would you say are the main challenges you face on a daily basis? (school/transport/meals)
 - i. Is there anyone who you would say helps you on a daily basis?
- c. What is you main source or sources of income at the moment?
 - i. Could you tell me what it's like accessing your welfare payments?
 - ii. Do you go to any other kind of places for help? (friends/family/charities/ food centres)
 - iii. How would you say you are managing in terms of money right now?
- d. What would you say you look forward to most during the week?

3. Children and Parenthood

- a. Can you tell me a little about your child(ren) and how you feel they're getting on at the moment?
 - i. Can you tell me about any particular concerns/worries you have for your children right now? When did you start to feel these concerns?
 - ii. What areas of their lives would you say are going well?
- b. Can you tell me about any kind of help you're getting around parenting/child-care?
- c. Can you tell me a little about your relationship with your child(ren) right now?
 - i. Have things changed at all since you've lived here?
 - ii. Would you say living here has impacted your child(ren)'s relationships with other people in their lives? (siblings/friends/parent/relatives)
- d. (* if in emergency accommodation) Is anyone else aware that you're children are living here? (teachers/friends/friend's parents). Would you speak with them much about what's going on?
- e. I know this might be a difficult thing to talk about, but can I ask if you've ever spent time living away from you child(ren), for example, if they were placed in 'out of home' care?
 - i. Can you tell me a little about how you felt during that time? (probe about reunification)

4. Education and Employment

- a. Can you tell me a little about your schooling and experience of education to date?
- b. Can you tell me about any jobs or work experience you've ever had? (full/part/voluntary/casual)
 - i. How did this job come about? What happened around leaving?
- c. Have you ever had any trouble applying for/getting a job?
 - i. If unemployed and job seeking
 1. How do you feel about being unemployed at the moment?
 2. What would you say are the main barriers to finding a job at right now?
 3. Is there anything that you think might help you with getting a job?

5. Housing/Living Places as a Family

*So as part of this study we're interested in learning about the different kind of places you've lived as a family, including any **private rented/owner occupied housing, times you spent living with friends or family and times you stayed in homelessness accommodation services/refuges/hotels/B&Bs etc.***

So to help us with this we've designed this diagram so we can write it all out and create what we're calling a 'housing history' for you, which we'll fill in now if that's ok. We'll go through this list of questions for each living place. Don't worry, if there's anything you can't remember, that's fine – anything you can tell us would be brilliant So can you tell me about the first ever place you lived together with your children? ...

- a. **Prompts for each living place mentioned:**
 - i. Can you tell me about what it was like living there?
 - ii. When (and how long) were you living there? Who were you living there with?
 - iii. How did living there come about?
 - iv. What were the circumstances under which you left?
 - v. What was going on in your life around that time?
 - vi. How did you feel about leaving?
 - vii. Where did you stay immediately after?
 - viii. What kind of help, if any, did you receive from friends/family/services during this time?
- b. **At the end, seek clarification in relation to the following:**
 - i. So looking back at this timeline, when would you say was the first time you experienced homelessness as a family?
 - ii. Was that the first time you *felt* homeless? What made you feel that way?
 - iii. Have you ever experienced homelessness or housing instability prior to this timeline, without you family? (probe details)

1. Seeking Housing (use past tense for those who have exited)

- a. Can you tell me a little about your experience of seeking housing in the last few months?
 - i. What kinds of support have you received around this? Who have you been working with?
 - ii. What would you say is the most challenging thing about trying to find housing?
- b. Have you ever applied to a local authority/county council for housing?
 - i. **If Yes**, what were you told? Did anything ever come of it?
 - ii. How would you describe the process?
 - iii. How do you feel about the prospect of being offered local authority housing right now?
- c. (*If in EA) what are the main things preventing you from securing housing? What would help?
 - i. Can you tell me about a time when you were able to exit/were close to exiting? What happened in the end?
- d. (* If in housing) what were the main things that helped you source and secure housing?

