

**Fathers who are
homeless and
do not live with
their children:
experiences,
challenges, and
responses**

**Challenging
homelessness.
Changing lives.**

FOCUS
Ireland



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- › COPE Galway
- › Cork County Council's Housing Department
- › Depaul Ireland
- › Dublin City Council's Dublin Region Homeless Executive
- › The Iveagh Trust
- › Housing First National Office
- › Merchant's Quay Ireland
- › Novas
- › Peter McVerry Trust
- › Respond
- › The Simon Community
- › Sligo Social Services

Foreword

For several years the Focus Ireland Christmas fundraising appeal has highlighted family homelessness, the scale of it in Ireland, the harm it does to children and how it could and should be solved. A few years ago, the photograph chosen as the centre of the campaign featured a tired looking mother with two children leaning against her as she looked directly and purposefully at the camera, holding a smaller child in her arms. The campaign presented a non-stereotypical view of what a person that is homeless might look like and was also successful in its main objective, raising funds for our family homeless services, whose full costs are not covered by state funding.

But the campaign also raised a number of questions from donors, or potential donors. The question of why we were showing a lone parent family was easily answered – lone parent families are substantially overrepresented among homeless families, comprising about a quarter of all families in the country but up to half of families who are homeless. But the question asked by several donors – ‘Where is the father?’ – proved much harder to answer.

Our front-line services tell us that many of the families are already one-parent families before they become homeless, and the risk of poverty and other challenges of lone parenthood must certainly contribute to these family’s higher risk of becoming homeless. But we also know that limitations of emergency accommodation can, not infrequently, force families to be split up, with mother and children going to one service and the father sent to single person’s services. We also know from other research that the pressures of being homeless puts huge pressures on parental relationships which can break down under that pressure.¹

From these discussions and attempts to answer the questions of supporters a set of research questions emerged about fatherhood and homelessness. These were discussed at some length by the Focus Ireland Board sub-committee responsible for our research programme. Here it was agreed to start exploring the issue not from the perspective of families but from the perspective of one of our other research themes – the operation of Housing First. Our Housing First services tell us that many of the ‘single’ men who we support in Housing First tenancies have children and seek to re-engage with those children as part of their exit from homelessness. This emerges as a policy issue in relation to access to two-bedroom apartments, but we know little about how this desire to re-connect influences, and may support, their journey out of homelessness. This intersection of interests led us to commission the first piece of research about fatherhood and homelessness from the most marginalised viewpoint – men who were homeless but also fathers with no custodial rights in respect of their children.

The homeless figures published each month by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government separate homeless people into two categories: families and single people. Focus Ireland’s analysis of homeless trends on our ‘Knowledge Hub’ and ‘Focus on Homelessness’ makes the same neat division, with the proviso that the ‘single people’ are

¹ Walsh, K. and Harvey, B., 2017. Finding a Home – Families’ Journeys out of Homelessness. *Focus Ireland*

better described as ‘adult only households’ and that some of them may involve a couple of adults rather than a person on their own.

This separation of people who are homeless into these two distinct groups probably derives from the way information is recorded on PASS, which is primarily a bed-management system and therefore sees people largely in relation to their sleeping requirements rather than their human complexity.

But listening to the stories of anyone who is ‘single’ and homeless immediately reveals the range of human and family connections which, although many are painfully broken, define much of who they are and their relationship to the world. The groundbreaking studies by Paula Mayock and colleagues², some of them commissioned by Focus Ireland,³ drew attention to the importance for family to young people – not as a source of whatever problems they faced but as a support into independent adulthood. This evidence challenged a long tradition in youth work that the families of young people ‘in trouble’ were the root of the trouble, and that progress necessitated breaking from the family. The stories which informed this research showed that for many young people who exited homelessness, family connection – in the right circumstances and at the right time - had been crucial.

Mayock’s subsequent work, with colleagues including Sarah Sheridan, the former Research Manager in Focus Ireland, revealed the same relationship complexity in the lives of ‘single’ homeless women⁴ and that many were mothers who were not accompanied by their children, but for whom these children remained a crucial part of their story and a motivation for their future.

This research turns its attention to single men - the group which is most frequently seen as ‘single’, viewed in isolation from the relationships which formed and shaped them, and seeks to explore their relationships with their children, what being a father means to them and what consequences it has as they seek for a way out of homelessness.

One of the long-standing themes of Focus Ireland’s research has been the exploration of hidden facets of homelessness through the stories of people who have experienced homelessness. This work helps breakdown the stereotypes about homelessness, helps people to recognise the humanity of people and contributes to finding solutions to homelessness of individuals and homelessness as a wider social problem.

A core challenge in exploring hidden dimensions of social problems is that there is usually a good reason that they have been hidden. Sometimes it is society that does not want to face up to its darker corners, but sometimes it is the people who experience them do not want to talk about them. We encountered this in our recent research into the experience of LGBTQI+ homeless young people,⁵ where we had to repeatedly extend

2 Mayock, P., Corr, M.L. and O’Sullivan, E., 2011. Homeless young people, families and change: Family support as a facilitator to exiting homelessness. *Child & Family Social Work*, 16(4), pp.391–401.

3 Mayock, P., Parker, S. and Murphy, A., 2014. Young people, homelessness and housing exclusion. *Focus Ireland*.

4 Mayock, P., Sheridan, S. and Parker, S., 2015. ‘It’s just like we’re going around in circles and going back to the same thing...’: The Dynamics of Women’s Unresolved Homelessness. *Housing Studies*, 30(6), pp.877–900.

5 Norris, M. and Quilty, A., 2020. A qualitative study of LGBTQI+ youth homelessness in Ireland. *Focus Ireland*.

the timeframe for interviews because of how hard it was to make connections with young people in these circumstances who were willing to be interviewed. The reasons for this were quite clear and emerge strongly in the final report – young LGBTQI+ people are hidden for reasons of safety.

What researchers call the ‘recruitment challenge’ was even greater when looking for interviews with non-custodial homeless fathers. But the reasons for this difficulty in connecting could not be explained in the same way, these fathers faced no risk of violence or exploitation.

When faced with such challenges it is reasonable to ask whether the people you are looking for are just hard to find or, perhaps they do not actually exist or is the issue you want to talk to them about of little significance to them. What both research projects had in common was the certainty of experienced front-line case managers that were meeting people with these experiences every day, and that what we wanted to explore was indeed important to them, and important in understanding their circumstances and the routes out of it.

Eventually, through the persistence of the Quality Matters researchers working on the project, our own research team and front-line services across the whole sector, we were able to undertake sufficient interviews to bring you this report, albeit with fewer voices than we would wish.

One of the things that was remarkable in the recruitment challenge for this project is the number of cases where men known to have the experiences we were exploring, eventually decided not to talk about them. There is something here about a human experience which wants to remain hidden, not because of fear for safety, but because of the pain involved in discussing it.

There is no great revelation here, perhaps. But there are some important lessons for homeless services and how they make room for this dimension of the lives of ‘single’ men who are homeless. There are lessons too for the housing authorities who assess their housing need and may need to look beyond the current circumstances to see the circumstances that are hoped for and can, with support, be achieved. Most significantly, a little light is shed on the complex lives of these most stereotyped of men, revealing a bit more of their vulnerable humanity and the crucial role that having a home plays in allowing them to lead fulfilling lives.

There is much more to understand in the lives of father who are homeless, in the various forms of homelessness and the various relationships they may have to their children, and this will be an area which Focus Ireland research will explore further.

Mike Allen
Director of Advocacy
Focus Ireland

1 Summary of key findings

This research has been commissioned to better understand the experiences of fathers who have experienced homelessness, and the impact of fatherhood in attaining secure, own-door accommodation.

It sought to facilitate nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of non-custodial or non-residential homeless fathers, to understand barriers to this population when they wish to establish, maintain, or improve relationships with their children, and opportunities for addressing these barriers in the context of service provision and national policy.

The research engaged affected fathers (n=9), those providing services to them (n=15), and those with strategic responsibility to identify barriers and opportunities across the spectrum of influence pertaining to the lives of these men (n=7). The research was also informed by the undertaking of a desktop review of relevant literature, policy, and models of good practice for supporting non-residential fathers who have experienced homelessness.

The objectives of the research were to:

- › Examine the social, psychological, and structural barriers and impacts of homelessness on fathers in maintaining a strong relationship with their children.
- › Investigate how this issue has been treated within the literature to guide the project and generate recommendations.
- › Incorporate the experiences, voices, and feedback from fathers who have experienced homelessness since having children.
- › Gain a better understanding of the impact of attaining appropriate, secure, own-door accommodation on the relationship between father and child.

Key Findings

Findings from consultation with fathers and services workers were synthesised to form the key findings of the research. They are as follows:

Homelessness damages the identity, self-efficacy, and self-confidence of fathers

Fathers interviewed for this research routinely reported that feelings of ineffectiveness and low self-confidence are endemic within themselves and were reinforced by the way they were treated by services and structures. Fathers felt as though they were not seen as a father anymore by service providers. This was reflected in the service staff interviews. Overall, the experience of becoming homeless serves to alienate a father from their role as a parent within themselves and wider society.

Homelessness combined with separation from children creates complex traumatic experiences for fathers

While it is well accepted that becoming homeless and being separated from your child are both traumatic experiences, for fathers who become homeless, these traumas are interconnected. During the interviews, fathers described how it impacted their mental health and recovery. For many, this served as a demotivating factor in attaining stability, in that being separated from their children left them feeling as though there was “no point” in recovery. This sentiment was reiterated by the service workers, who had observed this happening with their own clients.

Homeless services may overlook fatherhood

Fathers reported they had not been asked about parenting supports as part of both the care planning process and during intake assessments. Many fathers received informal support from staff members and this support had a significant positive impact on their own capacity and confidence to parent. Service workers noted this discrepancy by stating that, in general, services find it easier to conceptualise a woman who is homeless as a “mother” compared to a man who is homeless as a “father”. There was an assumption by some staff interviewed that fathers were not necessarily interested in accessing parenting support.

A lack of practical supports needed to foster relationships between children and non-residential fathers who are homeless

For many fathers, a lack of dedicated, child-friendly spaces to see their children created significant barriers in maintaining relationships with their children. A lack of child-friendly spaces meant fathers depended on their relationships with the other parent or with their own family in order to see their children. In interviews, fathers expressed how access to their children resulted in improvements to their wellbeing, such as feelings of self-confidence, a sense of happiness, self-belief as a parent, and a sense of security or peace of mind. Also, it was noted that children were happier, more stable, and their relationship with fathers had improved.

Fathers encounter various barriers with accessing suitable, family-friendly housing

Both fathers and service workers reported the difficulty faced by fathers in accessing suitable social housing and/or housing supports. In most cases, the children were living with their other parent, and so housing authorities did not recognise their need for accommodation that could house their children. This issue extended into the private market, where it was noted by respondents that the housing crisis has made it unfeasible for a father to secure own-door, non-shared accommodation by himself.

Recommendations

Recommendations were co-developed by Focus Ireland and Quality Matters. All recommendations were based on findings from data gathered from fathers who are homeless and service workers, as well as findings from the literature review. After a preliminary set of recommendations were co-developed, an additional series of phone interviews were undertaken with seven senior representatives from various organisations and agencies in Ireland's homelessness sector who shared guidance and suggestions on further developing these recommendations

The six recommendations are organised into two sections, service-related and sector-related:

Service

- › Improve the identification of non-custodial parents who are homeless in the assessment of support needs
- › Develop a resource on local and national family and parenting support services to facilitate improved referral for non-custodial parents who are homeless
- › Ensure non-custodial parents who are granted supervised access visits with children are provided with suitable spaces for their family

Sector

- › Develop a service training for case managers and frontline workers on responding to parenting and family-related issues for non-custodial parents and people who are homeless
- › Introduce new standards and guidelines specific to provision of housing supports and care planning of non-custodial parents and their children in the National Quality Standards Framework (NQSF)
- › Every Local Authority should ensure that the ruling of Fagan v. Dublin City Council is reflected in their scheme of lettings and housing needs assessment



2 Introduction

Background

In recent years, a significant amount of attention has been paid to both the experiences of families undergoing separation, and their direct, or indirect experiences of homelessness. In cases of homelessness, the majority of literature within the Irish context has focused on experiences of adults, on the topic of family homelessness, or, where the family unit has been made homeless (1). However, there has been relatively little research examining the experiences of fathers who are homeless. What is known to date, however, is that there are several barriers to fulfilling the role of a father encountered by homeless fathers, including those who are single, non-residential and noncustodial (2–5). Indeed, it has been highlighted that this dimension of the experiences of adult homeless men has remained largely ignored both in academia and in policy (3). However, it has been recognised that homelessness intensifies the already existing challenges of non-custodial or non-residential fathers in assuming their parental functions (6). The little knowledge there is in this area and the relevance of the findings reported so far, are a call for services to gain better understanding of the unique needs of homeless fathers. This is particularly crucial considering that evidence suggests that supporting homeless non-custodial or non-residential fathers in their parenting role is key in contributing to both the health and wellbeing of children (7) as well as fathers' health and wellbeing (8). Focus Ireland is also interested in the role that fatherhood might play in either prolonging an experience of homelessness or acting as an incentive or opportunity to exit homelessness.

In recognition of this knowledge gap and the importance of bridging this, Focus Ireland commissioned this research to better understand the experiences of fathers who have experienced homelessness, and the impact of fatherhood in attaining secure, own-door accommodation.

Objectives of the research

This research sought to facilitate nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of non-custodial or non-residential homeless fathers, to understand barriers to this population when they wish to establish, maintain, or improve relationships with their children, and opportunities for addressing these barriers in the context of service provision and national policy. Accordingly, the research engaged affected fathers, those providing services to them, and those with strategic responsibility to identify barriers and opportunities across the spectrum of influence pertaining to the lives of these men. The objectives of the research were to:

- › Examine the social, psychological, and structural barriers and impacts of homelessness on fathers in maintaining a strong relationship with their children.
- › Investigate how this issue has been treated within the literature to guide the project and generate recommendations.
- › Incorporate the experiences, voices, and feedback from fathers who have experienced homelessness since having children.
- › Gain a better understanding of the impact of attaining appropriate, secure, own-door accommodation on the relationship between father and child.

Research partnerships

This project initially sought to recruit service users through organisations involved in delivering Housing First. However, as the project developed, it became evident that there was a need to extend the recruitment approach to service users in all types of secure accommodation as the issues were relevant to a much wider cohort, and the population in Housing First was small. Because of this, several services and stakeholders were invited to partner on this research project, and provide their support, guidance, and assist with recruitment. These partners were:

- › COPE Galway
- › The Iveagh Trust
- › Merchant's Quay Ireland
- › Novas
- › Respond
- › The Simon Community
- › Sligo Social Services

After the research was undertaken and as key recommendations were developed, input was obtained from several agencies and organisations to ensure that recommendations were ambitious yet achievable. Several representatives for Irish NGOs and organisations working with people who are homeless provided their input on the set of recommendations. These organisations were:

- › Cork County Council's Housing Department
- › Depaul Ireland
- › Dublin City Council's Dublin Region Homeless Executive
- › Housing First National Office
- › Peter McVerry Trust

3 Methodology

Overview

This research included qualitative interviews with fathers, service workers, and expert stakeholders, and a desktop review of relevant literature, policy, and models of good practice for supporting non-residential fathers who have experienced homelessness. The methodology for these components are described in greater detail below.

Literature review

This literature review was conducted through two different streams of research. The first stream of research focused on finding relevant literature specific to non-custodial/non-residential fathers experiencing homelessness. The second stream of research focused on influential factors on parental involvement for non-custodial/non-residential fathers. Additional research was also undertaken to explore the relationship between homelessness, trauma, and parenting. A combination of terms was used for each stream of research.⁶

The desktop search was conducted using Google and Google scholar and UCC and ERIC databases. Sources were also collected through snowballing. The first 50 to 90 results of each search were revised. Most relevant sources were then selected according to the following criteria:

- **Relevance:** articles were specific to non-residential, non-custodial and/or homeless fathers who were separated from their children or, at least, applicable to these.
- **Date:** Most updated articles were prioritised. Articles published before 2000 were not included unless they were seminal research on fatherhood.

