

Designing strategies to prevent homelessness among single adults in Dublin: What the data tells us

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Introduction

Preventing homelessness is a key policy objective in Ireland at both national level and in the Dublin region where most of the homeless population is concentrated. Prevention has also become increasingly central to homelessness policy internationally in recent years (Mackie, 2015). However, prevention strategies and associated investment are often not informed by an adequate empirical evidence base (Culhane, Metraux and Byrne, 2011). This has negative implications not just for the effectiveness of these strategies, but potentially also for those at risk of homelessness (Shinn, Baumohl and Hopper, 2001). This is because, in the context of resource constraints, poorly targeted strategies may result in the non-provision or withdrawal of supports from those who need it, and therefore may just redistribute homelessness rather than prevent it.

To help address these important empirical oversights and inform better design of strategies to prevent homelessness, this paper examines variations in the interaction between structural and personal factors that influence the risk of homelessness and therefore should be the focus of strategies to reduce this risk. To do this, we analyse administrative data on single adult users of emergency accommodation (EA) for homeless people in Dublin between 2016 and 2018. These data were collated by the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive (DRHE), which funds accommodation and support services for homeless people in the operational areas of Dublin City Council, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, Fingal County Council and South Dublin County Council. Data on 3,669 single adults EA users (defined as people aged 18 years+ who did not have a partner or children in emergency accommodation) are examined here. This includes most of the single adults who used EA in Dublin between 2016 and 2018 but excludes 594 members of this cohort who did not give explicit consent for their data to be reused for research purposes.

The analysis of these data presented here focuses on single adult EA users' experiences during the period leading up to homelessness and on variations in this regard between different age and demographic groups as well as between people with different housing and personal histories. This focus reflects the findings of existing research evidence on the factors associated with heightened risk of homelessness. For instance, there is abundant evidence that the risks and experiences of homelessness vary significantly between age groups (Beer *et al*, 2011; McNaughton, 2008) and that housing and life histories and associated social, personal and economic capital and fragilities, also influence these risks (Chamberlain and Johnson, 2013; Fitzpatrick, Bramley and Johnsen, 2013; Bramley and Fitzpatrick, 2018).

Context: Homelessness prevalence and prevention in Ireland and Dublin

The 2016-18 period examined in this paper saw an unprecedented rise in homelessness in Ireland, which consequently has become an increasingly pressing concern for policy makers, service providers and social activists (O’Sullivan, 2020). Between January 2016 and March 2019, occupancy of EA for homeless people increased by 91% (from 5,715 to 9,753 people) (Department of Housing Local Government and Heritage, various years). Although in absolute terms the greatest proportionate increase in homelessness has occurred in rural areas, the vast majority of the homeless population is concentrated in Dublin (an average of 73% between 2016 and 2018). Single adults account for around half of the homeless population in Dublin between these years (Department of Housing Local Government and Heritage, various years).

The rise in homelessness inspired a parallel increase in policy action to combat homelessness and in spending on EA for homeless people (see: O’Sullivan, 2020). Notably, although EA for homeless people in Ireland is almost entirely publicly funded, very little is publicly delivered – rather it is delivered by non-profit organisations and commercial providers contracted by local authorities (O’Sullivan and Musafiri, 2018). Each of these sectors provides around half of EA in Dublin, but most accommodation for single and two-adult homeless households is provided by the non-profit sector, primarily in homeless hostels that offer single or multi-bed occupancy rooms in institutional settings.

A national strategy on preventing homelessness was published in 2002 and, while this strategy has not been updated, the issue has been addressed in most of the numerous other national housing and regional homelessness policies published since then (Department of Environment and Local Government, Department of Health and Children and Department of Education and Science, 2002; Dublin Region Homeless Executive, 2019; Government of Ireland, 2021).

Busch-Geertsema and Fitzpatrick (2008) have usefully categorised homelessness prevention measures into three groups:

- Primary prevention activities that reduce the risk of homelessness among the general population or large parts of the population
- Secondary prevention interventions focused on those at high risk of homelessness because of their personal characteristics (for example, they are leaving prison) or because they are in crisis situations (such as eviction), and
- Tertiary prevention measures targeted at people who have already been affected by homelessness.

