



Mercy Law
Resource Centre

EXCLUDED AND LEFT BEHIND:

The Lived Experience of Long-Term Family Homelessness on Minority Ethnic Families and the Effects on Their Children





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About Mercy Law Resource Centre

Mercy Law Resource Centre (MLRC) is an independent law centre, registered charity and company limited by guarantee. MLRC provides free legal advice and representation for people who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. It also seeks to advocate for change in laws, policies and attitudes which unduly and adversely impact people who are at the margins of our society.

Our core services include free legal advice, legal representation, legal support and training to organisations and professionals, and policy work.

MLRC is committed to the principles of human rights, social justice and equality. Partnership and working in collaboration with others is at the heart of our approach and MLRC has built strong working relationships with organisations and professionals working in the field of homelessness and housing.

MLRC's vision is of a society where each individual lives in dignity and enjoys equal rights, in particular the right to a home, which is fundamental to each human being. MLRC's vision is also of a society where every individual enjoys equal access to justice and legal recourse in order to vindicate those rights.



Introduction

MLRC has provided legal advice and representation to individuals and families facing homelessness or housing difficulty since 2009. Over the last fifteen years, MLRC has provided legal assistance, advocacy support, and legal information and advice to those clients. MLRC has also frequently provided full legal representation in public law cases, acting for clients in their legal challenges of decisions made by public bodies, most frequently housing authorities. MLRC draws upon this casework experience to inform our legal and policy recommendations.

In the course of our work, and particularly since 2015, MLRC has noted the rapidly increasing numbers of individuals and families from minority groups accessing our service. This includes Irish nationals who are of ethnic minority and non-Irish nationals from both EU and non-EU countries. We have provided legal advice and representation to members of the Traveller community and the Roma community, who often present with the most acute and urgent legal issues. In light of both the ongoing record levels of homelessness in Ireland, coupled with an increasingly diverse population, MLRC believes that this report is a crucial tool that can be used in vindicating the human rights of minority ethnic families facing homelessness.

This report seeks to provide new insights into the experience of minority ethnic families in emergency accommodation and the impact of homelessness on their children, specifically through its qualitative and interview-centred approach. Through one-to-one engagement with minority ethnic families and keyworkers,

this research aims to provide the reader with a holistic understanding of the day-to-day lives of, and challenges faced by, minority ethnic families living in emergency accommodation. MLRC believes that the lived experiences of such families are valuable sources of knowledge that should inform the laws and policies that impact their lives and has thus formulated policy and legislative recommendations grounded in the findings of this report as well as MLRC's casework experience. The recommendations highlight the potential to effect positive change in this area.

MLRC is grateful to the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) for supporting our research and publication of this report.

MLRC would also like to express our sincere thanks to Dr. Méabh Savage, Lecturer in the Department of Social Care and Early Childhood at South East Technological University, for authoring this much-needed report.

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Executive Summary

This report explores the lived experience of family homelessness for minority ethnic families and the effects on their children. It seeks to build on extant research on family homelessness to reveal how long-term homelessness impacts on the equality and human rights of minority ethnic children.

The research evidences the importance of recognising diversity within lived experiences of family homelessness. This is because people have intersectional identities and so can experience multiple forms of disadvantage, which can interact to shape their entries into experiences of, and exits from homelessness. The research shows how these intersectional inequalities (including race/ethnicity, class, gender, migration) combine with racialized institutional barriers to prolong families' experiences of homelessness. This has detrimental effects on minority ethnic families and their children. As this report will show, the lack of an adequate definition of family homelessness means that the intersectional needs and rights of minority ethnic families and their children are frequently invisible in responses to family homelessness. This has disabling effects on children's lives.

The research design is qualitative and involved a desk-based review of research on the topic to date. The qualitative methodology involved semi-structured interviews with 3 minority ethnic families and 9 keyworkers supporting families.

Key insights that emerged from the literature review point to the structurally marginal positions occupied by minority ethnic families in Ireland. As a result of this, they face multiple barriers to accessing adequate housing independently. Additionally, research to date shows how minority ethnic families frequently experience housing exclusion, inadequate housing, and hidden homelessness prior to their entries into official homelessness. These prolong their experiences of housing exclusion and can be a significant source of trauma for them.

There is currently a dearth of in-depth research into the lived experiences of minority ethnic families living in emergency accommodation and the effects this has on their children in Ireland. A goal of this study is to start to fill that gap. The available research to date reveals the hugely damaging effects of

homelessness on families and children in general. Additionally, the reality of homelessness as an adverse childhood experience is also recognised in research. This is because the conditions of emergency accommodation are antithetical to family life. They can impact on the resources which enable caregiving, including emotional, cultural, economic and social. Positive parent child relations can act as a buffer to the negative effects of homelessness. However, the conditions of homelessness can negate this protective factor, particularly when parents are unsupported in their caregiving.

Building on existing research, key findings from this study confirm the nuanced ways in which the conditions of emergency accommodation negate family life for minority ethnic families over time. The relational and cultural dimensions that are essential to enabling family life are diminished under the conditions of homelessness and emergency accommodation. The findings reveal how the lack of access to culturally appropriate accommodation and support creates an added layer of stress and exclusion for families and children. This can result in family separation and breakdown. It can further diminish the resources needed to support caregiving, including cultural socialisation, which can act as a protective factor for children's identity development. Additionally, the hostile and discriminatory conditions many families find themselves in exacerbates the stresses and challenges resulting from their homelessness and the structurally marginal positions they occupy in wider society.

Accounts from participants reveal the daily grinds of homelessness and the work involved in trying to exit homelessness. Despite recognition in policy of the importance of supporting families and children to exit homelessness, participants report a hierarchy in emergency accommodation. This creates inequalities in access to the support needed to exit homelessness for some families. It can prolong minority ethnic families' experiences in emergency accommodation. Evidence shows that this is particularly the case for those experiencing the highest levels of exclusion and intersectional needs.

As with previous research, the findings also reveal structural and institutional barriers to accessing the support needed to



exit homelessness. These barriers combine with a classed and racialized housing market to prolong families' experiences of homelessness. While some participants reported evidence of good practices, accounts suggest that these appear to be the result of individual actions and not the result of a coherent policy response. Furthermore, a lack of training and awareness of the traumatic effects of homelessness, coupled with a lack of knowledge of the rights of minority families, can prolong the traumas of homelessness for them. Evidence of the pervasiveness of discrimination throughout the housing system, amongst housing authorities and throughout the private-rental sector, makes access to housing even more challenging for some families who lack access to support. The findings also reveal however, that where support is provided, it can unintentionally reproduce cultural assimilation, as opposed to challenging a racialized and classed housing market.

The consequences of living in these unequal conditions over time are disabling for children and families. The findings build on research to date to show how children from minority ethnic families often experience prolonged and embodied traumas as a result of their lived experiences of family homelessness. Participants repeatedly spoke of how children are being left behind in every aspect of their lives. Children's experiences can vary depending on the conditions of the accommodation they are living in. More profound effects were reported in private emergency accommodation (PEAs), which lack cultural awareness and on-site trained staff. The conditions attached to living in PEAs can invisibilise children's developmental and emotional needs. Children embody the climate of fear and threat they are living in, as "everything is resting on you having to be good..." and their behaviour can become a condition to access housing.

Living in such conditions long-term impacts on every area of children's lives, in terms of their ability to grow and develop, to have a family life, to play, to develop friendships, on their mental health, and their ethnic identity. It can lead to a loss of connection to their peers, their community, and the wider community. It can impact on their learning and access to education. They can lose all hope, as one keyworker described about one young person. Reports reveal how children and young people experience a double stigmatisation – as a minority group in emergency accommodation, but also within school and wider society. The cumulative and traumatic effects of living in family homelessness are embodied by children and expressed through their play, their behaviour, and in their disconnection from "anything that might be good for them...all kind of waiting on...when I'm housed I'll go to..."

Despite there being a body of evidence which shows the detrimental effects that living in emergency accommodation long-term has on families and children, participants overwhelmingly reported the absence of children's best interests being considered in responses to family homelessness. Evidence of a lack of understanding and knowledge around the needs and rights of ethnic minority children to adequate housing exacerbates the unequal conditions that families are living in. Adequate housing is central to enabling family life and to an adequate standard of living. Minority ethnic families know this, but lack access to the resources to independently secure adequate housing themselves. The barriers to accessing adequate housing have disabling effects on all other areas of their lives and on the enjoyment of numerous human rights. This includes the principle of non-discrimination, the right to health, education, employment, participation, privacy and family life. As a result of this, children from minority ethnic families are being left behind.



Recommendations for Legislative Change

- a. MLRC recommends that the definition of homelessness in section 2 of the Housing Act 1988 be amended to better capture the lived experiences of families and children experiencing homelessness, centre the best interests of the child, and better capture families experiencing hidden homelessness.
- b. MLRC recommends amending section 22 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 to introduce a standardised, legislative “homeless priority” to be included in every local authority’s allocation scheme.
- c. MLRC recommends the standardisation of social housing waiting lists across local authority areas by way of amendment to the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009.
- d. MLRC recommends the creation of an oversight and reporting responsibility for local authorities to provide clarity on what steps are being taken to assist families to exit homelessness where they have spent in excess of two years in emergency accommodation, modelled on section 22(12) of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009.
- e. MLRC recommends the creation of a Statutory Instrument, modelled on regulation 12 of the Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011 (as amended), to codify statutory timelines for the completion of assessments for priority status on social housing waiting lists pursuant to the relevant Allocation Scheme and, separately, for the completion of homeless assessments made under the Housing Act 1988.
- f. MLRC recommends legislating a means and responsibility for local authorities to engage with other Government agencies to confirm and share information on families due to enter the State via family reunification prior to their arrival, potentially modelled on section 15 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1997.
- g. MLRC recommends the amendment of section 10 of the Housing Act 1988 to place the existing administrative law responsibility to provide written reasons for decisions on a statutory footing, similar to the duty to provide same contained in regulation 15(2) of the Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011 (as amended).
- h. MLRC reiterates their earlier recommendation for Regulations to be issued by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage under section 10(11) (a) of the Housing Act 1988, specifying and restricting the type of emergency accommodation that individuals and families may be accommodated in, ensuring therefore its suitability and adequacy.



Recommendations for Policy Change

- a. MLRC recommends the standardisation of minimum standards across all family emergency accommodation – both public and private – in respect of adequate cooking, washing, and child play facilities, in particular such that they fulfil the cultural and/or religious needs of minority families.
- b. MLRC recommends that all staff involved in the provision of social housing supports and emergency accommodation be required to undertake comprehensive cultural competence, trauma-informed, and anti-discrimination training. This should be accompanied by the introduction of clear procedures through which individuals accessing emergency accommodation can report instances of discrimination or hostility.
- c. MLRC recommends, in the absence of legislative definition, the issuance of a circular or official government guidance stating clearly the criteria to be used by local authorities in determining when particular families should be assigned to NGO operated family hubs.
- d. MLRC recommends for all staff involved in the provision of social housing supports and emergency accommodation to be provided with appropriate training in relation to domestic violence, and for such training to include guidance on how to approach cases of domestic violence within minority families.
- e. MLRC recommends the government prioritise increasing the stock and availability of larger multi-bedroom social housing so as to accommodate larger families in a manner compliant with the overcrowding rules laid out in the Housing Act 1966.



Chapter 1: Introduction and background context

1.0 The growing crisis of child and family homelessness

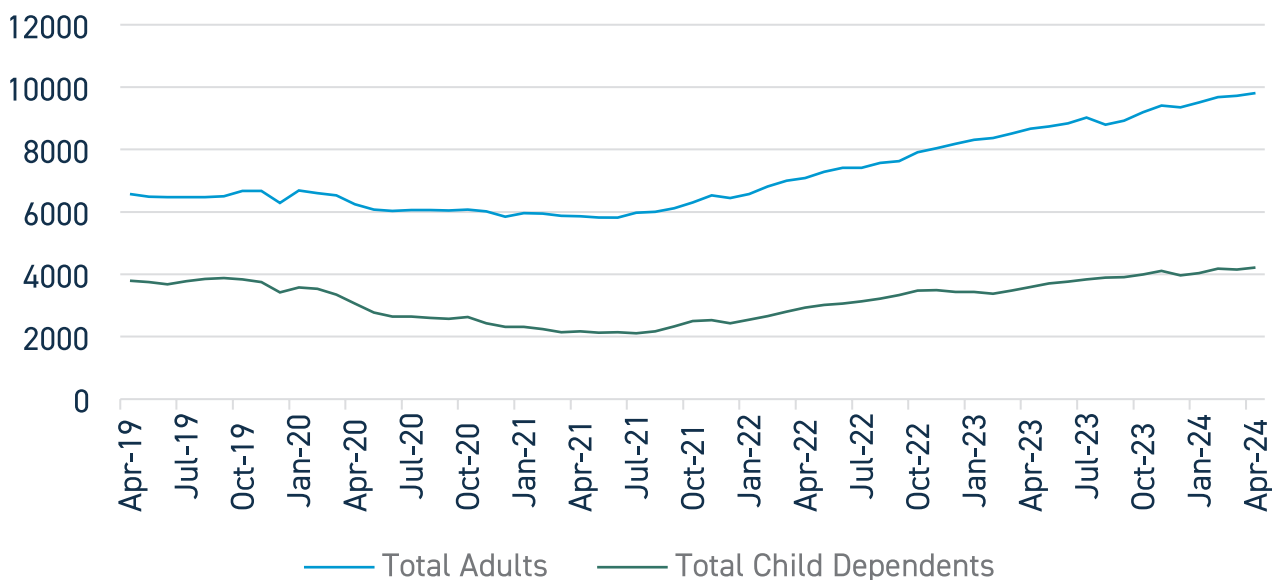
“Children need a safe, warm and secure place to call home. Inadequate, unsafe or insecure housing has serious repercussions; affecting a child’s mental and physical health, social and emotional development, education and their key relationships. There is no question this is a serious crisis and that children are the most vulnerable victims.” (Barnardos 2016, p.2)

It has been eight years since Barnardos published this briefing, highlighting the serious and invidious effects of homelessness on children. Since then, despite some levelling out of numbers during the Covid-19 pandemic, the problem of family homelessness has continued to grow. As figure.1 shows, there has been a gradual increase in the numbers of children and families experiencing homelessness particularly over the past three years. The figures recorded from June are the highest yet recorded, at 4,404 children aged under 18 and 2,093 families. Of the 2,093 families accessing emergency accommodation in

June fifty-six per cent are lone parent families (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 2024a).

In addition to the growing numbers of children and families accessing emergency accommodation, the length of time that families with children are remaining in emergency accommodation has also increased. Ireland is said to differ to other jurisdictions because families are reportedly spending much longer in emergency accommodation than in other countries (Siersbaek and Loftus 2020). In 2019, 11% of families were living in emergency accommodation for longer than 2 years in Dublin (Focus Ireland 2021a). In 2024, nearly 25%, or 1 in 4 families with children in Dublin are living in emergency accommodation for over two years (figure 2 below). In the West, over 25% of families are remaining in emergency accommodation after 2 years (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 2024b).

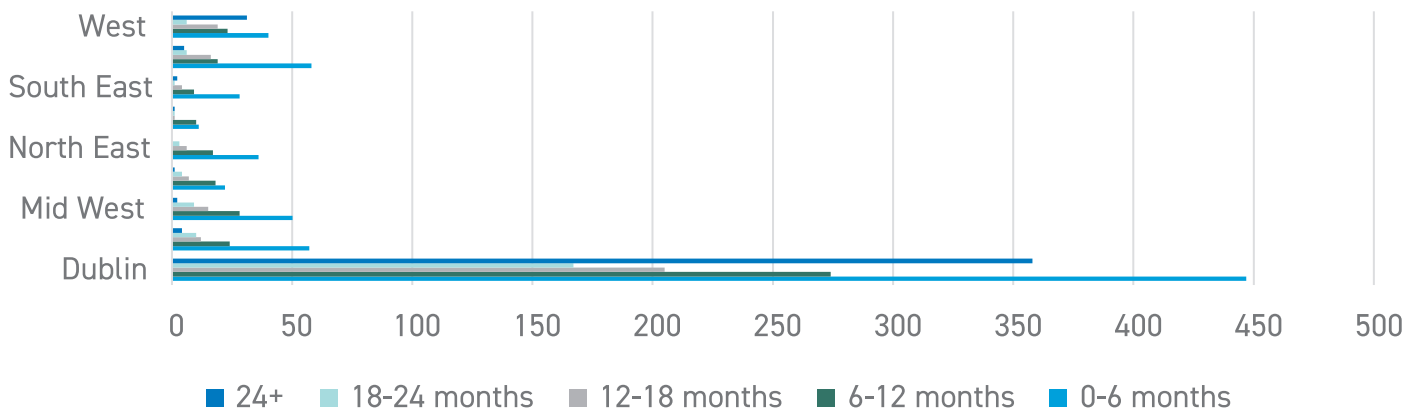
Figure.1 Total numbers of homeless adults and children over the past 5 years



(Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage data)



Figure. 2 Duration of stay in emergency accommodation in Q2 2024



(Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 2024b)

During this time, the practice of accommodating families with children in commercial hotels has also increased. This is despite considerable evidence of the detrimental effects that living in emergency accommodation has on children and family life (Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs 2019; Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government 2019), including key equality and human rights concerns.

