

ARTICLE

Homelessness Transitions, Risks, and Prevention Across the Life Course

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Despite significant evidence that age is an important factor in homelessness, life course considerations have not been systematically incorporated into the most influential theories of the factors that heighten the risk of becoming homeless. To address this oversight, this article examines variations in the risk of transitioning into homelessness among single adults in Dublin, Ireland. Consideration is given to how these transitions are shaped by the interaction between life course stage and changing personal circumstances, experiences, and relationships. It reveals that while some triggers of homelessness, such as leaving institutional or private rented accommodation, are common experiences among all age groups, younger and older adults both experience distinct patterns of transition into homelessness. This understanding can help to strengthen the traditionally weak evidence base for homelessness prevention strategies, and in particular inform the design of targeted measures, that address the specific homelessness risks faced by some age groups.

Keywords: Homelessness; life course; homeless prevention

Introduction

In the contemporary world, particularly in high-income countries, most people live in several different homes over their lifetime, often in a variety of locations and tenures. An enormous body of research has accumulated over the last fifty years which examines these patterns of housing mobility, the factors that shape them, and how they have changed over time (Feijten and Mulder, 2005). This highlights a strong correlation between life cycle stage and type of housing occupied (Beer *et al.*, 2011), but also reveals that this relationship has become more complex in recent decades (Mikolai *et al.*, 2020). Thus, some of the early research on this issue – which examined the evolution of ‘housing careers’ across the life course – is of limited relevance today (Kendig, 1984). Increased labour market flexibility and family breakdown means that fewer households now progress seamlessly along the previously typical housing career path – from the parental home to private renting, to home ownership, or social housing (Beer *et al.*, 2011). To address these complexities, more recent research on ‘housing histories’ explores how external and structural factors influence the housing a household will occupy. The household head’s life stage can act as a positive factor in their ability to move home or as a stagnating factor that prevents a desired move (Forrest, 1987). The latest research in this genre on ‘housing pathways’ takes this analysis a stage further by incorporating a social constructivist inspired emphasis on the meaning of home, while also taking account of the influence of socio-economic structures and life-course factors, together with individual agency on moves within the housing system (Clapham, 2005).

Despite the centrality of life-course considerations in the housing studies literature, they play a more peripheral role in the parallel literature on homelessness and have not been systematically

incorporated into the most influential theories of the factors that heighten the risk of becoming homeless, influence experiences of homelessness, and enable exit from homelessness. This is surprising for several reasons. First, there is significant evidence that age is an important factor in homelessness (Kuhn and Culhane, 1998; Fitzpatrick, 2000; Warnes and Crane, 2006; Aubry *et al.*, 2012; Mayock and Corr, 2013). In particular, there is a huge volume of research on youth homelessness which demonstrates that this cohort's risks and experiences of homelessness are distinct from the rest of the population (Craig *et al.*, 1996; Avramov, 1998; Hyde, 2005; Quilgars *et al.*, 2008; Mayock *et al.*, 2014; Ecker, 2016; Roy *et al.*, 2016; Feantsa, 2020; Quilty and Norris, 2020). However, insights from this research have rarely been employed to examine variations in homeless experiences and risks in later life stages. Second, the housing pathways model has been very commonly used to research homelessness in different countries and demographic, racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups (e.g. Weitzman *et al.*, 1990; Anderson, 2001; Chamberlain and Johnson, 2013; Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2013; Mayock and Corr, 2013; Thurston *et al.*, 2013; Piat *et al.*, 2015). However, the life-course dimension that is central to this framework has been largely overlooked in examinations of homeless pathways (Fopp, 2009). Third, the conceptual and theoretical bases of the traditionally largely descriptive and atheoretical research literature on homelessness have strengthened significantly in recent decades. The focus on either individual or structural explanations for homelessness that traditionally dominated this literature has been replaced by a multi-faceted understanding, commonly referred to as 'New Orthodoxy' (Somerville, 2013), which is based on the idea that individual challenges are amplified by the inability to remain in or return to the housing system due to structural barriers (McNaughton, 2008). However, this increasing theoretical sophistication has rarely resulted in the inclusion of life-course issues in analyses of homelessness.

To help address these critical empirical and theoretical oversights in the literature, this article presents a quantitative analysis of life-course variations in the interaction between structural and personal factors that influence the risk of homelessness during the period leading up to homelessness. To do this, we analyse administrative data on single adult users of emergency accommodation (EA) for homeless people in Dublin, Ireland's capital and largest city, between 2016 and 2018. The framework used to guide this analysis draws on the aforementioned literature on key changes in housing circumstances over the life-course and particularly on Beer *et al.* (2011) work on 'housing transitions' and McNaughton's (2008) research on 'homeless transitions'. Elements of both these analyses are combined with key insights from the extensive literature on homelessness risks to generate a new analytical framework that captures how transitions into homelessness among single adults vary over the life-course. This framework offers new insights into this critical concern for homelessness researchers and policymakers.