⁶ Terms used in Streams of research:

- Stream of research one terms: Homeless AND (non-residential OR noncustodial) AND (fathers OR parenting OR responsible fathering)
- Stream of research two terms: (Meta-analysis OR “systematic review” OR “literature review”) AND (cause) OR predictors OR determine* OR influence* OR contribute* OR “critical factor” OR “decisive factor” OR inhibitor) AND father AND (non-residential OR noncustodial) AND (involvement OR engagement OR responsible)

Also considered in the selection of sources was the inclusion of research conducted in a diversity of countries and regions where there has been relevant research and developments such as the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, and/or other European countries. There were several areas which, even though related to the main theme, were out of scope of the literature review. These were:

- › Research findings on the effects of healthy father-child relationships on child development.
- › A comprehensive list of all aspects which have been reported to be influential in father's involvement.⁷ Instead, this review mentions those which have been identified to be key in literature and point at areas social services could potentially support.

Because of the lack of research in the field, a great proportion of good practice consists of recommendations on what could potentially positively impact, rather than empirically supported practice.

Interviews with fathers who were homeless

Approach and engagement

A total of nine respondents with lived experience of homelessness were recruited to take part in semi-structured interviews for this research project. These respondents were recruited directly through Focus Ireland, and the partner agencies listed in this report. Respondents were eligible to participate provided they met the following criteria:

- › They are the father to one or more children
- › They have previously experienced homelessness
- › They have been living in stable, own-door accommodation for a period of at least three months.
- › They do not have custody of their children

Before agreeing to take part, respondents were provided with an information sheet with details about the interviews and given the opportunity to ask further questions without committing to take part. These interviews broadly discussed the respondent's own experience of homelessness as a father, their experience of services, and how transitioning into secure accommodation has impacted on their relationships. Informed consent was gathered from each participant before commencing the interview. These interviews took place over phone, and respondents were offered a copy of their transcripts upon

7 Examples of other factors that can influence father involvement in children's lives but that are not within social services scope are:

- › Time passed since separation. The longer time has passed the less contact with children (Rollie, 2006)
- › Fathers having multiple biological children in the same household increases likelihood of contact with children (Cooksey & Craig, 1998 cited in Rollie, 2006)
- › Fathers coming from high socio-economic status before the separation (Seltzer, 1998 cited in Rollie, 2006) and who have higher levels of education increase likelihood of contact with children (Cooksey & Craig, 1998, Seltzer, 1998 cited in Rollie, 2006)

completion. The interviews were not recorded; however, the interviewer took written note of the responses throughout. These interviews were then analyzed using thematic analysis.

Challenges in recruitment

It is important to note that this project underwent several developments in scope as it progressed. Initially, this project faced several significant challenges in recruiting eligible respondents. Initially, this research project aimed to recruit 30 fathers who had previously been homeless but had transitioned into a secure tenancy with 'Housing First' at least six months prior to participation. However, very early on in this process it was decided that invitation should be extended to fathers who were in any form of secure tenancy (including social housing, HAP, rent supplement, private rental, etc.). Despite this broadening of inclusion criteria, the project faced significant difficulties in recruiting eligible respondents. Several reasons were posited including, primarily that the research was taking place at the height of, and shortly after the pandemic – many organisations noted staff and service users were burned out, that there was 'research fatigue' as there was an increase in any desk-based activities such as research, strategy, and consultation during the lockdown periods.

The cohort that tentatively engaged was more numerous than the final number of respondents. At several stages of the research project, respondents would begin to engage in the process, but soon after would withdraw from the study. This is unsurprising given the vulnerability of the population, and the sensitivity of the interview subject. To assist in recruitment, a substantial effort was made to engage with eligible respondents by inviting multiple organisations and services to partner on the project. Additionally, at this time, inclusion criteria were relaxed once again to include any father who had experienced homelessness but was now living in secure accommodation at least three months prior to the interview (where previously, it had only been fathers in Housing First tenancies). While the study aimed to recruit a total of 30 respondents, the final number included in this report is nine. This is indicative of the difficulty in reaching this population, and future research in this area could potentially seek to work closely with individual service keyworkers to build trust and rapport with the fathers. The nine interviews conducted yielded exceptionally rich data, and there was sufficient material present to proceed with the thematic analysis. Additionally, to ensure the integrity and strength of the findings, an additional five service staff interviews were conducted, bringing the number to a total of 15, instead of the originally planned ten.

Interviews with service workers

A total of 15 participants who worked in either frontline or management roles were recruited to take part in semi-structured interviews. The purpose of these interviews was to gain a better understanding of how services approach the issue of fathers experiencing homelessness, and the challenges they see in providing support. Participants were provided with an information sheet outlining the purpose of the interview, and what would be discussed. Interviews covered their own level of experience in the area, how they feel this issue is treated within other services, and what they feel may be improved. These interviews were carried out by phone or video call, and participants were offered a chance to review their transcripts before completion. These transcripts were then analyzed using thematic analysis.

Co-development of recommendations

A collaborative, iterative approach was taken to developing a series of recommendation. Initially, a set of recommendations were co-developed by Focus Ireland and the research team with Quality Matters, based on the key findings and themes from the research.

Following this, the draft recommendations were shared and discussed in semi-structured interviews with senior representatives who were purposively selected from five organisations in Ireland's homeless sector. The purpose of the interviews was to gather input on recommendations and towards developing a nuanced understanding of how recommendations may be further improved or how implementation could be enhanced to achieve a intended outcome. The five organisations that participated in these interviews were:

- › Cork County Council's Housing Department
- › Depaul Ireland
- › Dublin City Council's Dublin Region Homeless Executive
- › Housing First National Office
- › Peter McVerry Trust

Based on the feedback and input obtained from these interviews, all recommendations were further developed to ensure they were relevant, appropriate, ambitious and achievable.

Ethical considerations

There were a number of key ethical concerns related to this research. Below is a summary of these issues, and how they were addressed during the project.

Potential risk	Strategies for prevention, mitigation and response
Research participants are not fully informed of the research	Information resources on all facets of the research process were provided to participants in information sheets and videos in plain language. The information sheet and video included information on purpose, process and scope of the research, confidentiality and voluntary nature of engagement, potential risks of participation and supports and payments for participation. Verbal consent was recorded by the researcher.
Research participants feel compelled to engage in the research	At all stages, participants were reminded that participation was voluntary, would not affect their service access, and at several points were thanked for their choice to participate and share their experiences.
Research participants feel they must share all their very personal information	Researchers were careful to ensure participants did not feel they had to share anything they were not comfortable with, were encouraged to decline questions if they wished, or seek further information before answering.
Research participants are harmed (e.g. re-traumatisation or triggering through retelling difficult stories)	Researchers were trained in trauma-informed research practices. Participants were informed about the nature of questions, reassured they could stop at any time and encouraged to seek support afterwards if needed.
Research participants views or identities are discernible in final reports or records	No stories were detailed in a way that would identify any participant in the research, or other identifying information used. Participants had the opportunity to review interview notes, which was offered to all participants. Transcribed notes were deleted upon completion of the report.

4 Literature review

Overview

This literature review aims to describe challenges and needs of homeless non-residential fathers and noncustodial fathers in establishing and maintaining the relationship with their children, including access to stable housing. The term non-residential father here refers to a father who is not living with their child/children at the present time but may also refer to a father who has never lived with their children (10). Non-custodial on the other hand, refers to a father who does not have legal guardianship or custody of their children, whether they live with them or not. The terms are differentiated to support an expansive review of the literature but are not used to define respondents in the research.

This literature review has three sections. The first section briefly outlines the national policy context in relation to homelessness. The second section focuses on the challenges to fatherhood faced by fathers not living with their children who are experiencing homelessness. The third section looks at good practice in supporting services for homeless fathers who don't live with their children.

Homelessness in Ireland

This research was developed within the context of the Housing First Strategy and its National Implementation Plan 2018–2021. This strategy, which is part of a set of national initiatives aiming to eliminate, reduce rough sleeping and long-term homelessness in Ireland, supports people, who have been chronically homeless and have complex needs, to have direct access to long term housing without preconditions around sobriety or mental health treatment, after which it provides them with intensive housing and health supports (11). This recognising “that a stable home provides the basis for recovery in other areas” (11) (p.3).

Fathers experiencing homelessness have not received significant attention in Irish policy or research. The National Quality Standards Framework for Homeless Services in Ireland does not make specific mention of parenting supports for either non-custodial parents or fathers. While this framework does take great effort to ensure a high level of quality in service provision for adults with dependent children, there are no standards that detail how services should work with homeless adults who do not live with their children, but are trying to establish, maintain or improve their relationship with them. The parental role is only referenced in the standards to cases where a service-user has dependent children living with them, in the context of family service provision. Where issues related to the family are mentioned otherwise, the standards highlight the importance of providing support around family and current relationships in assessment processes and housing support, but are not explicit on the type of relationships this refers to or the unique challenges where the family is not living together.

Research on homelessness conducted in Ireland has included challenges and experiences of; young people (12–14), LGBTQI+ (15), migrants (16, 17), women (18) and families (1, 19–22); focused on physical health (23), mental health (24) and drug use (25, 26) of homeless population; and/or looked at the impact of different governmental housing schemes and policies on homelessness (1, 27). However, research specific to non-custodial or non-residential fathers has not been conducted yet. Indeed, family status monitoring of the homeless population in emergency accommodation services for the Dublin area, which concentrates the majority of homeless population in Ireland, was not in place until 2014 (28).

There is some census data on homelessness, but it provides an incomplete picture in relation to this cohort. Figures from the 2022 national census indicate that there were at least 10,300 people experiencing homelessness (29). Of this number, approximately 27% were aged 17 or younger. In total, there were 1,367 family units recorded. There were more one-parent families with children (n=711) than couples with children (n=576). However, these figures do not provide any information as per the parental status of single adults in homeless services, so the extent of the needs of this population is yet unknown.

Recently published figures show there are 14,966 people accessing state funded emergency accommodation (30), however this figure is not inclusive of other forms of homelessness both visible and invisible. Including people sleeping rough, people couch surfing, homeless people in hospitals and prisons, those in Direct provision centres, and homeless households in Domestic Violence refugees.

Focus Ireland published a series of reports providing greater insight into single adult homelessness in Ireland since records began. Some notable trends include:

- › Adult individuals without accompanying children form the vast majority of households in emergency accommodation (83% as of April 2021) (31) (p.8).
- › Family homelessness has seen a marked decline between 2019 to 2021 coinciding with a reduction in the total amount of homeless individuals as well as women and children. Despite this decline an increase was observed in the number of single adult households for both men and women (31) (p.9).
- › The number of exits from emergency accommodation has increased by 92% in recent years with nearly 8000 exits between 2019 – 2020. Exits were made to various locations including state subsidised housing, insecure accommodation and prisons or hospitals (31) (p.14).
- › Around 80% of male adults in emergency accommodation in Dublin are without children, this demographic saw a 45% rise in entrance rates compared to their counterparts accompanied by children who saw a 43% decline over the same period (32) (p.8).
- › Outside Dublin numbers of “single men” fell slightly while the number of men with children and as part of a couple with children in emergency accommodation roughly halved (32) (p.8).

Literature on mothers who are homeless shows that they have varied and complex experiences, and that there are multiple causes that result in housing instability and eventually homelessness (33). The issue of homeless families, which is an issue closely linked to a mother’s experiences of homelessness, make up to 97% of lone-parent families living in emergency accommodation (34). Following a brief decline of 43% in family homelessness due to a series of rent protections and an increase in properties available in 2020, women’s homelessness saw a 23% decrease compared to a 3% decline for men during the same period (34).

Recent figures show a reversal in the trend, the number of families who are homeless increased by 44% between the period of January 2022 to January 2023 (34). Literature shows that vulnerable mothers experience a sense of fear of losing their children and that this separation from children is a deeply traumatic experience for both a mother and their child. Additionally, these women also experience shame, stigma and feelings of “failure” associated with their identities as mothers (35) (p.14).

Although there is a link between women’s homelessness and homeless families it is important to separate the two as the number of “single women” (i.e., women without accompanying children) has increased since early 2022 (34). Some of these drivers include landlords selling homes, breakdowns of family relationships, mental health, addiction, and asylum status. Of note in the literature is the role of gender and domestic violence as a driver of women’s homelessness. Women attempting to leave abusive relationships or living environments where they may be at-risk of physical or emotional abuse will mean that women find themselves in unstable or unsuitable accommodations or, without any alternative options or the decision to be homeless, are forced to remain in dangerous living situations (36).

Fagan v. Dublin City Council – ruling on social housing applications for separated parents with joint custody

In 2019, the Supreme Court ruled in the case of Fagan v. Dublin City Council, which addresses the treatment of separated parents with joint custody applying for social housing assistance under the Housing Act 2009. The Supreme Court made a unanimous decision that criticized Dublin City Council for exceeding its discretion by categorizing Mr. Fagan as a one-person household, despite being entitled to three-nights per week custody and co-parenting rights. This judgement criticized the local authority's de facto policy of blocking individual assessments where applicants have joint custody and are applying for two-bedroom or family accommodation (37, 38).

In the case, Mr. Fagan argued that Dublin City Council did not consider his eligibility for social housing as being suitable for his children, and this contracted with the practices in other local authorities. The Supreme Court expressed concern over the local authority's characterisation of parents with joint custody as "access parents" as well as highlighted the evolving nature of parenting roles and rejected outdated assumptions of mothers being fully responsible for children after separation (37, 38).

The implications of Fagan v. Dublin City Council are that the Supreme Court held that the local authority was not entitled to take resources into account when undertaking an individual assessment of the household's composition (under section 20(1) of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009) and that each assessment should be made on a case by case basis taking the applicant's particular circumstances into account. This ruling also has implications for separated parents with access to their children to have their household needs properly recognised by the local authority and to potentially secure an increase rate of HAP or rent allowance to reflect this need (38).

Challenges to fatherhood experienced by non-custodial or non-residential homeless fathers

Overview

Fathers who are homeless and separated from their children experience significant barriers in establishing, maintaining, or improving father-child relationships. These challenges are two-fold: there are those related to being a non-residential, noncustodial father, and those related to the experience of homelessness. This section aims to outline factors commonly mentioned in literature in relation to both challenges. Seminal research conducted on fathers involvement frames fatherhood within an ecological framework comprising of individual, relational and contextual aspects, which have been identified to be influential in parental involvement (39). Following this structure, challenges mentioned in this section have been organised as follows: challenges relating to the self, relational challenges, practical challenges, and structural challenges.

Challenges to fatherhood relating to the self

Challenges relating to the self are those experiences concerned with individual wellbeing and self-development that may have a negative relationship with experiences of fatherhood. These challenges may be a contributory factor to homelessness or may be exacerbated by homelessness. In other words, a factor which leads to fathers becoming homeless (such as mental health or addiction) often impacts on the relationship with the children, however, these factors may also become more severe in response to homelessness and child separation. The factors explored here include father's emotional and psychological health, father's confidence and self-competence, and their internal identity as a parent.

Father's emotional and psychological health

A fathers' emotional stability (40, 41) and psychological wellbeing have been reported to influence parenting attitudes and skills (Cox et al., 1989; Levy-Shiff & Israelashvili, 1988; Pleck, 1997 as cited in Doherty et al., 1998) (41). In turn, poor emotional and physical health in fathers' has been associated with lower levels of parental involvement (39).

In homelessness, where high levels of cumulative stress are prevalent (42) and where basic needs, namely physiological and safety needs, are being unmet (7), the weight of these factors can take particular relevance. The levels of distress of homeless parents, for instance, have been reported to be higher than those found in homed parents of low incomes (42). In research specific to homeless fathers, Rogers and Rogers (2019) report fathers can also be overtaken by a sense of hopelessness, which can result from the compounding issues surrounding homelessness (2). Homeless populations are frequently facing numerous highly complex issues, which may have preceded the loss of stable housing (2, 4) this can include difficulties related to family relationships, separation from partner, challenges with employment, untreated childhood trauma etc. (2, 4). Homeless men have also been reported to be more likely to suffer from mental health and substance use disorders as well as be involved with the criminal justice system (7). In addition to this, research documents shame arising from not meeting gendered social expectations. There is, first, the 'defeat' of being homeless in a society that expects men to 'stand on their own feet', and also the defeat of being a father who cannot be a 'breadwinner' (2).