2. Independent Living and Housing Options (use past tense for those who have exited)

- a. How do you feel about moving on from emergency accommodation?
 - i. Would you have any worries or concerns?
 - ii. Do you think you would need follow on support for a while after leaving?
 - iii. What kind of things do you think you'd like/need support with?
- b. Can you tell me about what housing options are available to you right now and your thoughts about them?
 - i. How did you find out about these options?
 - ii. Have you talked to anyone specifically about these options and which might be the best one for you and your family? (DCC/services/keyworker/friends/family)?
 - iii. Have you received any other kind of advice in and around housing from anyone?
 - iv. Would you say you feel in control of your housing decisions? (explore feelings on this)
- c. What are your views on/understandings of HAP? Living in the PRS? LA housing? Approved housing bodies? (explore thoughts and feelings on each)
- d. When considering a place for you and your family to live, what would you say are the most important things that you are taking into account?
- e. When you hear the word 'home', what comes to mind? What would you say 'home' means to you and your family?
- f. Where have you felt most at home? What was it about that place that made you feel at home there?

3. Interactions and experiences with Services

- a. Can you tell me a bit about your experiences with services so far?
 - i. What kind of services have you been in touch with? What kind of things do they help you with? Would you be in touch with them often?
 - ii. Can you tell me about a time when you had a **positive** experience with a service or service staff where you felt they really helped you?
 - iii. Can you tell me about a time when you had a **negative** experience with a service or service staff?

- a. Do you have a keyworker (or SLI worker) at the moment? Can you tell me about him/her? What kind of things does he/she help you with?
- b. What, if anything, would you say services are helping you with that you feel you might find difficult to do on your own?
- c. What kind of things, if any, would you like more help with from services?
- d. What are the three most important things that you would say you and your family needs support with right now? What could services be doing to help you with that do you think?

2. Social Supports

- a. Can you tell me about any support from family, friends or others in your life that your family has received in the last few months?
- b. Who would you consider to be an important source of support in your life?
 - i. What makes them important to you? How do they support you? What makes that relationship stand out?
- c. Would you say there's many people in your life whom you could trust and confide in?
 - ii. If yes: Who are they? How often do you see them? Have you spoken to them recently?
 - iii. If no: was there ever a time when you felt there was someone you could trust or rely on? When did that change? Who would you have wanted to rely upon but can't? (explore)
- d. Would many people in your life know about your current (or past) situation?
 - iv. Did you tell anyone when your family first experienced homelessness?
 - v. What, if any, kind of support did they provide/offer at that point?
 - vi. Would you feel comfortable telling people in your life about what's going on? What about asking for help? (explore)
- e. How would you describe your relationship with your own/your partner's family?
 - vii. Has this changed at all since experiencing (or exiting) homelessness?
 - viii. What about you relationships with friends?

3. Adverse life experiences

As part of this study, we're also interested in learning about whether you experienced difficulties throughout your life, perhaps things when you were younger or as an adult that you feel were significant or had any kind of impact on you. Would you mind if I asked you some questions about this? We don't have to go into too much detail and you can skip over anything you like.

- a. Growing up, is there anything that stands out to you as being a particularly difficult or hard experience? For instance, others in the study have spoken about spending time in care, moving around a lot as a kid, their parents splitting up, fights happening in the home and things like that. Did you have any kind of similar experiences?
- b. Several people have told us that they experienced difficulties with their partners leading to violence of some kind... is this something that you've ever experienced?
- c. In terms of what you've just mentioned, would you say that/those experience(s) had any kind of impact on your life? Would you say that has contributed in any way to your exp. of homelessness as a family? (explore)

Thank you for sharing that with me, I know these things can be very difficult to talk about so I really appreciate you opening up about your experiences. I'm going to move forward now if that's ok?