In relation to the latter, these insights are useful for increasing the effectiveness of strategies and services to prevent homelessness because they can inform the targeting of these measures at those at greatest risk of homelessness and tailoring of their design to meet the specific needs of these groups (Shinn *et al.*, 2001; Dej *et al.*, 2020). Preventing homelessness is a key policy objective in Ireland at both the national (Government of Ireland, 2021) (Government of Ireland, 2021) and regional levels (DRHE, 2022) and has become increasingly central to homelessness policy internationally in recent years (see: Mackie, 2015; Mackie, 2022). However, Culhane *et al.* (2011) argue that investment in prevention is not informed by an adequate empirical and conceptual basis, and Mackie (2022) suggests that the evidence base is particularly weak in Europe. This has negative implications not only for the effectiveness of these strategies, but also for those at risk of homelessness (Shinn *et al.*, 2001). This is because, in the context of resource constraints, poorly targeted strategies may result in the non-provision or withdrawal of support from those who need it, and therefore, may just redistribute homelessness rather than prevent it.

The discussion of these issues presented here is organised into five further sections. The next section reviews the literature on housing and homeless transitions throughout the life-course and, particularly Beer *et al.* (2011) and McNaughton's (2008) contributions to this literature. This is

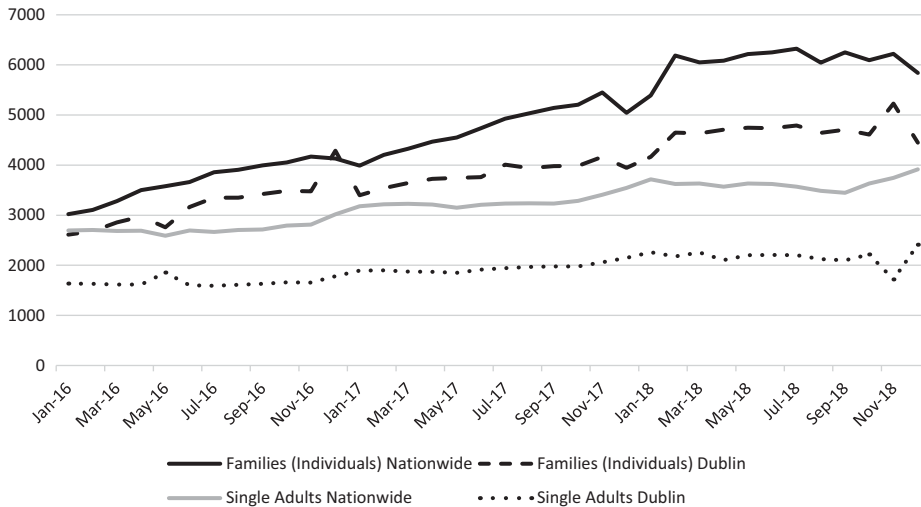


Figure 1. Number of individuals in emergency accommodation for homeless single adults and homeless families in Ireland and Dublin, 2016–2018.

Source: Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (various years).

followed by an outline of the research methodology that underpins this analysis. The results of the data analysis are then described, and analysed to illuminate how homeless transitions vary across the life-course and the implications of this for the design of homelessness prevention strategies in the Dublin context. The conclusions set out the key findings and implications of the analysis.

Context: homelessness rates and policy responses in Ireland

The 2016–18 period examined in this article saw an unprecedented rise in homelessness in Ireland, which has consequently become a pressing concern for policymakers, service providers and social activists (O’Sullivan, 2020). Between January 2016 and March 2019, occupancy of EA by homeless people increased by 91 per cent (from 5,715 to 9,753 people). Although in absolute terms, the greatest proportionate increase in homelessness occurred in rural areas and amongst families, most of the homeless population was concentrated in Dublin (an average of 73 per cent) and among single people (who made up half the homeless population in the city) during the time period examined here (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, various years) (see Figure 1).

Rising homelessness inspired a parallel increase in policy action to combat homelessness, and spending on homeless services (see: O’Sullivan, 2020). Notably, although formal EA for homeless people is almost entirely publicly funded in Ireland, very little is publicly delivered; rather, it is delivered by non-government organisations (NGOs) and commercial providers contracted by local authorities (O’Sullivan and Musafiri, 2020). Each of these sectors provides around half of EA in Dublin, and most accommodation for single- and two-adult homeless households is provided by NGOs in homeless hostels (called ‘shelters’ in North America) that offer single- or multi-bed occupancy rooms in institutional settings.