1.1 Human rights and equality considerations in responses to family homelessness

The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) conducted research in 2017 into the experiences of families living in emergency accommodation. It revealed how the conditions of:

“Family homelessness gives rise to particular human rights and equality considerations that must be taken into account when developing an appropriate response. Such a response must focus on the long-term housing needs of families experiencing homelessness in order to ensure that homelessness and living in emergency accommodation does not become normalised.” (IHREC 2017, p.3)

Recognition of the need to respond to children and families differently to other homelessness presentations was also outlined in the national strategy on housing and homelessness, Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness (Government of Ireland 2016). The plan recognised the need to support parents and children ‘as much as possible’ through the provision of ‘effective services’ coordinated by

Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and Tusla, alongside the housing authorities and the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (DHPLG). Despite this, Focus Ireland (2021b) argued that the strategy itself did not give family homelessness the depth of attention required to respond adequately to the problem. Rebuilding Ireland ceased in 2021 and was replaced by Housing for All (2021), which represents the Government’s housing plan to 2030. The current plan, Housing for All, set goals to further develop family supports and services for children and families through multi-disciplinary teams (3.16), as outlined above, and to provide enhanced supports, to families experiencing long-term homelessness, to exit emergency accommodation and sustain their tenancies (3.18). However, according to the Children’s Rights Alliance (2024, p.172) children are not independently recognised within the plan and it lacks ‘dedicated actions to tackle family homelessness’. Further to this, in their recent report on the Government’s progress in meeting targets set in the Programme for Government, the Children’s Rights Alliance noted the government’s limited progress in responding to family homelessness, giving them a D- (Children’s Rights Alliance 2024).

Similar concerns were also outlined in 2023 in their concluding remarks on the State’s progress in meeting their requirements under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The Committee recommended the need to recognise the intersectional needs and rights of minority ethnic children, including their access to adequate housing and related services¹ and to respond appropriately to the root causes of homelessness for children.²

1 For example, 15(d) highlighted the need to ‘strengthen measures to eliminate discrimination against Traveller and Roma children, children of African descent, children of minority faith or non-faith backgrounds, children in socioeconomically disadvantaged situations...children without regular residence status...and asylum-seeking, refugee and migrant children. Also, where appropriate, ensure their access to adequate accommodation, health care, education and a decent standard of living...’; (UNCRC 2023, 15d)

2 At paragraph 35 (b), the Committee recommended the need to ‘address the root causes of homelessness among children, strengthen measures to phase out temporary and emergency accommodation schemes and significantly increase the availability of adequate and long-term social housing for families in need’ (UNCRC 2023, 35b).

More recently, in their submission to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights on Ireland's fourth periodic report (2024), the Human Rights and Equality Commission noted ongoing concerns in relation to the growing crisis in homelessness and its impacts on the right to an adequate standard of living, particularly for minority groups. The committee recommended the need to (among other things):

“Ensure non-discrimination in the application of social housing policies...[and] Access to culturally appropriate and high-quality accommodation must be ensured for structurally vulnerable groups, and institutionalisation in all forms should cease.” (IHREC 2024, p.9)

Evidently, family homelessness gives rise to particular human rights and equality concerns for children, with evidence of noteworthy gaps in meeting specific requirements set out in human rights law. In recognition of this, this project seeks to explore the lived experiences of long-term family homelessness and its effects on children from ethnic minority families. A key goal of the study is to produce evidence-based recommendations to enhance outcomes for minority children through the lens of the public sector duty. Section 42 (1) of the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Commission Act 2014 (Public Sector duty) places a statutory duty on public bodies to make specific efforts to, among other aims, 'eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity and protect the human rights' of those they provide services to.

Part of the rationale for this current project is to update the available research on the effects of long-term homelessness on children using primary qualitative data. This is because, as noted, there is mounting evidence of the increasing numbers of families remaining in emergency accommodation longer than the 6 months envisioned by government policy. This is particularly the case in Dublin and amongst those from minority ethnic communities (Mercy Law Resource Centre

2020; Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 2024b). Recognising differences amongst families experiencing homelessness is important because people have intersectional identities and so can face multiple forms of disadvantage all at once. As this report will show, these intersectional inequalities can interact to shape entries into, experiences of and exits from homelessness, and can prolong experiences of family homelessness.

1.2 Defining family homelessness

The specific focus of this project is on families accessing and availing of emergency accommodation as defined under Section 2 of the Housing Act 1988 (Government of Ireland 1988). Therefore, the study is concerned specifically with families living in emergency accommodation funded under Section 10 of the Housing Act, thus meeting the official definition of homelessness, as outlined in Section 2 of the Housing Act 1988 (ibid.).

It is important to state from the outset that concerns have been expressed about the adequacy of this definition owing to its narrow interpretation of homelessness³ (Baptista et al. 2022; Hearne and Mc Sweeney 2023), and the discretion available to local authorities in determining whether someone meets the legal definition for homelessness (Mercy Law Resource Centre 2019). As will become evident, this leaves the possibility for discrimination in access to housing and to emergency accommodation a reality for certain families (ibid.). It also results in a significant underestimation of the true number of people experiencing homelessness, particularly amongst families experiencing hidden homelessness (Harvey 2021; Hearne and Mc Sweeney 2023; Simon Communities of Ireland 2024).

³ The legal definition of homelessness in S2 of the 1988 Act recognises only people accessing emergency accommodation funded under section 10. The definition excludes a whole range of people experiencing housing exclusion and inadequate housing, often deemed to be part of the hidden homelessness population including: people (mainly women and children) living in domestic violence refuges; 'people in state institutions and care due to leave with no housing to go to (care leavers, prisons; mental health facilities); families in own-door short term accommodation; long-term homeless accommodation without tenancies; people in severe housing insecurity (staying temporarily with friends or family, couch surfing); those in Direct Provision with status and Travellers in substandard accommodation' (Hearne and Sweeney 2023, p.7).



1.2.1 The invisibility of families in the legal definition of homelessness

Frazer et al. (2020) have queried the suitability of the statutory definition in defining and recognising family homelessness, as it focuses solely on the individual, using male pronouns. It is necessary also to consider the extent to which children are recognised independently within the current definition of homelessness, and whether their best interests are taken into consideration in responses to family homelessness.

Plans to address the invisibility of families and children in the legal definition of homelessness emerged in 2017 when a bill was introduced with the aim of making an explicit reference to children within the 1988 Act. The Housing (Homeless Families) Bill 2017, aims to insert a new Section 10A to include ‘Homeless persons and children’, to Section 10 of the 1988 Act. Among the main objectives of the Bill, is to ensure that children are recognised within the 1988 Act; to recognise families as a unit; to prescribe that children’s best interests be a paramount consideration in all decisions; and to ensure reasonable measures are taken to help and protect families so as to enable ‘the effective functioning of families’ and ‘the development, welfare and protection of children within a family home’ (p.2). According to a recent report on the Strategic Overview on Homelessness (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 2024c), this definition continues to be under review with legislative amendments being proposed, thus indicating the timeliness of this report.

The lack of an adequate definition of family homelessness means that current figures are a significant underestimation of the problem of homelessness for ethnic minority families and children, who often occupy hidden homelessness spaces prior to presenting for services (Harvey 2021; Hearne and Mc Sweeney 2023; Simon Communities of Ireland 2024). This has

implications for ethnic minority families experiencing long-term homelessness, in particular. As this report will detail, ethnic minority families and children often experience cumulative traumas and structural inequalities prior to and on their entries into homelessness; and which structure all aspects of their lives (Kennedy 2018; Feantsa 2020; Hermans et al. 2020; Smith et al. 2020; Harvey 2021; Bramley et al. 2022; Cioarta 2023). This suggests that the effects of homelessness can often be more prolonged than the official record of their stay within emergency accommodation suggests (Simon Communities of Ireland 2024).

Recognition of these broader housing exclusion and inadequate housing-related experiences is particularly pertinent given recent evidence in Ireland from the longitudinal study Growing Up in Ireland. The report reveals the very negative effects that housing inadequacy (in particular, a lack of space) has on child and family well-being and relationships over time (Laurence et al. 2023a; 2024). This is alongside evidence of the effects of poverty (Maitre et al. 2021; Curristan et al. 2022), racial discrimination (Benner et al. 2018; Bernard et al. 2022; Quirke et al. 2022; Tyrell et al. 2023) and migration on child outcomes (Bryant et al. 2018; Ní Rathallaigh et al. 2019; Smith et al. 2020). As will become evident, all of these intersecting inequalities frequently structure the lives of ethnic minority families on their entries into, lived experiences of and in their efforts to exit homelessness. They can have long-lasting effects on children and families’ lives.



1.2.2 ETHOS definition of family homelessness

To explore the lived experiences of homelessness for minority ethnic families, a broader definition, such as that provided by The European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA), known as the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS), offers more scope to include the intersectionality of minority families' experiences (Hearne and Mc Sweeney 2023).⁴ While this definition is not without critique (Pleace and Herman 2020; Amore et al. 2022), it offers a more comprehensive definition that reflects the various forms of housing exclusion and homelessness that many minority ethnic families occupy in Ireland and across Europe (Kennedy 2018; Baptista and Marlier 2019; Feantsa 2020; Harvey 2021; Bramley et al. 2022; Hearne and Mc Sweeney 2023; Cioarta 2023). If a broader definition of homelessness, such as the Ethos definition, was used in the context of understanding family homelessness, it would allow for a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of children and families. This could enable the development of more adequate responses to this invidious problem. Although the focus of this report is on the lived experiences of family homelessness in S10 emergency accommodation, the need to include this broader definition of homelessness into the framework for conducting the study became very apparent early on in the project. In using this broader understanding of homelessness, the report reveals the cumulatively disabling effects on children resulting from the lived experiences of homelessness for minority ethnic families living in emergency accommodation long-term.

1.3 Overview of the report

This report aims to provide up-to-date evidence on the lived experience of family homelessness and its effects on children from minority ethnic families. To do this, chapter 2 discusses the research design, methodology, ethical approach and the limitations of the study. Chapter 3 explores the current literature on the lived experiences of homelessness for minority ethnic families and their children. Chapters 4-6 outline the key findings from the study. Chapter 7 offers the conclusions and evidence-based recommendations on how to enhance outcomes for minority ethnic children living in emergency accommodation.

⁴ Ethos defines the different forms of homelessness along a continuum from:

Rooflessness (without a shelter of any kind, sleeping rough). Houselessness (with a place to sleep but temporary in institutions or shelter)

Living in insecure housing (threatened with severe exclusion due to insecure tenancies, eviction, and domestic violence).

Living in inadequate housing (in caravans on illegal campsites, in unfit housing, in extreme overcrowding) (FEANSTA 2007).



Chapter 2: Research aims and design

2.0 Aims and objectives of the study

This research seeks to explore the lived experiences of long-term family homelessness for minority ethnic families and the effects on children through an intersectional equality lens. Specifically, it aims to understand how homelessness, for ethnic minority families living in S10 funded emergency accommodation, is lived and experienced and the effects this has on children. As mentioned in chapter 1, recognising diversity amongst families experiencing homelessness is important because people have intersectional identities and so can face multiple forms of disadvantage all at once. These intersectional inequalities can interact to shape entries into, experiences of and exits from homelessness, and can prolong experiences of homelessness.

A key objective of the study is to produce evidence-based recommendations to enhance outcomes for children experiencing long-term homelessness, through the public sector duty lens. In this regard, the study aims to contribute towards the elimination of discrimination, enhance equality of opportunity and protect the human rights of children and families from minority ethnic communities experiencing long-term homelessness (Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission, n.d.).

2.1 Methodological approach and methods

To achieve the aims and objectives set out for this project, the research design included a critical desk-based review of the literature to identify the intersectionality of the lived experiences of ethnic minority families experiencing homelessness and the effects this has on children.

The second stage of the project involved qualitative semi-structured interviews with two different groups, families and keyworkers who are working with families. As the study is small, and exploratory in nature, and sought to gain in-depth insights into the lived experiences of families, a qualitative methodology was the preferred choice (Bryman 2016).

Semi-structured interviews underpinned by feminist principles were used to create a safe space to enable participants to explore their experiences in-depth (Liamputtong 2007; Coombes et al. 2009). The research involved:

- (i) 3 semi-structured interviews with family members experiencing or with experience of long-term homelessness.
- (ii) 9 semi-structured interviews with professionals/key workers working with/supporting families, including those specifically supporting the needs of children, as well as those supporting the parent(s).

2.2 Sampling, recruitment and access

As the project primarily involved a population which is marginalised and therefore frequently designated as 'hard-to-reach' within a research context, purposive and snowball sampling was used to recruit the sample of families (Faughier and Sargeant 1997). Specific focus was on recruiting families with children with lived experience of long-term homelessness in emergency accommodation funded under S10 of the Housing Act 1988. In Ireland, long-term homelessness is defined as 'the occupation of emergency accommodation for longer than 6 months' (Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government 2008, p.7). The definition of family for this study included both one-parent and two-parent families over 18 years, with dependent children under the age of eighteen, and families who may have become separated from their children at some stage during their homelessness. Adult children who experienced homelessness with their family while they were under the age of eighteen were also included. Children under 18 years were excluded from the study.

Snowball and purposive sampling was also used to recruit a sample of keyworkers. For the keyworkers, the sample included workers who work directly with and support minority ethnic families and/or children living in S10 emergency homelessness accommodation.



Because of the hidden nature of the families involved and the disparate way in which emergency accommodation is provided, in hotels and B&B's, gate-keepers with whom participants have trusted relationships were identified to support the initial stages of the recruitment process for families and keyworkers. A number of key homelessness service providers and advocacy services working with the group (for both groups) were contacted by email and phone and asked to act as gatekeepers to enable selection and recruitment of participants for the study. In the end, keyworkers from 7 different services took part in the study and 3 family members, each representing a different ethnic minority group currently availing of long-term emergency accommodation.⁵

2.3 Data collection

Interviews with 2 of the 3 family members took place in person, one taking place in the person's accommodation, and the other in an NGO service supporting them. The third interview took place via Zoom, with support from an NGO service provider. An interpreter was used during one of the interviews. Translation services were used to translate the information sheets into two different languages. All 9 interviews with key workers working across 7 different services took place via Zoom. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher with the assistance of Otter.ai and de-identified by the researcher to ensure confidentiality. The length of interviews ranged from 35 minutes to 72 minutes each.

2.3.1 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify, sort, code and analyse the data according to the themes relating to the specific aims and objectives of the research (Braun and Clarke 2006). Following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework to support the thematic analysis process, the researcher became familiar with the data by listening and reading it repeatedly, generating initial codes, then searching for themes, reviewing and (re) defining the themes before writing it up (Braun and Clarke 2006).

2.4 Ethical considerations

Ethics and ethical issues are central to how qualitative research is performed and as such were central to all aspects of this research (Lewis 2003). This is particularly important as vulnerable/marginalised groups have frequently been colonised and disenfranchised within research by powerful groups of professionals (Lynch 1999; Albrtan et al. 2022). Additionally, as per guidelines by Albrtan et al. (2022), safeguarding, confidentiality and privacy are extremely important when conducting ethical research with people with refugee backgrounds. These principles therefore informed the research process throughout. Owing to funding-related time constraints it was not possible to include a comprehensive participatory research design, involving peer researchers or participants in the whole research process. Instead, the measures below aimed to ensure some small participatory elements to the research design throughout.

Two organisations acted as initial advisors to the researcher in relation to the research design. Some important considerations emerged from these initial conversations around cultural competency, the needs of the specific communities, including

⁵ Despite making contact with 11 different service providers/organisations, not all agencies responded to the phone and email communications. Three other families had also expressed interest in participating however, were unable to participate for different reasons.



literacy and translation supports to ensure informed consent and in relation to concerns about confidentiality.⁶ The importance of voluntary participation, autonomy and control around the research process and in answering questions was emphasised within the research design to mitigate these concerns.