Psychological distress, in turn, has been associated with negative parenting styles and increased difficulties with shared parenting relationships (41). Indeed, research has recognised emotional and physical challenges posed by homelessness can diminish parenting ability (2) and negatively impact the possibility of maintaining or establishing a relationship with children. Importantly, the relationship of emotional and psychological wellbeing with positive parental involvement is bi-directional. Emotional and psychological challenges without adequate support can lead to interrupted relationships with children, and interrupted relationships with children can further decrease fathers' health and wellbeing. In relation to this, Barker and Morrison (2014) maintain that:

“When a lack of contact with their children is combined with a lack of recognition of their role or identity as fathers, these men experience adverse effects on their health and wellbeing.” (5) (p.2)

Father's motivation, skills, and self-confidence

Fathers' motivation and attitudes towards parenthood, and parenting skills and self-confidence have been reported to be influential aspects in parental involvement (39,41,43). Research conducted with homeless fathers have further supported some of these findings, particularly those relating to parenting skills. Stokes et al., (2020) mention, for instance, in a study with homeless, non-residential fathers, that feeling underprepared for the role and lacking understanding on how to be an effective parent have had an effect on fathers' parenting engagement, with this being particularly relevant for those fathers looking to transition into more stable accommodation to live with their children (7).

Father's paternal identities and conceptions of fatherhood

Paternal identities can significantly suffer because of fathers' experiences of homelessness. Homelessness challenges social constructs around gender roles in parenting which can lead to gender role strain⁸ (7) and uncertainty on alternative ways to embody fatherhood (6). Homeless fathers are exposed to a mismatch between their lived experience and social expectations of them as men and fathers (44). This experience can cause psychological distress (44), and may also result in low self-esteem (45).

Even though some fathers may respond by adopting new functions into their parental identity (i.e. acting as teachers or guides instead of providers) (45) some others experience low self-esteem, guilt and shame and lose confidence on their parenting ability, which can result in lower levels of involvement (7, 46). Roche et al., (2018) give a clearer insight on this issue in a qualitative study with homeless fathers, where they report fathers describing "a 'performance failure' that results in 'distancing' themselves from their children, acting to conceal their inabilities to fulfil the prescriptive social norms and dominant representations of fatherhood." (46) (p.283).

In addition to the gender role strain, homelessness can lead to increased internal and external pressures on being 'good fathers', increased fears of failing at it and sense of inability to parent in the way they want to which, in turn, can result in fathers being more vulnerable to experience frustration, distress, sense of disempowerment and, consequently, retreat from parental involvement (5, 6). Barker and Morrison (2014) highlight, that in these cases, there seems to be a tipping point, a level of contact with children, that stops being adverse for father's wellbeing becoming instead motivating, this tipping point being subjective to each father (5). Fathers may also choose to distance themselves from their children as part of their parental role i.e. if they consider it is beneficial for children not to be aware of their circumstances and see the impact that homelessness has had on them (5).

Second, homelessness can decrease parenting autonomy and result in fathers' avoiding or reducing parenting functions relating to discipline and setting of boundaries (6). Diebacker et al., (2015) explains that, in homelessness, fathers are subject to highly controlled parenting experiences. There is a lack of control over norms and rules that guide the father-child relationship, which are instead established by either mothers or other external actors (i.e. institutional regulations including those of shelters), and there

⁸ This describes the pressure experienced by men to perform a certain type of masculinity, often in the independent, self-reliant, provider role. The Gender Role Strain paradigm was developed by Pleck, J. H. (1981) in the myth of masculinity. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

is also fear of the multiple threats of discontinued contact they are exposed to (6). Under these circumstances, Diebacker et al., (2015) findings show homeless fathers tend to decrease or avoid the ‘upbringing function’ of their parenting role,⁹ this is in order to avoid conflict with mothers, and sometimes also for fear of children responding to sanctions with rejection or avoidance (6). This is the case even for those fathers who undertook this function previous to being homeless (6). In relation to this, Diebacker et al., (2015) explains:

“When it comes to their children, on the other hand, this fear of conflict combined with the great pressure to succeed can in some cases lead to a dichotomization of parental practices, exemplified in situations where men perceive themselves and act as a ‘good friend’ or leisure partner for their children while transferring other parental tasks to the mothers.” (p.97) (6)

This study’s findings indicate supporting fathers in establishing or maintaining the upbringing function of their parenting role may be an area of exploration for homeless and housing support services.

Challenges to fatherhood relating to relationships

Challenges to fatherhood and relationships refers to the difficulties faced by fathers in navigating and maintaining relationships with those around them. While much of this research is focused on the relationship between the father and child, this also refers to their relationship with the other parent, their wider family, and with others within their wider social support network that may affect their parenting role in any way.

Relationships with the other parent

The quality of the relationship between parents is consistently addressed in literature as a key influencing factor on father’s involvement and contact with their children (47–49). Indeed, the quality and nature of relationships between separated parents have been referred to as one of the best predictors of non-residential fathers involvement in children’s lives (49), and, when constrained, as one of the main barriers preventing fathers from engaging in their role (6, 47, 48). There are different ways in which this factor can influence father’s involvement which include:

- ▶ **Access arrangements** – Rollie (2006) mentions non-residential fathers who have joint legal custody see their children more frequently and for greater lengths of time than other non-residential fathers (Seltzer, 1998 cited in Rollie, 2006) (43).
- ▶ **Mothers acting as gatekeepers** – Mothers can exert great influence on the quality of the relationship between non-residential fathers and their children. They can affect frequency and nature of contacts by controlling time and guidelines for visitations, access to information related to the child and father’s ability to participate in the child’s life related decision making (43). This gatekeeper role of mothers has been reported to be one of the most influential factors on fathers capacity for involvement

⁹ The study defines parenting role functions as: leisure, upbringing, care function and financial provision. The upbringing function is related to discipline and setting boundaries.

even when compared to other influential aspects such as fathers involvement in children's early lives, fathers paying child support, or fathers own relationship with their fathers due to its mediating role (50).

Relationship with children

Another influential factor in fathers' involvement is the quality of the relationship they have with their children, with weak relationships, including those in which there is rejection or avoidance from children towards the father, decreasing the likelihood of father involvement (43). This indicates that providing support for fathers to acquire skills in re-establishing, building, and improving parent-child relationships may be of benefit to increase parental involvement in non-residential fathers.

Relationship with others and social support

Access to social networks providing psychological, emotional and financial support has also been identified in literature as a relevant factor in fathers' involvement, particularly for non-residential parents (39, 41, 43), whose social network can reduce after separation (43) and for homeless fathers, a high proportion of whom lose links with family and friends, resulting in highly isolated experiences of parenting (5). An important part of this social network are members of the father's extended family. Fagan and Kaufman (2014) maintain this has been identified as a vital resource for low income at risk families in decreasing parenting stress and increasing parental engagement, particularly for non-residential fathers (51). Family members, for instance, can facilitate practical resources for fathers to remain in contact with children (i.e. homes of extended family which can serve as suitable places for fathers to see and spend time with children) (5).

Also important are the attitudes held by members of the fathers' social network towards their parenting role (41, 43). Rollie (2006) states non-residential parents "are more likely to maintain NRP-child relationship when network members support and encourage their involvement in the relationship" (p.196)(43) and vice versa. Importantly, research has shown that social support can reduce the negative impact of poverty in fathering (McLoyd, 1990 cited in Doherty, 1998) (41) indicating it may be a protective factor of father's involvement.

Practical factors

Practical factors refer to physical and material resources that either facilitate or hinder the capacity of fathers to stay in contact with children.

Housing stability

The crucial role of stable, secure and adequate housing in enabling family functioning is well established in research (52, 53). Geller and Curtis (2018) state, however, that housing stability in non-residential fathers remains an understudied area (52). In their study, which looked at housing hardships of urban fathers in the United States, Geller, and Curtis (2018) noted that non-resident fathers have higher rates of housing insecurity than their resident counterparts with nearly a quarter experiencing housing insecurity in the child's first nine years. It was also noted that the nature of the housing insecurity experienced differed qualitatively from that of resident fathers, being more precarious for the former than the latter (52).

Research has also indicated lack of suitable housing affects fathers' involvement in children lives (5, 41, 54). Baker and Morrison (2014), in a qualitative and quantitative study involving 40 single homeless men, reported that lack of suitable accommodation was one of the major barriers to father involvement impacting both the ability and willingness of fathers to have contact with their children, further highlighting the lack of adequate housing options there is for fathers who have shared care arrangements (5). In the same vein, Geller, and Curtis (2018) state that:

“A father’s ability to remain stably housed enables this ongoing parental involvement. A nonresident father in precarious housing likely faces trade-offs between meeting his own survival needs and attending to his parental responsibilities.” (52) (p.1177)

Not only is stable and adequate housing vital for fathers' involvement but more specifically, housing which is geographically close to children's place of residence. Rollie (2006) highlights studies' findings showing that fathers living more than 100 miles away from their children are less likely to talk and interact with them, fathers living between 11 and 100 miles away are more likely to have regular contact but to do so through calls rather than visiting, with *“involvement [being] greatest for NRPs [non-residential parents] who live short distances from their children”* (43) (p.182)

Father’s employment status and economic wellbeing

Economic wellbeing and employment stability have been mentioned as aspects affecting parental involvement since early fatherhood research. Ihinger – Tallman et al., (1995), who developed a model to explore influential factors in fathers involvement after divorce, identified these two components as moderators between father's parenting role identity and actual involvement in children's lives after divorce (40). This has been followed by research findings pointing at associations between unemployment, low income and low education in fathers and lower levels of parental involvement (39, 49).

This is particularly important when considering research has pointed that non-resident fathers are more likely to be underemployed or unemployed, have lower incomes (7) and also lower education levels than resident fathers (39). They have also been reported to have less access to flexible work arrangements than the latter, which is another identified key factor of father involvement (39). Moreover, non-residential fathers also need to assume additional costs associated with children visitations (i.e. transport) which can enhance financial constraints and make non-residential fathers with financial difficulties less likely to see their children (43).

For homeless fathers the physical and material barriers to fatherhood take an even more central role. In addition to the inability to meet their own physical needs, they are also unlikely to have capacity to provide material support to children (46) which can directly affect access, for instance, when there are access constraints which are dependent on the father's ability to provide child support (43). Research with fathers living with children in shelters has shown this inability to financially support children may also lead fathers to become impatient, frustrated and likely to accept short term immediate jobs which in turn may affect their ability to secure stable employment in the long term (45).

Research looking into the role played by employment stability in non-residential fathers involvement, however, is cautious on overstating the relationship between employment status and father involvement, arguing that workplace flexibility rather than employment stability is the main factor associated with higher levels of involvement (39). This can have practical implications for services supporting non-residential fathers to gain employment, as it shows that the nature and conditions of job positions they take on matters.

Lack of access to child friendly spaces or spaces otherwise suitable for access visits

Lack of spatial resources is a challenge for homeless fathers in trying to fully engage with parental functions i.e. arranging meetings with children (6). Barker and Morrison (2014) reported fathers' having an alternative location to meet with their children was a significant enabler in maintaining contact with them (p.4) (5).

Diebacker et al., (2015) highlights homeless support services can either facilitate or hinder father's contact with children through their facilities' spatial conditions and institutional regulations, which can include opening times, levels of occupancy (i.e., cramped services), availability of private spaces, rules around supervision etc. These, along with the stigma attached to shelters can cause fathers to be ambivalent on deciding whether to bring children to services, even when there is willingness to arrange visits and overnights (6). Importantly, fathers may also fear that taking children to services will be negatively evaluated by mothers or institutions resulting in contact being discontinued (6).

Structural factors

Structural factors at the societal and service levels are highly emphasised in literature on non-custodial, non-residential homeless fathers as major barriers. Rigid gender social constructs, stigma and negative stereotypes of men and parenting, and men and homelessness have greatly affected the quality and availability of service provision for this group and posed significant challenges in their ability to assume parental functions. Structural challenges detailed in this section include gendered biases within formal structures, the lack of access to support services, and the inability to secure appropriate housing.

Gender based assumptions in courts, welfare and other systems

Gender bias or gendered assumptions in relation to parenting goals and roles in family court systems can lead to custody arrangements that place an increased burden of care on mothers, and undermine the role of fathers (8). This gender bias can mean non-residential fathers have no guarantee of access to children even when they meet other parenting related responsibilities (i.e. paying child support and having a parenting plan in place) (50). In Ireland, gendered assumptions around parenting responsibilities (e.g. that the mother will be the primary caregiver where she does not live with the father) creates a range of challenges in legal and welfare systems that impact on several aspects of custody and guardianship, which has also been evidenced in other jurisdictions (55).

Lack of access to services and support

Services often fail to acknowledge or address the needs of fathers experiencing homelessness (2, 7, 47, 56). This service provision gap has been attributed to a number of factors, including: social and health services holding negative perceptions of homeless men (5) leading, sometimes, to social workers' reluctance to work with them (47); and services holding negative perceptions around men and parenting(8,50) as well as rigid gender roles expectations (56), resulting in a lack of acknowledgment of, and response to, their parenting role and needs (2, 4, 5).

In other words, when accessing services, homeless fathers face not only stigmatisation in relation to their homelessness but also in relation to their parenting role. The 'deadbeat dad' stereotype (50) and the "parenting "deficit perspective" (8) are examples of this negative framing. Barker and Morrison (2014), based on findings of a research conducted with 40 single homeless fathers, note the particularly challenging nature of this intersection of experiences:

"Even within services that work with homeless men, we rarely think of these people as being concerned with anything else aside from their own needs. Homeless men are often thought of as free-floating individuals, almost dysfunctional in their autonomy and separation from family and the community. Rarely do people think of homeless men as being fathers intimately connected to their children, even when they're unable to be with them." (p.1) (5)

Diebacker et al., (2015) states homeless support services do not enquire with men in relation to their family circumstances or parenting status to the same extent they do with mothers, and when they do it this is "*not identified in its psychosocial dimension of a possible support requirement for the fathers, or as a social work target*" (p.103)(6).

Furthermore, Diebacker et al., (2015) add that bringing family related topics into the conversation is dependent on the worker's ability to recognise this need in services users or in service users willingness to introduce the topic themselves (6). This is particularly relevant when considering homeless fathers are likely to feel reluctant to disclose information relating to their parenting status due to distrust in social services (2), feelings of embarrassment (2), fears of it affecting their chances to access independent housing (6) or attachment to gender defined social roles which means fathers prefer to focus on independent living and securing employment when accessing services (2).

The invisibility of non-custodial fathers parental role means service provision for this population group, more frequently than not, prioritises education and employment supports, and if in relation to their children, focuses on child support adherence, overlooking other parenting related supports including those aiming to improve father-child relationships (2, 7). Barker and Morrison (2014) also note the denial of fathers' paternal identity can also lead "to further despair and anguish [in fathers], creating a feedback loop that diminishes their capacity to parent and prolongs their period of homelessness." (p.2) (5).

Furthermore, negative stereotypes may also affect services expectation on homeless fathers in their role as parents which in turn can impact fathers' trust in their parenting ability (4). Research with homeless fathers has shown, however, they do not want expectations in relation to their fatherhood to be changed due to homelessness (45).

Moreover, service providers bias, if perceived by fathers, can cause lack of trust in social services and discourage them from seeking support (2, 7, 47), potentially causing a situation in which services do not reach out to fathers and fathers do not reach out to services. In a study in the United States, Baron and Sylvester (2002) reported this lack of trust in low income, non-custodial fathers who would show to be fearful of the system and “assume that caseworkers are aligned with mothers and will do little to help them, even when they seek needed services” (p.6) (47). In the same line, Rogers and Rogers (2019), in a qualitative study conducted with service providers catering for homeless non-custodial fathers, describe fathers displaying ‘outright resistance’ as a way of avoiding disappointment, as they had given up to the idea of there being any help available (2).

In spite of the negative stereotypes, research has shown low income and homeless noncustodial fathers have similar needs to those of mothers (47), and show willingness to be involved in their childrens lives as well as commitment with parenthood (5–7, 47, 50, 57).

Lack of Affordable Housing and Unemployment Crises

Amongst the most influential factors in fathers' parental involvement, are contextual factors mainly associated with the socio-economic environment (41). Lack of occupational opportunities and poor income have been reported to be particularly harmful (41). In this regard, Doherty et al., (1998) suggests that:

“Fathering is especially sensitive to changes in economic forces in the work force and marketplace and to shifts in public policy. [It] suffers disproportionately from negative social forces, such as a racism, that inhibit opportunities in the environment.” (41) (p.287)

Additionally, there is the fact that noncustodial fathers do not have equal access to social welfare supports frequently available to families, including those relating to housing subsidies (52, 55). If to this structural disadvantage is added to long term housing crises and difficult processes to access social or subsidised housing, both of which are true in the case of Ireland (19, 58) (59), the situation for fathers is further aggravated, affecting their capacity to fully assume their parenting role.