A national strategy for preventing homelessness was published in 2002 and has not been updated since, but this issue has been addressed in most of the numerous other housing and homelessness policies published since then (Tusla, 2017; Government of Ireland, 2021; DOHLGH, 2022; DRHE, 2022). Busch-Geertsema and Fitzpatrick (2008) categorise homelessness prevention measures into three groups:

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

The initial approach to homeless prevention adopted in Ireland mainly encompassed secondary prevention strategies focused on people leaving institutional accommodation, including foster or residential care, psychiatric institutions, acute hospitals, prisons and youth offender institutions (Maher and Allen, 2014). Care leavers were a central focus of this phase of policy action, whereas limited progress has been made in preventing homelessness among people leaving other types of institutional accommodation (Palmer *et al.*, 2022). More recently, primary prevention strategies have been introduced that provide fast track social housing tenancies or higher levels of housing allowances for private renting tenants to those at risk of homelessness (Baptista *et al.*, 2022). These measures are not widespread in Europe, but research on their use in the USA suggests they are very effective (Shinn and Cohen, 2019). The latest national housing policy statement focuses on preventing homelessness among children, young people (defined as those aged between eighteen years and early/mid twenties), and families (Government of Ireland, 2022).

Housing and homeless transitions through the life-course

In their book *Housing Transitions Through the Life Course* Beer *et al.* (2011) propose a framework for analysing changing housing circumstances over the life-course that has several important benefits over the housing careers, housing histories, and housing pathways frameworks that have heretofore dominated this literature. According to Beer *et al.* (2011: 31), housing transitions refers to ‘a series of housing decisions about whether to move or not move, the quality and quantity of housing to occupy, location relative to employment and social networks’. They argue that this concept better reflects the complex and fluid relationship between individuals in developed economies and their housing in the twenty first century’ (Beer *et al.*, 2011: 31). Where the housing careers literature emphasises a series of steps up the ‘property ladder’ that most adults follow, housing transitions focuses on ‘ongoing change – potential or real – in housing circumstances and leaves open the possibility of identifying common housing “sequences” that may shift over time in response to social, economic and cultural developments’ (ibid). Furthermore, in contrast to the housing pathways framework, the concept of housing transitions ‘does not privilege the subjective dimensions of housing over quantitative assessment’ (ibid).

Broadly, over the life-course, they argue that an individual would be expected to live in the parental family home until early adulthood (eighteen to twenty-five years), then to move to independent living, with friends, or in university accommodation, etc. During the next stage of life, people are expected to form their own households and live either alone or with a partner, possibly followed by children (thirty to forty-five years). Finally, later life (aged seventy-plus years) people often live alone or with a partner and potentially move to a retirement facility or care home. Beer *et al.* (2011) demonstrate that the decision-making environment shifts over time because housing decisions are shaped by different balances of opportunities and constraints. Among these opportunities and constraints, their analysis emphasises that the five dimensions are likely to be particularly influential:

- stage in the life-course (age, household structure, fertility)
- economic resources (labour market position, wealth, access to government assistance)

- health and well-being (presence or absence of a disability within the household)
- tenure (history of prior occupancy in one or more tenures)
- lifestyle values and aspirations (cultural norms, consumption preferences, relative significance attached to housing) (Beer *et al.*, 2011: 31)

Thus, an individual's housing decisions reflect the relative importance of each of these dimensions at that point in their life-course.

Another important effort to address the aforementioned shortcomings in the homelessness research also employs the concept of transitions. Carol McNaughton's (2008) book *Transitions Through Homelessness: lives on the edge*, draws on in-depth interviews conducted with twenty-eight people over the course of a year, which examined their transitions into and through homelessness. Her analysis highlights the significance of:

transitional events over the life course, where the 'plot' of someone's life is changing, are important to explore; in this way, how people attempt to maintain their ontological security, their sense of identity, and how their actions may affect the transitions they make, can be better understood (McNaughton, 2008: 48).

Participants in her research were asked to identify their reasons for homelessness, and their responses were: 'alcohol use (5); drug use (4); domestic violence (4); breakdown of family or couple relationship (6); bereavement (3); mental illness (2); leaving care with nowhere else to go (2); debt (1), and leaving poor quality housing (1)' (McNaughton, 2008: 55). Her interviews with homeless people also revealed that becoming homeless was often the outcome of a sudden or traumatic experience that caused them to leave their previous accommodation.