Additionally, as the focus of this research was on the effects of homelessness on children, specific consideration was given to ensuring child protection safeguards were central to the research design and to ethical considerations for the study. Children under 18 were excluded from participating in the study due to ethical reasons, including risk of emotional upset.

Full ethical approval was received from South East Technological University and ethical clearance was given by two organisations contacted as part of the study. A condition of the funding was that a small voucher worth 25 euro was provided to family participants as a thank you for their contribution. A similar practice was done in the study by Scanlon and Mc Kenna (2018, p.50). Giving a voucher as a token of thanks was received very positively by one of the study advisors, who saw it as a positive way to recognise the contribution given by participants.

As mentioned, ethical considerations were central to the whole research process, in particular principles of confidentiality and de-identification. To avoid identifying participants in the study, none of the service providers involved in the study have been named or their locations identified. Details of the family members have been de-identified and pseudonyms have been assigned. These measures are to help safeguard the identity of the families who participated in the research.

2.5 Limitations of the study

The sample size for this study is very small and the findings cannot be held as representative of the lived experiences of all ethnic minority families experiencing homelessness. However, this was never the intention of the study (Bryman 2016). It was initially envisaged that a larger sample of families would be involved directly in the study, so as to ensure that their voices were central to the study outcomes. This was not possible for a number of reasons, despite ongoing efforts by the researcher and gatekeepers. As this research explores such a sensitive topic, future studies could employ a participatory design, involving peer researchers and a longer timeline, which might yield a larger sample of families and more in-depth insights.

⁶ It was highlighted that some communities might be reluctant to talk about the effects of homelessness on their children because of fears of social work involvement, which is something these communities have experienced disproportionately. See Coulter (2015) and Allen and Riding (2018).



Chapter 3: Review of existing literature detailing the lived experiences of homelessness for minority ethnic families

3.0 Introduction

This chapter will review the current literature on the lived experiences of homelessness for minority ethnic families to identify what is known about how it impacts on children. The review focuses initially on Travellers, Roma and Beneficiaries of International Protection (BIP) (Murphy and Stapleton 2024). It reveals the structurally marginal position occupied by these minority ethnic groups in Ireland. Lived experiences of inadequate housing and hidden homelessness often precede their entries into homelessness. From here they can experience a range of barriers to accessing housing services and to exiting homelessness. These barriers can prolong their experiences of homelessness.

Additionally, this chapter summarises the evidence to date on the lived experiences of family homelessness in emergency accommodation and the effects on children. It reveals how the conditions of homelessness and emergency accommodation can impact significantly on the capacity of families to live an adequate family life, and how this has disabling effects on children. It highlights a dearth of up-to-date research which explores the lived experiences of family homelessness in emergency accommodation for ethnic minority groups and how it affects their children from an Irish perspective; a gap that this research aims to fill.

3.1 Recognising diversity within homeless families

Recognition of the minority ethnic status of families experiencing homelessness is important because Traveller, Roma and migrant families are disproportionately represented amongst families experiencing different forms of homelessness, housing exclusion, housing inequality and discrimination in accessing housing (Grotti et al. 2018; Kennedy 2018; Mercy Law Resource Centre 2019; 2020; Harvey 2021; Murray 2019; Russell et al. 2021; Cork & Kerry RTAWG 2022; Murphy and Stapleton 2024). In 2020 minority groups constituted 65% of the case work completed by Mercy Law. This included work with ethnic minorities of Irish nationality and EU and non-EU

nationals. People from the Traveller community and Roma communities presented with some of the most serious and pressing concerns (Mercy Law Resource Centre 2020). Additionally, the report highlights the heightened risks that non-Irish nationals face in respect of becoming homeless and the additional challenges they experience in accessing housing services. These concerns are also borne out in an earlier report by Mercy Law Resource Centre (2019). The report identified the invisibility of the specific needs and rights of ethnic minority families when seeking emergency accommodation (ibid.). The next section reviews evidence to show examples of how Travellers, Roma and BIP experience a range of intersectional inequalities, which impact on their capacity to access housing independently.

3.1.1 Travellers

Research reveals the multiple forms of homelessness and housing exclusion that Travellers experience contemporarily. This includes inadequate housing, hidden homelessness, housing exclusion and homelessness (Galway Traveller Movement 2019; Harvey 2021; Cork & Kerry RTAWG 2022). These problems are widespread and prolonged for Traveller families and are often preceded by long periods of living in very unsafe, unfit and overcrowded living conditions (ibid.). They are compounded by the historically marginalised position occupied by Travellers in Irish society, the high rates of discrimination they experience across all areas of society and the crisis in mental health that is befalling the Traveller community presently (Joyce et al. 2017; Watson et al. 2017; Murray 2019; Houses of the Oireachtas 2021; Quirke et al. 2022; Villani et al. 2023).

Among the challenges experienced by Travellers in terms of accessing housing is the failure of the state to respond appropriately and adequately to the housing and culturally-specific accommodation needs of Travellers in Ireland. This failure has been outlined in a number of reports in recent years (Galway Traveller Movement 2019), including for victims of domestic abuse (Mercy Law Resource Centre 2019; Hamill



2024). More recently, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (2023), wrote in their Report to the European Committee of Social Rights on the State’s implementation of the Revised European Social Charter (ratified by Ireland in 2000) of their concerns that the state is failing to meet its responsibilities under Article 16. This is because of the lack of safeguards for Travellers being evicted. Collectively, these failures appear to be directly contributing to the problem of homelessness for Travellers, and creating barriers to exiting homelessness for Travellers also (Harvey 2021).

3.1.2 Roma

Roma are also one of the most marginalised communities in Ireland and throughout Europe (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2018/ FRA; Pavee Point 2024). Although they are only a relatively small minority group in Ireland (with approximately 5,000 people) extant research reveals examples of the many challenges faced by Roma families and children in Ireland that can impact on their access to adequate housing (Van Hout and Staniewicz 2012; Kennedy and Smith 2019; Winston and Kennedy 2019; The National Roma Network 2022; O’Sullivan et al. 2023).

In terms of the lived experiences of housing for Roma families in Ireland, the National Roma Needs Assessment (Kennedy 2018) highlights the reality of homelessness and inadequate housing for them. Roma are over-reliant on the private rental sector (just below 80% living there). Nearly half of all Roma have experienced homelessness at some point in their lives, while overcrowding is widespread, with nearly one-quarter of households living with 8 or more people; nearly half do not have access to enough beds in the accommodation they are living in (ibid.). The report provides further details of the dreadful housing conditions and sense of powerlessness experienced by Roma families within their tenancies, including the frequency of rat infestation in properties in different areas of Ireland. Roma are also fearful that reporting the poor conditions

would result in their eviction into homelessness. Nearly 38% of Roma lacked access to a tenancy agreement. This impacted their ability to access homelessness services because they lacked evidence of their residency (ibid.).

3.1.3 Migrants and beneficiaries of the International protection (BIP)

Recent research by Murphy and Stapleton (2024) highlights how migrant families including refugee families and families with subsidiary status, referred to as Beneficiaries of the International protection (BIP), are facing increased rates of homelessness. This is resulting from an overreliance on HAP and the private-rental market as the primary housing solution for people leaving direct provision, and because of the recent practice of transferring BIP with status to other accommodation centres, away from their social networks.⁷ Murphy and Stapleton (2024) also highlight that where BIP are moving into accommodation, this appears to often be of a poor standard, or they might move in temporarily with family/friends, becoming part of the hidden homelessness population. Both of these insecure living situations increase their likelihood of entering homelessness (ibid.). Additional barriers that BIPs experience to accessing housing and housing services are similar to those noted for other minority families. These include discrimination; language barriers; lack of employment and psychological effects of prior accommodation/ living situation (Crosscare 2018; Grotti et al. 2018; Gusciute et al. 2020; Reilly et al. 2021; Laurence et al. 2023b). For example, a report by Gusciute et al. (2020) revealed how experiences of ethnic discrimination differ for European and non-European groups, with Black Africans experiencing the greatest discrimination in the private-rental sector.

⁷ See Ailbhe Connely ‘Homeless fears for many told to leave direct provision’ RTÉ News (4 July 2024). Available at: <https://www.rte.ie/news/ireland/2024/0704/1458099-homeless-accommodation/>



Research on the experiences of BIP also highlights the major challenges and traumas associated with seeking protection and with their experiences of living in direct provision, often for extended periods of time (Hinds 2018; Ombudsman for Children 2020; Smith et al. 2020). For example, a report by the Ombudsman for Children (2020) highlighted the views and experiences of children living in direct provision. Among the challenges faced by children was the lack of privacy, space, exclusion from community participation and activities, discrimination and racism in school and within their communities. Additionally, a study by Hinds (2018) explored the often brutal, conflict-related violence, gender-based violence and persecution which causes some families and family members to flee and seek safety in Ireland. In the acts of fleeing many are separated from their families or forced to leave them behind because of lack of resources (ibid.). The emotional devastation of the separation is experienced by all family members and can be felt significantly by the children who have remained behind (ibid.).

In addition to this, barriers to accessing homelessness and housing supports for ethnic minority families, particularly Roma and migrant families, result from discrimination because of local connection tests and other bureaucratic requirements; because of large family size; discrimination and racism in the housing market; and the lack of translation services (Mercy Law 2020). These barriers interact with the discretionary nature of responses available to local authorities and can compound the negative experiences of minority groups trying to access homelessness services or exit homelessness (Mercy Law Resource Centre 2020; National Roma Advocacy Network 2022).

3.1.4 Intersectional inequalities framing ethnic minority families' lives

The literature reviewed in this section provides important insights into the various inequalities and institutional barriers that impact on minority ethnic families' entries into homelessness, and the barriers they experience to exiting homelessness, and to accessing housing and homelessness supports and services. It also evidences the structurally vulnerable and marginal positions occupied by these groups, which can impact on their ability to access housing independently. Barriers to accessing housing and homelessness services for minority ethnic and BIP families, must also be understood in the context of their historical exclusion and marginalisation in Ireland (and across Europe). Policies of forced assimilation and persecution have resulted in inequalities in access to and unequal experiences of health, education, employment, social participation, as well as housing (Van Hout & Staniewicz 2012; Matras 2014; Loyal and Quilley 2016; Joyce et al. 2017; Watson et al. 2017; FRA 2018; Tileaga et al. 2019; Ombudsman for Children 2020; Houses of the Oireachtas 2021; Murphy 2021; Quirke et al. 2022; Cioarta 2023; Villani et al. 2023). Combined this has contributed to a lack of trust and suspicion of mainstream society and towards service providers in particular for Roma and Travellers (Van Hout and Staniewicz 2012; Allen and Riding 2018; Kennedy 2018; Quirke et al. 2022; O'Sullivan et al. 2023).

The next section will review some of the available literature which gives more explicit insights into the lived experiences of families and children in emergency accommodation. It points to the absence of up-to-date qualitative insights into the lived experiences of ethnic minority families living in section 10 funded emergency accommodation for prolonged periods and the effects on their children, a gap this report aims to fill.



3.2 The lived experiences of long-term family homelessness in emergency accommodation⁸ and the effects on children

3.2.1 Living conditions that are antithetical to caregiving

Existing research provides in-depth accounts of the hugely negative and challenging lived experiences of families in emergency accommodation in Ireland and how this impacts on children (Halpenny et al 2001; 2002; Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs 2019; Joint Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government 2019; Nowicki et al. 2018; 2019; Ombudsman for Children 2019; Quinlan and Bolger 2019; Siersbaek and Loftus 2020). The research reveals the multiple barriers and challenges to family life that arise due to living in emergency accommodation for varying periods of time. This was evidenced to be the case over twenty years ago in two studies by Halpenny et al. (2001; 2002). The research explored the lived experiences of children and families living in emergency accommodation in Dublin. The vast majority of parents in the study were lone parent mothers, who had experienced poverty, violence and family conflict prior to their entries into homelessness. The findings revealed how living in emergency accommodation impacted children’s education, health and well-being, as well as providing living conditions that were antithetical to family life and caregiving. Within the emergency accommodation, families experienced significant stresses:

“Because of confined space and the absence of play facilities for children. Difficulties maintaining family routines..[was] an additional stressor. Mental health problems among children and parents in homeless centres occur... as a result of adverse events leading to homelessness and the loss of a stable home and support from family and friends. There was great variation with regard to the accommodation in which these families were living. While some families were living in one room with no access to cooking facilities, a small number of families had access to two or three rooms and their own kitchen. A strong sense of their losing dignity and

respect was strikingly apparent in parents’ accounts of being homeless and living in emergency accommodation. Many parents believed they had let their children down by failing to provide their own home for them. Many of these parents also felt that since becoming homeless they were denied the dignity and respect normally afforded parents and individuals within a community. Many of the families had limited access to support from extended family networks...” (Halpenny et al. 2002, p. 15-16)

Mothers also reported concerns about how the living conditions were creating conflict and strain in the parenting of their children. For the children, the study highlighted differences in children’s experiences depending on their ages. For younger children, they struggled with adapting to the rules set by strangers, including not being allowed to play inside or outside and could not understand why they couldn’t invite family members to visit. For the older adolescent children, they were:

“Caught up in anxieties about the general well-being of their families and felt little control over their lives. This made it impossible for them to think and plan beyond the immediate and urgent demands of their daily lives.” (Halpenny et al. 2002, p.31)

Other reported difficulties for teenagers included avoidance of peers, loss of privacy and own space, and a loss of opportunities to develop their own sense of identity and independence. Families’ experiences varied over time, with some living in emergency accommodation for up to 9 years (ibid.).

More recent studies reveal much the same findings, including barriers to performing basic caregiving because of the lack of washing and cooking facilities and how this impacts on nutrition for children, choice and control over food options, resulting in financial constraints for families (Share and Hennessy 2017; Nowicki et al. 2018; 2019). There are also reports of the loss of family routine and wider social networks, lack of space, privacy, lack of places to play for children. This also impacted significantly on children’s development in multiple ways (Joint Committee on Housing and Homelessness 2019; Nowicki et al. 2018; 2019; Ombudsman for Children 2019).

⁸ The use of the term emergency accommodation here and going forward will refer to S10 funded accommodation, unless specified otherwise.



The institutionalising effects of emergency accommodation impacted parenting capacity, leading to a loss of autonomy, producing feelings of stigma and shame. It was also reported to have a significant impact on children's social, emotional, physical and educational development (ibid.).

3.2.2 Different experiences in different types of emergency accommodation

The above experiences were reported in different types of emergency accommodation, in hubs (Ombudsman for Children 2019) and hotels (Nowicki et al. 2019). However, the report by the Ombudsman (2019) also reveals some more positive experiences in hubs than in the PEAs. Some of the advantages described about hubs over other forms of emergency accommodation, such as B&Bs and hotels, included providing a sense of stability, safety, and security. Support provided by staff at a time of real uncertainty and trauma for them was also greatly appreciated by some families. For children, they reportedly liked making friends, the staff, the facilities and the food. However, not all children and families liked their experiences there. Among the difficulties noted by children was a lack of privacy and space, loss of family life, fighting, visiting rules, noise, not being allowed pets, and feelings of shame and embarrassment (ibid.). These findings reveal how the conditions of emergency accommodation impact significantly on the capacity to live an adequate family life. These experiences can vary in different types of emergency accommodation, producing differential outcomes for families and children.

3.3 Ontological insecurity and the effects on children

In discussing the extent to which homelessness impacts on children and families' lives, Nowicki et al. described how the loss of home and the experience of precarious housing impacts on families' sense of security and safety, or 'ontological security' (Nowicki et al. 2018, p.18). These experiences of ontological insecurity and exclusion intersect with the inadequate living

conditions for family life and impact children's physical, mental and emotional health and development (Nowicki et al. 2018; Royal College of Physicians of Ireland 2019; D'Sa et al. 2021; Harrion 2024); their education (Keogh et al. 2006; Scanlon and McKenna 2018), their nutrition (Share and Hennessy 2017) and constitute an adverse childhood experience (Siersbaek and Loftus 2020).

3.3.1 Adverse childhood experience

Research on the effects of homelessness on children's mental health describes homelessness as a compound trauma for children, an adverse childhood experience (ACE) (Cutuli et al. 2017; Radcliff et al. 2019; Barnes et al. 2021; Spiegel et al. 2022) and a form of toxic stress (Siersbaek and Loftus 2020). Experiences of toxic stress are mediated by a range of factors including the events associated with becoming homeless; the length and consistency of exposure and the risk or protective role of caregivers whether they are the source of the trauma (Cowan 2014; Guarino 2014; Perlman et al. 2014; Siersbaek and Loftus 2020).