Good practice in supporting homeless non-custodial and non-residential fathers

There is a paucity of research on ways social services can support and reduce barriers for fathers who do not live with their children and are experiencing homelessness (2,7). In spite of this, their potential to counteract the negative impact of homelessness on fatherhood has been recognised (2). Rogers and Rogers (2019) indicates that, in this sense, “social services are [being] sub-optimally used in practice” (p.41)(2).

A key recommendation has been that social service systems introducing a holistic (7) or multifaceted (2) response to homeless fathers’ needs, with different services working in an integrated fashion (i.e. child welfare, housing, mental health etc.)(7) which is required to respond to populations with complex needs. For this to happen, however, social services need to first recognise homeless fathers who do not live with their children as a target group with unique needs and counteract the current invisibility of their status as fathers, and the barriers they face to fostering positive relationships with their children. Another key recommendation has been that social services create responses with input from service users and service providers (2) and consider appointing men who are also fathers as leaders of initiatives and programmes (7).

Importantly, research has recognised that homeless support services may provide a unique platform to provide interventions (44) and resources that help sustain the relationship between homeless fathers and children(6). This primarily points to the importance of homeless support services that incorporate parenting resources and emphasise the psychosocial aspects of it, and do not solely focus on independent living, self-sufficiency and employment (6).

Supporting homeless fathers who do not live with their children in their parenting role can also help them transition out of homelessness. The relationship between homelessness and parent-child relationship is bi-directional. Fathers being able to remain in contact with their children has been identified as a key motivator to transition out of homelessness and a key factor to maintain their health and wellbeing (4,57). Zimbrick – Rogers et al., (2017), for instance, showed how parenthood was framed by young homeless parents as a ‘turning point’ motivating them to change behaviours (i.e., entering shelters, looking for jobs, stop or reduce substance use). Caldwell et al., (2019), on the other hand, in a study with non-residential African American fathers showed that:

“fathers with close, supportive relationships with their sons exhibited fewer depressive symptoms (...), drank less (...),and requested services more (...) than fathers who did not have such relationships.” (60)

Interventions for self-development

Stokes et al., (2020) state that:

“before improving the fathering experiences of homeless men, systems must first work with fathers to address their personal needs.” (7) (p.559)

Providing psychosocial support is key in achieving this. Rogers and Rogers (2019), describing social workers' lessons in their work with homeless fathers, reported social workers considered vital to address not only physical but also emotional, spiritual and mental health needs of fathers (2).

The importance of supporting homeless fathers in building personal resources to facilitate parenting has also been indicated in seminal research on fatherhood. Doherty et al., (1998) highlights that fathers' personal resources, such as strong commitment to fatherhood, can help overcome highly challenging contextual factors that diminish parental involvement (i.e. difficult co-parenting relationships, unfavourable legal arrangements etc.) (41). The following are self-related supports mentioned in literature.

Providing therapeutic support

In an evaluation of a programme for non-custodial homeless fathers, therapeutic support, including family therapists, was found to help participants to persevere in their journey towards self-sufficiency and healthy parenting, and manage anger (54). Services may also want to consider using alternative modes of psychosocial support. Dad's House, a support service for single fathers in the United Kingdom, for instance, offers a buddy service with one to one consultations to accompany fathers particularly when going through traumatic times (61).

Key Worker-service user relationship building and intensive interventions

Research has indicated front-line workers investing in building rapport and trust with fathers who are homeless and don't live with their children is vital to support them in overcoming shame and developing parenting capacity (2). Rogers and Rogers (2019) highlights this relationship building can contribute in a number of ways: it makes it more likely for fathers to disclose their homeless or parenting status, it makes fathers more receptive to information and services, it helps re-establishing trust in the system, and it works as a motivator for fathers, alleviating the pressure of having to go through challenging processes by themselves (2).

Holding a compassionate and sensitive approach, genuinely caring, being willing to understand homeless fathers' experiences and feelings, holding a non-judgemental attitude regardless of the cause of homelessness, 'meeting fathers where they are', empathising with mental health issues and trauma backgrounds are all considered highly relevant aspects in the key worker and father's relationship (2). The use of certain communication styles such as motivational interviewing may also prove beneficial in working with homeless non-custodial fathers (2).

Also important is providing intensive interventions including one to one support, for instance, coaching sessions with key workers. This has been reported to help participants stay focused on goals, access the resources they need to achieve these in a timely manner, and integrate these goals with their parenting role by developing ‘child centred decision making skills’ (54).

Supporting expanded paternal identities

Services can acknowledge the impact of engrained limited gender roles in the experience of fathering (2) and support homeless fathers to relate to new forms of father identity different from the traditional ‘bread winner’ or ‘provider’ identity (7, 45, 46, 62). This has also been referred to as reconceptualising performances of fathering (46), identifying different ways to show paternal commitment and forming closer parent-child relationships (48). Stokes et al., (2020) concludes in a study involving homeless non-residential fathers that services’ programmes emphasising:

“diverse roles of fatherhood including financial, emotional, and physical involvement...may help fathers adopt positive perceptions of their ability to parent and thus increase their involvement with their children.” (7) (p.558)

The reconceptualization of the parenting role may happen naturally as fathers adjust to the circumstances posed by homelessness. A qualitative study with homeless fathers showed the leisure and emotional care function of their parenting role became central to the father-child relationship, partly due to the reduced capacity of assuming other functions (i.e. financial provision) (6). In this context, services may be able to help fathers make such adjustments in a balanced and integrated way (i.e. not becoming only a leisure father without capacity to set boundaries as identified earlier in the literature).

Interventions to support with relationship challenges

As noted previously, relevant relationships that can impact on the homeless father and his relationship with his children include the relationship with the child, the child’s other parent, extended families, or with other fathers in their position. Interventions detailed in research include practical support such as parenting skills or in-person visitation, communication skills for the relationship between parents, and peer support for fathers in similar positions.

Support with in-person visitations and with parenting skills

Supports that help fathers repair or maintain the relationship with their children have been detailed in literature (7). This includes services facilitating regular in-person visits with children, supporting communication between father and child (7), and also supporting fathers to increase their parenting skills and knowledge (54).

For homeless fathers, having a safe and child-friendly space to spend time with their child is crucial. Research has shown homeless services creating child friendly spaces and changing visitor rules and regulations to accommodate this. (5, 6).

In relation to supporting fathers to build their knowledge, skills and confidence, parenting education programmes should be evidence based (54). They may also benefit from having an age differential approach. Parenting skills training may be particularly relevant for young fathers, who do not have yet a settled parenting approach, and may also lack positive role modelling (6). The importance of parenting education is well illustrated by Ferguson and Morley (2011) in a programme evaluation involving homeless fathers who do not live with their children, where participants reported changes in the ways they would choose to spend time with their children during visitations as a result of increased parenting skills, knowledge and confidence (54).

Both types of supports can also be integrated to promote the father-child relationship, for instance, through the development of group work activities for parents, playgroup and outings with children, which allow fathers to learn, reflect and get involved in children care in a communal setting (6, 47)

Supports to improve co-parenting communication

Services measuring the quality of co-parenting relationships and offering supports to improve it has also been highlighted in literature as highly important given the great influence this relationship can have in father's involvement (43, 49).

Ways in which programmes can support homeless fathers who do not live with their children to improve their communication and interpersonal relationships with the other parent is an area of research that, even though considered to be key, has not been explored substantially (7). Suggestions range from offering information on working with ex-partners to care for children after separation (5), and increasing communication skills to facilitate spaces in which this can happen (i.e. one-to-one conversations, dialogues to reconcile differences) (7) and offering access to specialised family relationship services (5). An example of good practice support to improve co-parenting communication is the 'Responsible Fatherhood Programme' (RFP) which has yielded positive results in helping low income fathers manage common co-parenting challenges (48).

Opportunities for peer support

Ferguson and Morley (2011), in an evaluation of a programme for homeless fathers who do not live with their children, noted support groups helped participants enhance their paternal identity, provided role models for parenting and fostered responsibility as they felt accountable to each other (54). This same study also reports fathers having a sense that external support or approval of their parenting role was a necessary condition for their engagement with the role (54). Research has also highlighted peer support opportunities can foster a sense of community while providing a supportive non-judgmental learning environment for homeless fathers (7).

Interventions to support management of practical challenges

Homeless fathers who do not live with their children need assistance to access both supports and services that will help them in their journey towards independent living (i.e. employment services and housing), and access resources that will enable them to maintain a regular communication with their children. The particularities of the barriers that fathers encounter when accessing social services (including discriminatory attitudes towards homelessness, and gender-based assumptions in relation to parenting goals and roles) indicate a need for services to provide an assistance that is cognisant of and responsive to these challenges. This may include:

- › Assistance accessing housing (7)
- › Employment support services (7, 47)
- › Assistance with transportation (7)
- › Access to working phones and other alternatives modes of communication for fathers to remain in contact with their children (7)
- › Access to legal and mediation services (i.e. pro bono clinics) to help fathers navigate the child support system and visitation arrangements (8, 47)
- › Life skills training i.e. budgeting, financial management (47, 63)

Service improvements in core activities

Including parenting in all assessments and care planning processes for men

A prerequisite for services to offer adequate supports for homeless fathers not living with their children is to be aware of their parenting status. Instead of depending on fathers' initiative to disclose, services should make this a routine practice by including it in the intake and assessment process (5). Stokes et al., (2020) note that:

“...social services that prioritize a man’s social identity as a father may positively impact his engagement in services and ultimately his ability to parent in a manner that is meaningful to him and his family.” (p.567) (7)

In addition to recognising homeless fathers' identity, services are to integrate it in the supports provided. This means services addressing both homelessness and parenting related needs (5), holding high expectations of their parenting role (4), and leveraging father identity potential to work as a motivator for change (5).

Explore assumptions and gender bias

Literature indicates a need for agencies to review their culture, policies and practices in relation to homeless men who may be fathers. Through training or another form of exploration and learning, services may explore the need to question their own assumptions on fathers' needs (4), to understand the particularities of the experience of homeless fathers who do not live with their children (7) and the complexity of the circumstances surrounding homelessness (i.e. separation from partners, unemployment, reduced social networks) and parenting (4).

Introduce a differential approach to supports

Needs of fathers experiencing homelessness can significantly vary according to the status of their relationship with their children (i.e. fathers who have lost contact with children need assistance reconnecting whereas fathers who have remained in contact need safe places to be with children)(5) or to their age (i.e. young fathers may need more emphasis on parenting education and skills than mature fathers who have a more settled parenting) (6). Services are, therefore, recommended to have a differential approach to supports provided (5).

Work in partnership with organisations offering complementary services

The importance of complementary services working in partnership is related to the complex needs of homeless population but also to the ecological sensitivity of fatherhood. Rogers and Rogers (2019) affirm:

“father engagement is higher when overlapping systems, including that which comprises relationships between homeless non-custodial fathers and social workers, are structured to support their complex needs (Fagans & Lee, 2011) including interagency collaboration.” (2) (p.46)

Interagency collaboration can include parenting supports, housing supports, mental health and substance use support services, criminal or family justice supports (2, 5).

Services advocating for structural change

Advocating for social systems that provide equal access to parenting related services and supports for fathers

Social systems, including social welfare, legislative and regulatory systems, need to be reviewed to promote equity and shared parenting (where this is desired, in the interests of the children, and safe to do so), ensuring there is equitable access to parenting related supports, reducing poverty traps and no extra burdens posed for men that have caring responsibilities (5, 7).

Adequate and appropriate family-friendly social housing should be provided to people who have children

The size, quality and affordability of housing have been pointed as key for family functioning (53) and children’s wellbeing (64, 65). There is some research pointing at positive correlations between housing size and educational outcomes of children (64). Affordable housing has been considered important not only for housing stability (53) but also for families to have increased financial resources to cover other household essential necessities (64). Clair (2019) highlights “housing costs are an important determinant of whether children live in poverty.” (64) (p.618). The importance of adequate and affordable housing for families is further confirmed in Bratt (2002) on a literature review on housing and family wellbeing, when concluding that:

“Housing is ... critical because of the way in which it relates to its occupants, providing sufficient space so that the family is not overcrowded; being affordable; providing opportunities to create a positive sense of self and empowerment; and providing stability and security.” (53) (p.13)

In Ireland, research on homeless families has pointed at similar findings in relation to the importance of the affordability and the size and quality of housing. Walsh and Harvey (2017) report ‘affordable rents deducted at source’ as one of the key enabling factors for families being able to exit homelessness in a sustainable way, and size of housing (i.e. houses that are too small to adequately accommodate children) as one of the impediments to it (19).

Furthermore, some research on homeless fathers has also pointed at the difficulty of meeting child support responsibilities when not having housing stability. Antelo et al., (2021) states for instance that child support payment can leave fathers with little resources for rent further enhancing their housing instability, pointing at a need for housing, child support and other relevant social services to have this as a consideration when deciding on housing options for fathers. (i.e. deciding housing rent rates according to child support payments) (66).

Good practice examples

Several examples of good practice in relation to service provision for non-custodial fathers include:

- ▶ Responsible Fatherhood Programme (RFP) is recommended in literature as a good practice for homeless services (7) (48), outcomes on non-residential homeless fathers has not been researched but it has yielded positive results in low income fathers (7).
- ▶ The Fathers and Sons Programme in the United States has also yielded positive results and its among few programmes to be developed with a solid theory of change and outcome evaluation process. The programme caters for non-residential fathers; however, it is not specific to fathers in homelessness (60).
- ▶ Dad’s House was founded in 2008 in the UK, and was the first organisation in Europe to offer temporary accommodation to single dads. Their services include supports to help fathers maintain a healthy relationship with their children (61).
- ▶ The Non-Custodial Parents Housing Program from the Project for Pride in Living Inc (PPL) created in 2005. The programme seeks to stabilize fathers housing while providing parenting education, psychosocial support, coaching and peer support (54).

5 Findings from service user experiential consultation

Overview

This section of the report contains findings from nine semi-structured interviews with fathers who were previously homeless. Out of the nine respondents, eight respondents reported their reason for becoming homeless was a breakdown in their relationship with their family or with a former spouse or partner. The nine respondents also display a range of contact with their children, including fathers with overnight access to their children, fathers without access but in contact with their children, as well as those without any access or contact with their children.

This section starts with a brief outline of the demographic background of the nine respondents, followed by details about their experience of homelessness and relationship with their children. An analysis of the interviews identified five themes related to fathers' experiences of accessing homeless service provision, the impact of homelessness on themselves and their relationship with children, and how fathers felt they were treated within services and by wider society.

Service user demographics

Out of nine respondents, five respondents have three or more children and four respondents had one or two children. At the start of the interview, respondents were asked about the number and age of their children, as well as who their children were living with presently.

In all cases, respondents reported that children were living with the other parent (i.e., a former spouse or partner), or another adult. Out of nine respondents, seven fathers reported their children were aged 16 years or younger, and two fathers stated their children were adults aged between 16 to 33 years old.

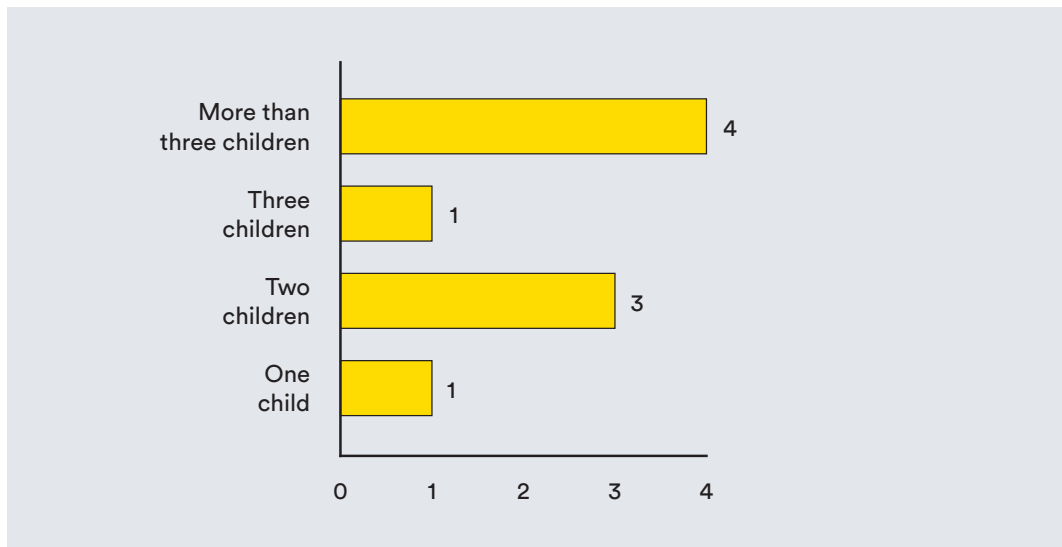


Figure 1 Number of children by participant (N=9)

All respondents were asked to explain their relationship with and access to their children. Five respondents reported they had overnight access to their children, or their children were permitted to stay overnight. Out of these five respondents, all fathers were living in different types of accommodation at present, such as private housing (in receipt of either a rent allowance or HAP), Housing First, social housing and transitional housing.