On the basis of this empirical evidence McNaughton (2008: vii) proffers the concept of 'integrative passages' which refers to 'transitional stages that maintain an individual's integration to society over their life course' and mean in practice that 'they adhere to the norms of society such as moving from the parental home to student accommodation'. Homelessness is likely to occur when the social, personal and economic capital required to support an integrative passage have been exhausted or cannot be relied upon. McNaughton's (2008: 63) research identifies three key factors as particularly crucial for supporting integrative passages, these are: '(1) relationships and social networks; (2) level of resources (economic, social, human, and material capital); and (3). experiences of edgework'. McNaughton (2008: VII) uses the concept of edgework to refer to 'actions and events that involve negotiating at the edge of normative behaviour' and involve 'voluntary and non-voluntary risks that require people to negotiate difficult circumstances', including drug use, violence, and suicide attempts. Therefore, her use of the concept differs from Lyng's (2005) original influential work on this issue, which focused on voluntary risk-taking.

Methodology

Analytical framework

The analysis presented in this article combines and adapts McNaughton's (2008) and Beer *et al.*'s (2011) ideas to examine transitions *into homelessness* (or, more accurately, transitions into EA for homeless people) among single adults in Dublin between 2016 and 2018. The analysis of life course related variations in these transitions presented here is structured around the most common housing life phases by Beer *et al.* (2011): younger adults (aged between eighteen and thirty-four); middle-aged adults (ages thirty-five to fifty-four), and older adults (age fifty-five plus). The single EA using homeless adults examined here were assigned to these phases on the basis of their age on the first night spent in EA as a single adult.

McNaughton's (2008) concepts of edgework, integrative passages, and focus on the impact of social, personal and economic capital on homelessness and Beer *et al.*'s (2011) ideas on the 'dimensions' of life that shape housing transitions are incorporated into the analysis by examining EA users' self-reported reasons for homelessness. Thus, this analysis homeless people's self-reported experiences prior to becoming homeless into the following types of 'contributory events' and explores their influence on transitions into homelessness over the life course:

- **Homeless Events:** experiences of homelessness prior to 2016 (usually in a different region of Ireland or as part of a homeless family) and people who engaged in rough sleeping prior to entering EA.
- **Health Events:** experiences of mental health or addiction issues. Time spent in rehabilitation facilities or hospitals.
- **Life Events:** having children, having a partner who also lives in EA in Dublin. Moving to Ireland abroad.
- **Institutional Events:** time spent in institutional facilities, including prison and foster or residential care during childhood.

Data source, collation, cleaning, and analysis

The data employed in this analysis were provided by the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive (DRHE), which funds services for homeless people on behalf of the four local authorities responsible for the Dublin region. This region encompasses Dublin city centre, its inner and outer suburbs, and some of its commuter belt (the operational areas of Dublin City Council and South Dublin, Fingal County and Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Councils), and had a population of 1.17 million in 2016 (Central Statistics Office, 2016).

The data were collected by EA providers on the national EA bed allocation and funding management system called the Pathways Accommodation and Support System (PASS). When homeless people first enter EA, their needs assessment and demographic characteristics are recorded in an individual PASS profile, and they are given a unique identifier, which means that their future use of EA can be tracked and service providers can access appropriate information on clients.

This analysis focuses on single adults who, for the purposes of this research, are defined as people aged over eighteen and not part of a family unit that is homeless. This choice of focus reflects the fact that they are the majority of homeless people in Dublin (and internationally), but most research on homelessness using PASS data has focused on families with children (see: Hoey and Sheridan, 2016; Gambi *et al.*, 2018; Morrin and O' Donoghue Hynes, 2018; Long *et al.*, 2019; Morrin, 2019; Parker, 2021). However, the information available on single adult homeless people in Ireland is limited (Waldron *et al.*, 2019 are exceptions; Bairéad and Norris, 2020; Bairéad and Norris, 2022).

PASS is a live dataset, meaning that the information recorded is updated continuously. Strict data-cleaning protocols were used to ensure that the data used in this analysis were as consistent as possible. All adults who first accessed EA in the Dublin region between the first of January 2016 and the thirty-first of December 2018 were identified first and their EA use until the thirty-first of March 2019 examined. Ten thousand two hundred and eighty-three potential cases were identified for analysis. The PASS profiles of this cohort were then examined to remove those who had entered EA before January 2016 or were registered multiple times on PASS (e.g. both as a single person and part of a family unit). EA users must provide explicit consent for reanalysis of their PASS data. Of the relevant cohort, 594 did not do so and were removed from the dataset. Following completion of this data cleaning, the final dataset of single EA users used in this analysis included 3,669 individuals.