4. Identity and reflections

- a. Now that you're more familiar with the system and what it's like, looking back, is there anything that you'd do differently following your first experience of homelessness as a family?
- b. Are there things others could have done that would have been helpful during that time?
- c. What about prior to your first experience? What, if anything, do you think could have been done to help prevent that from happening?
- d. What would you say you've learned about the homelessness service system?
- e. Drawing on your knowledge and experience, if your friend told you that their family was about to experience homelessness for the first time:

1. The Future

- a. How do you feel about the future right now? (explore worries)
- b. (*If still in EA) Would you say you're hopeful that things will improve for your family soon or do you think it might take a little longer? Why do you feel that way?
- c. Would you say you feel in control of your family's future? (explore feelings on this)

- a. In terms of accommodation specifically:
 - i. Would you say you feel secure right now?
 - ii. Do you know what is going to happen next? How do you feel about that?
- b. What are your hopes for the future? And what, in your opinion, do you think might help to make this happen?

2. Views on Participation in the Research

- a. What have you thought about this whole process, about being interviewed?
- b. How would you describe the experience? Is there anything you would have liked to have been done differently?
- c. Is there any questions/topics we didn't ask about that you think would be important to include?
- d. Would you take part in a research study again? (Explore feelings on this)

Appendix I: Housing History Timeline

Housing History Timeline

Date: _____

ID: _____

We'll go through this list of questions for each living place. Don't worry, if there's anything you can't remember, that's OK – anything you can tell us would be brilliant!

1. When were you living there/Who were you living there with?
2. How did living there come about?
3. What was it like living there?
4. How long were you living there?
5. What were the circumstances under which you left?
6. What was going on in your life around that time?
7. How did you feel about leaving?
8. Where did you stay immediately after?
9. Did you ask for/receive any help from services during this time?



Appendix J: Questionnaire

BACKGROUND DEMOGRAPHICS

Q1. **Date of birth/Age:** _____

Q2. **Current Relationship Status:**

- Single
- In a relationship but not married
- Married (first marriage)
- Re-married
- Same-sex civil partnership
- Married but separated
- Divorced
- Widowed

(2a) **If you have a Partner:**

What age is he/she? _____

What is his/her country of origin? _____

Length of relationship (days/months/years): _____

Is he/she employed? Yes No | Occupation: _____

Is he/she living with you? Yes No | Where is he/she living? _____

Q3. **What is your nationality?** _____

Q4. **What is your ethnic/cultural background?**

White	Black	Asian	Other, including mixed background
Irish <input type="checkbox"/>	Irish <input type="checkbox"/>	Irish <input type="checkbox"/>	Other <input type="checkbox"/>
Traveller <input type="checkbox"/>	African <input type="checkbox"/>	UK <input type="checkbox"/>	
UK <input type="checkbox"/>	Caribbean <input type="checkbox"/>	Indian/Pakistani <input type="checkbox"/>	
Europe <input type="checkbox"/>	Europe <input type="checkbox"/>	Chinese <input type="checkbox"/>	
Other <input type="checkbox"/>	UK <input type="checkbox"/>	Other <input type="checkbox"/>	
	Other <input type="checkbox"/>		

If other, details: _____

Q5. **If non-Irish**

What age were you when you moved to Ireland? _____

How long have you lived in Ireland? _____

Do you have Irish Citizenship?

Yes No

If yes, how was it acquired?

- Through birth in Ireland
- Through descent
- Through marriage
- Through naturalization

If Non-EU national, what is your current immigration status?

- Refugee
- Leave to Remain in Ireland
- Subsidiary Protection
- Don't know

What residence stamp do you currently possess?

- Stamp 0
- Stamp 1
- Stamp 1a
- Stamp 1G
- Stamp 2 (2A)
- Stamp 3
- Stamp 4
- Stamp 5
- Stamp 6
- Don't know

Are you eligible for social housing supports? Yes No don't know

Are you eligible to receive social welfare assistance? Yes No don't know

Does any other member of your family have Irish citizenship? Yes No

If yes, who: _____

If yes, how was it acquired?

- Through birth in Ireland
- Through descent
- Through marriage
- Through naturalization

EDUCATION, INCOME AND EMPLOYMENT

Q6. When did you leave school?