ACEs are often associated with traumatic events which occur within the context of immediate family/caregiving relations (Felitti et al. 1998). More recently the lens for understanding ACEs has expanded in international studies to recognise the role of structural and community-level factors, such as economic poverty and homelessness (Braveman et al. 2017); poverty, racism and the intersectionality of inequalities, with children from minority families, living in poverty, with experiences of domestic and community violence, and racism at heightened risk of ACEs and negative health outcomes (Cronholm et al. 2015; Cutuli et al. 2017). Recognition that the cumulative effects of living in poverty and deprivation increase the likelihood of ACEs for children over time has also emerged (Lewer et al. 2019).



3.3.2 Positive relationships as a buffer to the conditions of homelessness

A literature review by D'Sa et al. (2021) highlighted how the psychological effects of homelessness can be mitigated by positive self-esteem, nurturing relationships and connectedness with family, school, positive peer groups and community. Similarly, Perlman et al. (2014) reviewed a number of studies to reveal how positive parent-child relationships or nurturing relations, play a key protective role for children experiencing homelessness (see Herbers et al. 2014 also). A study by Moore and Arthur (2011), involving the voices of children experiencing homelessness, revealed how parents reportedly helped to mitigate the negative effects of being homeless when children felt supported and connected to them. As mentioned above, some children in the study by the Ombudsman (2019) also spoke of how, positive staff and peer relations acted as a protective factor against the negative effects of living in emergency accommodation. For children from Black and ethnic minority families, research from the USA reveals how ethnic-racial/cultural socialisation (Tyrell et al. 2023) and nurturing ethnic racial identity (Marcelo and Yates 2019) can buffer the effects of institutional racism, prejudice and discrimination, especially for homeless children (Tyrell et al. 2023). This is an important consideration given the negative implications that racism and discrimination have on children's development and their health and well-being (Cronholm et al. 2015; Benner et al. 2018; Bernard et al. 2022). Importantly, what these findings suggest is that the negative effects of living in homelessness can be mediated through positive nurturing relations experienced with parents, friends, at school and within the wider community.

3.4 The impact of homelessness on the resources to support caregiving

While positive parent-child relationships can help to buffer the traumatic effects of homelessness to some extent, the conditions of living in emergency accommodation can diminish the resources needed to support this. For example, the conditions of homelessness including, the loss of family routine, 'parenting in public' (under scrutiny of service providers), loss of parental autonomy, cultural disconnects, social isolation, often deplete the resources needed to enable nurturing relations for caregivers (Perlman et al. 2014, p.60-61). Research by Shinn et al. (2015) in the USA also reveals the reality of family break-up and parent-child separation as a consequence of poverty, homelessness, and the conditions of emergency accommodation. Other studies confirm the challenges experienced when caregiving in poverty and homelessness, including the impact on parental mental health, particularly when they are unsupported in their caregiving (Meadows-Oliver 2005; Lucke et al. 2021; Savage 2022; Laurence et al. 2024). The experience of caregiving in poverty and homelessness without support can diminish the emotional, nurturing, cultural and financial resources needed to support caregiving. The absence of these resources impacts significantly on the parent's mental health (Lynch and Lyons 2009; Paquette and Bassuk 2009; Savage 2022; Tyrell et al. 2023). As Paquette and Bassuk explain:

"A parent's identity is often defined in relationship to others, especially their children, and to how well they care for them. Loving, protecting, nurturing, guiding ,and teaching children is fundamental to helping children grow, develop, and thrive. Homelessness undercuts parents' ability to protect their children, often leaving mothers and fathers feeling depressed, anxious, guilty, and ashamed." (Paquette and Bassuk 2009, p.292)

A lack of support to enable caregiving in the context of homelessness and the unequal conditions that families are living in can impact significantly on child and parental well-being. This can compound the negative effects of homelessness for them. The reality of relationship breakdown and the challenges associated with parenting in poverty and homelessness reveals the emotional and relational costs of homelessness for some families.



3.5 Conclusion

The available research is very informative and clearly illustrates the hugely detrimental effects that homelessness has on children's emotional, social, educational and cognitive development. The longer the experience of homelessness and the more cumulative and intersectional the inequalities, the more profound and long-term the effects. While the Irish studies give detailed insights into the lived experiences of family homelessness and the effects on children, these studies do not give specific insights into the experiences of ethnic minority children and families. This is particularly important given the evidence reviewed in this chapter of the growing prevalence of ethnic minority families amongst the population of families experiencing homelessness; the often traumatic experiences they have prior to and on their entries into homelessness; the barriers they can experience to accessing housing services and to exiting homelessness, and the structurally marginal and vulnerable positions occupied by these families which can prevent them from accessing housing independently. It is also of importance given the key protective role that cultural socialisation can play in moderating the negative effects of discrimination and homelessness for this group. Cultural adequacy in housing is an important element of the human right to adequate housing, which 'should respect and take into account the expression of cultural identity and ways of life' (Office of the High Commission for Human Rights 2024, n.p.). A key aim of this research is to update and add to the current research base on family homelessness by exploring the lived experiences of family homelessness for minority ethnic families and the effects on children using an equality lens. The next three chapters will outline the findings from this study to reveal the human rights and equality consideration arising from their lived experiences in emergency accommodation, which are then detailed in chapter 7.



Chapter 4: The lived experiences of minority ethnic families experiencing long-term homelessness

4.0 Introduction

Recognition of the damaging effects that homelessness, and in particular, different forms of emergency accommodation, have on family life has been evidenced in previous research and reports (Paquette and Bassuk 2009; Joint Committee on Child and Youth Affairs 2019; Nowicki et al. 2019; Ombudsman for Children 2019; Quinlan and Bolger 2019; Royal College of Physicians of Ireland 2019, Share and Hennessy 2017; Siersbaek and Loftus 2020). Interviews with all participants in this study revealed direct accounts of daily struggles by family members, and accounts of families struggling given by keyworkers who have worked with them. One of the strong themes to emerge from the interviews with all participants relates to the challenges of caregiving in different forms of emergency accommodation in conditions that are antithetical to enabling family life, nurturing and for healthy child development. Moreover, as the findings suggest, the stresses associated with living conditions in emergency accommodation, over an extended period, affects the capacity of parents to nurture their children's ethnic racial identity. This can involve different forms of cultural socialisation that have the potential to buffer the effects of structural inequalities and discrimination for minority ethnic families (Marcelo and Yates 2019; Tyrell et al. 2023). The lack of access to sufficient resources to enable an adequate standard of living also diminishes parents' capacity to protect their children from the effects of living in homelessness long-term.

4.1 Lived experiences in private emergency accommodation for minority ethnic families

All family members who participated in the study occupied some form of Private Emergency Accommodation (PEA), including B&B and hotel accommodation for extended periods of time.

A member of a Roma family, Luca*, spoke of their family's experiences of living in hotel accommodation for three and a half years as a family of seven. The family's entry into homelessness was triggered by their eviction from the private-rental sector. The account given describes aggressive actions by the landlord - cutting off the electricity and removing the front door of the house - prior to their eviction. Luca described how the family was lucky to find some emergency accommodation where "they understood Roma people", so "everything was fine with them". The family initially lived in one room in the hotel but after a while were allocated a second room. Luca described how it was very difficult living in one room, and that the second room eased the stresses slightly. Luca spoke of the challenge of trying to provide proper food for the five children when living in the hotel because of a lack of cooking facilities:

"Five children, yes, five children was also difficult, you know, from the beginning, to have to cook for them, you know, make them proper food. It was very difficult, what can I say?"

During the interview Luca spoke of how one of their children, who was only 2 at the time they entered homelessness, struggled with very, very delayed speech and language, which Luca attributes to the effects of living in emergency accommodation for such a prolonged period (Nowicki et al. 2018; Royal College of Physicians 2019).

The other family member who participated is a lone father, Amir* and his child, who is under 9 years old. Amir and his child are EU-passport holders and have been living in emergency hotel accommodation in a small room for the past nearly 20 months. Amir, who has been here over 2 years, was working initially but had to cease working when his child joined him some months later. Amir's wife and other children, who are non-EU passport holders, have been unable to join the family because of the family's current living conditions. The family were ineligible for any social welfare payment⁹ until recently and so lived without any form of income for approximately a year and a half. Amir was unable to access housing independently during this time

⁹ This is possibly due to administrative barriers, such as the habitual residency condition. However, Amir was unclear as to the specific reason for their lack of income during this time.



as he could not work and didn't have any income to pay for rent or deposit. The family were given dry food from a local non-governmental organisation and were also assisted in a number of ways by the school the child attends. The hotel the family is living in has a shared kitchen and laundry facilities. It does not have any play area or facilities for his child to play, so Amir brings his child out to the park to play at times. Amir's child does not have any friends in the hotel as the children are of different nationalities. Consequently, his child spends a lot of time in their room and misses their siblings and mother a lot. Amir described their experiences of living in emergency accommodation for over one and a half years as "It's very, very hard for [his child]". Although Amir now has a source of income, he is unable to bring his child to visit the family, as they will lose their accommodation due to restrictions on staying away.

The third family who participated is a lone parent mother from the Traveller community with four children under 9 years. Brigid and her children have occupied different homelessness spaces over a 14-month period. They first became homeless because of domestic abuse and entered a refuge and a community-based domestic abuse service. They exited refuge accommodation into homelessness, initially becoming part of the hidden homelessness population, staying with different family members and then B&B accommodation. All five of them lived in one room for a 5-month period, which Brigid described "as a struggle". The accommodation lacked any cooking or washing facilities. This made life very, very difficult for them. Brigid spoke of the significant challenges that this type of accommodation posed for her and her children. This was made more difficult because she was unable to find a school place for her four children for the first few months of living in the PEA. This meant that the children were stuck in the room on a daily basis during that time. The accommodation does not have any play area or garden and is next to a busy main road. Two of Brigid's children have delayed speech and language and are waiting for speech and language therapy. The children's appointments were somewhat delayed because of moving to a different health service area. Despite moving to another area, Brigid and her children continue to attend the same GP, which is over one hour away on the bus.

4.2 The challenge of caregiving for minority ethnic families living in private emergency accommodation

Similar to previous research discussed in chapter 3, families living in emergency accommodation reported significant barriers to performing their caregiving responsibilities, including meeting their children's basic needs, such as nutrition, providing clean clothes, space to play, and for identity development. The lack of these basic facilities resulted in added burdens on parents as they sought to care for their children.

Brigid* described in detail the daily struggles of trying to care for her children without access to basic facilities, such as washing, cooking and refrigeration facilities. To perform this basic task she and the four young children had to walk up to the local town with bags of washing during the winter months, or she had to travel to family with the small children on a bus - a journey of 45 minutes:

"No washing machine, no dryer, no kitchen facilities, having to wash my cups and plates in a bathroom sink. Having to cook breakfast and dinner in a room and my children not going to school, it affected them, it affected them very badly, it did... I'm not driving at the minute and it was very hard having to pull washing and go up to washing machines and sometimes they weren't working. So that's the struggle of having to hand wash their uniforms and then having to drag a big bag of washing with 4 kids on the bus over to my mother's to wash. It was very hard. I wouldn't wish it on nobody."

Providing nutritious meals for her children was also a struggle at that time because of a lack of refrigeration facilities. This meant she had to shop daily, which was very costly for her (Share and Hennessy 2017). There was also quite a large cost associated with doing washing for five people in the laundrette - with three washes per week costing just under fifty euro - a huge cost, particularly for someone living on lone parent allowance (Quinlan and Bolger 2019).



Brigid also spoke of how her children lacked a routine during their time in the single room, because of the lack of space, but also because they weren't in a school yet, as there was no spaces available for them initially. One of the children, whom she described as being "hyper", was particularly affected because of the lack of space and lack of routine.

"When we were stuck in the room it was kind of a struggle when [the child] was jumping from bed to bed to bed... Because [the child] is hyper and ...not having a routine being stuck in a room would make anyone go hyper, do you know what I mean... So it would!"

The family were then moved to a different unit which has a small kitchen. Brigid spoke of how, despite the fact that they are still homeless, having cooking and washing facilities eased the daily challenges a lot, enabling her to care for her children's needs more easily. She spoke in particular of how going to school, having a separate bedroom to sleep in (and not living in one room), having cooked dinners has enabled them to develop a proper routine. This has helped the children to "feel normal". However, the accommodation doesn't have any play facilities/areas and it is too small to have friends or family over to play. This is a continued source of stress for them:

"[Having the washing and kitchen facilities takes a]... bit of pressure...off my heart cause I can cook dinner, proper, meals for my kids, and I can wash their uniforms and wash their clothes and dry their clothes. But it doesn't take the pressure off that my children have no back garden to play...the little things that every child should have and want...I can't let them outside because just because there's nothing but cars... Yeah. So. So yeah, just adds stresses to the pressure too..."

The challenges of caregiving in emergency accommodation were not unique to Brigid and were recounted by Luca and his family, and in smaller ways by Amir and his child and by keyworkers working with other minority ethnic families. Similar experiences have also been recorded in previous studies and reports on family homelessness (Share and Hennessy 2017; Joint Committee on Child and Youth Affairs 2019; Joint

Committee on Housing Planning and Local Government 2019; Quinlan and Bolger 2019; Fraser et al. 2020). However, unique to this study is how the lived experiences of ethnic minority families in emergency accommodation impact on their children through an equality lens. This involves consideration of barriers to the expression of their cultural identity and to their ways of life. ¹⁰

4.2.1 Minority ethnic families and challenges with cultural socialisation

Accounts given by keyworkers reveal similar challenges experienced by Traveller families living in hotels. This was also confirmed by keyworkers working with migrant and Roma families. One keyworker described how a Traveller family with eight children was forced to wash their clothes in the bathtub in the hotel, where the mother "was getting in trouble for drying her clothes in the hotel room because of the damp and, you know, the lack of circulation and things like that, like she was actually being berated for washing their clothes". The cost of washing clothes for large families was also mentioned as being so exorbitant that it is often cheaper for them to buy new clothes for their children than to wash them.

The lack of access to basic facilities to support daily family life was also discussed in the context of cultural traditions that structure family relations for ethnic minority families. These can provide them with a sense of belonging and identity and negate the effects of discrimination for them (Parasecoli 2014; Moran 2019; Tyrell et al. 2023). A keyworker working with Roma families living in emergency accommodation spoke of how the lack of access to cooking facilities not only impacts nutritionally and economically on families because of the cost of buying food out (Share and Hennessy 2017), it also has cultural significance for them:

"Yes, make everything, yes, Roma people, usually, Roma people, they cook every single day for their children and their family. You know, this is the way how Roma people, they are doing soup, they are doing food. They are doing

¹⁰ Housing is not adequate if it does not respect and take into consideration the cultural adequacy and the expression of cultural identity -Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and UN Habitat, The Right to Adequate Housing. Fact Sheet No.21 (2009), p.4. Available at https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/FS21_rev_1_Housing_en.pdf. See also UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, supra note 41, para. 8.



these kind of things, like a Roma [person] eats. Some of the Roma people, they don't like different kind of dishes, you know, they like to their food. And that's it, you know...

The keyworker noted how not having access to cooking and washing facilities and not knowing where they can perform these activities has a significantly negative affect on them. It can diminish opportunities for cultural socialisation as Roma families often educate their children through participating in daily activities of living (Van Hout and Staniewicz 2012; Matras 2014). Two other keyworkers spoke of how migrant families too struggle with the lack of cooking facilities; the lack of cultural appropriateness of the food served in institutional settings, which impact negatively on their mental health and well-being (Keane 2021):

"The other thing...in a lot of the BBs and hotels, there's no cooking facilities...that certainly has a big negative effect on people...people's physical and mental health. People are often eating food that's not culturally appropriate. If they're religiously observant, it's often not in step with the way they're supposed to eat and also a lot of people will say that, and I would tend to agree having seen some of the things that are served, that it's not very nutritious food either. It's not food that you want to be feeding your like growing child."

Evidently, the practice of accommodating minority ethnic families in PEAs where they lack access to basic facilities to support caregiving can impact significantly on the families' well-being. It can diminish their capacity to engage in activities to support the expression of their cultural identity, and which have been recognised as having a positive effect on children's ethno-racial identity development (Marcelo and Yates 2019).