Two rounds of data analyses were conducted. First, trends in the raw data were examined, then a series of cross-tabulations (two-way, three-way, and four-way) were generated. As part of the latter, standard statistical tests (Chi² and Cramer's *V* tests and *p*-values) were conducted and, for completeness, are reported here. However, they are not considered in the analysis because the PASS database covers the entire population of state funded EA users in Dublin, therefore it is effectively a complete enumeration survey not a sample survey and statistical tests of the probability that a relationship exists between variables are not required (Field, 2009; Rea and Parker, 2014; Connelly *et al.*, 2016).

Data strengths, limitations, and ethical considerations

There are several significant advantages to using administrative data for researching homelessness. Comprehensive coverage of this hard-to-reach population is a one. As mentioned earlier, PASS data includes almost everyone who uses publicly funded EA, which is almost the entire population of EA users, because non-government funded EA is highly unusual in the Irish context. Administrative data also have ethical benefits because it means that this vulnerable, but very over-researched and monitored population is not required to provide the same information to multiple services, government agencies, and researchers. The full potential of administrative data in research on homelessness has yet to be realised (Culhane, 2016), but its use is increasing in many countries, including Ireland (Waldron *et al.*, 2019), Denmark (Benjaminsen and Andrade, 2015), Canada (Aubry *et al.*, 2013) and particularly in the United States (Culhane and Kuhn, 1998; Kuhn and Culhane, 1998).

However, administrative data and PASS data specifically also has some important limitations as a source of data for research on homelessness. These limitations, which reflect the origins of PASS as a bed management system, rather than a research tool, include:

Accuracy

PASS is populated by numerous different EA providers, which increases the risk of data errors due to inconsistent or incorrect information being recorded. Some (but not all) PASS data are self-reported by homeless people, including information on their 'reason for homelessness' and 'previous accommodation'. This creates data accuracy challenges, because these data are not verifiable and also are collated by caseworkers when homeless people check in to EA - a very stressful context which is not conducive to elucidating considered responses. On the other hand, self reported information also enables homeless people to report their own perceptions of their situation and may therefore generate more meaningful data (McNaughton, 2008).

Comprehensiveness

Because PASS is an administrative rather than a research tool, it does not include all of the data required to interrogate homeless transitions. Most notably information on income source and level, employment status, and family background, is not gathered as standard on PASS and therefore could not be collated for the whole population under examination here.

Population coverage

PASS only includes those who fit into the statutory definition of homelessness in Ireland (as set out in the Housing Act, 1988) and qualify for EA on this basis (O'Sullivan, 2020). This definition includes people without accommodation, living in institutional accommodation, or in accommodation, who could not reasonably remain in occupation. It is significantly narrower than the definition of homelessness used in several other Western European countries and the widely used European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) definition

proposed by Fédération Européenne d'Associations Nationales Travaillant avec les Sans-Abri (FEANTSA) (2005) (the representative organisation for homeless service providers in Europe), which also include people living in temporary, insecure, or inadequate housing, or in 'hidden homelessness' because they are 'sofa surfing' or involuntarily sharing accommodation (Allen *et al.*, 2020). In addition, PASS data only includes users of local government-funded EA; it does not include occupants of domestic violence shelters, which are central government-funded (O'Sullivan and Musafiri, 2020).

Population size

The small size of the population (3,669 people) and geographical area examined in this analysis create risks that some individuals may be identifiable, which in turn raises ethical, privacy, and data protection concerns. To mitigate these risks, very small subcategories of EA categories were not included in this analysis.

Results

Table 1 outlines the results of the analysis of the raw data regarding the type of accommodation that single homeless people reported having occupied immediately before their entry into EA. Sixty-nine per cent of the single homeless population recorded their previous accommodation types on PASS, the remaining 31.2 per cent did not answer or a recorded as a previous accommodation type of 'other'. The single adults in this population were primarily male (78 per cent), this contrasts with homeless families which are much more likely to be headed by women (Parker, 2021).

Housing tenure patterns in Ireland have changed significantly over recent decades, as homeownership has declined, private renting has expanded significantly, and social renting has grown modestly (see Figure 2). Notably, these trends were more pronounced in the Dublin region (Central Statistics Office, various years). Table 1 reveals that, in contrast to the norms among the population at large, only 1 per cent of single EA users in Dublin were previously homeowners, there were far more who had been renting privately prior to homelessness (23 per cent), living with parents or family (22 per cent), or with friends (9 per cent). These results echo those of other studies on transitions into homelessness among families in Dublin, which indicates that the vast majority were previously private renters (Hoey and Sheridan, 2016; Gambi *et al.*, 2018; Parker, 2021).