>18 Age/year of school: _____

<18

How many years in total have you spent in education? _____

Please indicate your educational qualifications (highest level completed):

- No formal qualifications
- Junior Certificate (or equivalent)
- Leaving Certificate (or equivalent)
- Further/adult ed. (e.g. PLC/FETAC) Details: _____
- Third-level Diploma Details: _____
- Third-level Degree Details: _____
- Other Details: _____

If relevant, please indicate your partner's educational qualifications (highest level completed):

- No formal qualifications
- Junior Certificate (or equivalent)
- Leaving Certificate (or equivalent)
- Further/adult ed. (e.g. PLC/FETAC) Details: _____
- Third-level Diploma Details: _____
- Third-level Degree Details: _____
- Other Details: _____

Have you ceased your full-time education?

Yes No

If yes, age at which it ceased _____

If no, details _____

Are you currently working?

Yes No

If yes:

Voluntary /informal work Details: _____

Part-time paid work Details: _____

Full-time paid work Details: _____

How many hours do you work a week? _____

If no,

Are you looking for a job at present? Yes No

What was your last job? _____

How long since your last job?

3 years or more

More than 1, less than 3 years

Less than 1 year

Less than 1 month

Which of these statements best describes your employment history? (Only pick one)

I have spent most of my life in long-term jobs

I have spent most of my life in casual, short-term or seasonal work

I have spent most of my life unemployed

I have spent most of my life unable to work because of sickness or injury

I have spent most of my life as a student/in education

I have never worked

None of these apply to me

Sources of income in the past month (tick all that apply)

- Social welfare assistance (Ireland)
- Paid work (incl. cash in hand work)
- Friends or relatives
- A charity/church
- Savings / Inheritance
- Pension
- Other (details: _____)
- No source at all

If relevant, please list the social welfare payments you're currently in receipt of: _____

HOUSING SITUATION/HISTORY

Current living situation:

- Family Hub
- STA
- B&B
- Hotel (PEA)
- Hostel
- Friends or family
- HAP tenancy
- Local Authority housing
- Approved housing body housing
- Own with mortgage

Who do you live there with?

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

If renting, how much is your rent per month? € _____

How long have you been living there?

- Less than a week
- Less than a month
- 1 – 3 months
- 3 – 6 months
- 6 months – 1 year
- More than 1 year

If relevant, how long were/have you been on the housing list? _____

Have you ever been offered local authority housing? Yes No When: _____

When did your family first experience homelessness? _____

When did you first present to the local authority as homeless? _____

How many homeless accomm services have you accessed as a family? _____

How long (days/months/years) has your family spent in homeless accomm? _____

Have you ever spent one or more nights in the following living situations as a family because you had nowhere to stay?

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Rough sleeping | <input type="checkbox"/> Duration: _____ |
| Squatting | <input type="checkbox"/> Duration: _____ |
| In your car or vehicle | <input type="checkbox"/> Duration: _____ |
| Garda station | <input type="checkbox"/> Duration: _____ |
| Emergency hostel | <input type="checkbox"/> Duration: _____ |
| Stayed with friends or family members | <input type="checkbox"/> Duration: _____ |
| Hospital | <input type="checkbox"/> Duration: _____ |
| Public transport | <input type="checkbox"/> Duration: _____ |
| Direct provision | <input type="checkbox"/> Duration: _____ |
| 24hr restaurant/shop/facility | <input type="checkbox"/> Duration: _____ |
| Other: _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Duration: _____ |

CHILDREN

How many children do you have? _____

What ages are you child(ren)? _____

How many children are living with you right now? _____

Are any of your children not living with you right now? Yes No

If yes, where are they living?

- | | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| With your parents | <input type="checkbox"/> Number: _____ Age: _____ Duration: _____ |
| With other family member | <input type="checkbox"/> Number: _____ Age: _____ Duration: _____ |
| With friends | <input type="checkbox"/> Number: _____ Age: _____ Duration: _____ |
| In foster care | <input type="checkbox"/> Number: _____ Age: _____ Duration: _____ |
| In residential care | <input type="checkbox"/> Number: _____ Age: _____ Duration: _____ |
| High support & special care | <input type="checkbox"/> Number: _____ Age: _____ Duration: _____ |
| Emergency foster care | <input type="checkbox"/> Number: _____ Age: _____ Duration: _____ |
| Other (details: _____) | <input type="checkbox"/> Number: _____ Age: _____ Duration: _____ |

If no, were any of your child(ren) ever placed in out of home care? Yes No

If yes, where were they placed? (tick all that apply)

- | | |
|--|--------------------------|
| Relative foster care | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Non-relative foster care | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Residential care | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| High support & special care | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Emergency foster care (supported lodgings) | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Do you have one or more children living with you that are:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Attending school/pre-school | <input type="checkbox"/> Number: _____ Age(s): _____ |
| Attending college | <input type="checkbox"/> Number: _____ Age(s): _____ |
| Attending training/further adult ed. | <input type="checkbox"/> Number: _____ Age(s): _____ |
| Out of ed. and currently employed | <input type="checkbox"/> Number: _____ Age(s): _____ |
| Out of ed. and currently unemployed | <input type="checkbox"/> Number: _____ Age(s): _____ |
| None of the above | <input type="checkbox"/> Number: _____ Age(s): _____ |

If attending school, does your child/any of your children go to:

- | | |
|---|--------------------------|
| Mainstream school | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| School for those with special ed. needs | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Appendix K: Consent Form

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I, , voluntarily agree to participate in this research.

- ❖ I understand that participation in the study involves taking part in an interview.
- ❖ I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- ❖ I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- ❖ I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- ❖ I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- ❖ I understand that, in any report on the finding of this research, my identity (name and other identifying information) will not be revealed.
- ❖ I understand that 'pieces' from my interview may be used in the research report, conference presentations or published papers.
- ❖ I understand that if I inform the researcher that I or someone else is at risk of harm, the researcher may have to report this to a relevant authority.
- ❖ I understand that the signed consent form and the transcript of my interview will be retained on a password-protected computer in a locked office.
- ❖ I understand that under freedom of information legislation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time.
- ❖ I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.
- ❖ I understand that the findings of the study will be reported and published as a report and/or in academic articles and that a summary of the research findings will be made available to me upon request.

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE _____

DATE _____

RESEARCHER SIGNATURE _____

DATE _____

Appendix L: Addressing Unequal Power Dynamics During Interview

All language used when communicating with participants was frank, clear and non-jargonistic. All documentation - including the information sheet and consent form - was presented in plain, comprehensible English (designed with accessibility in mind) and this information was also communicated verbally to all participants¹. Time and care was also taken to explain any terminology that the individual was unfamiliar with, and, prior to the interview commencing, I clearly and explicitly reiterated the limits of confidentiality such that participants were reminded that if they disclosed sensitive information indicating that they, or another person, was at risk of physical or psychological harm, I would have to inform a relevant authority, but would not do so without discussing the matter with them in advance². I was also upfront and honest about the dissemination and potential impact of the research, explaining that whilst the goal of the study was to provide important information that could potentially help to inform homelessness policy and service delivery, no guarantees could be made about the up-take or implementation of the findings.

To put the participants at ease, I engaged in casual conversation before the interview began, making sure to provide (or accept) offers of water, tea and snacks and supply colouring pencils and paper for any accompanying children, where possible. At the end and beginning of each interview I explicitly thanked participants for taking time out of their day to speak with me, emphasising their valuable role and their position as experts in the research due to their ability to provide crucial insights and perspectives that can only come from first-hand, lived experience (Miller and Glassner, 1997)³. By foregrounding the participant's voice in this way, I hoped that families would leave feeling that their participation had been worthwhile and meaningful (Hutchinson *et al.*, 1994). Indeed, whilst careful not to overstate the benefits of participation in qualitative research, many expressed, unprompted, that they enjoyed the interview and appreciated the opportunity to tell their story and have their opinions heard.