4.2.2 Barriers to the promotion of family life

Another key challenge to family life when living in emergency accommodation long-term for minority ethnic families is the challenge of family separation for families undergoing family reunification. As discussed in the literature review, in the context of family reunification, a number of difficulties have been identified relating to the stress of being separated from parents for long periods of time and how children can experience this (Hinds 2018; Smith et al. 2020). One keyworker described new ways that decisions about emergency accommodation are being made for families undergoing reunification. This can impact negatively on family relations and can prolong their experiences of separation and/or result in loss of employment for some:

"Another thing that again, very specific that is really troubling and has really become more and more common... in the past year is instances where perhaps a refugee or refugee spouse or parent is living in either IPAS accommodation or in homeless like emergency accommodation section 10 accommodation, successfully applying for family reunification to have their family join them here, and then for prolonged periods of time are accommodated in separate accommodations. So mum might be in a women's hostel in [the city centre], dad and kids who they have just been reunified with are in a B&B in [another county]. And I have clients who has been living in that situation for like months and months...[where] one or two people actually quit their jobs because they said I can't do my job and be like truckin over and back across town to make sure I like see my family and get everything done that they need done to kind of be settled here..."

These practices impact negatively on the reuniting family, adding to the stress for both parents and children and "it really sets people off on the wrong foot". These negative experiences of separation are cumulative once the family is accommodated together and occur:



“On top of the more kind of long-term problems like, being moved around from place to place being a real barrier to...integrating, the lack of privacy being really detrimental in terms of families being able to kind of heal from being separated for so long and maybe come to terms with what they’ve all gone through....It’s really distressing for everyone involved...I think it disadvantages the newly arrived people and it also puts the sponsor under a lot of pressure.”

The random placement of families “willy nilly... wherever a room will come up”, away from access to vital supports systems (mental health, education, employment) was also identified as a particular issue for large families (often a tradition with Traveller, Roma and some migrant families to have large families), with significant cost implications for them. As this keyworker discussed:

“You know, so imagine the stress of...parents trying to get their children some families where there are eight children. There’s three different schools to get to and they’re either driving or trying to, you know, fuel the car with no petrol expenses, or they’re the one lady she had four children under six, and she was trying to get them after school on the bus. And it was costing her 70 euros a week. That was for a bus from her hotel to the school... But there is a bus leap card system...the County Council are supposed to fund that and they are always dragging their feet. So they run out of the leap cards, and they could be a couple of months with no leap cards, where they have to choose a bus to School or food, you know for the week.”

4.2.3 The emotional and relational costs of homelessness

Cultural traditions associated with gender roles place an importance on marriage amongst minority ethnic families (Matras 2014; The Traveller Movement 2019). These are being eroded significantly because of the stresses and challenging conditions of living in homelessness long-term (Kennedy 2018; Nowicki et al. 2019; Harvey 2021). Accounts were given during interviews with several of the keyworkers about the effects that living in these stressful conditions have on families’ over time. This keyworker described how the hostile and institutional environment which many families find themselves in hotels (Nowicki et al. 2019) is leading to “huge marital stress and a lot of families that come in would disclose, you know, marital issues being perpetrated by the fact that they have so much stress around being homeless”. The conditions of homelessness are having devastating effects on the roles that Traveller men and women occupy, where “a man, father figure... feels that they can’t provide for their family and shame around that and a knock on loss sense of self-worth”. For women, as mothers, she feels like a failure as she cannot maintain a routine for her children, getting them to school and getting a proper dinner for them, and how these feelings are widespread amongst the community:

“And I just spoke to a family last week. You know, both parents are not feeling good enough. And even many families you know, marriage is so important in the Traveller Community. many married couples I’ve spoken to have discussed separating, you know, because of the stress that they’ve been experiencing, around just being in survival mode, and not having a place to go as secure base. So what I’m seeing is that homelessness is causing relationship breakdowns massively.”



Families have told this key worker that arguments and abuse are stemming from the stress of living in emergency accommodation, especially hotels. Reports are being made to Tusla as “people are under a microscope, you know, when they’re in hotels, and when I speak to families about that... they’ll say look we were arguing over it, you know, our housing situation or financial situation...so it’s all tied in together”. The stresses and losses associated with living in emergency accommodation over time are experienced emotionally and relationally by families and run the risk of family breakdown and of child protection involvement. This can bring an added source of stress to families given their distrust of professionals, and high rates of child removal amongst ethnic minority families (Coulter 2015; Allen and Riding 2018).

4.3 Lack of cultural awareness, discrimination by staff and “policing” families

The challenges of family life in emergency accommodation were also reportedly made more difficult because of a lack of understanding of cultural traditions amongst minority ethnic families and/or because of prejudicial and/or discriminatory actions of staff in some emergency accommodation, B&B and hotels. For example, two keyworkers working with Roma discussed how some of the community experience difficulties because staff do not understand Roma traditions, or where they come from and what their prior (often traumatic) experiences have been (Kennedy 2018). This lack of recognition and understanding of Roma culture and their lived experiences makes living in emergency accommodation much more “complicated”. Roma can often face threats of eviction from emergency accommodation if they are perceived as not complying with the rules there, so are fearful of reporting difficulties they are experiencing (this was also discussed in the context of Traveller families).

“You know, because the Roma people, they don’t want to mention these kind of things. But it’s happening these things, you know, always with the Roma people, the staff they need to understand also Roma people.”

Another keyworker spoke of how a Traveller family experienced both overt and subtle racism and discrimination on a daily basis in a private hub, which was staffed by private security staff, not social care trained. The mother, who struggled significantly with her mental health, felt judged and stigmatised by staff there. The keyworker described how staff seemed to police the parents, monitoring their actions as a form of control “as opposed to, but how can we help you do that? How can we help you with this? So it was very, it kind of, it wasn’t helpful, and it felt like quite a hostile environment”. This keyworker discussed how this family was treated differently and unfairly in this accommodation:

“I was very conscious that for that family, their experience of being ‘othered’, like there were Black families, there were non-Irish families, and I’m sure they had equal experiences, or just, you know, like the same type of experiences. But there was something for me, watching them as a Traveller family, it was very, very clear that they were treated differently from the other white, settled Irish families. This kind of casual racism that people would make comments in front of you...”

Brigid too spoke of being looked down on and judged by staff in the accommodation she is living in and the effect that this can have on a person:

Just because we are homeless...we’re homeless for good reasons. We’re human. And we don’t deserve to be controlled or looked down or judged or condemned...I’m being looked on because I’m homeless...as if you’re something else...that’s not a nice feeling.

The effects of discrimination within homelessness accommodation can compound the challenges of caregiving for minority ethnic families, who frequently lack the resources needed to access accommodation independently, owing to the significantly marginalised positions they occupy in Irish society (Grotti et al. 2018; Kennedy 2018; Harvey 2021; Russell et al. 2021). The lack of recognition and understanding of how the lived experiences of homelessness affects families and children impacts significantly on their well-being, as Brigid describes below:



“I didn’t ask to be homeless. I didn’t want to be homeless. I didn’t want to uproot my home. I didn’t want to take my children out of school, but it was a case of, well I had no choice to... this is not what I want, but I’m here... I’ve no choice but to put up with it. I suppose in one sense I should be grateful. And I am grateful and thankful cause I know the suffering of being in the room! I’m one of the lucky ones that has a washing machine and dryer and not everybody gets that. And I do appreciate that but I don’t think anybody deserves to be judged or looked at because they’re homeless And it’s not an easy journey. It’s very, very hard...”

In discussing how discriminatory behaviour and attitudes impacts on families, another participant described how it impacts significantly on the mental health and well-being of families: “They already feel bad enough....They just feel absolutely worthless, [and] the migrant families do seem to get a disproportionate amount of those kind of attitudes... receive that kind of poor attitude”. In discussing how living in conditions where families and children are subjected to unequal and discriminatory treatment impacts on parents and children, this keyworker adds:

“and that’s horrible when you’re there with your child, you know, so degrading. You know you’re with your child, and someone is really rude, someone speaks to you really poorly. I often wonder, what does it do? You know these kids are going to grow up and feel completely unattached to society. Feel completely unattached...just...feel like outsiders, you know, especially the kids who are Black, you know, they already feel like outsiders because they look different... I think we have a big, big problem on our hands now, but even a bigger one may be coming down the road, when you have a whole generation, 1000s of kids who are completely disenfranchised, feel absolutely no connection to society, feel, and I don’t know what’s the impact of that going to be. It’s got to be terrible...”

Discriminatory actions by staff can impact on parent’s well-being and on children’s well-being, and on their developing identity and their sense of belonging in wider society. Living in hostile conditions long-term can undermine parents’ capacity to protect and nurture their children and exacerbate the effects of living in homelessness for ethnic minority children.

4.4 Summary

These accounts provide in-depth insights into the daily challenges and struggles that minority ethnic families experience while living in emergency accommodation for extended periods of time. The accounts provided reveal how inadequate living conditions impact significantly on the resources (emotional, economic, social and cultural) that are essential to supporting healthy childhood development, for family life, and the expression of cultural identity. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the lived experiences of families trying to exit homelessness in a timely manner, in a highly unequal housing market (Grotti et al. 2018; Gasciute et al. 2020; Russell et al. 2021), is strongly influenced by access to supports and services to assist them in doing so. Barriers to accessing support can prolong their experiences in these hostile conditions, compounding the negative effects of homelessness for minority ethnic children.



Chapter 5: Inequalities in access to supports, and barriers to exiting homelessness

5.0 Introduction

Recognition of the importance of supporting families to enable them to exit homelessness has been outlined in both Rebuilding Ireland (2016) and Housing for All (2021) actions plans. In Dublin, which has the largest percentage of homeless families and children, support is provided in NGO family hubs on-site, while support is provided in private emergency accommodation through in-reach services by NGO and Dublin Regional Homeless Executive teams, as well as by Tusla and HSE services (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage 2024b). In other jurisdictions, similar models of support are provided by different NGO services and local authority teams, as well as in NGO hubs where present.

This chapter provides evidence of how access to meaningful and culturally appropriate support to exit homelessness appears to be very unequal for different families with evidence of a “two-tiered system” at play. This can prolong families’ experiences in emergency accommodation, and the negative consequences that flow from this. This is particularly concerning as accounts describe the significant levels of work involved in exiting homelessness, which is made more difficult for some minority ethnic families, because of a lack of access to culturally appropriate supports to assist them.

5.1 The work of homelessness

All participants in the research spoke in one way or another of how the daily grind of living in homelessness was made more challenging by the huge amount of work involved in trying to exit homelessness and access the necessary supports to exit. All participants referred to high levels of paper work that need to be completed, the challenges of searching for housing daily, weekly, preparing for viewings and of barriers to accessing housing and support to exit homelessness. Inequalities in access to supports to exit homelessness appear to be influenced by the type of emergency accommodation families are referred to; either non-governmental organisation (NGO) operated hub, or private hub, or private emergency accommodation (PEA).

¹¹ Citizens Information, ‘Housing Assistance Payment (HAP)’. <<https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/housing/renting-a-home/help-with-renting/housing-assistance-payment/>> Accessed 26 August 2024.

¹² Daft.ie is a widely used online property search website.

5.1.1 Hierarchy in emergency accommodation and inequalities in access to support

Several keyworkers referred to there being “a hierarchy of emergency accommodation that exists...”, with the hubs provided by the NGOs being described as gold standard, as they have social care teams present to offer support through key working, some have own door facilities (with kitchen) and/or communal kitchens. According to this, and other keyworkers, “that’s really like the only situation where people have some kind of like meaningful support to actually exit homelessness”. Several of the keyworkers spoke of private hubs which have developed from repurposed hotels (and PEAs), which do not have social care trained staff on-site to support family and children’s needs.

In describing the type of support provided to families in NGO hubs was the practice of “preparing people for interviews” or getting them “housing ready”. This was mentioned by a few different keyworkers as something that is needed to support families to access housing in the highly unequal private-rental market using Housing Assistance Payment (HAP)¹¹ (Hearne and Murphy 2017; Hearne and Walsh 2021; Simon Communities of Ireland 2024). “Housing ready” was described by one keyworker as:

“So housing ready would be to... ensure that they have a HAP package ready. It would be to ensure that they’re registered with the Council, to ensure that they’re doing Daft¹² searches every week, to... encourage them to engage in the workforce, so that might be to top up on their HAP property so that they’re able to afford that. And it would be kind of budgeting.”

In NGO hubs, another keyworker described how there is a whole team who is dedicated to supporting residents with their housing needs, while private emergency accommodation (PEA) do not have this support on-site:

“So in the hub, like they’d [the staff] be on Daft every day checking... So there’s a team dedicated... Now the hub would give that available support, they prep people, do role plays for interviews, tell them how to dress things like



that. But in the PEAs, a lot of the guys coming to me... like...they are meant to have housing support officers... but I don't think there's a heavy on the ground presence... there's no keyworkers in the PEAs you know, to be on site, it's a drop in thing. But I'm understanding from all the clients and from the staff that do the drop-in, is that they have a huge allocation of cases to get through in the month or a few hundred or 150 clients, so sitting down doing Daft searches is just not their priority."

This keyworker further explained how the housing support needed is not just with Daft searches, it is also needed with viewing and negotiating about properties:

"It's also about the expediting bit like actually going to the viewing, having the support or explaining what it means, how the HAP works, you know, that kind of thing. The key workers in the hub are very good at that. They have the car and bring them to the viewing...talk...if they need to...talk to the landlord. It's hard to talk to when you're actually in front of the landlord, you have to sell yourself."

This is particularly the case for ethnic minority families where there are language barriers. Another keyworker who works in a hub spoke of how they support residents with appointments for viewings and with the Council, to avoid miscommunication which might occur due to language barriers.

Becoming 'housing ready' for some minority families living in homelessness long-term is made much more difficult because many of them lack access to support to help them to navigate this work. For example, one keyworker who works with Travellers stated that the families they work with; "haven't seen these mythical family hubs with wonderful social care staff and trauma-informed practice. Maybe I'm sure they are out there but the Traveller families that we work with, they are in B&B's, hotels and guest houses". In discussing how families are referred to different types of emergency accommodation, another participant spoke about how there is no set criteria for referral, it is based on availability, "they (accommodation provider) have a room, so let's put them there".

The two-tiered system of support provided in emergency accommodation is evidently a source of concern for some minority ethnic families, as they lack access to support to enable them to navigate the unequal housing market. It would appear that keyworkers also play a role as cultural assimilators, educating families to meet the requirements of a 'good tenant', who is employed and dresses and speaks a certain way.

5.2 The trauma of homelessness for families and inequalities in access to support to exit homelessness

All keyworkers spoke of the many challenges that minority ethnic families have in completing the work of exiting homelessness without support. This is also the case because many have endured prolonged periods living in emergency accommodation, having experienced significant levels of trauma there, as well as during their entries into homelessness (NASC 2018; Kennedy 2018; Smith et al. 2020; Harvey 2021). For example, Brigid entered homelessness following a period of hidden homelessness upon exiting a domestic violence service because of abuse she was experiencing by her ex-partner. Other families became homeless because of aggressive evictions, violent feuds on the sites they were living in, spending time in hidden homelessness, in cars, rough sleeping and in chaotic living situations. Many of the families seeking reunification have come from regions of conflict and violence while others have experienced hugely traumatic and violent losses of loved ones or have lived for sustained periods in direct provision. These experiences of housing exclusion and inadequate housing mean that families often enter homelessness embodying huge trauma, which has already impacted their mental health and well-being prior to prolonged stays in emergency accommodation. In addition to this, families often do not speak English, have low levels of literacy, including digital literacy skills. Yet, several reports detailed how families often lack access to culturally appropriate supports to enable them to exit homelessness. Keyworkers reported that there is a lack of trauma-informed and culturally-competent practice within many of the local authorities, which can impact on



the service provided to meet the needs of families. This can combine with a lack of trauma-informed support in emergency accommodation for families, to prolong their experiences there:

“mental health....is really significant...because their capacity to...advocate for themselves, to get up and make the phone calls...because...it needs to be almost like a full time bloody job...you need to be on to the council, like, every single week you need to...be arguing, “where were you? What letters were needed”, then following up and getting the letters off... chasing...people for the letters, making sure the letters were sent over...all of that stuff... you could easily be spending a day a week doing that. So if...you’re suffering from depression, and it’s really hard to just survive on a day-to-day basis, like trying to do that is just...”

Despite the fact that Brigid became homeless because of domestic abuse, she spoke of the lack of support she received while in the satellite domestic violence service and facing homelessness, and since becoming homeless. Although she does receive some support through a Traveller support service, this is a long-standing form of support and not one that is directly housing related. Brigid spoke of not having good support from the local authority, of having her files lost, having to repeat her lived experiences to them over and over again (of domestic abuse). She described how at one stage she felt that they didn't believe her, despite having “sent an email, every letter, every proof, everything that I had to do, did ask me to do, I was getting ignored”. Brigid spoke of her ongoing frustrations because of this neglect, where the onus has been on her to find accommodation on becoming homeless, and also in trying to exit homelessness.