Of the remaining, two respondents did not have any access or relationship with their children, one respondent was in-contact with their children, but did not have permission to overnight access, and one respondent had permissions to supervised access only with their children. The figure below illustrates a breakdown of their access to children.

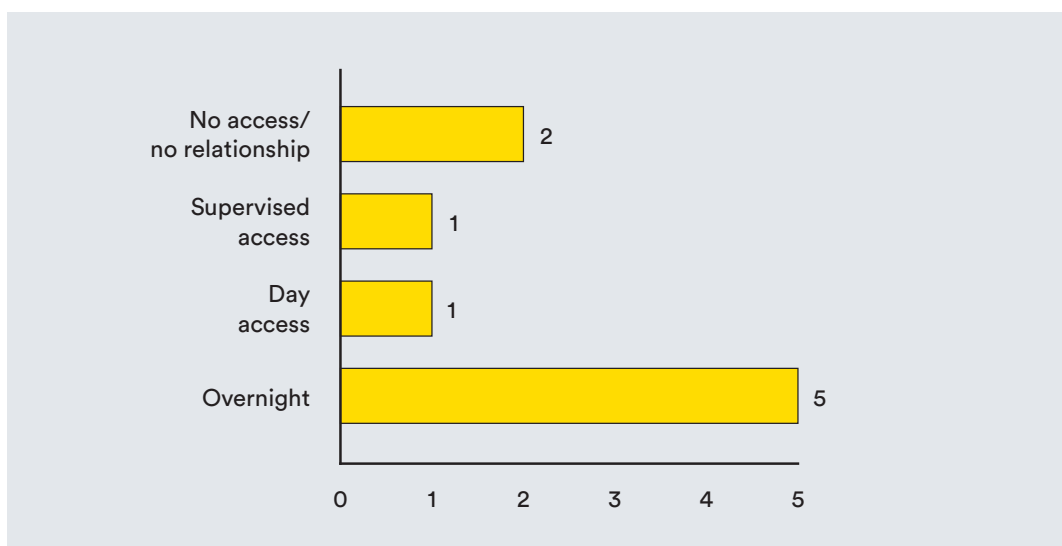


Figure 2 Type of access arrangement/contact with children (N=9)

All nine respondents were asked to provide information on their experience of homelessness and the period(s) of their life when this occurred. When asked to explain the circumstances that initially led them to becoming homeless, eight of nine respondents reported a breakdown in their relationship with their family or a relationship with a former spouse or partner as the primary reason for becoming homeless. One respondent reported that their substance use was the reason for becoming homeless. When respondents were asked the length of time spent as homeless, prior to securing their current tenancy, there were a range of responses as illustrated in the figure below.

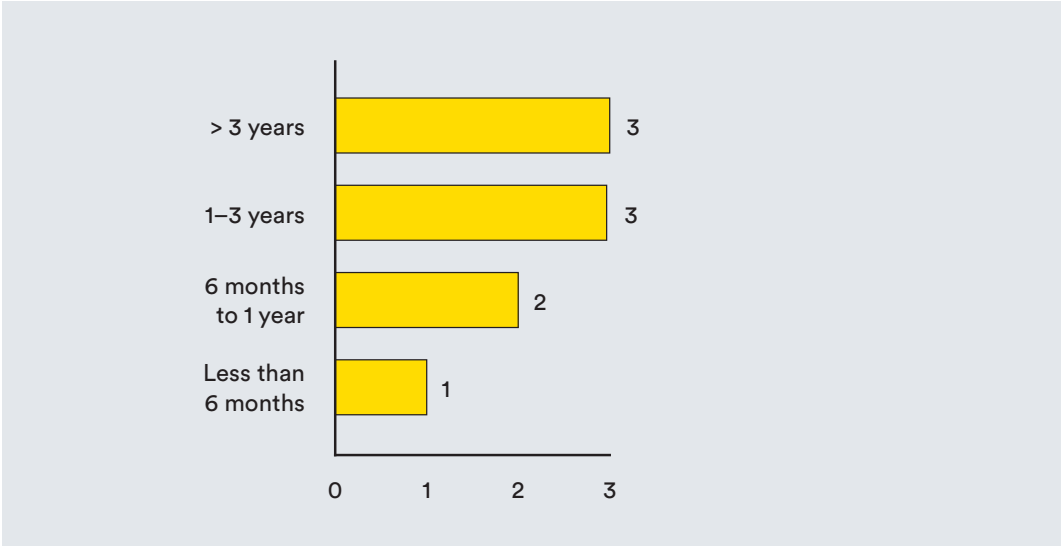


Figure 3 Length of most recent period of homelessness (N=9)

Out of nine respondents, seven fathers reported they had spent more than three years in their lifetime as homeless. The remaining two respondents stated they were made homeless for a shorter period due to a recent breakdown in their relationships. Out of nine respondents, six fathers explained how they experienced multiple episodes or periods of homelessness over their lifetime. Three respondents explained that their first experience of homelessness occurred as a young person or child when they were aged 18 years or younger. The figure below shows a breakdown on the length of time spent as homeless.

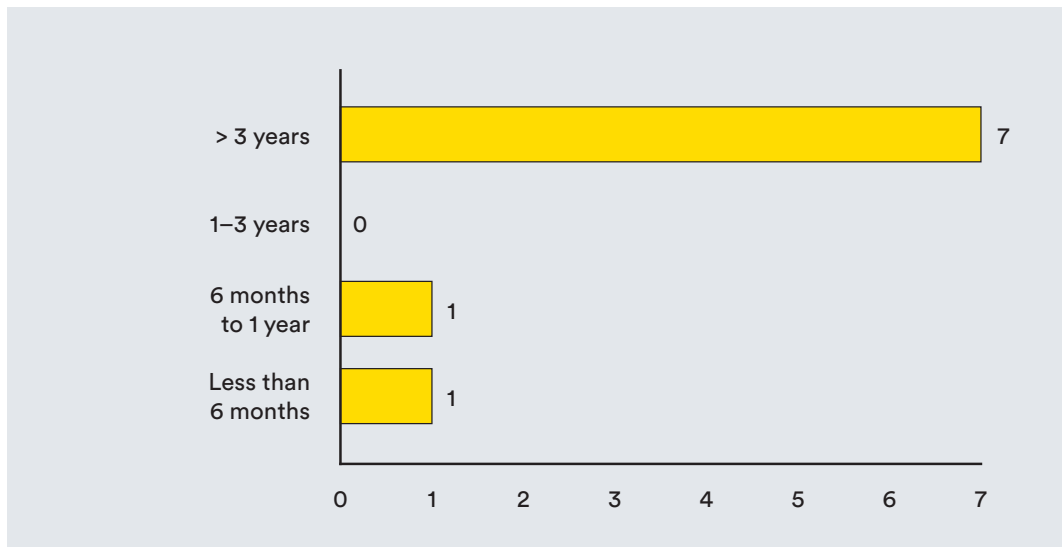


Figure 4 Total time spent homeless as an adult (N=9)

As a follow-up question, respondents were asked to clarify their current living situation or type of accommodation. Four respondents were currently living in Housing First, a supported accommodation model that offers secure accommodation alongside intensive, specialized supports. Only one respondent was living in private accommodation without being in receipt of any assistance, such as rent allowance or HAP. An overview of the types of accommodation is outlined in the figure below:

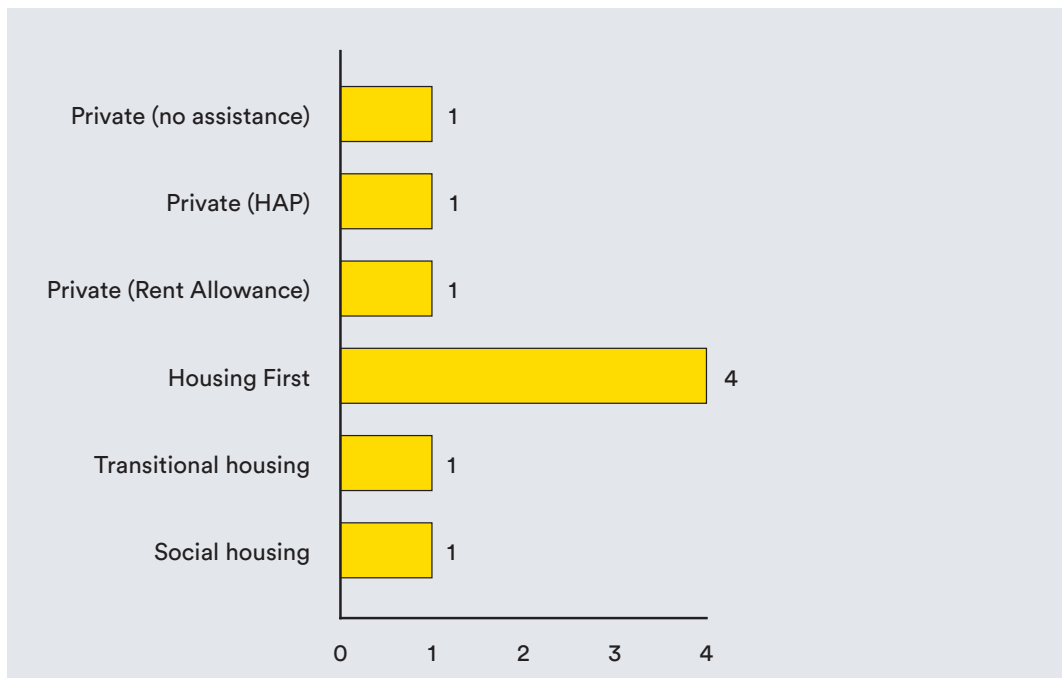


Figure 5 Type of current accommodation by participant (N=9)

When asked the length of time they had been living in their current accommodation, responses varied between four months to 14 years. Approximately, five respondents had been living in their current accommodation for 1 to 3 years.

Theme 1 – Fathers who are no longer recognised as suitable parents

An important theme emerging from interviews with fathers who were homeless was how respondents felt they were no longer considered or treated as parents while homeless. There were various ways respondents communicated this experience of loss, such as in terms of feeling ‘unworthy’ as a parent who was homeless, a lack of infrastructure or supports needed to maintain relationships with their children, and a lack of recognition as parents when living in emergency accommodation. This theme will explore and characterise four sub-themes reported by fathers who were homeless.

Fathers who feel they are ‘unworthy’ and not considered a parent

Respondents who described feeling ‘unworthy’ as a parent expressed how they were perceived and treated as a person who did fulfil their role as a parent while they were homeless and experiencing difficulties. During these periods, respondents were focused on their current situation of homelessness, their mental wellbeing, or co-occurring needs or issues experienced at the time.

“Society expects a father to be a certain way. As soon as you bring alcohol, addiction, or mental health, they were the headline tickets they saw. They thought ‘ok you’re drinking too much, a father shouldn’t do that, stop’, ‘you have mental health issues, you have depression, anxiety, therefore, you are a problem.” – Donal, a father

For some fathers, homelessness or issues with mental health or substance use made respondents feel implicitly unfit as parents, and their care was absent of any recognition of their parenthood. This lack of recognition of parenthood was also experienced in other ways:

“Social welfare would say that because the kids were housed with my ex, I couldn’t get more than a one bedroom. The max rent allowance at the time was €450. I was trying to get back into their lives and they were telling me tough sh*t basically.” – James, a father

This experience of a participant describing the difficulty with accessing accommodation suitable for shared parenting arrangements or suitable for overnight access visits was a common experience reported by fathers. Some respondents noted how fathers, who wished to arrange overnight access visits with their children, were required by social services to have a separate bedroom for the child. In several instances, respondents were ineligible for social welfare payments, like HAP and rent allowances, to afford a two-bedroom rental accommodation, because their children were living with the other parent, and fathers were not considered the primary caregiver.

A similar experience was reported by a father who was only eligible for HAP as a single person, which prevented him from securing a two-bedroom rental accommodation so his child could stay with him.

“See the HAP? Single fathers get €990 off with the HAP. For €990, you’re lucky if you get a bedroom. How are you supposed to find anything with that?.” – Robert, a father

Diminished recognition of fatherhood by authorities

Another clear example of the intersection between fatherhood and homelessness is the diminished recognition of a father’s rights and abilities to parent. A father shared his difficult experience applying for social housing from a local authority and how he was not eligible for suitable accommodation, because custody of his child was not recognised:

“I had to go over to the city council and talk to them, and constantly explain my situation, ‘like you do understand I have a daughter, I’m living in a hostel’ and they’re like ‘things might change, you might not need a place, the mother might come back’. I said that’s none of your business, she’s always been in my life, she doesn’t want to come back to her mother.” – Michael, a father

Later, the respondent explained how the other parent was absent from their lives due to ongoing substance use, and their daughter was with another family member while he attempted to secure suitable social housing. Even though the respondent was the legal guardian and the only parent presently available to provide care, the father faced significant difficulties in being recognized as a parent.

Another respondent noted: “There should be built in programmes to homeless services especially for fathers because we don’t have support when it comes to law, social welfare, housing.” – John, a father.

This highlights how fathers who are homeless experience a range of challenges with accessing and navigating social services, such as in areas of legal aid, social welfare, and housing. Together, this shows how fathers who are homeless are not consistently recognized and encounter barriers, that may complicate their ability to navigate from emergency or temporary accommodation to secure accommodation.

Lack of supports and space to maintain relationship with children

Some fathers reported limited supports available to facilitate access or maintain relationships with their children. This is best illustrated by the following quote:

“If it was sunny, we could go to the park but if it was raining where could I go? The only option I had was a social worker’s office, but they would be looking at you.” – James, a father

Some fathers with their own-door accommodation had contact with their children or were permitted to overnight access. However, fathers who are living in temporary accommodation or hostels did not have this option. Instead, they were forced to seek out alternative options and ways of maintaining a relationship with their children, as described in the testimonial above.

Another way many fathers attempt to maintain relationships with their children is relying on family members or a former spouse/partner to facilitate contact with their children. Out of the nine respondents, eight reported relying on their family members or ex-partner to facilitate access.

“He has a great relationship with my sister and my mother. If I didn’t have that space there, [not seeing my child] would have killed me.” – John, a father

“You can’t bring them to the hostel. I used to be able to bring them to town with my brother. Now they’re in a place where there’s a private company doing supervision.” – Kevin, a father

From these experiences, it shows a lack of supports for fathers who are homeless to facilitate contact or help maintain ongoing relationships with their children. Some examples of supports may include social service supervisions, community-based facilitated or contact centres as spaces where fathers can interact with their children in a suitable yet informal setting.

Lack of recognition of fatherhood in homeless services

Another experience reported by fathers who are homeless was a lack of recognition of their ‘fatherhood’ or need for parenting supports while accessing homeless services. Many respondents reported this had a significant impact on them, as they felt their role as a father was never considered or overlooked. In interviews, a consistent finding was the lack of services and/or supports offered in relation to their parenting. Out of nine respondents, only one father reported that they were asked about parenting supports while accessing homeless services and how this support was offered by an addiction service, rather than a homeless service. The following quotes illustrate this experience:

“I’ve never had support in the hostels ... I haven’t had bad experiences; I just haven’t been approached and asked if I need anything [in relation to parenting]. No one ever came to me.” – John, a father

“I had no support or help from no one. No one told me where to go.” – Donal, a father

Some fathers reported they would have likely been provided with parenting supports if it had been requested, however, they felt they were alone in finding these supports or left to find a suitable support on their own. As one participant stated:

“I did a parenting class. I saw the sign myself and signed myself up for it. No one asked me about it.” – Darren, a father

Also, some respondents reported difficulties with accepting they needed or required parenting supports. This is best described by the following quote:

“They knew I had a relationship with the kids. The support has always been there, but I never took it up because I felt I didn’t need to, I felt I could do it all myself and like I had something to prove.” – Robert, a father

These testimonials show there is a need for homeless services to be more proactive in how parenting supports are promoted for fathers within services, how parenting supports are offered to fathers, as well as how parenting supports are discussed with clients as part of individual support or care planning. The same respondent also highlighted how eventually discussing parenting supports with a service worker offered reassurance with how they attempted to maintain a relationship with their children and the benefit of being able to discuss these challenges with staff:

“I always felt much better coming out of there after speaking. The weight off your shoulders being able to say it. I thought they’d be like ‘Jesus this is the worst person in the world’, but it’s not like that. And you don’t know until you’re in there. Just the general advice. Just being able to talk, and get reassurance, knowing whether it’s ok or not. To have the backup to know whether I’m doing things right.” – Robert, a father

This testimonial shows there are benefits to fathers who are homeless when service workers and case managers proactively discuss parenting and parenting supports, as well as where there may be opportunity to provide needed supports for fathers who are living in homeless services.