The initial approach to homeless prevention adopted in Ireland mainly encompassed secondary prevention strategies that focused on people leaving institutional accommodation including: foster or residential care, psychiatric institutions, acute hospitals, prisons and youth offender institutions (Maher and Allen, 2014). Care leavers were a central focus of this phase of homeless prevention policy action, whereas limited progress was made in preventing homelessness among people leaving other types of institutional accommodation such as prisons (Palmer, Norris & Kelleher, 2022). More recently, primary prevention strategies have been introduced that provide fast track social housing tenancies or higher levels of housing allowances for private rented accommodation to those at risk of homelessness (Baptista,

Culhane, Pleace, & O’Sullivan, 2022). The latest national housing policy statement focuses on preventing homelessness among children, young people (defined as aged between 18 years and early/mid 20s), and families with children (Government of Ireland, 2021).

Results: Variations in homelessness risks among single adult EA users

Variations among the EA using populating as a whole

Table 1 below outlines the analysis of the raw data regarding the type of accommodation that single homeless people reported having occupied immediately prior to their entry into EA. 68.8% of the single homeless population recorded their previous accommodation types on the Pathway Accommodation and Support System (PASS), the remaining 31.2% did not answer or reported that their previous accommodation type was ‘other’.

Housing tenure patterns in Ireland have changed significantly over recent decades, as homeownership has declined (albeit from a very high base), while private renting has expanded significantly, and social renting has grown modestly. Notably, these trends were more pronounced in the Dublin region (Central Statistics Office, various years). Table 1 reveals that, in contrast to the norms among the population at large, only 1% of single EA users in Dublin were previously homeowners. They were far more likely to have been renting privately prior to homelessness (23%), living with parents or family (22%), or with friends (9%). These results echo those of other research on transitions into homelessness among families in Dublin, which indicate that the vast majority were previously private renters (Hoey and Sheridan, 2016; Gambi, Sheridan and Hoey, 2018; Parker, 2021). However, Table 1 also indicates that homeless single people were much more likely to have shared with family and friends prior to becoming homeless than homeless families.

Table 1 also details single homeless EA users’ self-reported reasons for homelessness. 69% of this cohort provided this information and, among these, ‘family circumstances’ was the commonly reported reason for homelessness among EA users (16%), followed by ‘asked to leave accommodation’ (13%) and served with a notice to quit or eviction notice (9%) (most likely from private rented accommodation, because these legal instruments are rarely used in social housing), and leaving an institutional facility (5%).

Table 1. Most Commonly Reported Types of Previous Accommodation and Reasons for Homelessness¹

	Younger Adults %	Middle-Aged Adults %	Older Adults %	Total %
Previous Accommodation				
Homeless	7	7	7	7
Homeowner	0	1	3	1
Living with Friends	10	9	7	9
Living with Parents	17	6	1	10
Other Accommodation	16	17	19	17
Parents/Family	15	9	12	12
Private rented (own means)	15	25	31	21
Private rented (supported by housing allowances)	1	3	3	2
Social housing	4	6	4	5
Unknown	16 ³	16	13	16
Self-Reported Reason for Homelessness				
Abuse (sexual, physical, emotional)	1	1	1	1
Asked to Leave Accommodation	11	13	18	13
Family Circumstances	22	12	11	16
Involuntary Sharing/Sofa Surfing	2	2	3	2
Leaving Institutional Facility	6	5	5	5
Mental Illness	2	2	2	2
No Income Source	5	8	4	6
Notice of Termination	4	5	8	5
Notice to Quit	2	6	6	4
Other Reason	8	11	16	12
Relationship Breakdown: Other	2	2	1	2
Relationship Breakdown: Parent	4	1	0	2
Relationship Breakdown: Partner	3	5	4	4
Substance Abuse: Alcohol	2	3	1	2
Substance Abuse: Drugs	2	2	0	2

Source: generated by the authors from administrative data on the funding and provision of EA for homeless people in Dublin. Note: 1. Some of the categories reported contain unclear information; these categories may have been created based on information provided by individuals. We have combined some categories as a result, particularly those with extremely closely worded descriptions; 2. 'Notice to quit' and 'notice of termination' are distinct legal terms – the former is a legal notice of the repossession of a dwelling by a landlord or bank, the latter is a legal notice instructing a tenant to vacate a dwelling. However, the data outlined in this table are self-reported and homeless people may be using these terms interchangeably; 3. Whole

number percentages reported which add up to 101%. 4&5: Chi² and Cramer's V tests conducted only on reported accommodation/reason, categories 'other' and 'unknown' were not included.