Finally, I reminded participants, at various stages, of their right to take a break, decline to respond to any specific question or turn off the recorder/terminate the interview to ensure that they felt in control at all times. The interview schedule was also designed to minimise risk by not introducing sensitive topics abruptly or leaving them towards the end of the interview so that participants did not leave feeling exposed. Nevertheless, a small number of participants, particular mothers, became visibly upset when discussing concerns they had for their children. In these instances, it was suggested that we take a break; the recorder was turned off and (more) tea, snacks and tissues were made available, where possible. The participant was reminded that they could end or reschedule the interview at any time and was asked if they would like to resume and proceed, which, in all cases, they did.

¹ There were a number of migrant participants for whom English was not their first language. Since a budget for translation costs was not available, a protocol was established whereby only individuals who had a level of English language deemed necessary to fully understand the research and what their participation involves would be deemed eligible for participation; however, this issue did not present itself.

² No such disclosures arose over the course of the research.

³ Like Lindsey (1997), to avoid the objectification of families I adopted an attitude of "not-knowing curiosity" whereby a number of questions posed positioned the participant as the authority in the room. For example, I asked what advice they would give to families in similar situations and to researchers wanting to learn more about homelessness. I also asked if there was anything they would change about the interview process and if there were any additional questions that they thought I should ask families going forward. This, I hoped would engender a sense of empowerment and ownership whilst also demonstrating that their thoughts and inputs were valued.

Appendix M: Comparison of Study Sample with National Census Data

The Central Statistics Office (CSO) conducts a National Census every six years to provide a robust statistical socio-economic profile of Ireland's general population. A comparison of the demographic and family characteristics of this study's sample of FRPs with the most recent CSO figures from 2016 is presented below, highlighting a number of important differences between these two groups.

	FRPs IN EA	GEN. POP	DIFFERENCE
Average age	31.35 years	37.4 years	-6.05 years
Aged 20-29 years	46%	24%	+22%
Born Abroad	26%	17%	+9%
Ethnic Minority Status	27%	8%	+19%
Black	17%	1%	+16%
Traveller	8%	0.7%	+7.3%
Asian	0.5%	2%	-1.5%
Avg. No. of Accompanying Children	2.0	1.3	+0.7
4+ Accompanying children	13%	7%	+6%
One-parent families	64%	25%	+39%
Female-headed	94%	86%	+8%

First, adults with accompanying children in Dublin-based EA were notably younger; they had a mean age of 31.3 (versus 37.4 in the general population) as well as a significantly higher proportion within the 20-29 year age-group standing at 46% (versus 24% recorded nationally). There were slightly more individuals born abroad and considered to have a migrant status amongst the sample of FRPs (26%) compared to the general population of those resident in Ireland (17%); however, families with an ethnic-minority background were more than three times as likely than the general population to be accessing homelessness services in the capital.

Indeed, those with a non-White ethnicity accounted for over one-quarter (27%) of FRPs in EA versus just 8% of the general population, representing a difference of 19%. FRPs with either a Black or Traveller ethnic/cultural background, in particular, were disproportionately likely to be residing in EA making up 17% and 8% of the total sample, respectively, compared to just 1% and 0.7% of the general population. Conversely, those who self-identified as Asian were under-represented, comprising just 0.5% of FRPs accessing homelessness services as opposed to 2% of the population nationally.

Looking specifically at families with accompanying children, FRPs in EA, on average, tended to have slightly more children ($M = 2.0$) than those in the general population ($M = 1.3$) and were almost twice as likely to have larger family sizes comprising four or more children standing at 13% and 7%, respectively. Finally, one-parent families were overrepresented amongst shelter users, accounting for approximately two-thirds (64%) of the total sample and just 25% of the general population, representing a sizeable difference of 39%. Among those parenting alone, FRPs in EA were disproportionately headed by a woman compared to national figures, making up 94% and 86% of each respective sample.

In keeping with the international literature on family homelessness discussed in Chapter 2, families in Dublin-based EA were thus comparatively younger and more likely to have at least one head of household with a migrant and/or ethnic minority status, larger family sizes and be headed by an individual parenting alone (almost always a woman) than the general population in Ireland.