“I know there is a housing crisis and I know the struggle is one on me to like be housed and things like that. But I don't think anybody deserves to be neglected...put to the back of the list or to the back burner- “oh yeah, we'll leave her there for a while to see how she gets on and then we back to her”.

“A keyworker who works with Travellers stated that there is a lack of pathways for Traveller women experiencing domestic abuse (Harvey 2021). There are added complications for women experiencing domestic abuse because of challenges with obtaining HAP and a lack of Traveller awareness amongst local authority staff and a culture of blame that exists amongst some staff (Harvey 2021).”

“There definitely seems to be a lack of understanding around the Traveller culture and a lot of the pushback as well, you've made yourself homeless or it's your own fault or... this type of rhetoric... And for Traveller families...we have spent so much time trying to support families to look for HAP accommodation...there is nothing right now... but then you're gonna have the added complication of being a Traveller and there's just no way forward. The only way is to enter homelessness, so some women will go back to an abusive situation before putting their children into homeless accommodation.”

Another keyworker working with Travellers discussed the experiences of a Traveller family who lived in a hub for seven years. She described this as a form of systemic neglect:

“And I think unfortunately, because of the historical reasons in Ireland, this is what we do to Travellers. We de-skill them. We make them think that they are not capable. We make them completely marginalised, and then they have to put their hand out and wait for the government, who were the ones turning their back on them to give them services. So I think, I think, really honestly, unfortunately, there was never any conversation about looking for somewhere else. It was just the council will house you know...”

For Amir, it was only after one and a half years of living in a hotel without any source of income, that he was connected with a housing support worker, who is supporting him to access housing through HAP. When asked about the barriers he has experienced to accessing housing support he stated “They have a homeless crisis or some problem, because I'm not the only one who is homeless. Everybody's like that. So it could be because of that, I don't know”.



5.2.1 Lack of coherent trauma-informed and culturally competent responses

The relationship between family homelessness and trauma and the need for trauma-informed responses when supporting families is recognised in research (Siersbaek and Loftus 2020; Mayock and Neary 2021). The importance of having local authority staff trained in trauma-informed, cultural awareness and anti-racist training was discussed by a number of keyworkers. For example, in relation to family reunification and challenges with accessing suitable accommodation, this keyworker described a common scenario which reflects this lack of training:

“The amount of times when those [reunifying] families then try to access homeless services and I’ve witnessed it and I’ve heard many of my clients relay this to me that some members of staff in like the [local authority] team makes a remark like “like why did you bring your family here now? Why did you make such a bad decision? To bring them here now?” Which is really insensitive, considering, like, again, just a tiny bit of like understanding of, number one, if a person gets refugee status, there’s actually a time limit on when they can bring their family here. So there’s a legislative limit to when they’re able to do that. And it’s a thing where if you don’t do it, you lose the right. But number two, families are coming from situations where their lives might be in peril all the time. So like, obviously, someone will bring a family here so.”

Other keyworkers referred to examples of positive decision-making for ethnic minority families by some officials and of specific efforts to support minority families such as Roma and Travellers within some local authorities. However, they spoke of how this is often the result of individual decision-making, rather than a coherent policy approach. There are huge variations amongst local authorities in how they respond to minority ethnic families. Two keyworkers discussed good examples where Roma families were supported to move towards exiting homelessness. However, not all Roma have access to this type of support, particularly those who do not speak English. This is a particular problem for them because, *“When they don’t have*

the language, it is very difficult to have a conversation with someone and to explain to them... what’s happening with them”. This keyworker also spoke of how there are only a small number of people who can speak Romani, and at times, some Roma have reported being discriminated against by some translators who are non-Roma. A critical issue for Roma, and other minority groups who have experienced racism, discrimination, and persecution, is trusting professionals with their personal lives and that of their family:

“And also for people, when you work with Roma... is a huge trust between us. You know, imagine to go a Roma person to someone, and that person to come to them. Oh, hi. I want to help you with accommodation and all these kind of things. Do you believe you will see the truth from the beginning? No. Never. Because how can I share to this person? My own heart, you know, or all my information, what I have, for my family, I don’t know what she would do with us. I don’t know what she can do with our documentation. You know this kind of mind? You know what they have in their head?”

The lack of access to culturally appropriate supports for minority ethnic families means that they can easily fall through the net and get left behind. This is particularly the case for:

“People who might not...have English as their first language or might have... limitations in terms of digital literacy or just literacy in general. Hugely disadvantages people and really... there’s nothing to ensure that those people don’t fall through the cracks or like get them get left behind.”

There appears to be a lack of culturally competent and trauma-informed support for ethnic minority families experiencing homelessness. This invisibilises their needs and results in inequalities in access to housing services. This can prolong their experiences of homelessness and compound the traumas they have experienced.



5.3 Administrative barriers and lack of staff knowledge

Furthermore, administrative barriers and a lack of understanding and knowledge amongst local authority staff around the rights of EU workers (MLRC 2020) can delay families being registered on the housing list and in getting access to the documentation needed to access housing supports and move out of homelessness:

“The officials, they haven’t been trained, they don’t have the knowledge, and they’re saying, No, you won’t qualify. Oh, no. They won’t even let people apply sometimes, but they apply and they get refused. And they’re left sitting there.”

Housing plays a central role in supporting family integration for an already very marginalised group. Because of barriers to accessing supports it can result in a cycle of further marginalisation for Roma and others:

“They cannot apply for the housing list if you don’t have PPS, they cannot apply for PPS if you don’t have a proof of address, and it’s coming everything, if you don’t have place where to live with your family, you don’t have what? If you don’t have place where to live, you will lose, also health, education and all these kind of things. You know it’s happening...it is all related, everything is go from house...”

Administrative delays and a lack of communication/clarity around decision-making is having significant consequences for families living long-term in emergency accommodation, who have experienced significant trauma, and where there are identified medical or exceptional social needs. In one example discussed, there was a delay of over one year in completing an amendment to an application to be able to apply for priority housing for a large lone parent Roma family who have suffered significant trauma. Because of their living situation, the children, who have been living in one room in emergency accommodation for over 2 years, have been unable to recover and heal from the trauma. The keyworker described how:

“There was just some block on it. They were not following through on what we wanted and I don’t know why...They were just requesting more information, but there was no obvious reason or rationale. No obvious reason. No, just no. Like no. We have a very hard time trying to get a reason out of local authorities, or communication wouldn’t be there... I would have sent a lot of emails, but they just wouldn’t be responded to. So yeah, don’t know what the reason is or the excuse to be honest. The family is kind of, I suppose, left there in limbo... waiting without any explanation or no explanation. I know nobody’s giving them an explanation...”

The same keyworker spoke of how there is a lack of information around applying for medical priority, and how it is “a bit shrouded in mystery”. While it offers some hope to people with exceptional needs to have priority access to housing, there is no clarity around the criteria when applying for it. There are differences between different local authorities, where some “of them are very efficient. And some Councils, you know, you can be waiting up to six months or a year for response. And there’s no timeframe. There’s nothing you know, it’s yeah, it’s pretty, it’s pretty bad and one local authorities specifically”.

Similar challenges and delays were discussed in the context of family reunification, which as discussed in chapter 3 & 4, is causing family separation on arrival in Ireland. Delays in placing the reunifying family members on the sponsor parent’s housing application prior to their arrival is meaning that family are placed in separate accommodation on arrival. The process to add them to the application, can at best, take 3 months, during which time the family remain separated. Then there is the issue of finding emergency accommodation for the family or a big enough house to rent. These administrative delays are adding to already traumatic and often stressful situations for families reunifying after years apart, and which brings its own challenges for families (Hinds 2018; Smith et al. 2020):

“But I think particularly for people who are often exiting, incredibly frightening and traumatic situations and then also facing [further lengthy challenges], because to be



honest, like family reunification...it's not all roses, like people change a lot when they've been separated from one another for a long time, especially with people often going through very difficult experiences and it's not totally uncommon for there to be...relationship breakdown in the wake of a family reunifying."

Similar challenges experienced by another family who had experienced significant trauma in their country of origin and on their journey here prior to being recognised as a refugee were discussed by a keyworker. Having received their refugee status, the sponsor parent applied for family reunification, for their family who were still living in this very dangerous country. Prior to their arrival, the sponsor was unable to find suitable accommodation for the family, so the family had to live in the bedroom the sponsor parent had been renting. The family lived in overcrowded conditions for a year and a half, on a waiting list for emergency homeless accommodation. Concerns were highlighted to Tusla because of serious overcrowding of the family of five in one room. One of the parents suffered significant health problems during this time and the other parent lost their employment. The newly arrived family member required sensitive interpreter support and both parents were still significantly traumatised because of their experiences in their home country. However, despite this, no emergency homeless accommodation was provided to them at any stage during this time, nor was any explanation given for not providing any, other than that none was available. According to this keyworker, when talking about the list for emergency homeless accommodation in this area:

"Unfortunately it moves like, you know, I have regularly asked about this waiting list. But like you know, you can see one person, one household, be offered the next day a place you know, so how have they been deem a priority? I'm not sure to be honest..."

The findings in this section reveal how there is a lack of transparency in decision-making, which is resulting in barriers to accessing adequate housing and support in a timely manner for ethnic minority families. This can prolong experiences of homelessness and the traumas families are experiencing, impacting significantly on family life.

5.3.1 Inflexible system

Additional challenges to exiting homelessness for minority families were reported because of a lack of flexibility in the housing system, which can hold people in homelessness for much longer. For example, several keyworkers spoke of how a lack of housing for large families was a barrier to exiting homelessness for ethnic minority families, often for those who have already endured long waits in PEA. In some cases families with significant medical/social needs have been given priority but cannot move until a suitability sized house is available. This can amount to a considerable wait. One keyworker remarked how, "you'll never get one on the local authority list- a 5-bed, forget it. So they won't authorise the HAP, in fairness for overcrowding. So what do you do? You're trapped. In addition to this, a lack of resources to support families equally is putting an incredible strain on the system, creating a two-tiered system, where the 'good tenant', is more likely to exit homelessness:

"And I think the problem... is that any service whether it's statutory and non-statutory, that's responding to that level of demand with limited resources ends up responding to the people who can self-advocate to some degree and it's these people who are going to achieve the outcomes that are so desired."

A critical issue for minority ethnic families is that the system is not designed flexibly in a way to respond to their specific needs:

"It's kind of like... you're a shape, and there's a block, and you... have to fit that shape into that block in a certain way. And if you're outside the shape of that, well I'm sorry.... Back to that thing of you know, it's the system is set up in this way, and you have to fit in with the system. The system...doesn't much flex to be able to consider individual needs."

As this keyworker explains, it "is the components of the system that actually hold people in homelessness" and not simply "the housing crisis and the insecurity of HAP and difficulty that people face just finding somewhere now". The delays in the system can be caused by any number of factors, it "doesn't have to be that many of them, each individual one, but when you add them



all up, whether you're affected by multiple or it just takes one, it adds months onto your time experiencing homelessness very, very easily...". On top of these challenges, however, for minority ethnic families is also the reality of discrimination in the housing market. As the next section will show, racism and discrimination are extremely pervasive within the housing market and create significant challenges for families trying to access adequate housing and exit homelessness (Gusciute et al. 2020).

5.4. Racism and discrimination in the private-rental market and acculturation as opposed to integration

Racism and discrimination emerged as a significant barrier for minority ethnic families experiencing long-term homelessness and was highlighted by all keyworkers as a major issue in the housing market. For some this was discussed as something that is more subtle, where communities such as Roma or Travellers are not phoned back when they view houses, or something that is becoming much more overt, as discussed by several participants, including this one who stated:

"Yeah, there's absolutely discrimination in the housing market... we are liaising with landlords a lot to try and sell HAP to them as an option and to, you know, make it feasible for them to complete the paperwork and for the tenants to move in, etc... And the number of landlords telling us "I'm not racist, but I do not want someone black and I don't want a Traveller", is, yeah, but like, the confidence to say it, like in the past month, I've heard it three times, and I've probably called 10 landlords."

Several keyworkers spoke of how when landlords hear ethnic minority accents, the "viewing is cancelled... [and] they could be living here their whole lives as such, you know, if they don't sound right...". While another two key workers stated that the discrimination experienced by minority ethnic families is firstly class-based, as professionals will get first preference, and then ethnicity comes after this. Keyworkers also expressed uncertainty about their own roles in trying to support families to become 'housing ready' and access housing in this highly unequal and discriminatory housing market:

"It's something I kind of struggled with...you know, we do some very practical things with people, like bringing them to a viewing and walking out and saying, "this is what you did wrong". And then the next time they go,[and] it goes really well. And like, you'd be shocked. I really thought it wouldn't work when I started, but it really does, simple things, like saying, "listen, you need to... put on jeans and iron your shirt, or you need to shave". You know, these are things that I feel very uncomfortable saying to people pointing out, this is your difference that they're saying is not okay, and yet we're sort of having to support people to fit that bill in this unit of time, to help them exit homelessness... It's a very messy one."

What appears to be happening is that keyworkers, in their efforts to support families to access housing in a highly unequal and racist housing market, are educating families on how to become 'good tenants'. In reality, what this involves is the promotion of acculturation, becoming cultural assimilators, as opposed to supporting integration and respect for the expression of cultural identity.



5.5 Summary of findings

These findings suggest that the process of becoming 'housing ready' and accessing housing to exit homelessness for minority ethnic families in the current private-rental market involves acculturation or assimilation into the wider culture, as opposed to challenging the pervasiveness of racism and discrimination within the housing market and housing services. Furthermore, evidence emerged that points to inequalities in access to support to exit homelessness for minority families. Among the barriers is a lack of recognition of the specific support needs of minority families owing to their specifically marginalised positions within society and their often very traumatic experiences prior to entering homelessness. All of these delays and barriers prolong children's experiences in emergency accommodation, the effects of which, as will be discussed in the next chapter, compound the multiple and intersectional traumas they've experienced, leaving the children behind.



Chapter 6: The Children Who Are Left Behind

6.0 Introduction

All participants spoke one way or another about the significantly negative effects that long-term homelessness has on minority-ethnic families, and how children are hugely impacted by this in multiple and intersectional ways. As highlighted within the literature review, there is a body of research available which points to the specifically negative implications of homelessness for children in terms of their health, education, cognitive, and socio-emotional development. Research also points to the deep distress, shame, and stigma that children experience because of being homeless. Children also experience being different to, and lesser than, other children and are discriminated against because of their difference (Benner et al. 2018; Clair 2019; Murray 2019; Ombudsman for Children 2019). Inequality impacts significantly on children's subjective well-being and compounds the traumas children experience, shaping their sense of selves and their adult trajectories (Maire et al. 2021; Laurence et al. 2023a; 2024). These are important considerations when exploring the long-term effects of family homelessness on children from minority ethnic families. As has been evidenced in chapters 3, 4 and 5, this group of children tend to experience inequality across a broad range of markers, in addition to homelessness and housing inadequacy. Their homelessness and housing inadequacy occur against a backdrop of policies and practices which exclude, devalue and discriminate against them and their families culturally and relationally. As this chapter details, collectively these inequalities intersect to leave children behind across all domains essential for enabling healthy and positive childhoods.

6.1 How living in emergency accommodation long-term impacts on children's development and well-being

All accounts provided by participants in the study spoke of the disabling effects of living in emergency accommodation long-term, resulting in children "being left behind". As with other studies discussed in chapter 3, and the findings in 4, participants in this study gave examples of how living in homelessness accommodation impacts on children's family life, their well-being, and their development in a multitude of ways.

For example, similar to findings from research carried out by the Ombudsman for Children (2019), two keyworkers with experience of working in an NGO hub, staffed by social care teams, spoke of how children's behaviour can be affected when they enter homelessness and/or into hubs:

"Some of the kid's behaviour does go downhill when they go into hub, or when they go into a homeless service... because there's so many kids living together. It's very difficult for the parents to kind of separate themselves and have their own rules or...their...parents lose autonomy... because there's a whirlwind of kids and they're having a great time and like, it's very difficult to say, No, you have to stay in and do your homework because all the other kids are playing- you can see 50 children having the laugh out in the garden...and sometimes I think that environment as well, just doesn't suit some children. It's too many people like too big...it's, it's, it's just chaos, it can be chaos."

Interestingly, two keyworkers (from two different regions) described how hubs have become like "tiny villages" because children have been born there and some families have been living there for extremely prolonged periods - in some cases for up to seven years - often with multiple children being born



into homelessness during this time. The hub reportedly has positive elements for children, as children can socialise with one another and have “a safety network to go out to play with other kids and other families and staff and feel safe”. However, it can also mean that children can be exposed to families with multiple needs, and to aggression, and “to a lot of things that they wouldn’t obviously normally be exposed” to.

