

**Examining the increase of Families becoming Homeless
in Ireland and the Effect on Child Well Being.**

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ABSTRACT

This independent qualitative research project will assess the key issues which have contributed to the increase of homelessness among families in the greater Dublin area. This study will also address that homelessness has an effect on child wellbeing and mental health. The participants comprised of 5 professionals who work with the homeless through relevant organizations.

In order to collect rich, in-depth qualitative data, semi structured interviews were carried out using 16 open ended questions and thematic analysis was used to encode the data.

The research study found factors such as an insufficient governmental state response to the homeless crisis, that socio economic factors had also contributed to the increase of families becoming homeless but moreover the negative physical and mental affects which homelessness was having on families and their children.

INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is one of the great social ills facing Ireland today. In 2009 there were 23,000 places to rent yet there are now less than 6,000. Every year millions are spent on hostels, hotels and other temporary solutions to this problem. Hitherto the majority of people who were homeless were socially disadvantaged member of the lower echelons of the working class, the unemployed, substance abusers, members of an ethnic minority, the physically and mentally challenged and lone parent families. Currently we are seeing a new class of homeless people, the working homeless. The researcher will examine some of the studies that have been carried out into the subject of homelessness and its privations yet there is room for more study. Little is known what sort of factors affect families and homelessness and the effects of homelessness upon child wellbeing. Themes such as the alienation of the homeless, the actuality of homelessness, sociological and social policy related issues, the pressure upon the voluntary services and the wellbeing of children will be addressed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Homelessness is one of the most extreme forms of social exclusion and it “should be defined as a fundamental and persistent problem” Amore, K. et alia. (2011, p.20). This is a broad definition and requires clarification as it is evidently difficult to find consensus “as to what constitutes homelessness.” (Greve and Currie, 2011, P.20).

A number of national strategies are in place to reduce and prevent homelessness. These include the Integrated Strategy on Homelessness, the Youth Homelessness Strategy and the Homelessness Preventative Strategy. Local authorities also have Homeless Action Plans. A National Action Plan 2007-2016 exists as does a National Social Report 2015 that addresses some of the main areas of homelessness and social exclusion.

Giddens (2009, p. 512) asserted Homelessness is a potent example of social exclusion and an overt example of social deprivation. (Philipps, 2012, p. 12) noted that, in most cases, there are a plethora of reasons that act as catalysts for homelessness. Homelessness represents an imbalance in normal society (ibid. p.18). It is difficult to find a coherent acceptable definition of homelessness although common themes such as personality problems, discrimination, and vulnerability to exclusion, an inability to purchase or rent a place to live in the medium or long term, or locate temporary accommodation in the short term somewhat define the problem (Edgar, B., 2009, p. 7).

The researcher concludes that although these studies have been somewhat helpful in describing the homelessness problem, they fall short of providing an all-encompassing definition.

O’Sullivan (2012, p.16) asserted that any approach to ultimately solving the plight of homeless people should begin with the homeless themselves instead of the advocates who speak for them. Policies and research should rise from the bottom and spread upwards, not vice versa. A “housing led approach” is what is needed, he maintains, where the emphasis is upon the “homeless themselves” (Eustace 2014).

The Homeless

Under Section 2 of the Irish Housing Act (1988), you are considered homeless if you are “sleeping rough, staying in an emergency hostel or refuge, staying in bed and breakfast or hotel accommodation on a temporary basis, staying temporarily with friends or family because you have nowhere else to go...[or]... squatting” (Citizens Advice Bureau, retrieved 21/05/2016).

This literature review will now examine the research on homeless children, particularly amongst adolescents as they are very much at risk of harm.

Homeless Children

The National Action Plan for Social Inclusion (2007-2016, p.1) was committed to “building viable and sustainable communities, improving the lives of people living in disadvantaged areas and building social capital.” It continued that “young people who are homeless are among the most marginalised and vulnerable of all young people. Their homelessness may be symptomatic of serious underlying personal, family and social problems” (p.35). It was hoped that “the involvement of the voluntary and cooperative housing sector will be

strengthened through the establishment of a National Homelessness Consultative Committee under the aegis of the Housing Forum during 2007” (p.63).

Evidence suggests that adolescents flee “out of home” (Citizens Advice Bureau, 2016) and become homeless when family dysfunction reaches a serious level and conflict may escalate into maltreatment. Some adolescents suffer physical abuse, ranging from very severe violence (threatened or assaulted with a weapon, intentionally burned, punched with a closed fist, kicked, thrown around the room, and so forth) to mild violence (being tied up, being denied food or medical care and being held underwater (Whitbeck and Simons, 1991).Some youths experience sexual abuse (verbal requests for sexual favors, being touched sexually against one’s will, and being forced to engage in sexual activities against one’s will (Whitbeck and Simons, 1991). The neglect of youths was measured by investigating how long they were left unsupervised and how often their basic needs were not met (Yoder, Whitbeck, & Hoyt, 2001).