Table 1 also details self-reported 'reasons for homelessness' among single homeless EA users. In total, 69 per cent of this population recorded this information on PASS; the remainder did not answer or were recorded 'other' as their reason for homelessness. Table 1 summarises the fourteen reasons provided by 1 per cent or more of this group. It reveals that family circumstance was the commonly reported reason for homelessness (16 per cent) followed by 'asked to leave accommodation' (13 per cent) and served with a notice to quit or eviction notice (9 per cent) (most likely from private rented accommodation, because these legal instruments are rarely used in social housing in Ireland), and leaving an institutional facility (5 per cent). These findings also mirror the results of both the Irish and international research on homelessness risks. For instance, relationship breakdown, particularly family relationships, has been commonly identified as a key driver of homelessness (Ravenhill, 2008; Chamberlain and Johnson, 2013), as has transition from institutional accommodation including: prison, residential care, psychiatric care, and the army (Shah, 2005; Tsai *et al.*, 2014; Piat *et al.*, 2015; Mayock and Parker, 2017).

Table 2 outlines the contributory events experienced by EA users prior to their transition into homelessness. It reveals that 2,624 (or 71 per cent) of this population reported that they experienced one or more of these events prior to entering EA; 44 per cent of this population experienced one event, 24 per cent experienced two events, and 3 per cent experienced more than

Table 1. Most commonly reported types of previous accommodation and reasons for homelessness¹

	Younger adults %	Middle-aged adults %	Older adults %	Total %
Previous accommodation				
Homeless	7	7	7	7
Homeowner	0	1	3	1
Living with friends	10	9	7	9
Living with parents	17	6	1	10
Other accommodation	16	17	19	17
Parents/family	15	9	12	12
Private rented (own means)	15	25	31	21
Private rented (housing allowances)	1	3	3	2
Social housing	4	6	4	5
Unknown	16 ²	16	13	16
Self-reported reason for homelessness				
Abuse (sexual, physical, emotional)	1	1	1	1
Asked to leave accommodation	11	13	18	13
Family circumstances	22	12	11	16
Involuntary sharing/sofa surfing	2	2	3	2
Leaving institutional facility	6	5	5	5
Mental illness	2	2	2	2
No income source	5	8	4	6
Notice of termination ³	4	5	8	5
Notice to quit ³	2	6	6	4
Other reason	8	11	16	12
Relationship breakdown: other	2	2	1	2
Relationship breakdown: parent	4	1	0	2
Relationship breakdown: partner	3	5	4	4
Substance abuse: alcohol	2	3	1	2
Substance abuse: drugs	2	2	0	2

Source: generated by the authors from administrative data on the funding and provision of EA for homeless people in Dublin.

¹Some of the categories reported contain unclear information; these categories may have been created based on information provided by individuals. We have combined some categories as a result, particularly those with extremely closely worded descriptions.

²Whole number percentages reported which add up to 101 per cent.

³'Notice to quit' and 'notice of termination' are distinct legal terms – the former is a legal notice of the repossession of a dwelling by a landlord or bank, the latter is a legal notice instructing a tenant to vacate a dwelling. However, the data outlined in this table are self-reported, and homeless people may be using these terms interchangeably.

one event. These data confirm the view that additional factors and experiences beyond housing play a key role in precipitating homelessness that is well established in the research literature (Anderson and Christian, 2003; Fitzpatrick, 2005; Johnson *et al.*, 2008; Chamberlain and Johnson, 2013; Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2013; Johnsen *et al.*, 2018).

Table 2. Contributory events experienced and age group

	Younger adults ¹ %	Middle-aged adults ² %	Older adults ³ %	Total ⁴ %
Homeless	18	16	15	17
Health	3	4	2	3
Life	22	24	24	23
Institutional	2	0	1	1
Homeless & health	3	7	6	6
Homeless & life	16	13	10	14
Homeless & institutional	3	1	2	2
Health & life	1	1	0	1
Health & institutional	0	0	0	0
Life & institutional	1	0	0	1
Homeless, health, & life	2	2	2	2
Homeless, health, & institutional	1	0	0	0
Homeless, life, & institutional	2	1	0	1
Health, life, & institutional	0	0	0	0
All	0	0	0	0
None	26	31	38	29

Source: generated by the authors from administrative data on the funding and provision of EA for homeless people in Dublin.

¹Younger adult group contains 1,618 individuals.

²Middle-aged group contains 1,612 individuals.

³Older adult group contains 439 individuals.

⁴Total group contains 3,669 individuals.