Table 2. *Contributory Events Experienced and Age Group*

	Younger Adults ¹ %	Middle-Aged Adults ² %	Older Adults ³ %	Total ⁴ %
One-way crosstabulation				
Homeless	18	16	15	17
Health	3	4	2	3
Life	22	24	24	23
Institutional	2	0	1	1
Two-way crosstabulation				
Homeless & Health	3	7	6	6
Homeless & Life	16	13	10	14
Homeless & Institutional	3	1	2	2
Health & Life	1	1	0	1
Health & Institutional	0	0	0	0
Life & Institutional	1	0	0	1
Three-way crosstabulation				
Homeless, Health & Life	2	2	2	2
Homeless, Health & Institutional	1	0	0	0
Homeless, Life & Institutional	2	1	0	1
Health, Life & Institutional	0	0	0	0
Four-way crosstabulation				
All	0	0	0	0
None	26	31	38	29

Source: generated by the authors from administrative data on the funding and provision of EA for homeless people in Dublin
 Note: 1. Younger adult group contains 1,618 individuals; 2. Middle-aged group contains 1,612 individuals; 3. Older adult group contains 439 individuals; 4. Total group contains 3,669 individuals; 5. Chi² and Cramer's V tests have been conducted only on one-way crosstabulations.

Table 2 above examines the significant housing and life history events that single EA users experienced prior to their transition into homelessness. These are termed 'contributory events' in the table and four categories of events of this type are distinguished:

- **Homeless Events:** experiences of homelessness prior to 2016 (usually in a different region of Ireland or as part of a homeless family) and people who have engaged in rough sleeping prior to entering EA.

- **Health Events:** experiences of mental health or addiction issues. Time spent in rehabilitation facilities or hospital.
- **Life Events:** having children, having a partner who also lives in EA in Dublin. Moving to Ireland from abroad.
- **Institutional Events:** time spent in institutional facilities, including prison and foster or residential care during childhood.

Table 2 reveals that 2,624 people (or 71% of the relevant population) reported that they experienced one or more of these events prior to entering EA. 44% experienced one event, 24% experienced two events, and 3% experienced more than three events.

Variations between EA users in different age groups

Tables 1 and 2 also identify marked variations between the experiences of EA users in different age groups. According to the 2016 census, 18-34 year olds made up 22% of the Irish population, but Table 1 reveals that they made up 44% of EA users in Dublin between 2016 and 2018 (Central Statistics Office, various years). The data examined here indicates that their overrepresentation in the EA using population reflects distinct transitions into homelessness among young people.

As would be expected, prior to entering EA, the most common type of accommodation occupied by young people was sharing with parents or other family (32%). The reasons for homelessness reported by young EA users reflect this reliance on family accommodation as many cited family circumstances (22%), but a further 4% linked their entry into EA to 'breakdown of parental relationship' (see Table 1). Notably young people reported these reasons for homelessness much more often than EA users in older age groups.

Among the three age groups examined here, younger adults were most likely to report having experienced contributory events (74%) prior to entering EA (see Table 2). The most common event experienced was a homeless event (18%), which young people experienced more frequently than the older age cohorts. Younger adults were also more likely to report having experienced multiple events (29%), with over half of these individuals experiencing a combination of life and homeless events.

People in the 35 to 54 age group made up 30% of the Irish population at large in 2016, but Table 1 reveals that they represented 44% of single adult EA users in Dublin between 2016 and 2018 (Central Statistics Office, various years). Thus, this age group is also overrepresented in the homeless population in Dublin but less strongly overrepresented than people aged between 18 and 34 years.