Homeless youths report higher levels of physical abuse and neglect and, to a lesser degree, sexual abuse than their non-homeless counterparts (Kurtz, Hick-Coolick, Jarvis, & Kurtz, 1996; Wolfe et alia, 1999). Physically and sexually abused youths ran away more often and stayed away longer than un-abused homeless youth (Kurtz & Kurtz, 1991). Serious psychological consequences exist for maltreated homeless adolescents. Those who experienced physical and sexual abuse at home are significantly more likely to meet diagnostic criteria for depression and attempt suicide than youths who have not been abused (Ryan et al., 2000). One study reported that 80% of their sample of homeless youths had a caretaker throw something at them and 43% reported being beaten up by a caretaker (Whitbeck et al., 1997a) It is clear that homeless adolescents are a diverse youth population that faces many challenges. They not only come from homes that offer little support and assistance to navigate adolescence but become involved in drug use, are victimized by

various adults and peers, become involved in criminal behaviors (often to survive), and have poor mental and physical health (Thompson, et alia., 2010).

Homeless Migrants

The world over, homelessness is mainly considered to be a shortage of affordable accommodation. Some minorities like asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants are perceived to be given greater priority by welfare agencies for housing assistance. (Spinney & Nethery, 2013).

At best this is stereotyping, at worst it is xenophobia. Research has also indicated certain patterns of migrant vulnerabilities that are different from those of indigenous homeless people. Migrants' homelessness seems to be more often directly caused by unemployment and financial problems and less frequently by addiction, psychological or psychiatric problems (Fitzpatrick et al., 2012).

Homeless lone parent families

A family is composed of at least 2 members bonded by blood ties, adoption or otherwise (Steel, Kidd and Brown, 2012, p.2). It is a popular belief within Irish society that traditionally the father is the breadwinner, the disciplinarian and head of the household; that the mother is the homemaker and nurturing influence and both parents tend to share in the education of the children.

However, there are lone parent families too (McCashin, A., 1993, p.13). Lone parents are extremely vulnerable to socio-economic problems (ibid. p.44). Many of these lone parents are women and single mothers are especially at risk from a variety of problems (physical abuse, sexual abuse, addiction and health problems) (McLanahan, S. 1994).

Seager (2011) poses that the “current approach” to helping the homeless is wrong because “physical shelter over psychological shelter” is valued. Instead of a need for bricks and mortar, he argues, “What they have lacked is a sense of worth, identity, purpose and belonging that is nurtured and maintained ultimately by emotional attachments and love relationships” (p.184). Seager appears to be putting forward the case that the concept of home is more important to a homeless person than a physical structure like a house or apartment.

Poverty

The Department of Social Protection defines poverty as a situation where people,

“Are living in poverty if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources people may be excluded and marginalized from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society.” (Welfare.ie, 2016). The Department adds that Social Exclusion is an inability to partake in society because of a lack of resources that are normally available to the general population.

Focus Ireland found that “there is very rarely only one reason for a person becoming homeless, there is usually a range of complex interacting factors involved”. (Focus Ireland, 2016). O'Sullivan (p.12, 2012) reiterate this point when he noted that a person becomes homeless for a variety of reasons, for example; Substance abuse, family breakdown and mental health issues.

The Department of the Environment Plan for Social Housing (1991) envisaged local authorities and voluntary housing groups working together to provide homes. Yet in September 2015 there were 4868 people in emergency accommodation in Ireland of whom 1,496 were children” (Dublin Region Homeless Executive, 2016).

On a positive note, Focus Ireland developed a strategy for the period 2011-2016 called ‘Holding on to a place you can call home’, which set out a plan for combating and preventing homelessness. According to Focus Ireland (2016) there are two main reasons why people end up becoming homeless, namely; either ‘individual’ or ‘structural’ explanations. The former shows up the personal characteristics, behaviour, needs, choices and vulnerabilities of people who are homeless. The latter focuses on external social and economic factors, such as housing market conditions, poverty and unemployment.

As regards to poverty, The OECD (2011) report on family wellbeing found that families with children are more likely to be poor than in previous decades. Statistics from the CSO (2010 revised, 2013) found that the highest rate of poverty applied to lone parents at a rate of 36.4% which indicates the deprivation within some Irish families. Poverty impacts negatively on the education and health of children and their wellbeing.

As is so often case with poverty, social exclusion and homelessness, the sources of these crisis and many other socio problems stem from modern existential concerns such as, a lack of security, a scarcity of fixed long term accommodation, escalating rents, and mortgage arrears. These issues have resulted in strained relationships within the family. It can be argued that “however, it is necessary to be aware that the sociology of family life cannot be reduced to the study of modernization. Sociological emphasis upon modernity (including, perhaps, the concept of modernity itself) places certain restrictions upon the development of the sociology of family life.” (Cheal, p.149, 2002).

Volunteers and Care Workers

In general, the homeless are assisted by professional care workers who are paid, either, by the Irish state, through charitable fundraising or donations from the general public, and, through the efforts of pro bono volunteers (who are acting for the common good). They are unpaid,

often spending their own money and providing assistance from their own resources to help disadvantaged individuals and families. (Youth Work Ireland, 2016) argued that;

“Volunteering has long been recognised for its very significant contribution to Irish society and the influential role that it can play in the creation of social capital, a more inclusive society, a better functioning democracy, more active citizens and an improved sense of community”

(p.7).