Another keyworker from an NGO hub spoke of how a number of Roma children learned very quickly to speak English through peer interactions and how parents are supported to access and interact with schools by staff in the hub. As mentioned in chapter 4, NGO hubs are seen as the gold standard in emergency accommodation because of the level of support available for families through keyworkers and through housing teams, and because of the specific supports available for children. However, despite this, keyworkers spoke of how there is often a strong emphasis placed on the supervision of children within hubs by social care staff, and this can impact on children’s behaviour and the parent-child relationship:

“As the relationship is always about just giving out and like, I’m in trouble on the back foot... So it impacts the kids emotionally. It impacts them physically, because their parent, is like they’re constantly feeling hopelessness Yeah, it definitely does impact them...”

Thus it would seem that although children are often living long-term in hubs, and while there are significant disadvantages to their experiences there, NGO hubs, with social care trained staff do offer some level of stability, security, and support to children where staff are trained, that is not available on-site in other forms of emergency accommodation (Ombudsman for Children 2019).

Similar concerns were highlighted in relation to private hubs regarding the supervision of children. Despite the introduction of a playroom into some private hubs, they are often not accessible to all children, and can present parents with significant challenges because of the emphasis placed on child protection, as opposed to supporting parents:

“So, you know, there was a playroom made available, beautifully done up, really gorgeous playroom...You’d never see a child in it because there weren’t that many toys. Actually, even though it’s this...beautifully done room, there weren’t actually that many toys. They were very, kind of geared towards younger children... Not much in the way of games for slightly older children, and just the fact that parents had to be there. So, like, if you had several, you know, different aged kids with different kind of wishes and wants, it was, like, I would say that was quite hard... quite a big ask. And so there was a lot of policing of the parents that went on in terms of... your kids aren’t meant...to be out in the corridor playing without you...all child protection...”

Other participants also spoke of how playrooms are inaccessible because they can be locked, “used to store furniture”, or not always accessible to children because of supervision rules.

6.1.1 The disabling effects of a lack of space and nowhere to play over time

The longer the time spent in homelessness, the more profound and cumulative the effects. Despite the disadvantages associated with living in NGO hubs noted above, several of the keyworkers and the three family members themselves also spoke of how children living in private emergency accommodation lack access to space, privacy, and somewhere safe to play. This has a significant impact on their development over time. For example, in discussing how living in emergency accommodation for three and a half years impacted his children, Luca described:

“And how did it affect us? Mentally you know. You know, do you think it’s easy for children to be in the small room? You know, to not have some where to play, to don’t have some where to go, and to don’t have friends to them room or to do something. No! It is a mental for children. And when I move in emergency accommodation, one of my child, he was very small. And my opinion this is, and I think so 100% this is because this was, you know, he has delayed speech. You know, he has a very, very delayed speech...”



One keyworker spoke of how due to the lack of space and privacy for families living in PEA it can mean that children are experiencing heightened anxiety as they overhear their parent(s) conversations, often about their challenging situation. The lack of space to support family life for children and parents also affects how children see their parents:

"You... visit some families and the mammy is on the bed every single time you go into them because where else are they supposed to sit, and the children see this and do not see their parents move at all, maybe from the bathroom to the bed, because they're piled up with stuff, as they've nowhere to store their stuff either."

Living in hotel or private hub accommodation long-term affects children of different ages in multiple ways, as this keyworker explains about one family she worked with:

"And for the younger children, like even in terms of their physical...like the capacity to have space to roll, to talk, to learn to walk, like, very practical...physical development pieces...for the younger ones, the capacity to have space to play, like, if you're trying to play in a bedroom where there's stuff all around you... the kids would be on tablets because it was easier, like, it was easier for the kids, it was easier for the parents, like, trying...to live in a room where...you're already struggling, you're under stress, you have kids...bouncing around, like, what are they going to be doing? They're going to be bouncing on beds. Then do you want to spend your time telling them not to play in the bed?"

This keyworker went on to describe how living long-term in emergency accommodation impacted all aspects of children and families' lives:

"So, it just impacted on their development on so many different levels, the lack of space to spread out and do anything, and the lack of space to do your homework, and, you know, just on so many different levels, the not having privacy from each other, a little bit of private time...like, we take, for granted being able to go into a different room... And the lack of capacity for a family life, really, to do that

in any meaningful way...and then not being able to eat a meal that your parents have cooked for you on a regular basis, for the parent not being able to cook the meal... for everything to be so expensive. So...everything just seemed it was like you take a situation and how can you increase and crank up the stress..."

Brigid and Amir also described how isolating homelessness is for their children. Brigid spoke of how both she and her children have been affected by their experiences of housing exclusion and homelessness:

"But between me and my children we got very bad anxiety, very bad anxiety. Like, all of last year, it was like refuge, [community house], and then it was my father and mothers and then my sisters because we weren't in the homeless. And then when we did go to the homeless, it was "ahh no we have nothing...we have nothin, we have nothin". Eventually we did get something. And it was very hard...my children got very bad anxiety out of it, so they did and I kinda think it has affected them with a small bit of depression too. I mean the constant change. I think then coming in here, being stuck in a room. You could go for a walk but in some days the weather was too bad to bring them out. So it did affect them, it greatly affected them so it did."

In discussing his child's experiences, Amir spoke of how his child gets on very well at school with other children. However, his child does not have this outlet during the summer months. His child remains in the room alone without friends, as there are no children of the same nationality in the hotel. Amir brings his child out to the park sometimes as there are no facilities for children to play at the hotel. Amir spoke of how his child misses their siblings and mother a lot. Although the family was recently linked with support in relation to their housing, no support outside of school has been provided for Amir's child.

While in-reach support is provided to families and children living in some PEA accommodation through local authority and NGO in-reach teams, which can include case managers and child support workers through Focus Ireland Homeless Action Team, this support does not appear to be available to all families living



in PEA (Siersback and Loftus 2020; Focus Ireland 2021b). In the absence of up-to-date data on the number of families and children who have access to support in all emergency accommodation facilities, and the nature of the support being provided, it is very difficult to know how some children are mitigating the effects of living in emergency accommodation long-term and what type of support is available for them.¹³

6.2 The cumulative traumas of homelessness for minority ethnic children

In discussing the experiences of Roma families and children living long-term in emergency accommodation, this keyworker described how Roma families can be unaware of how their children are being affected by the conditions they are living in, “because this kind of time is flying” and they might appear to be developing normally physically, but it does have a huge effect on them as children. In particular, this keyworker spoke of how these effects are compounded by the experiences of discrimination and racism that the Roma community can have in some emergency accommodation, in their experiences of housing and the discrimination and racism they experience in general in accessing services and across their lives (Kennedy 2018; Smith and Kennedy 2020). This was also stated by three other keyworkers as impacting on the lived experiences of Traveller families and children also:

“But the children who live for long-term in emergency accommodation, that can affect them, because- one, they don’t have communication with friends. You know, they don’t know where to go to play, even if you have some place where to play, the parents will always say “quiet, quiet, quiet” because it will be problematic for [them], they will kick [them] out from the emergency accommodation and all these kind are things. And it’s happening these things. You know, when the children, they are running or they are doing something, the staff, straight away they go and they say, “Okay, you need to leave from the emergency accommodation”, because this is a normal

thing for Roma people [to be evicted] after that means they can say, okay, don’t want to be again the problem. “Quiet, quiet, quiet”...And the children, they will be quiet, you know what I mean...Yeah, it can affect them mental or physical...”

In discussing the effects on children from the Traveller community, this keyworker described the sense of desperation that families have around accessing stable, secure housing for their families, which is something out of their reach otherwise (Grotti et al. 2018; Harvey 2021). This places huge pressure on Traveller families, who keyworkers also spoke of frequently experiencing discrimination and being subject to disproportionate levels of monitoring and control within private emergency accommodation in particular. For them, “there’s just very little...room for mistake”. This has a profound effect on Traveller children also:

“I really think the children are being left behind. You know, I can see this. There’s just huge anxiety around, you know, everything is resting on this house, when it’s coming, this...house that we don’t know when, where, how it will come but that’s the way it is...Everything is resting on that. And...there has to be no record of antisocial behaviour, because when you finally get offered your house, there’s going to be a check...you’re vetted, to check references. So you have... to be on your best behaviour.”

As a result of the rules in the PEAs, observance of which can be a condition of their access to housing, children become invisible and embody the climate of fear and conditionality that families are living in:

“But whenever I’m visiting families, children rarely even speak you know, they’re so tuned to threat or, you know, perceived threat for them might be a professional, a Tusla person, or housing person. You might not even see or hear the children when you visit because everything is resting on you having to be good, you have to have clean record of no arguments, no antisocial behaviour, no arrears...[it] seems to be all kind of conditioned...”

¹³ Statistics provided by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage only show the numbers of families with support plans in place in NGO hubs. No other details are available on this.



Living in an environment of fear and threat such as this can impact on children's development and on every facet of their lives, as the rules have institutionalising effects on them:

"When they're in the hotels, you know... trauma is further embedded. Because in so many of these hotels [and hubs], and there are no social care trained staff or trauma-informed staff. There are security staff who stand and watch cameras. And if children come out to their room to play in the corridor, they're told straight away "get back into your room", because it's all about insurance and liability. And I've seen that time and time again in hotels where children, staff come straight up, "get back in... get back into your room", speaking to five year old children, three year old children. You know, if a teenager wants to do homework on his iPad or something in the corridor- "No, you're not supervised to get back into your room..." young girls who wants to cook and bake in the communal kitchen. They have to have certain times or else they have to get back into their room. You know, it's really institutionalised."

Another keyworker spoke of the experiences of another Traveller family where:

"Staff were really judgmental about the fact that they were Travellers, and made assumptions and judgments about them on the basis that they were Travellers, and made assumptions and judgements about their kids on the basis that they were Travellers... and so that it was just that that level of kind of casual and quite overt racism just added to the difficulties that they experienced."

Living in hostile conditions such as this was reported as further isolating children already struggling with their mental health. One child, who "suffered from a lot of anxiety, so... used to hate going down into the dining area for dinner. So they would be buying basically chipper food a couple of times a week...". Children's lives are put on hold because of the unequal conditions they are living in:

"I thought the kids were really impacted by it...And, you know, it's just that thing of like...it felt for them, like... someone had pressed stop on their lives, and they were, you know, they were just waiting...and they were trying to keep going in terms of keeping the kids in school...things like that. But for the kids, some of the kids were really, really struggling. The older boy was really struggling. One of the older girls was really struggling, and they didn't want people to know that they were homeless. They were so ashamed and so embarrassed about it."

The emotional and relational effects of being homeless are experienced in a multitude of ways by children also. Reports by keyworkers described how Traveller children experienced a "huge" double stigma, "like they already felt the stigma of being a Traveller because they were all in settled schools... And then there was the stigma of being in homelessness on top of that". Several keyworkers spoke of how children can further isolate themselves as they do not invite friends over due to the levels of shame and embarrassment they experience. Reports of children making up stories or of "learning to lie...kind of learning to cover it up, you know, and like, oh, where does Santa leave my presents? Oh yeah under my chimney! like the kids, you know, are in a hotel?".

The prolonged effects of living in homeless accommodation are expressed in the account given by this keyworker of one young person:

"But he'd given up. He used to love boxing. He'd given up boxing. He was in his room all the time. His dad was really trying to encourage him to get back into boxing. His dad says to me, like he needs to be out. He needs to do mixing with other people. I just, it's not about the boxing I just want them to be out and doing something. It's not good for them to be in the hotel room all the time."

The prolonged effects of living away from extended family and from other Travellers was also discussed by this keyworker, which combined with the transience of homelessness to compound children's experiences of disconnection, loss and trauma.

"Because they would maybe build up a... bit of relationship... the older kids might start to get friendly with some of the kids of their own age, and then that family would just disappear, because some get accommodated really quickly. You'll never see them again. And [an older child] said to me, "I did that a few times, and I just thought, it's not worth it".

Children and young people from ethnic minority families experience deeply embodied and compounding traumas living long-term in emergency accommodation. These impact negatively on their self-esteem and self-identity and can be exacerbated by their disconnection from peers, wider social networks and their experiences of not belonging to wider society.¹⁴

¹⁴ See Kitty Holland, "Traveller children feel 'unwanted' in education system, says report" The Irish Times (Dublin, 28 September 2021). Available at: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/traveller-children-feel-unwanted-in-education-system-says-report-1.4685032>

6.3 School as a buffer to the negative effects of homelessness

School was reported to have a positive stabilising effect on Brigid, Luca and Amir’s children and with the promotion of their developmental needs (Keogh et al. 2006; Scanlon and Mc Kenna 2018). However, Brigid struggled to find space for her children when they first moved to their emergency accommodation, with a delay of 3 months in starting school. No pre-school place was found for her youngest child.

For Amir, the school provided sensitive translation support, financial support with the cost of schooling and breakfast and lunch for his child. However, this support was only available during term-times. Another keyworker spoke of schools who offer similar supports, which are also available during summer months and include summer activities. Examples of the supports given are discussed by this keyworker:

“Yeah, I can’t think of a family where I haven’t the school hasn’t engaged with me to try and get funding for extra supports for those children, whether it’s around language supports or just because of living in emergency accommodation, to kind of to be able to give them a better space, or to give them more recreational activities, or summer activities, that kind of stuff. Like, yeah, really, really, fantastic supports.”

However, the availability of school places was identified as a big issue and has acted as a barrier to families exiting homelessness because there were no schools for children to attend in the area the accommodation was located. According to another keyworker, not knowing where families are going to be moved to, also has “a negative effect on children’s ability to attend school”.

Furthermore, it was reported that not all schools are sensitive to the experiences of migrant children experiencing homelessness and that “there’s a lot of like variation..., particularly in primary schools, of staff sensitivity to...the experience of living in homeless services as a child, for children...”. Another keyworker

spoke of emerging discriminatory entry policies in one area, experienced by Roma families, claiming that “only children who had attended the pre-school can attend the primary school”. According to this keyworker, where families are not supported to navigate these discriminatory practices, children can struggle to get access to school, impacting on their education, and their access to additional supports provided through schools.

Furthermore, as discussed, living in hostile and institutional environments over time can impact on children’s sense of safety. This can create a toxic stress for them, which can also impact on their education and learning. This is particularly the case where there is a lack of trauma-informed training for teachers:

“But I really see the children have been left behind especially in terms of their education. Because when children are living in an environment, that is, whether or not their bodies are not feeling safe. Their fight or flight responses are activated on the way to school, even they might have to get two or three buses and be embarrassed that their clothes aren’t washed. There could be so many things filling up there, you know, with stress. And then once they get into school their bodies or their brains are under stress and they are falling behind and they’re expected...and there seems to be no education or training for teachers about children who live in homelessness, or inadequate housing.”

The cumulative and traumatic effects of living in family homelessness for prolonged periods impacts on children’s learning and behaviour and represents an adverse childhood experience, with significantly negative implications for children’s well-being and for their future well-being (Crouch et al. 2019; Siersbaek and Loftus 2020; Maitre et al. 2021; Curristan et al. 2022):

“When children are coming in, not ready to learn, they’re not able to follow if there’s stress response systems activated, especially for a prolonged period of time. They’re on edge, they’re not able to follow everyday simple



cues or tasks like putting on your coat or read this page of a book or you know...their bodies and their brains are not in a conducive space for learning or taking in information so that amplifies the fight or flight, you know- "are they going to call on me to read or to, you know, get a book or whatever it is", but they're falling behind, it's not their fault. You know, it's setting them up to fail long term... it is an adverse childhood experience, and it does have prolonged impact on children's success in every way of life, whether it's their educational journey or their mental health, long term."

Evidently, the conditions associated with living long-term in homelessness can affect children's experiences of education. Living in prolonged states of fear and stress for children is embodied over time as a form of toxic stress. The buffering effect that school can offer children is not available to all ethnic minority children, and instead school can become a site for more prolonged states of trauma, exclusion and isolation for them. This can compound the depth of the trauma experienced.

6.4 The importance of therapeutic support for children living in long-term homelessness

Recognition of the importance of having therapeutic supports for children to counteract the traumatic effects of homelessness was discussed by several participants in the study (Siersbaek and Loftus 2020). For example, in discussing her own children's experiences of not receiving any support from the council or from any child support workers, Brigid spoke of how, she thinks that:

"It should be the case, and I don't know if it's the same in every council, but there should be more support for children. Along the lines of play therapy, counselling. I think every child in homelessness needs that because, thank god, they have their [siblings], but there are other children that are by themselves and have nowhere to go... Nowhere to play...that's stuck in a room when they come out of school. It does affect ya!... If it affects an adult, mentally and emotionally, it sure does affect the child."

