**Youth Homelessness: A review of the Literature.**

Margaret Kennedy

February 2012

**University of Limerick**

**Department of Sociology**

The Department of Sociology, University of Limerick, welcomes applications for post-graduate study

- MA in Sociology (Applied Social Research): http://www.ul.ie/sociology/ma.html

- MA in Sociology (Youth, Community and Social Regeneration): http://www.ul.ie/sociology/ycsr.html

- MA in Gender Culture and Society: http://www.ul.ie/sociology/gcs.html

- PhD by research: http://www.ul.ie/sociology/researchdegrees.html

Find us on Facebook

http://www.ul.ie/sociology

**sociology**
UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK

# Youth Homelessness: A review of the Literature

## Margaret Kennedy

PhD Candidate Department of Sociology

University of Limerick

Homelessness is perhaps the most extreme form of poverty and social exclusion today, with those residing 'out of home' amongst the most vulnerable in society (Focus Ireland, 2010). While homelessness has traditionally been viewed as a male experience and problem, recent decades has seen the nature and composition of the homeless changing significantly, with an increase in women and children, and a drop in the average age 'out of home' (Focus Ireland, 2011). This paper focuses specifically on this population of younger homeless, defines and describes youth homeless in Ireland and discusses the causes of homelessness among this vulnerable population.

## Introduction

Homelessness is perhaps the most extreme form of poverty and social exclusion today, with those residing 'out of home' amongst the most vulnerable in society (Focus Ireland 2010). Decent housing and living conditions are some of our most basic needs, with access to secure accommodation often a prerequisite to exercising many of our fundamental rights. As homelessness is clearly about more than a lack of housing, but 'a fundamental denial of civil, political and social rights', it results in individuals being alienated and distanced from mainstream society (Foord et al 1998, p.1). While homelessness has traditionally been viewed as a male experience and problem, recent decades has seen the nature and composition of the homeless changing significantly, with an increase in women and children, and a drop in the average age 'out of home'

(Focus Ireland 2011). This paper focuses specifically on this population of younger homeless, defines and describes youth homeless in Ireland and discusses the causes of homelessness among this vulnerable population.

## Homelessness: a definition

It is clear that the distinction between those with shelter and those without is not adequate to properly define homelessness. Yet, 'homelessness' as a term continues to be contested with no common definition at policy and research level. While there is considerable research into homelessness, there is still a lack of data and understanding on some aspects of homelessness (Busch- Geertsema, et al 2010). Homelessness traditionally has tended to be narrowly defined in terms of 'houselessness' with individuals residing on the street, in shelters, or in abandoned houses or buildings. The notion of 'home' cannot be reduced to having access to minimally adequate housing. For Riggs and Coyle (2002, p. 2) the "concept of 'hearthlessness', meaning the absence of any home-like ethos within a place of abode, illuminates this psychological component of homelessness and helps to explain why some young people in temporary or tenuous accommodation still view themselves as homeless". They argue that those individuals whose accommodation is characterised by continual insecurity, those who have shelter but who are unsafe in that shelter or who lack security of tenure and therefore are at risk of homelessness must also be acknowledged when homelessness is being discussed.

From a research perspective a universal common definition is essential for comparative studies of homelessness, while from a policy perspective it is vital to determine who should be measured and planned for (Levinson 2004). Yet, while it is patently obvious that all those affected by the phenomenon should be included in any definition of homelessness, there continues to be some resistance to broadening the definition of homelessness. Reticence from

governments and policy makers to the broadening of the definition of homelessness has generally been justified on the grounds that the inclusion of groups like the hidden homeless will downplay the seriousness of homelessness. Critics of this policy argue however that by limiting homelessness to a narrow definition, governments and policy makers do not have to accept responsibility for all those others experiencing forms of homelessness excluded from a narrow definition. Therefore in seeking to be inclusive of all individuals experiencing homelessness in all its different forms, the definition of homelessness used for the purpose of the paper will be O'Sullivan's, which includes the visible homeless, the hidden homeless and also those at risk of homelessness (1996). Furthermore, in relation to homeless youth, the utilisation of a broader definition such as O' Sullivan's is especially important, as along with women and children, 'out of home' young people are most likely to be among the hidden homeless.