This is a point reiterated by NUI Galway researchers Tansey and Gonzalez-Perez (2006) who noted, “An increasing emphasis on the volunteer organisations and volunteering as part of a civic culture in Ireland” (p.1). They observed that the volunteer community can be perceived as those with, “free time to help others and help others less fortunate” (ibid, p.8).

Conclusion

Maslow referred to the hierarchy of needs amongst human beings, he mentioned “safety” (1943, p. 370) where individuals have basic nutrition, shelter and safety. The homeless do not possess that sense of safety. Homelessness is one of the most pressing issues currently facing Irish society. Rates of homelessness have increased rapidly during the recession and homeless families have had great traumas thrust upon them. Homeless children, who are part of the bedrock in the next generation of the Irish electorate, have suffered gravely.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the reasons for the increase in homelessness among families in the greater Dublin area and what are the diverse factors that can have an effect on child wellbeing?

METHOD

This research project used a qualitative approach to construct semi structured interviews with 5 consenting participants on the research questions.

Theoretical Approach

This independent qualitative research project will assess the key issues which have contributed to the increase of homelessness among families in the greater Dublin area.

Due to families experiencing homelessness, factors such as poverty has resulted in families having lack of access to food, housing and uncertainty in regards stability within the home. “These adversities have consequences for children, caregivers, and the caregiver–child relationship. Relative to economically advantaged children, those growing up in poverty

evidence higher rates of depression, behavioural problems, somatic complaints, and strained peer relationships.” (Kilmer, Cook, Crust, Strater and Haber , 2012).

This research had examined if homelessness had an effect on child wellbeing and mental health and the qualitative approach rather than quantitative approach enabled the researcher to collect the necessary rich in dept. data.

Materials

Access to participants required an access letter from the supervisor. An Information letter and consent form were given to participants prior to interviews which contained both the researcher and lecturer contact details and research objectives. Each interview was carefully transcribed verbatim excluding any identifying material. The software used to successfully transcribe the interviews was Nvivo 96, a password protected USB and laptop were used to store the data from interviews and the participant information. Nvivo was used to manage the data and aided thematic analysis.

Participants

The purpose sampling size comprised of 5 participants, 3 males and 2 females aged 32 – 44 years who were working within organizations for the homeless in Dublin. The researcher interviewed 5 participants who were randomly assigned fake names Peter, a nonprofessional, worked as a manger within a NGO, Sarah a professional who’s role was a family support worker for families experiencing homelessness, Colm a professional worked as a family key worker within one of the main GO for homeless, Ashley a nonprofessional worked as a family support worker with a non-GO for families experiencing homeless and Gareth a volunteer worker, using a semi structured questionnaire. Each of the subjects were representative of organisations who deal with the homeless

Design

This research project used a qualitative approach to construct semi structured interviews with 5 participants on the topic of examining the increase of families becoming homeless in Ireland and the effects on child wellbeing. The objective was to collect and analyse the findings using thematic analysis. In order to collect rich, in-depth qualitative data, semi structured interviews were identified as been the most appropriate method to use. A qualitative interview schedule using 16 open ended questions, addressing the general research question was developed.

The researcher analysed all the collected data and a report of findings was produced from the interpretations from the data given by the 5 participants. The participants who consented were professionals and non-professionals working within homeless organisations who were asked 16 open ended questions

Procedure

The researcher had arranged with each participant to meet in a quiet, confidential place which was convenient for the participant. The researcher conversed for a few minutes with each participant prior commencing to ease any tensions or anxiety. Consent forms were signed by each participant prior to the interviews been recorded and the interview schedule was used. A qualitative interview schedule of 16 questions was advised at times, when necessary some prompts were used. The researcher assured the participants of full confidentiality as means of signed consent forms which are stored on password protected computers and that the data would be destroyed when researcher received end of course results. Semi structured interviews were used to collect rich in-depth data. The interview times varied, from 61 minutes to 29 minutes for each participant. When each interview ended, each participant was thanked for their participation and debriefed.

Ethical Issues and Risk

This was a small scale study based on data that was collected from a sample of 5 participants. All participants were over the age of 18 and no homeless people were interviewed because they are a vulnerable group. Only people working within the homeless organisations were interviewed. Pseudonyms were attached to participants to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Due to a qualitative research method used, it would have to be taken into account that some of the participants may not have given honest answers due to personal reasons; it could be possible that some participants preferred to give socially desirable answers instead while being interviewed. The researcher assured the participants of full confidentiality as means of signed consent forms which are stored on a password protected computer, additionally the data collected was viewed and approved by the Dublin Business School Ethics board.

Data Analysis

Data analysis software CAQDAS was used with Nvivo 10 and all the data was encoded using a thematic analysis method from the semi structured interviews.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

During this study into the effects of homelessness on families, especially children, the researcher interviewed five participants (randomly assigned pseudonyms; Peter, a non-professional, worked as a manager within a NGO, Sarah a professional whose role was a family support worker experiencing crisis and homelessness, Colm, a professional working as a family key worker within one of the main GO for homeless, Ashley, a non-professional working as a family support worker with a NGO for families experiencing homeless and Gareth a volunteer worker from one of the main GO homeless services), using a semi structured questionnaire. The evidence collected in this study identified five themes; The changing face of homelessness, a place to call home, loss, impacts and effects and Volunteers, strengths and weaknesses. The researcher will deal with each main theme and identify sub themes in order.