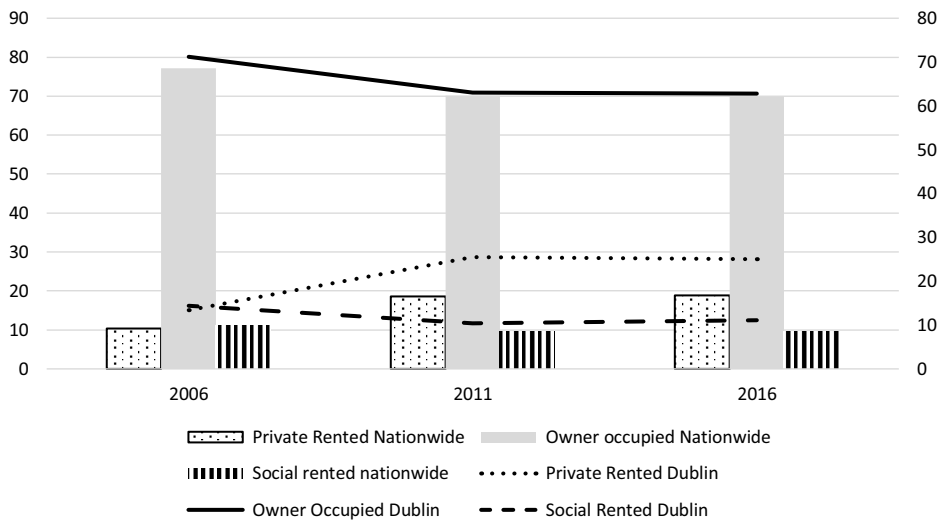


Figure 2. Housing tenure in Ireland and Dublin (% of households), 2006–2016.

Source: Central Statistics Office (various years).

Note: Data excludes ‘not stated’ and graph does not report dwellings occupied free of rent. Dublin refers to the operational areas of Dublin City Council and Dún Laoghaire Rathdown, Final, and South Dublin County Council.

Analysis: homeless transitions across the life course

Younger adults

According to the 2016 census, eighteen to thirty-four year olds made up 22 per cent of the Irish population, but Table 1 reveals that they made up 44 per cent of EA users in Dublin between 2016 and 2018 (Central Statistics Office, [various years](#)). Thus, they are strongly overrepresented in Dublin's homeless population. The data examined here indicates that this phenomenon reflects distinct transitions into homelessness among this age group.

Before entering EA, the most common type of accommodation occupied by young people was sharing with parents or other family members (32 per cent). This is unsurprising in view of the fact that 85 per cent of all eighteen year olds in Ireland lived with their parents in 2016 (Central Statistics Office, [various years](#)). The reasons for homelessness reported by young EA users reflect their reliance on family accommodation – 22 per cent attributed it to 'family circumstances' (22 per cent), but a further 4 per cent linked their entry into EA to 'breakdown of parental relationship' (see Table 1). Notably, young people reported these reasons for homelessness more often than EA users in the older age groups.

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

Not all aspects of young people's transitions into homelessness diverge from the dominant experiences among older age groups. Between 5 and 6 per cent of EA users in all age groups reported that 'leaving an institutional facility' was their primary reason for homelessness. In common with their older counterparts, structural factors, including 'having no income source' (5 per cent) and 'being asked to leave their accommodation' (11 per cent) were two of the top three reasons for homelessness reported by young people. However, younger EA users reported these reasons less often than their older counterparts.

Middle-aged adults

People in the thirty-five to fifty-four age group made up 30 per cent of the Irish population in 2016, but Table 1 reveals that they represented 44 per cent of single adult EA users in Dublin between 2016 and 2018 (Central Statistics Office, [various years](#)). Thus, this age group is also overrepresented in the homeless population in Dublin but less strongly than people aged between eighteen and thirty-five years. Notably, males were also overrepresented in this age group – women made up 15 per cent of single homeless people aged thirty-five to fifty-four years, compared to 20.3 per cent of the entire single homeless population.

Compared to their younger counterparts, middle-aged homeless adults were less likely to report that they became homeless due to family circumstances (12 per cent), but they were more likely link their homeless to the breakdown of a relationship with a partner (5 per cent), having no income source (8 per cent), and being asked to leave accommodation (13 per cent). Thus, while the reasons for homelessness cited by middle-aged adults echo those cited by their younger counterparts, the significance of these different factors varies by age group. The latter reflects distinct patterns in the types of accommodation occupied by middle-aged EA users prior to homelessness. Among the Irish population-at-large, 30 per cent of this age group lived in private rented accommodation in 2016 (Central Statistics Office, [various years](#)). Similarly, 25 per cent of middle-aged EA users previously lived in private rented accommodation, paid for by their own means, and a further 3 per cent received housing allowances to subsidise their private rents.