Theme 2 – Separation from children is a source of trauma and demotivation

An important theme from the analysis was the negative consequences and trauma experienced by fathers who were separated from their children. Respondents described how separation from their children had impacted them in several ways, including intense feelings of guilt or shame, feelings of distress and suicidal ideation, a loss of self-confidence and control.

Feeling demoralised and the impact on mental health

In interviews, several fathers described feeling powerless or demoralised because of the separation from their children. This is best described by the following quote:

**“[It was] devastating. I felt like a criminal even though I did nothing wrong. I had no record, but it was devastating to me. It takes away your demeanor, your character, you feel like a prisoner. It takes away our soul.”
– Darren, a father**

Another experience reported by fathers was how being separated from their children led to feelings of guilt or shame:

“The biggest thing was the shame, and the impact was that I was suicidal, depressed. I turned to drink. I sought escapism. It was escaping the reality that I felt I had caused.” – Donal, a father

This quote shows how these feelings of shame and overwhelm resulted in feelings of distress and thoughts of suicidal ideation. As shown, these feelings served as a catalyst for the respondent to begin drinking alcohol as a form of escape.

Loss of confidence and sense of identity as a father

Another theme reported by fathers was a loss of confidence in their ability to parent, as a result of their loss of independence and reliance on homeless services or social supports. As one participant noted:

“There was a lack of confidence because the capability to be independent was taken away. So not being independent, not being able to provide, not having a job, it all ended up with me feeling like I wasn’t confident.” – Michael, a father

For some respondents, they experienced a lost identity as fathers who provide for their families because they no longer had family accommodations, lost their financial means or employment, or felt less useful to their children. Another respondent elaborated on this experience by stating:

“I felt useless because I wasn’t there. I would have loved to be there all the time. I blamed everything on myself. I don’t know why but I did. I was putting myself down all the time and that affected my confidence as a dad, really badly.” – Kevin, a father

Conversely, one father had explained how their confidence had gradually improved after they had reconnected with their child and after securing stable accommodation:

“As the years have gone on, I’ve become far more confident in myself and my ability to deal with them whenever I’m given the opportunity.” – Donal, a father

In this instance, the respondent’s desire to reconnect with their child was a motivating factor in exiting homeless services and finding stable accommodation, so they might have opportunities to parent or arrange overnight visits. This shows that supporting fathers who are homeless to maintain contact and relationships with their children, or supporting fathers to continue in their parental role while they are homeless, may serve as motivation towards finding stable accommodation.

Separation as an consequence for drug and/or alcohol use and recovery

Another theme was that fathers reported how separation from their children had consequences on their recovery from past drug use or left them feeling defeated and demotivated about maintaining abstinence. This experience was described by a participant:

“I definitely used more drugs. The services [housing authority] wouldn’t help me. I felt deflated, there’s no point, I can’t have my kids live with me so why should I bother. They suffered a lot from seeing that as well.” – James, a father

Here, the participant explained how they had no reason to maintain their recovery if they could not see their children or be a father, which led to a relapse in their drug use. This cycle of shame, feeling overwhelmed, and engaging in drug and/or alcohol use is best summarized by the following quote:

“It was horrible. It was the end of the world. I started drinking and then getting into a depression. I was like no one cares so why should I? I still had to work for the hostel and for the drink, but that was my mindset. Going to work, getting drunk, going to sleep. As far as I was concerned no one loves you. That’s the way I thought.” – Robert, a father

Theme 3 –

Gender expectations impact a father’s ability to be in their children’s lives

Another key theme reported by fathers who are homeless was the impact of gender expectations of fatherhood. Consistently, respondents reported significant pressure, both internally and from others, to perform their role as fathers in a societally acceptable way, and how this pressure was exacerbated by their homelessness. Here, a respondent described feeling embarrassed because of the contrast between living in a homeless shelter and the expectations of being a father. As this participant stated:

“I was embarrassed to be this societal failure. Because at this stage they had their own home and compared to that I was in a homeless shelter, and I was embarrassed. My ex brought them to see me a couple of times in the shelter and I felt very ashamed. I had an awful childhood myself and having failed to become the father I was supposed to be.” – Donal, a father

Some respondents stated how expectations to be an ideal father or perform as a provider had resulted in intense feelings of shame, embarrassment, and a widening disconnect from their children’s lives, as a way of sparing their children and themselves from further embarrassment. This is best illustrated by the following quote:

“I felt like less of a man because I couldn’t provide for them. I was coming up to barriers upon barriers, I couldn’t get help., And then my children were dealing with their trauma from seeing my addiction. It was just a cycle.” – James, a father

While living in emergency or temporary accommodation, respondents described a cycle of shame and self-blame, which made it increasingly difficult to seek help or confide these feelings in another. For some respondents, when they did eventually share these feelings with another, they were met with judgement:

“I felt challenged by the support workers and keyworkers. I felt that they were telling me I should be doing better as a father, that it was my duty, my role and my responsibility. I did not feel supported in my shame, guilt, or fear.” – Donal, a father

“It’s like they want you to fail. I find it hard to believe because a government organisation shouldn’t be like that.” – James, a father

Taken collectively, these testimonials show how gendered expectations of fatherhood resulted in feelings of shame and self-blame for fathers who are homeless. Also, respondents explained how this pressure led to feelings of inadequacy or feeling they were poor role models for their children, which eventually impacted their motivation to maintain a relationship with their children or led them to keep distance from their children. Overall, these gendered expectations place a significant amount of undue stress and pressure on fathers who are homeless and served to fuel their own internal feelings of shame and guilt.

Theme 4 – Small actions by service workers have a large impact

Another theme from this analysis was the impact that service workers and staff had on fathers who were homeless. A consistent finding was how staff working in homeless services had a positive impact on the wellbeing of respondents, and how their support was integral to maintaining a relationship with their children. In interviews, several respondents took the opportunity to highlight how a single staff member had made an importance difference for them:

“A few months ago, I missed two visits because I was in addiction again, but I wouldn’t really like talking to social workers. But the keyworker I have now just kept ringing them and letting them know what was happening, and if that didn’t happen it would have made it harder to go back. Going the extra mile.”
– James, a father

“[Manager] put my name forward and I came straight here. He asked me, I was telling him I need to get out of there for my daughter. He knew I was really gone down on the low. I kind of kept talking to him and he said, “look I’ll put your name down for this housing agency” and I think it was about a month later I heard from them.” – Kevin, a father

Respondents explained how staff went out of their way to offer help and treat them with respect. Service workers were credited as integral to help respondents with getting secure accommodation and motivating them to maintain relationships with their children. In interviews, respondents gave examples of simple actions, like phone calls and referrals to services, helped fathers to feel that someone was advocating for them, showed care for their role as parents, or that they were not left alone to address these challenges. This is best illustrated by the following quotes:

“The staff there are brilliant. Never had a run in, never had an issue. They were always there when you needed them. They gave me good advice, they said if I stuck it out, I’d get housed, and I did.” – John, a father

“Early days, there were a few keyworkers and I had talked to them about my children. They always advised me on what to do next, so they gave me good direction on what to do and what to apply for.” – Darren, a father

Alternatively, some respondents mentioned surprise when they were not offered parenting supports as part of their support plans, even though they respected and expressed gratitude for the service. This theme suggests that if service workers show concern for fathers who are homeless and offer parenting supports it may have a positive difference for fathers who are living in emergency or temporary accommodation.

Theme 5 – Securing own-door accommodation has a positive impact on relationships

The most important theme from the interviews was how securing own-door accommodation had a significant, positive impact for a father's relationship with their children and towards rebuilding their connection with their children. While not all respondents were in contact presently with their children, those fathers who are in contact reported that leaving homeless services and having secure, stable accommodation for their children led them to feel more secure as fathers. One respondent described the impact of being able to provide a safe place for their children:

“Having the security and being able to go get her and go home. It’s having a home to bring her to and being able to say that’s your room. Having that, instead of going somewhere or coming up with a plan or a [bed and breakfast] or free gaff, we’re going home to our own house and our own space. She has everything she needs here.” – Robert, a father

In interviews, respondents explained how they were unable to arrange overnight visits for their children while they were accommodated in homeless services, or how their children were living with family members or a former spouse/partner. After securing own-door accommodation, respondents reported how they regained a sense of independence and ability as a parent, which helped to increase trust and connection with their children. This is best illustrated by the following quotes:

“To be able to put them all into their individual beds at night is priceless... I told them. This house is forever. They have security... It means a lot to them. It gives them that security and trust.” – James, a father

“[Our relationship has] changed in the sense that there is a kind of peace now. I don’t know how to explain that. There’s reassurance to know there’s a roof over our head, my daughter has her own room, she doesn’t have to worry about being evicted, she doesn’t have to worry about me. There are so many positives to have your own place. It’s been a dream come true.” – Michael, a father

Another participant offered more insight into how having secure accommodation led to greater contact with their child:

“She’s always on my doorstep (laughs) if the buzzer rings I know who’s ringing. She’s constantly here. Brilliant, it’s absolutely brilliant. I’m surprised she hasn’t rung already tonight (laughs). I 100% notice a difference since I got my own place. [Our bond] is stronger now. Definitely.” – Kevin, a father

Overall, there was a clear sentiment expressed by respondents that leaving emergency accommodation to secure stable, own-door accommodation led to a significant positive effect on their own wellbeing, the wellbeing of their children, and the strength of their relationship.

Summary

In summary, there are several interpersonal, social, familial, and structural factors which impacted on fathers’ experiences of being a parent when homelessness. Overall, the experience of separation had a range of effects for fathers who are homeless, such as a loss of identity as a father, feelings of shame, guilt, and self-blame, as well as feeling powerless and demoralised. Respondents also reported how homelessness had impacted their self-confidence, mental health, substance misuse or motivation to sustain recovery from past drugs and/or alcohol use.

In interviews, fathers reported how being separated from their children was a damaging and traumatic experience. This experience was routinely accompanied by feelings of shame and self-blame, and in many cases resulted in the intensification of destructive and negative coping mechanisms, such as alcoholism and substance use. The longer respondents were separated from their children, they experienced a loss of their sense of purpose, confidence in their ability to parent, and a widening disconnect from their children. This suggests that maintenance of parent-child relationships or provision of parenting supports may be a supportive and motivating factor for non-custodial fathers who are homeless.

6 Findings from Service Worker consultation

Overview

This section of the report details the findings from 15 service workers, gathered from 10 separate semi-structured interviews (this included some group/dual interviews). The purpose of these interviews was to gain a better understanding of what service workers perceive to be the primary challenges for non-residential homeless fathers, and to examine how the topic of fatherhood is treated by frontline workers and management. Due to potential issues with confidentiality, no demographic information is included in this analysis, however, the 15 participants are comprised of a range of professionals, including those working in outreach, emergency hostels, long-term hostels, social services, service management, social care, and housing projects. Participants had been working in the homeless sector for anywhere from six months to over thirty years, and over half (n=8) had been working in the sector for over ten years. Results of the thematic analysis found five broad themes related to how fathers are treated within services, the impact of being a father and homelessness, the varied background of fathers, and their role as a father.

Theme 1 – Pervasive gender assumptions underpin experiences of fathers who are homelessness

Over the course of the interviews, it became apparent that there were several aspects of gender and gender norms that were impacting on almost every aspect of fathers' experiences in homelessness. For example, service providers reported that from their experience of working with fathers in homelessness, that fathers felt an internal sense of shame around their own role as a father and felt reluctant to maintain this identity when becoming homeless. Additionally, services routinely treated fatherhood and fathers as less important than mothers in relation to parenting, and this is reflected on the service user journey, and the services offered. Because of this level of complexity, this theme is organised into two distinct, but related, sub-themes.

Homelessness damages fathers' identities and connection to fatherhood

A key theme in this report is the ways in which gendered expectations impact upon fathers, and how this relates to how fathers think about themselves and are thought about by others. To demonstrate how this manifests in the ways services think about the identity of fathers, one participant stated:

“Sometimes we see clients as men who are homeless, as opposed to fathers who are homeless. With women we can see them as mothers who are homeless.” – A service worker

In this quotation, the participant is reflecting on the different ways in which parenthood is considered in relation to homelessness. They note that oftentimes within services, a mother's role as a parent is consistently centered within her care, however, with fathers, it can be difficult to consider them as both parent and individual. This is indicative of a wider societal expectation of gender, and as with almost all findings in this research, aligns with existing literature showing that when a father transitions to becoming homeless, he is no longer considered as a viable parent. In other words, the identity of fatherhood is removed by merit of the intersection of the client's gender and lack of stable housing. Three participants took time to discuss this further, one speaking to the role of mothers, two to fathers:

“Our minds are still set on “mothers raise the children”, so if there's a family breakdown, it's the mother that keeps the children most of the time.” – A service worker

“There is a disconnect from the role of being a parent, they are a father in title, but they don't consider themselves in a parenting role. One client doesn't think he has a right to act in a parenting capacity, he acknowledges he has fathered a child, but doesn't perceive himself as having rights as a parent.” – A service worker

**“Although they’re fathers, they might not feel like they’re able to identify as fathers because they’re not giving care, they’re in homeless services.” –
A service worker**

In these quotations, participants are commenting on the specific intersection of gender, responsibility, and homelessness. For mothers, it is taken as a given that they will maintain the responsibility of caring for their children because this is what society accepts to be the norm. The other participants discuss how this norm is internalised by fathers; in that they feel they cannot continue to consider themselves as parents.

Services often do not recognise fatherhood or offer the same level of parenting support to fathers

The second, related sub-theme identified within this analysis is related to how mothers and fathers are treated differently within homeless and other support services. Overall, there was a general acknowledgement from services that mothers were provided with more parent-focused supports than fathers as standard. As one participant noted:

**“We definitely give more time to women. It just feels more obvious, more at the forefront. I’ve worked with men and women, but not a mixed service. The services that work with women, it’s more of a priority from the start.” –
A service worker**

When asked to comment on the differences in ways that mothers and fathers are treated, another participant pointed to experiences, both within child protection services, and within support services where care-planning type support is provided, that there is a presumption of a desire or drive for connection with children in relation to mothers. This presumption does not tend to be there for fathers, and so access, or support to gain access, is often not proactively offered. The participant goes on to state that for fathers, the responsibility to seek out care is placed on the fathers themselves, rather than support to do so being offered by services as standard. As the participant notes, factors such as self-esteem and confidence will impact on a father’s motivation to seek out this support, and thus they often do not pursue access or contact with their child.

The treatment of mothers and fathers within homeless services was a key theme. While most people agreed that there is not parity in how this support is provided (e.g., that often, proactive support is provided to mothers, but it is not raised with fathers), there were a variety of reasons proffered for this. Here one participant provided some context on why this is the case in their own work:

“I don’t raise it unless the client does, to avoid hurting/upsetting them further. I’m not in a counselling role, I have no power over access, I can’t offer solutions to access issues. If clients request supports they would be redirected to what we can do, I’m mindful of triggering them.” – A service worker

Here the participant describes their own reasoning as to why they do not engage with fathers around parenting unless explicitly asked. When working in this role, the worker felt as though they were limited in the amount of support they could provide, and what types of services they could refer them to. Because of these limitations, the worker has decided to only address parental support if it is mentioned by the father to avoid undue stress. However, even in cases where services attempt to offer support evenly, there is a discrepancy in how often it is mentioned by mothers and fathers:

“I wouldn’t ask women more frequently; mothers bring it up more frequently. I would always ask the fathers, particularly those who want access, but it happens more frequently with women.” – A service worker

While this worker does try to include parental support in their standard practice with fathers, they note that this materialises more frequently with mothers. This suggests that even when there is equal treatment, and comparable supports available, there are still difficulties for fathers in asking for, and accepting this support. As noted by one participant:

“I think that the support that fathers need here is personal support around managing the shame, frustration, to help them understand that being in this situation does not say anything about their ability to be a good and loving father. So, services need to empower them.” – A service worker

Here, the worker is describing how the experience of being homeless as a father is often accompanied by feelings of shame and doubt in themselves as a parent. This, in turn, impacts on their own belief in themselves to act in that parental role, and to accept help when it is needed. This highlights that even in cases where comparable support is provided to mothers and fathers, there are individual differences in how homelessness is experienced as a parent between them.