Repeatedly the respondents all talked about dealing with homeless men, women and children, who whether through unemployment, addiction issues, and the impact of austerity or the breakdown of their normal family unit have been left without a place to call a home of

their own. Some of the participants were from paid government organisations (G.O.'s) and some were unpaid from non-government organisations (N.G.O.'s). There was a definite commonality of experiences and attitudes amongst the interviewees regarding homelessness in 21st century Ireland.

The Changing face of Homelessness:

The researcher noted similar comments from a paid homeless worker and an unpaid volunteer regarding what homelessness represents to them.

What comes initially to my mind are words like uprooted, wounded, lost, unequal and unfair society, the haves and have nots, cardboard in doorways, the disadvantaged, children, addiction, mental health issues, professionals, employees. A few years ago the professional would not have been in there, they didn't form part of that picture (Sarah)

The researcher recognised certain emotive adjectives and images, for example, lost, disadvantaged and cardboard in doorways. Sarah was well spoken and articulate. She understood the tragedy and depth of the homeless situation yet appeared to believe that she could have a positive effect with the homeless whom she encountered. Another participant spoke about how he'd been contacted by a mother and son from an affluent area of Dublin who had been made homeless through personal and family reasons.

Homelessness occurs in any area, not just deprived areas. A woman called me recently. She came from a privileged area and she was well spoken, there was problems within the home. She didn't drink or smoke. So too her son, both were well mannered. Every family is affected the same, they found themselves also in a position of been homeless (Peter)

Homelessness does not respect socio economic status, it would appear. Peter spoke of his concerns about how crisis cases were dealt with by the state.

There is no prioritisation if you're pregnant, but if you look into the law, there's supposedly laws in place to protect the unborn child. When you're homeless you are just a statistic, just a name, date of birth, regardless of situation (Peter)

This depersonalization of the homeless community is apparently being made worse by the increase of people been maltreated, irrespective of who they are and where they are from.

Family homelessness is on the rise to huge proportions, back in early 2013 there was one hundred and forty families and three years later, 783 families are the latest figures in Dublin alone. So what was perceived as being homeless 4 years ago has changed today. For example, in my case, I work with 4 of those families who have both parents working so what I'm trying to say is that the families becoming homeless today are due to circumstance, system failures more so rather than personal issues (Colm)

All the participants seemed to be critical of society's uncaring and impersonal attitude towards the homeless. All participants revealed frustration in the inadequacy of Government policies and strategies to deal with the actuality of homelessness.

Recently I've noticed a new face to homelessness. It's not just the rough sleepers, drug addicts and alcoholics, it's the young women with children... one thing they have in common is that they are accessing homeless services and they are at rock bottom (Peter)

In contrast to Sarah who was clear, calm and determined, Peter and Colm were emotional and passionate when he spoke. There are two sub themes, as well, that the researcher noticed, namely; the stereotyping of the homeless and the working homeless.

Stereotypes, stigma and misconceptions.

Personally I am not seeing the attitudes changing and the stigma attached been shifted, although there seems to a lot of the right things being said. I'm not seeing the changes. There's always the presumption that the homeless are perceived to be there because of their own bad decisions, their fault (Ashley)

This over generalization of the homeless situation is concerning, although not surprising. People with homes appear to project their biases and opinions on to the homeless without looking at the underlying issues. "Their self-esteem and the stigmas attached are a huge burden for children to possess. It's difficult for that child to manage." (Colm) This stereotyping of the homeless is also seen in the following extract.

Some people think that homeless is just a rough sleeper in a sleeping bag on the street but there are also are homeless people on very low incomes living in rented accommodation, it could be a single mother with children (Gareth)

Sarah continued this theme of stigmatisation, “The prospect of building modular homes is waste of money. Just build homes because segregation and stigmatization will happen if a family moves to a modular home.” (Sarah) She also bemoaned the indifference and scorn with which she and her homeless cases were dealt with by the governmental homeless services and agencies.

The working homeless

It was observed in the interviews that there were references to a new type of homeless people; the working homeless. A participant observed that we are seeing a new type of homeless.

There is a new cohort of homelessness, the people who are working full time with children, if they lose their rental property there is every chance that they may not find a suitable property within an affordable rate. The rental market. It’s unattainable even for the people who are working. There is no rent regulation in place and there’s a need to increase rent caps (Sarah)

This observation revealed from Colm highlights those on low incomes, although they are working, are at high risk of becoming homeless.

It’s often the case, if parents’ working hours have been reduced or through unemployment, it has led to financial constraints and being unable to pay rent/mortgage resulting in evictions. The current schemes from government are not adequate to support families when that situation happens (Colm)

These working homeless are people who are working full time or part time but their outgoings are greater than their incomes. They lose their rental property or home and they cannot find a suitable place at an affordable rate. “Even working people who are renting and been told you have to leave, find somewhere else that to me is been then homeless. You are really homeless unless you are guaranteed a place to live” (Ashley).