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

Older adults

In contrast to their younger and middle-aged counterparts, older people were significantly underrepresented in the EA using population; they made up 12 per cent of single EA users between 2016 and 2018 and 23 per cent of the whole Irish population in 2016 (Central Statistics Office, [various years](#)). This may reflect the fact that among the three age cohorts of EA users examined here, the homeless transitions of older single adults (aged fifty-five plus) were the most distinctive.

Table 1 indicates that older EA users are atypical of their age group within the Irish population at large and are also distinctive within the homeless population. For instance, among the entire Irish population, people aged fifty-five plus have by far the highest rate of home ownership, 75 per cent were outright home owners in 2016, and a further 12 per cent owned with a mortgage (Central Statistics Office, [various years](#)). Only 3 per cent of older EA users had transitioned from owner-occupied accommodation, and 34 per cent had transitioned from private rented accommodation (the largest proportion among the three age groups under examination). Among the single homeless population in Dublin, older EA users were the least likely to identify family circumstances (11 per cent) and 'no income source' (4 per cent) as their reason for homelessness and the most likely to report that they had become homeless after being asked to leave their accommodation (18 per cent). Older people were also less likely to have experienced contributory events prior to entering EA and reported particularly low levels of multiple contributory events compared to middle-aged and younger EA users.

Conclusion

Drawing on the ideas of Beer *et al.* (2011) and McNaughton (2008), this article has presented a new analytical framework that examines variations in the risk of transitioning into homelessness across the life-course. It has also used this 'homeless transitions' framework to analyse administrative data on transitions into homelessness among single adults in Dublin between 2016 and 2018. The analysis presented here confirms the results of previous research that found a strong relationship between the risk of homelessness and life course stage (e.g. Allgood and Warren, 2003; Scutella *et al.*, 2013; Cobb-Clark *et al.*, 2016), but the homeless transitions framework also informs a deeper understanding of how these risks are shaped by the interaction between life course stage and changing personal circumstances, experiences, and relationships.

This understanding can help to strengthen the traditionally weak evidence base for homelessness prevention strategies (Culhane *et al.*, 2011). Fisher *et al.* (2014) analysis of over 11,000 families who were in contact with homeless services in New York City, showed that screening for risk factors is a better predictor of homelessness than service staff assessments. By using the transitions framework to inform an analysis of administrative data on homeless people's life experiences and accommodation prior to becoming homeless, and their self-reported reasons for homelessness, this article has identified the factors associated with heightened risk of becoming homeless among single adults in Dublin.

This analysis suggests that some homelessness risks are common among all sections of the single adult population and therefore should be the focus of 'generalist' homeless prevention measures. Leaving private rented accommodation is an example, so the strong focus that primary homeless prevention strategies in Ireland place on supporting those at risk of homelessness to

remain in their private rented accommodation or to secure new private or social rented tenancies is likely to benefit many single homeless adults (and the effectiveness of this approach is also supported by the existing research, Mackie, 2022). These strategies' focus on reducing the risk of transitioning into homelessness from institutional accommodation also addresses a homelessness risk factor that is particularly common among single people; to date, most progress has been made in supporting transitions from foster or residential care and support for transition from psychiatric institutions, acute hospitals, and prisons remain underdeveloped (Maher and Allen, 2014). The large volume of research on the use 'Critical Time Interventions' in the USA demonstrates that the provision of intensive supports during the transition from institutional care to community living significantly reduces their risk of homelessness (Herman *et al.*, 2007). This suggests that this and other discharge support measures should be more widely used in Ireland (Mackie, 2022).

In addition to these generalist measures, the analysis presented here suggests that there is a need for homelessness prevention measures tailored specifically to the specific risks faced by different age cohorts. Dedicated measures have already been introduced to address specific homelessness risks faced by young people. The marked over-representation of young people in Dublin's homeless population, as reported in the preceding analysis, suggests that this approach is correct, but should be extended to encompass a broader range of secondary prevention responses to youth homelessness. To date, these interventions have focused on young people leaving foster or residential care, but the data presented earlier reveals that the breakdown of relationships within families are more common drivers of youth homelessness. This points to a need for family support and mediation services (although Watts *et al.* 2015 point to limited evidence for the success of these services), as well as temporary accommodation provision to provide young people with an 'integrative passage' that can provide them with space from which they can rebuild fractured familiar relationships or make a planned transition to long-term accommodation (Gaetz *et al.*, 2018).

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

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