Another reason participants noted parental support is not provided or discussed with fathers is because there are other, more pressing issues that need to be addressed.

“It’s not really a priority or a massive thing, unless they bring it up. It can be a painful subject for a lot of dads. And then there are things like worrying about where you’re going to sleep, or mental health or addiction, or even just anxiety and self – esteem.” – A service worker

Here, the participant describes how the issue of parenthood is often less important in the immediate, when compared to factors such as addiction or accommodation. As the participant notes, the topic of parenthood itself can be distressing. Here the participant is insinuating that in some cases, the introduction of parenting to conversations around care may sometimes be harmful when there are several other complex needs. As noted by another participant:

“When we identify key goals, it doesn’t often come up. Men’s support needs are often substance use, tenancy, mental health, legal issues, court. Parenting rarely comes in, a trigger event can cause it to come up, but it’s not a regular topic.” – A service worker

While parenting may sometimes come up as an issue that the father would like to address, this participant again reiterates the notion that often this must be placed within a wider context. Because many fathers engaging with homelessness are dealing with urgent issues such as substance use, mental health difficulties, or legal trouble, parenting rarely comes up in their role unless it is related to one of these factors, and that work with fathers is often *“more focused on practical problems and housing”*.

These findings suggest that fathers are not offered an equal amount of support in relation to mothers, and when they are, these are not meeting the individual needs. It is indicative of a general bias in society and services in that the father is seen as less important, or more specifically, less valuable to the child. While it is certainly not a conscious action taken by services or individual workers, the discrepancies in the support provided indicate a need for further exploration of this issue within services. Furthermore, by placing the onus of pursuing parenthood on fathers rather than proactively engaging with it, services may be inadvertently reinforcing feelings fathers have of not being eligible, worthy, or capable of parenting. It is critical to note that where participants provided the rationale that there are other more pressing issues, no factor mentioned was gender specific or exclusive to fathers. Each of the items listed (addiction, mental health, legal issues, housing etc.) are routinely faced by women experiencing homelessness. There is significant potential for services to examine their approach, and to draw on good practice from literature in improving the support they provide to fathers.

Theme 2 – Separation from children is a traumatic experience

The second theme identified in this analysis describes how fathers experience of homelessness is traumatic, and that separation from their children is another experience of trauma for them. Over the course of the interviews, several respondents spoke about the intersection of these different traumas:

“The theme throughout their experience is the trauma experienced by the dads. It is ongoing, and it is often the elephant in the room. It’s not often spoken about, and it’s difficult to get support in relation to it. Traumatic events such as the end of relationship, losing home, ongoing trauma of not seeing or knowing kids.” – A service worker

“Being in a homeless service is a trauma, and not seeing your kids is a trauma.” – A service worker

“Often, people would have some kind of hardship, but the difference is the extra trauma of not seeing the kids. Some might only talk about it periodically but would always think about it. Even the ones who don’t say anything, they feel the same. It’s a massive thing for them.” – A service worker

While it is widely recognised that the experience of becoming homeless is a source of trauma, oftentimes the trauma of separation from children is overlooked in relation to people who are homeless. These respondents describe it as the *“elephant in the room”*, and something that is rarely spoken about but often thought about. When discussing the impact of this trauma on the wellbeing of fathers, respondents consistently reported it served as a demotivating factor:

“The big impact is basically self-destructive behaviour, self-sabotage. Subduing their emotions with alcohol and drugs. They know they shouldn’t do it, but what reason is there to look after themselves? It’s happening to someone I know now, he doesn’t see the point because he can’t see his kids. The fact he can’t see the kids is leading to the self-medicating, the bad mental health, the other stuff – the root thing is not being able to see his kids.” – A service worker

“For people in addiction, so if the reason you decided to get sober, and then you’re refused, I see men who are like “what is this for”. It’s really a huge impact on mental health. There’s no reason why men shouldn’t have equal access to their children.” – A service worker

Consistently, and in line with previous literature, workers reported that the ability or inability to see their children was a critical factor in their own wellbeing, care and recovery. Because the act of separation from their children is experienced as a deep trauma, being unable to see their children or be reunited with them can lead many fathers into feeling as though there is no motivation to pursue recovery. As the participant mentioned, when the fathers feel as though there is no justifiable reason for this separation, they may lose their sense of purpose and value in themselves.

Theme 3 – A critical lack of suitable housing options for non-residential fathers

The next theme identified in this analysis relates to the critical lack of child-appropriate housing and accommodation options for fathers when exiting homelessness. The most pressing issue described by participants in relation to this theme, was the lack of recognition of fathers' status as parents within statutory and non-statutory housing supports:

“The biggest challenge is the housing sector. There needs to be recognition at all levels of housing that a single man is a single household, and that they would be recognised without question that he is able to access housing to facilitate that relationship. I believe that any housing provider that does not do that is depriving fathers and children of this.” – A service worker

Here, the participant states that one of the fundamental difficulties currently, is how a non-residential father will almost always be considered as a single applicant in all types of housing support. One of the most significant challenges that arises because of this, is that if a father is treated as a single applicant within these systems, he will not be entitled to a property with more than one-bedroom. This immediately removes an ability for a father to seek out an overnight access order, and greatly impacts upon the time he may be able to spend with his children. As the participant states, it is “depriving fathers and children”. This was expanded upon by another participant, who stated:

“They would have an issue with the council in getting a two bedroom to have access. Anybody that comes in through services has a housing needs assessment. So, they're coming in as a single applicant. They're kind of looking at them as a single person, not a person who has a child.” – A service worker

It is important to note, though, that these difficulties extend beyond social housing and other housing agencies.

“We also support people renting privately. It's a horrible system to navigate. That's fairly brutal. There are families being squashed into two beds. There's nowhere to play, they might get a year or two out of it. For the people I'm working with, it's not so much an issue for long term social housing, but massively for private rental.” – A service worker

Here, the participant is describing how their experience in supporting fathers who have moved into private rented accommodation. In addition to the challenges faced in finding accommodation that is affordable, there is a significant lack of child-friendly homes in general. This results in a certain level of instability, in that through the private rented market, fathers and families need to consistently search for suitable accommodation for their own changing needs. Overall, these findings indicate that there are significant structural barriers facing families, and in particular fathers, in finding suitable accommodation to support them to live, or have visitation with their children.

Theme 4 – Shame and stigma are prevalent among fathers experiencing homelessness

The fourth theme identified in this analysis, is the powerful impact of shame and stigma on the wellbeing of fathers experiencing homelessness as perceived by service providers. This happens through a combination of self-stigma of homelessness, but also on how fathers felt they would be perceived by those around them. For instance, one participant commented on how this has become present in their own work over the past number of years.

“I’ve become very aware of how this issue affects fathers and children. Fella in yesterday in tears. He has four children, he can’t bring them here, the sense of shame.” – A service worker

Here, the participant is describing an experience with a current client within their service. In this situation, the worker was supporting the client through their own emotional difficulties related to being unable to see their children. While the client had access, he felt an intense amount of shame around his children seeing the homeless accommodation he is staying in. As the participant goes on to say about this client:

“There’s shame, and their confidence takes a knock. He felt he was letting his children down, and his confidence took a battering.” – A service worker

The impact of this shame and stigma around fatherhood and homelessness was consistently reported. In this intersection, there were very specific ways in which fathers internalized this shame and stigma. For instance, while many people experiencing homelessness may question their self-worth, for fathers this can often manifest in ways that are specific to their identity and capacity to advocate for themselves. As one participant noted:

“It feeds into already existing stigma about being in homeless services and label of being homelessness, a massive barrier for some dads trying to go about exerting the rights that are there for them. It feeds into the monster of ‘I’m homeless, I’m worthless, why would anyone listen to me, who’s going to allow me to see my kids if I’m on the streets or in emergency accommodation.” – A service worker

Here, the participant describes what are typical ways people perceive stigma around homelessness, feeling worthless or without value, however, with fathers, these are oriented towards their children. While there are common themes of worth and value, the focus is placed on the consequence of this worth, and how this will impact on their relationship with their children. Overall, this stigma and shame is pervasive within homelessness in general but impacts fathers in very specific ways. It impacts on confidence, self-efficacy, and fathers overall feeling of worth in their role.

Theme 5 – Many fathers are among hidden homeless population without support

The final theme identified in this analysis, is related to how fathers who are homeless often arrive in homelessness after family breakdown, and those known to services may only be a small minority of those who need support. Here workers describe pathways into homelessness for fathers they have worked with:

**“Relationship breakdown can be the cause, they have typically accessed emergency accommodation, then hostel/short term accommodation.” –
A service worker**

“[They’re] mostly coming from their family home with partner, or family home of parents.” – A service worker

In these cases, the incident which led to the father becoming homeless was a need to leave the family home. Typically, these fathers would then engage with emergency accommodation services, before being placed in a longer-term unit. In addition to this, participants working in rural areas took time to note the difference in clients seen in comparison to towns:

**“The number [of fathers] is lower in the city. In rural areas number is higher.” –
A service worker**

“In the more rural area – there are younger clients with less homelessness experience, very few rough sleepers. There are no hostels in the rural area, so homeless clients are allocated to B&Bs, some are couch surfing, or in hospital.” – A service worker

As these service workers note, from their own experience, they engaged with a higher proportion of fathers in rural areas and noted that with increased visibility of housing difficulties that may arise from being in a rural area where more people know what is going on, comes increased stigma. In considering the impact of this, one participant noted:

**“It is challenging in the rural area to find people suitable for Housing First... There may be as many or more [eligible fathers] in the rural area than the town, but the local authority struggles to identify them. With rural homelessness, there’s a higher level of stigma than in cities, there’s a tendency to hide homelessness and social problems. Rural rough sleeping is hidden.” –
A service worker**

Here, this participant discusses a significant challenge faced by fathers from rural areas. As there are limited homeless services available, after being made homeless, many fathers may spend some time staying with friends or family as there is no other option available. Furthermore, due to the high levels of stigma, fathers who are forced to sleep rough are often unnoticed, as they will choose to conceal their circumstances. In turn, this makes it more difficult for a father to access support through housing agencies, as there is no record of the entry or tenure of homelessness, and no service to advocate for them. Taken together, a consistent sentiment expressed by the workers was that homeless fathers are not a homogenous group, may remain out of sight of services for longer due to the stigma, and services may need specific and targeted outreach strategies to engage this group.

7 Synthesis of consultation findings

Finding 1 – Homelessness damages the identity, self-efficacy, and self-confidence of fathers

One of the most consistent findings across the interviews, which is echoed by the literature, was the impact of homelessness on a father's own identity as a parent, and their overall sense of self-efficacy as fathers, as well as their sense of confidence as fathers. As demonstrated in the service user interviews, respondents routinely reported feeling that these feelings of ineffectiveness and low self-confidence are endemic within themselves and were reinforced by the way they were treated by services and structures, as fathers. In addition to their own sense of shame and confidence in their ability to parent, fathers felt as though they were not seen as a father anymore by service providers. This was reflected in the service staff interviews, in which there was a sense that workers “see *clients as men who are homeless, as opposed to fathers who are homeless*.” Within the literature these sentiments were reflected and demonstrate that this diminishment of identity can have detrimental impacts on a father's ability to exit homelessness and impacts all aspects of their future care. Overall, the experience of becoming homeless serves to alienate a father from their role as a parent within themselves and wider society.

Finding 2 – Homelessness combined with separation from children creates complex traumatic experiences for fathers

The second key finding of the research describes how becoming homeless *as a parent* is experienced as a distinct form of complex trauma, which is defined as exposure to multiple traumatic events, often over months and years. While it is well accepted that becoming homeless and being separated from your child are both traumatic experiences, for fathers who become homeless, these traumas are interconnected. During the interviews, fathers would describe this experience as being like “*the end of the world*”, and described how it impacted their mental health and recovery.

For many, this served as a demotivating factor in attaining stability, in that being separated from their children left them feeling as though there was “*no point*” in recovery. This sentiment was reiterated by the service workers, who had observed this happening with their own clients. They describe the weight of this trauma on the fathers in how it reinforced self-destructive behaviours, reduced their ability to engage in recovery, and how it often goes without recognition. As one worker stated, trauma is embedded within their whole journey through homelessness, and it is the “elephant in the room”. Again, findings from the literature review are highly consistent with the interviews. Research in this area has consistently indicated that the experience of separation from children and homelessness is highly traumatic, and often results in a perpetuating cycle of inability to exit homelessness.

Finding 3 – Homeless services may overlook fatherhood

Another finding from this synthesis is how fatherhood is supported within homeless services. It is evidence from interviews with both fathers who were homeless and service workers that there are gaps in terms of how fatherhood is raised, discussed, and promoted in terms of service provision processes. Fathers reported they had not been asked about parenting supports as part of both the care planning process and during intake assessments. A few fathers reported they managed to access supports, but they had sought out parenting supports themselves or they were supported by services other than homeless services. These findings suggest there is an absence of formal supports for fathers who are accessing emergency or temporary accommodation.

Another finding was that, in absence of these formal supports, many fathers received informal support from staff members and this support had a significant positive impact on their own capacity and confidence to parent. Service workers noted this discrepancy by stating that, in general, services find it easier to conceptualise a woman who is homeless as a “mother” compared to a man who is homeless as a “father”.

Service workers also reported that parenting supports for mothers were embedded from the point of intake, and, while there may be substantial barriers to achieving this, it is assumed mothers will want to seek access, contact, and/or apply for guardianship of their children. This was in contrast to experiences reported by service staff working with fathers, where it was reflected that staff did not assume fathers were necessarily interested in accessing parenting support. In interviews, staff reflected that fathers were more responsible for raising parenting supports as a priority, or to identify this need in an intake assessment or one-to-one sessions with their worker. These expectations, when compounded with high levels of shame, guilt, a lack of confidence, low motivation and a lack of self-efficacy can result in fathers not seeking to connect with their children while homeless. Again, these findings are aligned with previous literature detailing gendered differences in how parenting is conceptualised and supported, and significant internal and external barriers for fathers who may wish to reignite, sustain or improve relationships with their children while homeless.

Finding 4 – A lack of practical supports needed to foster relationships between children and non-residential fathers who are homeless

The fourth key finding of this synthesis is related to the lack of practical structural supports and spaces for fathers to maintain positive relationships with their children after they enter homelessness. For many fathers, a lack of dedicated, child-friendly spaces to see their children created significant barriers in maintaining relationships with their children. A lack of child-friendly spaces meant fathers depended on their relationships with the other parent or with their own family in order to see their children.

In interviews, fathers expressed how ‘own-door accommodation’ would be a more suitable space for fathers to see their children compared to shared unit accommodation. ‘Own-door accommodation’ is considered self-contained emergency accommodation where an individual has control or autonomy over the space, is free to come and go as they please, and where they do not have to share accommodation with other adults.

Literature shows a connection between fathers who are empowered to strengthen their position as a father or improve their level of security and stability as parent, with fathers who have strengthened their relationship with children. Overall, it suggests that ‘own-door accommodation’ may be crucial in fostering a positive relationship between fathers and children. In interviews, fathers expressed how access to their children resulted in improvements to their wellbeing, such as feelings of self-confidence, a sense of happiness, self-belief as a parent, and a sense of security or peace of mind. Also, it was noted that children were happier, more stable, and their relationship with fathers had improved.

In instances where fathers were not able to arrange access visits with their children (either supervised or unsupervised), it was reported that a lack of dedicated, child-friendly spaces and formal supports were a negative impact on a father’s ability to maintain contact with their children, because they did not have appropriate housing or spaces for see their children.