A Place to call Home:

The homeless are a disparate group, rough sleepers, and people sleeping on their friends’ sofas, families in hostels, B&BS and hotels and in other temporary accommodation. The

homeless are obviously, individuals without the ability to provide accommodation for themselves. Some of the homeless are on rent allowance, others are in emergency accommodation services like hotels and hostels. These were meant to be short term temporary solutions for the homeless. These places lack security and cannot be considered homes.

Vulnerability and treating the homeless person as an individual, not just a number were two evident sub themes.

The researcher noticed the compassion and directness of the comments of two interviewees in particular. The participant's collective experiences illustrate the necessity and urgency for the Irish government to respond to the current lack of housing stock and build homes for its citizens.

Sarah asserted, "It's a core fundamental right and of importance that one has a safe place to call home and people are being deprived of that. Furthermore, Peter and Colm both share an emotive response in relation to how disparate the homeless are being treated.

Peter lays blame to the Irish government in its lack of response to increase its supply of social housing, "The government needs to build homes. It is a horrendous way to live."

Interestingly Ashley, reveals concern that migrants presenting themselves as homeless in Ireland is already placing strain on the states already limited services and housing supply available to its citizens. "Migrants coming here has put more pressure on an already limited amount of housing available." (Ashley),

This seemed to be a prosaic and heartfelt assessment of the situation. It's very saddening, it's overwhelming at times but ultimately you need to be understanding and supportive towards them. It means someone being on rent allowance, a rough sleeper, a homeless person is without a "home" not just bricks. (Colm). This empathy was reinforced by another interviewee.

Telling your child to shush all time, your child been suppressed all the time, the parent also been suppressed, walking through the hotel lobby with head down, your child is told to be quiet at all times, no calling out. These are the stories you are been told, everyone seems to be saying the same things, must be the truth (Peter)

Treating the homeless person as an individual

The revelations from the participants in relation to their observations and experiences while working with the homeless illustrated how much trauma that they actually experience on a daily basis and how much suffering that the homeless people endure. “People don’t give them the time of day, Hundreds of passer byes have walked by them on the street without any acknowledgement and I am the first person that’s mentioned a word, said hello to them.” (Peter) The next interviewee revealed a clear direct response and identified the basic necessities in which homeless people people and families are in need of in Ireland.

The rough sleepers need food, somewhere to wash, a place to sleep, they need extra supports such as link to addiction services, mental health services and the services need to improve in regards the family (Ashley)

Furthermore, the researcher elicited this response from the interviewee about a case where, being treated as a normal individual when you are homeless was notable by its absence.

Homeless people come in all shapes and sizes. Their needs vary. Some may need supported accommodation long term, like addicts and others may simply need access to affordable housing. Overall I think that homeless people need services and supports which respect their dignity, that do not disempower them (Sarah)

The researcher then prompted this comment from a participant about where the problems lie. “Going through the system, it’s a lot of complex cases, though that basic system of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs has to be met” (Sarah)

Vulnerability

The previous litany of negative statements about the effects of not having a place to call home supported the observation of vulnerability as a sub theme. Ashley’s words on the powerlessness of the homeless person were insightful.

It's disempowering people in a way. It's a stressful situation. They are without a home, they already may have a baby, often very young and that is just a tiny insight into what that person is experiencing and to be met with somebody who is rude and unhelpful, it's just not good enough (Ashley)

Colm was more balanced in his assessment and explains the difficulties he has endured but also the job satisfaction in successfully helping those in need.

I am working with vulnerable persons who can be chaotic, can be aggressive but they are extremely vulnerable so some days are more difficult than others but for the most part I do enjoy it, if I can help someone that's all that really matters at the end of the day. (Colm)

Both participants express the complexities and diversities when they worked with the homeless, that it can be at times an extremely challenging and stressful for both parties involved. The participants revealed that the homeless were a vulnerable group of people who need understanding and support from the services available to them.

Loss

Loss was a recurring theme throughout the findings and all the participants shared their variations of what the homeless had lost for on a psychological sense and also on a financial and material level. "These families have ended up losing their livelihood and homes as a result." (Gareth)

Loss of identity and dignity

There is another notable sub theme in this study, namely; loss of identity and dignity. They are just a number to some services out there, a statistic. It's a name and date of birth that is just asked at the time. That's it and then being told, there's no bed, and the Freephone number. Being told go to Grafton Street and get a sleeping bag. That's it (Peter)

Colm and Sarah both identified what children lose as a consequence of been homeless and were concerned about the effects it had upon children.

On a practical level, the loss of their school, loss of their friends which is huge, the loss of all that is familiar, their sense of self as they moved out of a home that they have lived in and is all that they have known. It's their place of attachment and identity. That's lost (Colm)

Another participant was concerned about child safety. “No safe place to play, confined to that one place all the time. The right to play is taken away from those kids” (Sarah)

These revelations expressed from the participants indicate the types of loss which ultimately affect the children. As a consequence of been homeless, having been placed in one room emergency accommodation and the need for alternative options, the family’s needs should be individually assessed in order to reduce the stress and strain in which the family are already experiencing.