## The definition of youth

The term youth generally refers to the period between childhood and adulthood. The range is generally from 12 to 24 years of age or some subset within this range. While the term youth is used interchangeably with the term adolescence, they often have contrasting meanings within academic discourse. Adolescence is typically viewed from a biological perspective as a developmental stage in the life cycle, as a period of growth and hormonal change that physically and mentally marks the transition from childhood to adulthood.  In contrast, the term 'youth' from a sociological perspective is used to refer to a socially constructed life phase. The term 'youth' is not centred on the physical processes of becoming an adult male or a female, but is interested in young people as a distinct social group, and their transitions to adulthood in the context of the society in which they live (Ritzer 2007)

**Homeless youth in Ireland**

'Homeless youth' are usually defined as those who experience homelessness on their own rather than as part of a homeless family group (Robertson & Toro, 1999). The issue of youth homelessness only started to emerge in Ireland in the 1970's, when at least 60 people under the age of 18 were found to be sleeping rough in Dublin City each night (Chance et al 1976). This number was found to have more than doubled three years later when a second study found 128 young people between the ages of 13 and 18 who had experience of sleeping rough (HOPE 1979). Then, as with homelessness in general, youth homelessness was found to have grown significantly during the 1980's and early 1990's, with significant numbers of youth found to be homeless in the cities of Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Waterford and Galway (McCarthy and Conlon 1988: Daly 1990). Of those recorded as homeless in 2005 the majority 87% were aged between 15 and 18 years and in gender terms almost equally split" (O' Sullivan 2008, p. 220). While youth homelessness is primarily an urban phenomenon, it is important to recognise that youth homelessness also occurs to some extent in rural areas. More recent information on young homeless people would suggest that there is a decline in the number of young people 'out of home', and while these figures undoubtedly give cause for optimism, Maycock and Carr (2008) caution "The enumeration of homeless young people is notoriously fraught". This, they argue "is in part due to disagreements over how to define the homeless population and is also related to the hidden nature of much homelessness".

**Causes of youth homelessness**

The causes of homelessness have generated much debate in recent years, but due to its 'multifaceted nature', studying homelessness and its causes can be extremely difficult (Lang,1989, p.2). Yet it is vital that efforts are made to understand the issues that lead to homelessness. Only by deepening our

understanding can effective policies be implemented that may help reduce the incidence of homelessness internationally. Similarly for homeless youths, the pathways to homelessness are multiple and complex (Burrows & Quilgars 1997: Miller et al 2004). While poverty may be identified as the single largest obstacle for people to overcome in obtaining standard quality housing, and it is a key factor in housing deprivation, it is clear that the causes of homelessness, and particularly for youth homelessness cannot be reduced to this one cause.

Traditionally, research into the causes of homelessness has been divided into two camps, those who attribute the cause of homelessness to individual factors, 'where personal failings, bad luck or the inability to cope with adverse events' result in homelessness (Kemp et al 2001, p.12), and those who attribute the causes of homelessness to identified a range of structural factors. Traditional explanations for homelessness have focused on individual pathologies as being responsible for homelessness (Kemp et al 2001). This thinking is evident in mainstream media in recent times, as poverty is discussed far less as a consequence of structural inequalities; this has coincided with a growing tendency to attribute poverty to personal character traits. This reframing of poverty and privilege emphasises individual life choices and conduct, and sidelines issues of inequality. This is evident in the media portrayals of the 'out of home' population, where homelessness is typically portrayed as a 'charity case' instead of a situation in urgent need of radical reform (Devereux 1998).