Finding 5 – Fathers encounter various barriers with accessing suitable, family-friendly housing

The final key finding of this report is the overwhelming difficulty faced by fathers who are homeless in securing suitable and family friendly housing. Almost all respondents in each set of interviews reported difficulty faced by fathers in accessing suitable social housing and/or housing supports. In most cases, the children were living with their other parent, and so these authorities did not recognise their need for accommodation that could house their children. Two respondents had experiences where they were refused the right to apply for housing as a family with their child due to the child living in residential care, or with the extended family. This issue extended beyond housing supports and into the private market, where it was noted by service users and staff that the housing crisis has made it unfeasible for a father to secure own-door, non-shared accommodation by himself. This is particularly the case where the father is assessed as having only a housing need for himself as he is then only eligible for a Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) for a single person, making units with more than one bedroom entirely unaffordable.

In essence, this results in fathers being unable to secure any type of suitable accommodation, unless it is provided at the discretion of the authorities, or through an initiative such as Housing First. As noted in the literature review, fatherhood is highly sensitive to shifts in economic factors, and so, the current economic and housing crisis has placed additional strain on these relationships.

8 Recommendations

This section contains a series of recommendations, which were co-developed by Focus Ireland and Quality Matters. All recommendations were based on findings from data gathered from fathers who are homeless and service workers, as well as findings from the literature review.

After a preliminary set of recommendations were co-developed, an additional series of phone interviews were undertaken with seven senior representatives from various organisations and agencies in Ireland's homelessness sector who shared guidance and suggestions on further developing these recommendations.

The six recommendations are organised into two sections:

- › **Service-related recommendations** – These recommendations refer to actions and changes in service provision, which can be taken into account by individual NGOs or by regional homeless authorities working with NGOs to improve supports for non-custodial parents who are accessing emergency accommodation;
- › **Sector-related recommendations** – Such recommendations refer to system changes and wider practices that may be best progressed through collaboration between local authorities, NGOs, relevant agencies and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Service level recommendations

Recommendation 1 – Improve the identification of non-custodial parents who are homeless in the assessment of support needs

It is recommended the needs assessment undertaken by homeless service providers at the time of intake include questions to help identify all adults who may be non-custodial parents and to recognise any specific support needs that may arise from this.

A gender-neutral approach should be adopted in the needs assessment used by homeless service providers at the point of intake, with the question of non-custodial children being raised with all single adults. Where the homeless person identifies non-custodial children as a relevant support need while in homelessness or as part of the route out of homelessness this should be reflected in the support plan and inform the on-going case management/key worker support.

It is further recommend that questions be included to further clarify if a homeless parent with non-custodial relationships are entitled or have been granted court-ordered permission to accommodate their children on non-custodial visits, in such instances where a court has made it mandatory for an individual to secure appropriate living conditions.

Where appropriate, the key worker should ensure any additional housing need related to their children is reflected in the local authority Housing Needs Assessment (see Recommendation 6 for further detail).

Recommendation 2 – Develop a resource on local and national family and parenting support services to facilitate improved referral for non-custodial parents who are homeless

It is recommended each regional housing authority compile a list of local and national family support services and parenting support services that offer professional support to men and women who are homeless and with non-custodial relationships with their children. It is recommended these resources be provided to homeless service providers and case managers.

To support service workers and case managers who provide assistance to non-custodial parents who are homeless and who are experiencing parenting and/or family-related issues, it is recommended research be undertaken to develop a comprehensive list of family support and parenting support services in each regional housing authority. It is recommended this resource be developed by each regional housing authority, or that an appropriate organisation or agency is commissioned to develop this resource.

For case workers, this will offer a practical, useful resource to help refer clients to service providers who can address specific parenting goals and family-related needs and issues, as well as ensuring such service providers are recorded on an individual support plan as the main provider responding to these needs. Also, this will help case workers with identifying nearby services, in such instances where a client may not be able to travel or access services outside of their local vicinity.

Recommendation 3 – Ensure non-custodial parents who are granted supervised access visits with children are provided with suitable spaces for their family

It is recommended each local authority should undertake an audit with homeless service providers in its locality to ensure appropriate and suitable spaces for children are available for non-custodial parents to use during supervised access visits with their children.

When homeless service users are identified as having non-custodial relationships with their children, or when they are seeking permission for supervised access visits to their parents, it is integral that case managers work to identify a suitable space for supervised access to take place. In many instances, it is unlikely that emergency accommodation is appropriate or equipped with a suitable space for family or children to visit.

It is recommended each local authority area ensures that at least one homeless service is available in their area with an appropriate space, either within the premises or nearby, where access visits with children can be held. Local authorities should ensure that people who are homeless who have access visits to non-custodial children are accommodated in the emergency accommodation with such facilities.

Other key considerations to facilitate access visits may include:

- › Case manager/key workers helping non-custodial parents with preparing for access visits
- › Services furnishing a space appropriately for young children or providing activities and toys for visits
- › Offering in-person staff supports for access visits, in cases where a non-custodial parent feels that support is needed
- › Case manager/key workers offering a debriefing session to offer emotional supports after access visits
- › Services working in-partnership with Tusla – The Child and Family Agency, where social worker supervision for access visits is court mandated

Statutory Regional Homeless Action Plans should ensure that sufficient accessible services are provided in the region. Where non-custodial parents in rural and remote areas are experiencing homelessness, the Regional Homeless Action Plan should set out how appropriate services are to be accessed.

Sector level recommendations

Recommendation 4 – Develop service training for case managers and frontline workers on responding to parenting and family-related issues for non-custodial parents and people who are homeless

It is recommended Focus Ireland in-partnership with other homeless service providers and partner agencies develop and implement a training programme for case managers and frontline workers on responding to the family-related issues experienced by both non-custodial parents and children of parents who are homeless.

While it is recognised some case managers have necessary skills with responding to the needs and issues experienced by non-custodial parents, it is recommended a specific training module on parenting and family-related experiences of people who are homeless be developed. It is suggested that this training be developed and offered as part of the normal continual professional development (CPD) available to case managers and frontline workers.

This training may explore issues like, but not limited to:

- Trauma and trauma informed practice for supporting homeless service users while increasing their self-compassion by understanding the impacts of trauma, homelessness, and separation from children.
- Challenging gender biases that reinforce ideas that parenting is less important for fathers (as compared to mothers) or traditional gender-based assumptions of fathers being ‘providers’ or ‘breadwinners’ for their family.
- Exploring strengths-based approaches to providing support through the support planning process.
- Identifying evidenced-informed practices for non-clinical interventions to improve a homeless service user’s self-efficacy, self-confidence, and parenting skills.

As an additional suggestion, it is recommended Focus Ireland share this report with any third-level colleges and universities offering a social care programme in the interests that such findings may be help educators or with further developing the curricula of these programmes.

Recommendation 5 – Introduce new standards and guidelines specific to provision of housing supports and care planning of non-custodial parents and their children in the National Quality Standards Framework (NQSF)

It is recommended Dublin Region Homeless Executive work with local authorities and/or NGOs to incorporate sector-level standards and guidance for ensuring appropriate services or interventions are in-place to promote positive family relationships between non-custodial parents and their children.

The NQSF was developed by the Dublin Region Homeless Executive on behalf of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. The NQSF serves as a policy framework that aims to ensure homeless services are organised, co-ordinated and integrated and focused on moving people out of homelessness, as quickly as possible, into long-term, sustainable housing. For service providers, having an agreed NQSF helps organisations ensure they are clear about their responsibilities for delivering safe and effective services, as well as the services provided result in the prevention and/or reduction of time spent in homeless services.

At present, while the framework does note the importance of service users being supported in their relationships with families or in respect of the needs of their children, the NQSF does not include any issues or references to barriers experienced by non-custodial parents. It is recommended that the following points be considered for inclusions when the NQSF is next reviewed:

- › Explicit inclusion of guidelines for parents who are not the sole guardian/provider/custodian of the children.
- › Outline requirements for service providers to provide a suitable space for facilitating access visits with children or establish partnerships with local organisations to achieve the same.
- › A set of minimum guidelines for all intake or needs assessments and care planning that identifies benefits for addressing the needs of non-custodial parents and promoting parity of service supports for both men and women as parents.
- › In relation to housing support and care planning, explicit inclusion of non-custodial and non-residential parents' children in reference to family and other relationships.
- › A requirement for local authorities and services to measure and collect data on non-custodial parents and the status of their parenting relationship with children.

Recommendation 6 – Every local authority should ensure that the ruling of Fagan v. Dublin City Council is reflected in their scheme of lettings and housing needs assessment

It is recommended each local authority consider how the Fagan v. Dublin City Council ruling is adequately covered or been incorporated into their scheme of lettings and ensure that non-custodial parents remain eligible for social housing in respect of their need of accommodation for facilitating access visits or non-custodial relationships with children.

While Dublin City Council revised its scheme of lettings following the 2020 Fagan v. Dublin City Council ruling (which compels local authorities to recognise family structures and arrangements with segmented parental roles and responsibilities), many local authorities are yet to adequately consider how family and child support needs of non-custodial parents should be recognised to reflect the ruling. It is integral that non-custodial parents be deemed eligible to apply to local authorities as families or family units, and that accommodation requirements and supports for non-custodial parents be recognised and reflected in these.

In 2023, the County and City Management Association (CCMA) reviewed the housing assessment used by local authorities to ensure a consistent approach to assessment is used across the country, however, specific questions are still required to identify individuals who have non-custodial relationships with their children.

While any housing assessment carried out by the local authority that confirms whether a person has a non-custodial relationship with their children or if they are entitled to accommodate their children on non-custodial visits does not automatically guarantee that a person will receive accommodation based on this need, it is recommended that inclusion of these questions would aim to ensure the housing requirements for non-custodial parents are appropriately recognised by local authorities when determination of housing allocations are made. This would also help both the State and homeless service providers quantify the numbers of non-custodial parents seeking housing supports in Ireland, and the appropriate level of services required to address this need.

In practical terms, even though local authorities may consider non-custodial parents less of a priority than two-parent households or single parents households in their allocations, recording their family housing needs in the Housing Needs Assessments ensures that they are entitled to receive HAP for suitable family accommodation in the private rental sector as a route out of homelessness.

Furthermore, it is recommended that the unmet housing requirements of non-custodial parents be reflected in the Housing Agency's Summary of Social Housing Assessments, which is an annual summary provided by local authorities on households in their area that qualify for social housing support but whose social housing need is not currently being met. While this report does give figures on single parent family households there is no available information or monitoring of social housing needs for non-custodial parents. This action would be further supported by implementation of Recommendations 1 and 5 of this report.

Finally, it is recommended the Housing Act (1988) be reviewed and amended by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to include the requirement that local authority homeless services make the best interests of the child a priority, and that the roles of both parents be considered, when it is safe to do so.

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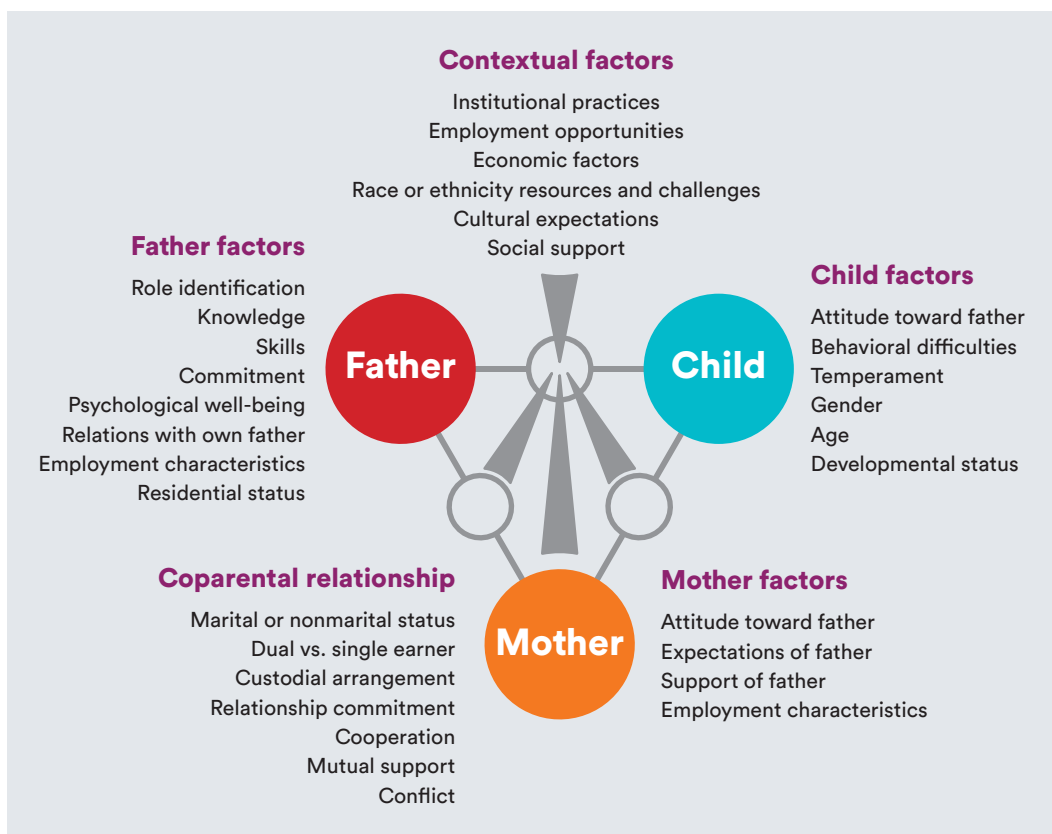
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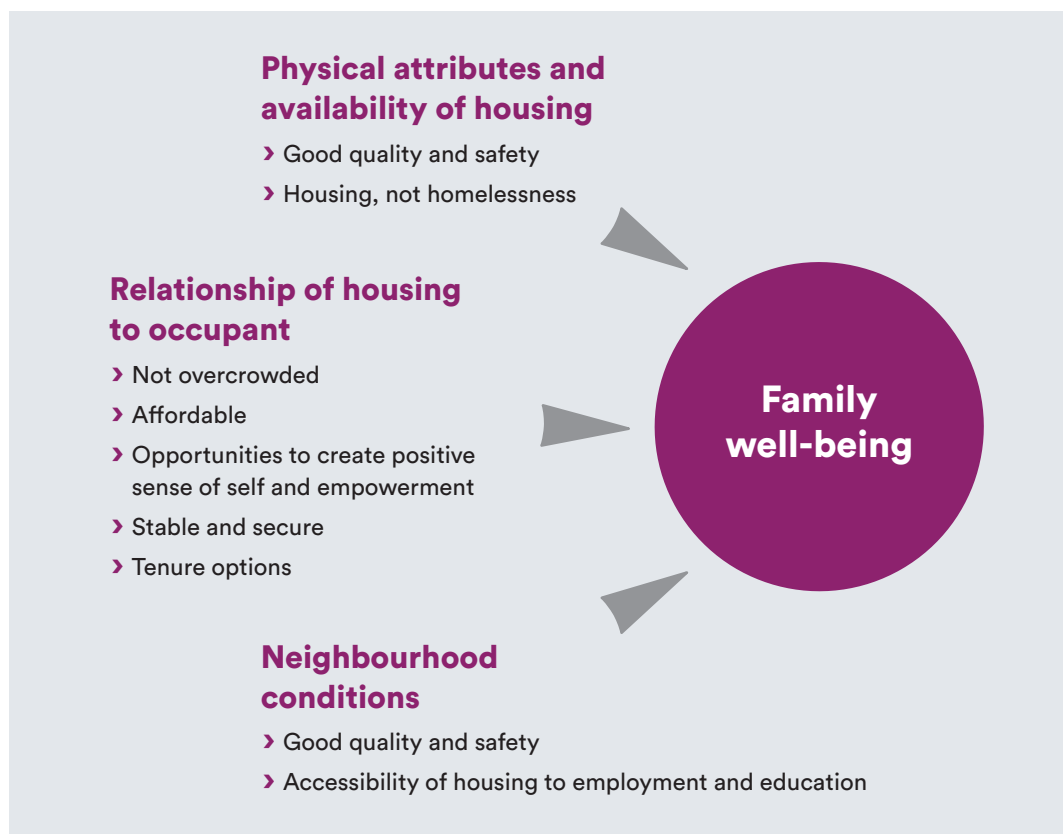
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Appendix I: Responsible fathering conceptual framework



Based on: Responsible Fathering: An Overview and Conceptual Framework by Doherty et al., (1998) Journal of Marriage and Family, Figure 1, Influences on responsible fathering: a conceptual model, 60, p.285

Appendix II: Connections between housing and family wellbeing – staff information



Based on: Housing and Family Wellbeing by Bratt (2002) *Housing Studies*, 17:1, 13–26, p.15.

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