The impacts and effects of homelessness:

Amongst the homeless, evidence exists that there are pronounced family problems, they are poorly treated by members of the public and the social services, there are high levels of stress amongst children and there is an overall deterioration in their emotional wellbeing of families.

There is desperation accepting substandard living conditions rather than accessing the homeless services. This is the current situation within Ireland. It impacts on children, their security having stability, on their routine, their consistency and especially on the younger children which is key in terms of their development, management of their wellbeing (Sarah)

The following participant added a valuable insight in to the psychological damage caused by homelessness. “Homelessness can have devastating consequences on a family. Depression can be a factor in affecting a mother/father and they can lose everything because of it.” (Gareth)

There was an issue too regarding privacy and personal space that the researcher uncovered.

No privacy, parents often have to go sleep same time as children in the room. This may have some consequences, such as attachment issues and the natural separation which occurs between parent and the child. The possible implications, kids experiencing natural separation at a later age rather than non- homeless families living in separate bedrooms (Sarah)

It is evident that the child has no say or choice in to how it affects them. This interviewee put it quite pithily and vigorously, “They are powerless.” (Sarah)

There are huge effects, the biggest thing is the stress on all the family, they don’t have their own front door, they don’t have normal life, they can’t have friends over, in regards to health, they are unable to cook for themselves, no certainty in where they’re staying, tensions get strained and relationships too because they are homeless (Colm)

Families and their maltreatment

The current system does not treat people well who are at risk of becoming homeless.

Most times, children are listening to this, exposed and subjected to this on the day of becoming homeless. It would appear that the children are been used to confirm that they are also homeless on the day, with the parents so it is not just the adults presenting as homeless. The agency wants to know for sure it’s a family case by subjecting them to do that (Ashley)

Ashley), was speaking here about a family who knew in advance that they were to be made homeless yet through a bureaucratic nightmare they could not apply to get assistance from the local authority until the day of eviction. To make matters worse, the family were obliged to take their children into the homeless unit with them.

Sarah concurred with Ashley’s observations about the maltreatment of families by the homeless services,

My frustration lies with working with the authorities, that part of the work is torturous, they work within an enormously bureaucratic system that’s inefficient, tedious and laborious even the extent of the form filling involved. My clients and I have been treated with utter contempt (Sarah)

The Sub theme that emerged here is concerned with psychological problems and crises.

Routine and stability go when you are homeless. Issues with emergency accommodation means that often you could be a long distance from a place to work or school so huge parental stress is involved in terms of travelling, child care. There’s a stress on their mental health in the wider family unit, as parents are less available to their children and this has an impact on the children. Their self-esteem, the stigma attached and it’s a huge burden for children to possess. She then forcefully concluded that “it’s difficult for that child to manage”. (Sarah)

Volunteers, Strengths and weaknesses:

Some interviewees were volunteers who worked pro bono (for the common good). Some of them were paid care workers. They all agreed they possessed a lack of faith in the government's response to homelessness and as Sarah put it, there was too much "bureaucracy, red tape and "contempt" facing the homeless. However, Gareth offered a more positive assessment of the work he carried out. "It's great having worked with the homeless, you discover within yourself that this can happen to absolutely anybody. As a consequence of the recession, losing your home, high rents, families are struggling and that. They are just like basically everyone else but struggling more than others" (Gareth). Colm interestingly revealed how inaccessible the homeless services are in wait time to be assigned a key worker. "They are affected through the lack of support. Their children are lacking counselling services. It takes up to 9 months to get a family key worker."

Systemic Failure

Each participant expressed clearly how they each encountered many problems while working with the homeless in Ireland, that the problems they are encountering on a daily basis while working with the relevant services are in fact much worse than what people are currently aware of.

Eh, I'd probably say the State, there's two sides to that coin. Rent allowance was meant to be a short term solution but they have not increased it and rent has increased, for example up to 30% or more in some areas for these families (Gareth)

Gareth asserts which factors in his opinion have contributed in the increase of families becoming homeless in Ireland, that the insufficient rent caps no longer cover the private rental costs. This issue has now resulted in many families becoming homeless due to no longer been able to rent a home through means of rental allowance alone.

Then the other side of the coin, social housing stock has not been significantly built in a number of decades. It's led to the increased housing list for people on rent allowance. I think it's actually bigger than that statement released by Focus Ireland that there's at least one family becoming homeless a day. There is more than that. Sometimes I am sitting here and that phone would ring 1,2,3,4 times one after another, it's another family you know and they could be getting evicted today or tomorrow (Peter)

The government's policies were at fault, it was argued. "It is a huge component, it is a reflection of structural failure and systemic failure" (Sarah)

The participant's responses indicate that there are many systematic failures and failure upon the government to act sufficiently to the needs of those who are homeless.

Through system failures, they feel let down, from a wider sense. They feel like their lives has been put on pause. They feel utter frustration. Some people are then so ingrained with their addiction that they can't function normally within society, finding themselves homeless for long time. I also have worked with people with terrible mental health issues also (Colm)

What is abundantly obvious here is the despair and nihilism facing the homeless. There is an almost complete absence of hope for the future.