The importance of having child-centred supports for children was discussed further by two different keyworkers who have worked therapeutically with Traveller children. They spoke of how children express the effects of their trauma through play:

"It would come out in a child's play. Play is the child's language so I would see it...in the theme of the play, a lot of themes around power, safety, you know, threat... a lot of children's nervous systems that are just completely, you know, stress responses activated and they're so adapted to threat you know, that they're ready... you know very on edge."

This keyworker described one young person she worked with "all she wanted to do was just relax" when she came for therapy because of the effects of living in a very chaotic hotel. The young person would ask:

"Can we turn the lights off. Can we get that lovely fluffy blanket? Put on some soft music"... You know, and it was self-directed. So she was just, she knew what her body needed...We would just let her rest because her body craved it so much because she was just exhausted and drained from living in that environment of just toxic stress, constant threat, being watched 24-7, you know, no quiet, nowhere to get peace and quiet. That was what she needed when she came in."

For others, they were too ashamed or embarrassed to engage with any form of therapy or support, or anything that:

"Might be good for them...And it was all kind of waiting on- "when I'm housed then I'll go to therapy". I hear that a lot from families. When we get our house sorted, then we will start therapy, you know, or then the football team or then we'll start you know, anything that might be good for them. Because, it's their basic needs. They cannot function and they cannot think about anything else until they've been housed...[and this can go on] effectively for years..."



While access to meaningful support can help to mitigate the effects of homelessness, children from minority ethnic families can experience barriers to accessing support. This can compound the traumas they have experienced.

6.5 The importance of safe and secure housing to family life for minority ethnic children and the best interests of children

Recognition of the importance of safe and secure housing for enabling family life and that the principles of the best interests of the child should guide decision-making in relation to children's lives (Children's Rights Alliance 2024), is largely absent from decision-making for families experiencing homelessness. This is particularly the case for minority ethnic families and children who face huge barriers to exiting homelessness. One example which was considered to reflect this principle was discussed where minority families present as homeless but there is a lack of emergency accommodation to fit them all together. In such instances, to prevent children from sleeping rough, or in the Garda stations, which was mentioned as a reality for some families, the practice of separating families to allow the mother and children get access to accommodation was also discussed. The other parent, usually the father, would "phone the Freephone number", or become part of the hidden homelessness population, or sleep in their cars or sleep out.

Another participant described the system as "a very inhumane system", where decision-making doesn't reflect "a genuine interest in the children's best interests, it's really moving numbers around a page, and when you've got this really big family...[and] there's only going to be X amount of those houses built in [the city]. So no consideration to what's that like? What's the impact [on the family and children]?"

Another keyworker also made reference to decisions being made based on numbers, without the human and emotional

cost being considered for children and families living with huge structural inequalities and trauma:

"...it's all about lists and they're moving people from. They've invented these priority lists, and are more and more priority lists so that they can spread out the list so that they don't look as big and also there's medical priority, there's exceptional social grounds priority, there's Traveller priority, there's homeless priority. You know, but everybody needs a house. And even when people get prioritised they get excited about being on a priority list. The list is huge. You know, it doesn't mean anything. They're just moving numbers around."

And the human face of children's need to be safe and protected and to have an adequate standard of living appear to be often missed to bureaucratic decision-making:

"You know, at times we've had to run down and get, you know, cereal and the toast and we are screaming, there are children in cars. They need, you know, accommodation and they need to be safe. And well no, go back to the other council. Go back to where you came from. Kind of thing. You know, like there's no recognition of this. That it is, you know, traumatic for children and that it's detrimental to their mental health and their well-being [to not have access to safe, stable accommodation]."

There is a lack of recognition of the levels of trauma families are experiencing and the effects this has on children. Despite proclaiming that there are children sleeping in cars trying to stay safe, this keyworker added how:

"There's no priority list, you know, for families who have experienced trauma for families who've experienced maybe, gangland criminality or... feuding...who've experienced domestic violence and...really complex trauma, there's some children who have seen it all you know, and they have to then go to the bottom of the list and to a homeless hotel for potentially years."



There is a distinct lack of understanding and knowledge around the needs and rights of ethnic minority children, as expressed through a range of human rights legislation:

“The answer is no, [many of] the local authorities don’t get it and they don’t get that they’re infringing on [fundamental human rights] and section 42 Irish Human Rights and Equality Act. I think the Public Sector Duty is gonna be a big thing because, like, they [local authorities] actually have to explain themselves. And where EU law is concerned, article 7 of the Charter Fundamental Rights of the European Union. It’s the right to family life, like it’s the same, especially article 8, rights in terms of European Convention on human rights, and article 24 of the Charter, the State is meant to act in the best interests of children.”

Brigid gives an important insight into why placing children’s best interests at the centre of decision-making is so important for ethnic minority children who have often experienced violence, trauma, and a range of intersecting structural inequalities which prevent them from being able to independently access housing themselves:

“I think of my children’s safety of where they’re going to grow up and where they’re going to live... And I just don’t want it to be anywhere...I just want... I’m not asking for a mansion, I’m just asking for a safe estate, where my kids, I know my kids can play out the front in the garden and I know they’ll be safe... I am responsible for them... for their safety til they get for a certain age where they can look after themselves... and you know what I mean.”

A study by Lambert et al. (2018) revealed how young parents’ decision-making and choices in relation to housing and accommodation was directed by the long-term needs and the well-being of their children. The importance of safe, secure housing is central to healthy childhood development. However, as has been evidenced in this report, this is out of reach for some families and children from ethnic minority families. The findings in this section confirm why children’s best interests should be paramount in responses to child and family homelessness. This is particularly the case for minority ethnic children and families owing to the structurally marginal positions they occupy in society and that structure the families’ lives. The effects of these inequalities are embodied by children and experienced subjectively as prolonged states of toxic stress and shame. As the findings in this chapter reveal, because children are living in these hostile conditions for prolonged periods it impacts on aspects of their lives often disabling their development, leaving the children behind.



Chapter 7: Conclusions and recommendations

7.0 The children who are left behind

A number of important themes emerged from the findings in this report that build on previous research, to confirm the seriously detrimental effects that living in emergency accommodation long-term has on ethnic minority children. Of significance is the extent to which children from minority ethnic families are being left behind in all aspects of their lives. This has long-term implications for their welfare, well-being and development, and gives rise to a number of human rights and equality concerns.

The findings show that children and families face multiple barriers to accessing adequate housing over extended periods of time. This is creating a two-tiered system where the needs and rights of minority ethnic families are not being recognised. As a result of this, children lack access to safety, security, a place to play, to develop a sense of identity, to develop relationships and to have friends, to experience family and community life, to feel like they belong and to access and benefit from education, over extended periods of time. This has profound effects on them. This amounts to a violation of a number of their basic human rights¹⁵ and the principle of non-discrimination, alongside other rights (Mercy Law Resource Centre 2018; Kelly-Desmond 2022).

The findings show how children in minority ethnic families often experience cumulative and intersectional inequalities on their entries into, lived experiences of, and in the barriers the families experience exiting homelessness. These cumulative and intersectional inequalities are experienced mentally, physically, relationally, socially, and emotionally by children and embodied deeply over time. They constitute a form of toxic stress and an adverse childhood experience. Additionally, owing to their loss of social networks and their experiences of stigmatisation and discrimination within emergency accommodation and wider society, these adverse childhood experiences are compounded for them.

¹⁵ Article 27 of the UNCRC, confirms that States "recognize the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.

2. The parent(s) or others responsible for the child have the primary responsibility to secure, within their abilities and financial capacities, the conditions of living necessary for the child's development.

3. States Parties, in accordance with national conditions and within their means, shall take appropriate measures to assist parents and others responsible for the child to implement this right and shall in case of need provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing." (Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights, 1989, General Assembly resolution 44/25)

Additionally, the effects of living in inadequate housing and homelessness for extended periods diminishes the resources parents need to support caregiving. This can include ethno/racial cultural socialisation, which can buffer the negative effects of homelessness, including experiences of racism and discrimination. The findings show how the structurally marginalised position occupied by minority ethnic families means they can lack access to the resources to access housing independently. They need support to do this. However, families can experience inequalities in access to different forms of support, which can prolong their experiences of homelessness.

Adequate housing is essential to enabling family life and to having an adequate standard of living. It can provide a secure base for children to flourish and grow up into happy and healthy adults. Adequate housing is more than a physical space, it has cultural, relational, and affective dimensions also. As the findings reveal, inadequate housing diminishes the resources needed to enable caregiving and for nurturing cultural differences. It prevents the expression of cultural identity and ways of life that shape children and families' identities and give them a sense of safety and security. It hinders inclusion and integration.

The absence of an adequate definition of homelessness for children and families means that the rights and needs of some minority ethnic children are not being taken into consideration in responses to family homelessness contemporarily. Their invisibility from the legal definition of homelessness means that the full continuum of homelessness and housing exclusion experienced by ethnic minority families is not realised. The absence of a right to housing for minority ethnic children and families means that the children are being left behind in all areas of their lives. Their lack of access to adequate housing and to an adequate standard of living infringes on a range of other human rights that are recognised as being essential for healthy childhood and future development (Mercy Law Resource Centre 2018).



7.1 Recommendations

This paper has highlighted significant harms that accrue to families with children, in particular families from minority ethnic backgrounds, where they spend prolonged periods in emergency homeless accommodation. MLRC has prepared recommendations for legislative changes which will better protect the rights of children and their families. These changes focus on the need to eliminate discrimination, promote equality of opportunity, and protect the human rights of families experiencing homelessness throughout their engagements with the State and homeless organisations.

In addition, this paper highlights a number of key issues in the provision of homeless services which may be better addressed by the promulgation of policy requirements from central government. These high-level recommendations are also included.

7.1.1 Recommendations for Legislative Change

- a. MLRC recommends that the definition of homelessness in section 2 of the Housing Act 1988 be amended to better capture the lived experiences of families and children experiencing homelessness, centre the best interests of the child, and better capture families experiencing hidden homelessness. Such amendment should be informed by or reflect the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS).
- b. MLRC recommends amending section 22 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 to introduce a standardised, legislative “homeless priority” to be included in every local authority’s allocation scheme. Families, and in particular children, suffer substantial harms from long stays in emergency accommodation. In addition, it is noted that a large percentage of families experiencing homelessness are spending in excess of 2 years living in emergency accommodation. An amendment to Section 22 of the 2009 Act, reflecting Section 22(8) of same but with compulsory language, could seek to address this issue. A standardised priority status across all local authorities aimed at transitioning families experiencing long term homelessness into permanent social housing would act to provide clarity and transparency for families, vindicate the rights of their children, and counter discriminatory practices.
- c. MLRC recommends the standardisation of social housing waiting lists across local authority areas by way of amendment to the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009. The report notes that many families, and in particular children, suffer mental health challenges tied to the uncertainty of knowing when they will eventually be housed. Casework from MLRC notes that clients awaiting an allocation in most local authority areas across the country are provided with little to no clarity on their position on the social housing waiting list. The creation of a legislatively backed procedure for recording a family’s place on the social housing waiting list, and any priority lists maintained under the relevant allocation scheme, in a manner that allows the families and their advocates to routinely access this information, would provide clarity for families and act to prevent potential discriminatory practices.
- d. MLRC recommends the creation of an oversight and reporting responsibility for local authorities to provide clarity on what steps are being taken to assist families to exit homelessness where they have spent in excess of two years in emergency accommodation, modelled on section 22(12) of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009. Such an obligation would provide oversight where a family have spent a prolonged period in homelessness, challenging the creation of the ‘two-tiered’ system noted in the Report and ensuring families with complex needs are identified and prioritised for support. This obligation should reflect that a family having spent such a prolonged period of time in emergency accommodation represents a policy failure, given that the definition of long-term homelessness occurs after six months residing in emergency accommodation.



- e. MLRC recommends the creation of a Statutory Instrument, modelled on regulation 12 of the Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011 (as amended), to codify statutory timelines for the completion of assessments for priority status on social housing waiting lists pursuant to the relevant Allocation Scheme and, separately, for the completion of homeless assessments made under the Housing Act 1988. The report notes substantial risk of families from minority ethnic backgrounds experiencing hidden homelessness and MLRC casework notes the risk of discriminatory practices posed by the absence of a legislative timeline to complete a homeless assessment. In addition, the report notes disparities between local authorities in processing applications for medical or other priorities, with some applications taking up to a year to be processed. This accords with MLRC’s experience through casework.
- f. MLRC recommends legislating a means and responsibility for local authorities to engage with other Government agencies to confirm and share information on families due to enter the State via family reunification prior to their arrival, potentially modelled on section 15 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1997. The report notes substantial issues where families arriving under family reunification face delays in accessing social housing supports or homeless services, often entering hidden homelessness for prolonged periods. A statutory power and duty to coordinate between State agencies to prepare for arrival would provide local authorities with tools to prepare for families’ arrivals in advance.
- g. MLRC recommends the amendment of section 10 of the Housing Act 1988 to place the existing administrative law responsibility to provide written reasons for decisions on a statutory footing, similar to the duty to provide same contained in regulation 15(2) of the Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011 (as amended). The report notes that families fear sudden and unexplained eviction from emergency accommodation, difficulties obtaining homeless

assessments under section 2 of the 1988 Act, or delays in accessing emergency accommodation under section 10 of the 1988 Act. Local authorities are required by law to provide written reasons for decisions which impact on the rights of individuals. However, MLRC casework indicates that most local authorities routinely refuse to do so, leaving applicants with no clarity on why they have been refused homeless accommodation or evicted from same. A statutory duty to issue and record these reasons would act to increase transparency in decision making, assist families in vindicating their rights, and challenge potentially discriminatory practices.

- h. MLRC reiterates their earlier recommendation for Regulations to be issued by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage under section 10(11)(a) of the Housing Act 1988, specifying and restricting the type of emergency accommodation that individuals and families may be accommodated in, ensuring therefore its suitability and adequacy. This will ensure that the criteria applied to determine what form of emergency accommodation homeless persons receive is clearly regulated and transparent.

7.1.2 Recommendations for Policy Change

- a. MLRC recommends the standardisation of minimum standards across all family emergency accommodation – both public and private – in respect of adequate cooking, washing, and child play facilities, in particular such that they fulfil the cultural and/or religious needs of minority families. The report highlights the absence of such facilities, particularly in private emergency accommodation, and the challenges that this presents for the caregiving and cultural socialisation of children. MLRC believes that this recommendation is essential in ensuring that local authorities are safeguarding the human rights of those in emergency accommodation and fulfilling its public sector duty under Section 42 (1) of the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Commission Act 2014.



- b. MLRC recommends that all staff involved in the provision of social housing supports and emergency accommodation be required to undertake comprehensive cultural competence, trauma-informed, and anti-discrimination training. This should be accompanied by the introduction of clear procedures through which individuals accessing emergency accommodation can report instances of discrimination or hostility. The report highlights the frequency with which the challenges of homelessness are exacerbated for minority families due to a lack of understanding or respect for cultural diversity - as well as instances of prejudice or discrimination - amongst both staff in emergency accommodation and in local authority housing departments. Measures aimed at preventing and redressing this issue are thus crucial so as to protect the human rights of minority families and empower them to exit homelessness. The contents of this report, in addition to previous reports on similar issues, suggests that this recommendation is necessary in order for local authorities to fulfil their public sector duty.
- c. MLRC recommends, in the absence of legislative definition, the issuance of a circular or official government guidance stating clearly the criteria to be used by local authorities in determining when particular families should be assigned to NGO operated family hubs. The report highlights the stark 'hierarchy of emergency accommodation' that exists with social care trained staff in NGO operated hubs supporting families in exiting homelessness and offering on-site support tailored to children's needs. MLRC thus recommends that the criteria for assignment to NGO operated family hubs should prioritise families experiencing long-term homelessness, to expedite their exit from homelessness and minimise the trauma associated with long-term homelessness.
- d. MLRC recommends for all staff involved in the provision of social housing supports and emergency accommodation to be provided with appropriate training in relation to domestic violence, and for such training to include guidance on how to approach cases of domestic violence within minority families. MLRC has previously recommended training in relation to domestic violence in its 2023 report 'Social Housing, Domestic Violence, and the Public Sector Duty'.
- e. MLRC recommends the government prioritise increasing the stock and availability of larger multi-bedroom social housing so as to accommodate larger families in a manner compliant with the overcrowding rules laid out in the Housing Act 1966. The report highlights how the lack of appropriately-sized housing represents a key barrier to exiting homelessness for large families.



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