Compared to their younger counterparts, middle-aged homeless adults were less likely to report that they became homeless due to family circumstances (12%), but they were more likely to report that they became homeless due to the breakdown of a relationship with a partner (5%), having no income source (8%), and being asked to leave accommodation (13%). Thus, while the reasons for homelessness cited by middle-aged adults, echo those cited by their younger counterparts, the significance of these different factors varies by age group. The latter reflects distinct patterns in the types of accommodation occupied by middle-aged EA users prior to

homelessness. Among the Irish population at large, 30% of this age group lived in rented accommodation in 2016 (Central Statistics Office, various years). Similarly, 25% of middle-aged EA users previously lived in private rented accommodation, paid for by their own means and a further 3% received housing allowances to subsidise their private rents.

This middle-aged cohort were almost as likely as their younger peers to experience an event prior to entering homelessness (69%). They were the most likely to experience health (4%), homeless (16%) and life (24%) events in this population. In total, 25% of this age group had experienced multiple forms of contributory events, less than the younger cohort but more than their older counterparts.

In contrast to their younger and middle-aged counterparts, older people were significantly underrepresented in the EA using population - they over made up 12% of single EA users between 2016 and 2018 and 23% of the whole Irish population in 2016 (Central Statistics Office, various years). This may reflect the fact that, among the three age cohorts of EA users under examination here, the homeless transitions of older single adults (aged 55+) were most distinctive.

For instance, among the entire Irish population, people aged 55+ have by far the highest rate of home ownership – 75% were outright home owners in 2016 and a further 12% owned with a mortgage (Central Statistics Office, various years). Whereas just 3% of older EA users had transitioned from owner occupied accommodation and 34% had transitioned from private rented accommodation (the largest proportion among the three age groups under examination). Among the single homeless population in Dublin, older EA users were the least likely to identify ‘family circumstances’ (11%) and ‘no income source’ (4%) as their reason for homelessness and the most likely to report that they had become homeless after being asked to leave their accommodation (18%). Older people were also less likely to have experienced contributory events prior to entering EA and reported particularly low levels of multiple contributory events compared to middle aged and younger EA users.

Policy Implications

The analysis presented in this paper has sought to improve understanding of how people become homeless in order to help strengthen the evidence base for homelessness prevention strategies. This analysis has focused on single adult users of emergency accommodation for homeless people in Dublin. It found that some homelessness risks are common among all sections of this population and therefore these should be the focus of ‘generalist’ homeless prevention measures. As leaving private rented accommodation is one of the common risks, the strong focus that primary homeless prevention strategies in Ireland have placed on supporting those at risk of homelessness to remain in their private rented accommodation, or secure new private or social rented tenancies, is likely to benefit many single homeless adults. These strategies’ focus on reducing risks of transitioning into homelessness from institutional accommodation also addresses a homelessness risk factor that is particularly common among single people, although, to date, far most progress has been made in supporting transitions from foster or residential care, while supports for transition from psychiatric institutions, acute hospitals, and prisons remain underdeveloped (Maher and Allen, 2014).

In addition to these generalist measures, our analysis suggests that there is a need for homelessness prevention measures that are tailored specifically to the specific risks faced by

different age cohorts. Dedicated measures have already been introduced to address the specific homelessness risks faced by young people. The marked overrepresentation of young people in Dublin's homeless population, as reported in the preceding analysis, suggests that this approach is correct, but this analysis also suggests that a broader range of secondary prevention responses to youth homelessness should be introduced. To date, these interventions have focused on young people leaving foster or residential care, but the data on homeless people in Dublin presented above, reveals that family circumstances or breakdown of relationship with family are more common drivers of youth homelessness. This points to a need for family support and mediation services and also temporary accommodation provision to provide young people with an 'integrative passage' that can provide them with space from which they can rebuild fractured familiar relationships or make a planned transition to long-term accommodation (Gaetz *et al.*, 2018).

In contrast, older people are underrepresented in the homeless population in Dublin, but the preceding analysis has revealed that this group also have a specific set of routes into homelessness which could be more effectively addressed by a distinct set of responses. Among this age group, having to leave their privately rented accommodation was a dominant proximate cause of their transition into homelessness and they were less likely to have experienced contributory events prior to their transition into homelessness than their younger and middle-aged counterparts. This suggests that primary prevention strategies, particularly stronger pathways for younger and middle aged adults into social housing (which they have very limited chances of being allocated until they are old enough to secure sheltered social housing for those unable to live independently) would be particularly effective in preventing homelessness (Bairéad and Norris, 2022).

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