First port of call is that they complete a housing assessment form and don't have their own forms, and they couldn't tell us where to get one of their forms to complete it so that was just the start of a really difficult process and my efforts to assist this most vulnerable client who is also dealing with a lot of other complex issues, attempting to help them navigate this system, about how it's done, it feels to me that people are put off going through that process (Sarah)

Homeless Services:

It was evident that there was a lack of services available to meet the demand, it would appear to this researcher, on the basis of some interviewees in particular.

I find the services are limited and lacking. For example, a major issue is that a family can only present themselves as being homeless to services on the day that they are actually homeless so their hands were tied until the day came when actually homeless, but in many cases they have known two months prior that they becoming homeless (Peter)

This tragic state of affairs prompted Peter to observe, "What is found is that the relevant organizations cannot predict how much emergency accommodation is needed in advance so

this leads to that family presenting themselves as homeless on that day have been told “sorry there is no availability, you will have to self-accommodate”.

The exasperation in her voice betrayed her irritation with the government offices with which she has to liaise, one could see.

The Dublin City Council Homeless Department is not very accessible, two hours in the morning and two hours in afternoon only. When every other avenue is exhausted, DCC will acknowledge their homeless status which, by then is pretty dire. It should be enough that the vulnerable person is showing up and that their needs should be simply met. (Ashley)

Recommendations from participants

The researcher noticed a consensus among the participants that a “grassroots” approach “from the bottom up” should be adopted, that there are systemic failures in local government and the political process.

60 to 70% of cases are due to landlords increasing the rents above rent allowance caps. Our recent findings are for most of them, okay, it’s their retirement fund or income. For the sake of giving those families the extra 200 euros monthly from the Social Welfare, they then would not have to go through the trauma. Long term, it saves money financially and also emergency accommodation costs (Colm)

I think that community led support groups need to be in place nationwide and the grassroots, non-political, without a financial agenda (Peter). Gareth supported Peter’s opinion when he said,

It should be the community groups within the families’ own area. They could replace the Council because the Council should not be politically-led. It should be those who are in the community, are active within the community, a grassroots-up system (Gareth)

Discussion

From the research findings, some interesting points emerged from the participant's responses to the research questions asked. One such interesting point would be from Colm who maintained that a certain level of training amongst volunteers ought to be achieved and that Garda vetting of helpers and care workers should be a topic for discussion. He observed that NGO homeless workers should require Garda vetting and that a new law should be implemented to professionalise the NGO workers which would aid in the protection of those whom Homeless.

Overall the researcher observed responses from the interviewees that alluded to a number a number of reasons why homelessness has spiralled. Austerity, high rents, lack of housing

stock, substance abuse, criminality, public attitudes and government policies have all contributed to the problem. On a final note, the researcher recalled the comments of one participant (Ashley) who protested that the government need a dedicated minister for Housing.

The aim of this qualitative research was to identify the current, relevant characteristics of the homeless in Ireland and to develop new topics for study within the field of homelessness studies. It sought to enhance and explain earlier studies. Furthermore, it attempted to broaden our knowledge in this area with respect to the stress and strains upon families, especially children who are facing or have endured homelessness.

The evidence from the findings of this research tends to show that there is a strong correlation between social disadvantage and a propensity towards homelessness. This is in line with previous research. If one is born into poverty, one is more likely to become homeless. Yet it is not a particularly strong relationship for, as this research has shown, persons from apparently affluent backgrounds are becoming homeless. Other predictors of homelessness such as unemployment, addiction to drugs, unstable family relationships, the risk of being sexually abused and a poor standard of education were noticed. This too, is in accord with previous research. However, this research did seem to suggest a new trend in the pattern of homelessness, namely the working homeless. This new subset of the homeless community has placed additional demands upon the already overwhelmed homelessness sections within the social welfare system.

It is undeniable that the homeless crisis is a main topic of discussion within the political landscape in Ireland. Yet the information found from the interviews was at times, conflicting and, compelling heartrending and contradictory.

The literature indicated that there was a relationship between socio economic class and homelessness. However, the strength of this correlation has yet to be shown. Most of the research has been very narrow and it was carried out under the assumption that poverty and homelessness were inextricably linked. There are three types of homeless as far as this researcher can see. Men and women who are homeless, homeless couples without children and homeless couples with children (homeless) families. There were three distinct entities which emerged from both the literature reviewed and the research findings.

Little is known about what sort of factors affect families who become homeless in Ireland and the impact that homelessness can have on the mental wellbeing of children. Previous studies and research have indicated that there is a correlation between upbringing and the likelihood of homelessness but a very limited amount of research has found on the effects which homelessness has on children especially in Ireland. This illustrates that there is a gap in the knowledge and that the findings from this research will contribute to the previous research.

These interviews have identified in part, a completely new trend in homelessness, the new homeless. The working homeless are a ripe topic for this discussion insofar as so very little research has been done in relation to it. In the past the majority of the homeless were unemployed.

In this study, it became apparent that substance abusers, for example, drug addicts, alcoholics and other troubled persons, do not receive the help they need to reintegrate into Irish society. The homeless who suffer from mental health issues are similarly overlooked by the social services.

Furthermore, it was noticed how racist are the attitudes amongst the home dwelling population towards those less fortunate than them. Comments about the treatment of the

homeless as objects or less than human abounded in the interviews. Frequent references were made to the stereotyping and stigmatization of them. Statements upon the maltreatment of these most disadvantaged persons were made. What was most saddening seemed to be the apparent blaming of the homeless themselves for their current predicament by others. Culpability for the crisis seemed to reflect upon its victims, for example, lone parents and drug addicts rather than upon structural issues. (McCashin, 1993) reminds us that lone parents are extremely vulnerable to socio economic problems which demonstrates that lone parents are high risk in becoming homeless.

Another pattern that was seen in the interviews concerned the problems facing homeless children.

This is a relatively new phenomenon. Children are now living on the streets or in unsuitable temporary accommodation and everything suffers. Diet, physical health, their mental health, education and development are adversely affected. Statistics from the CSO (2010) found that homelessness impacts negatively on health and education of children. Homeless of children are exposed to crime and substance abuse. From the literature (Edgar, 2009) reminds us that currently it is difficult to define homelessness, there are many variations such as those living in emergency temporary accommodation

What are the root causes of homelessness? There are system failings, social policy blunders, unclear strategies and inept political responses according to the participants with regards to homelessness. The perception that the authorities are uncaring permeated through the interviews as well.

There were ideas however, to improve the lot of the homeless. Participants recommended appointing a specific Minister for Homeless Affairs. A grassroots approach was mentioned as a catalyst for improvement. This finding was also found from the literature review, A “housing led approach” is what is needed, he maintains, where the emphasis is upon the “homeless themselves” (Eustace 2014). Changes in legislation was proposed to ameliorate the homeless situation.

On a contentious note, there was a disparity between some of the subjects in respect of their views on Garda Vetting. It can best be described thus.

On the one hand, there were paid care workers who were wary that untrained, unsupervised and un-vetted volunteers were attempting to help the homeless. The feeling amongst the professionals was that those volunteering might lack the appropriate information and relevant skills for dealing with the homeless. It followed then that those who help the homeless need to be vetted by the Gardaí.

On the other hand, a subject (Peter) who was a volunteer with a prior criminal record, felt that an unfettered approach from the bottom upwards was the best way to go.

It could be asserted that the volunteer workers questioned the motives of the paid professional workers with an element of disdain. One might infer that volunteers viewed paid care workers with caution and felt that the salaried workers acted as if it was simply a job to them, and that financial reward, not altruism, was their main focus. One might also infer that a paid care worker is not as likely to question the status quo as volunteers.

Conclusion

Whereas this study was informative and shed new light on an important issue, that is, the working homeless, it was not flawless. Ideally, in a future study, the sample should be larger and might even include the opinions of the homeless themselves.

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To Whom it May Concern,

Avril Dolan is a final year Social Science student at Dublin Business School. As part of her final year dissertation Avril is conducting research into the relationship between homelessness and child wellbeing under my supervision. Avril would like to interview professionals working in homeless services to seek their views on this matter. I would be grateful if you could accommodate her in any way. The research is conducted under strict ethical principles which Avril will explain in detail before beginning. All interviews are entirely anonymous and confidential.

Yours Sincerely,

Niall Hanlon

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An examination of the rise of homelessness among Irish families

My name is Avril Dolan and I am conducting research that explores the key issues which have contributed to the increase of homelessness among families in the greater Dublin area.

You are invited to take part in this study and participation involves an interview that will take roughly 40 minutes. Participation is completely voluntary and so you are not obliged to take part. If you do take part and any of the questions do raise difficult feelings, you do not have to answer that question, and/or continue with the interview.

Participation is confidential. If, after the interview has been completed, you wish to have your interview removed from the study this can be accommodated up until the research study is published.

The interview, and all associated documentation, will be securely stored and stored on a password protected computer.

It is important that you understand that by completing and submitting the interview that you are consenting to participate in the study.

Should you require any further information about the research, please contact

Avril Dolan email avril_dolan@yahoo.ie or Dr. Niall Hanlon. niall.hanlon@dbs.ie

Thank you for participating in this study.

Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____

Qualitative Research Questions.

1. Can you tell me about, how you are involved in working with the homeless?
2. Tell me what it was like while working with the homeless
3. When you think of the word homeless, what immediately comes to mind?
4. What is your reaction or thoughts, when you see homeless people?
5. Current research has found that there was a 50% increase of families becoming homeless in Ireland from the previous year, what are your views on that?
6. What do you think are the reasons why there is an increase in families becoming homeless in Ireland?
7. Who do you think is responsible?
8. What are the needs of the homeless?
9. How accessible and available are the services for the homeless?
10. How in your opinion, does homelessness affect a family?
11. What are your views on the homeless charities and the voluntary groups who seek to protect homeless children and adults?
12. Do you think the Irish government is doing enough in regards the current housing crisis?
13. What would you like to see the Irish government do in regards help alleviate the housing crisis?
14. Who do you think should be leading the policy making decisions for the homeless?
15. In your opinion, is Irish society being proactive in its response to the current homeless issue? Why do you think that?
16. Is there anything more, which you would like to add?