Individual causes of youth homelessness are identified as drug and alcohol problems, mental illness, family breakdown, family and domestic violence, sexual abuse and low educational attainment. Most research would indicate that the majority of the youth homeless population present with at least one or two individual causal factors. A 2002 study, reported that up to 81% of the homeless were addicted to alcohol or drugs, with heroin topping the list and alcohol

following in second place (Fountain and Howes 2002). Mental health issues are also regularly cited by all agencies as a common pathway for young people into homelessness (Riggs & Coyle 2002) Changing social mores, are also regularly cited as being a factor in rising levels of homelessness. Most notably, profound changes in family structure, rising divorce rates, and the resultant increase in female headed households and young people leaving home earlier are all considered contributory individual factors (Foord et al 1998, p.1).

In the past two decades, these individual explanations for homelessness has been rejected by an increasing number of commentators, who contend that structural factors play far a more important role in the rise in youth homelessness. For these commentators, it is no coincidence that the increase in youth homelessness has occurred over a period of time when transitions from youth to adulthood have been severely disrupted. These transitions, when one moves up from one age group to another, are nowadays less fixed than for previous generations. For Roulleau-Berger (2003, 12) the duration of youth could be said to have even doubled in the last thirty years. While this extended period of youth extension may be considered largely positive, in particular with the lengthening of the period of study and training, Roulleau-Berger (2003, 12) cautions that for some groups it has been negative. For disadvantaged groups especially, the extension of these transitions has resulted in them becoming "more complex, take longer and are more difficult to achieve successfully, resulting in many young people experiencing 'extended' or 'fractured' transitions".

The decline of traditional forms of employment is the primary factor for these 'fractured' transitions for youths from disadvantaged communities. Whereas previous generations of working class youth had a relatively smooth transition from education to work, the decline of manufacturing jobs, coupled with

continued early school leaving, has resulted in these groups experiencing more difficulties in recent decades. The impact of these changed work practices means that the transition from childhood to adulthood has become more complex and beset with risk and uncertainty. These changes, which have resulted in expectations of life-long labour giving way to the prospect of long-term unemployment, means that the smooth transition into adulthood and manual employment as was once expected by the white working classes is now unachievable (Nayak and Kehily, 2001). These changes impacted significantly on those at risk of homelessness. These rapid changes in work patterns experienced by these groups with de-industrialization and further exacerbated by welfare reforms clearly served "to entrench further the unemployability, alienation, and social outsider status of members of these communities (White & Cunneen 2006, p. 19). For White and Cunneen (2006, p. 4) this "dearth of paid employment in 'advanced' industrial economies is a key reason for heightened social class locations and disorganization'.

Changes in homeownership patterns have also significantly impacted on youth homelessness. Kemp et al (2001) maintain that a statistical relationship exists between homelessness and the housing market. The supply of affordable housing has been in decline and the bottom end of the rental market has steadily declined over the last twenty years. Owner occupiers have been steadily increasing throughout Europe in recent decades, with former Irish government initiatives proving very successful, with up to 80% owner occupation, a rate more than twice that of Germany with 38% home ownership (Avramov 2001, p.8). Government policy of encouraging holders of social housing to purchase has resulted in the stock of local authority housing being sharply reduced in England and Ireland, with two thirds of social housing built since the foundation of the Irish State, having since been sold into private hands (Fahy 1999). Carlisle (1999) argues that this policy of reducing levels of social housing is

possibly the single most important factor affecting the rate of home ownership among marginal groups. The resulting loss of social housing has resulted in a situation in which 'severe competition exists at the bottom half of the rental market' (Avramov 2001, p.23). The process of urban gentrification actively encouraged in Ireland during the recent economic boom by urban renewal schemes has also resulted in the supply of low cost rental properties decline (Duffy et al 2007). Neighbourhoods previously inhabited by marginal groups existing on the lowest incomes, were transformed into exclusive developments. With the reduction of social housing available, and the loss of low cost rental properties, housing options open to socially disadvantaged groups are dwindling. For Merchant's Quay Ireland, the scarcity of affordable housing available in Irish cities is the key structural factor affecting homelessness (Cox and Lawless 1999).

Deinstitutionalisation is another factor that is prominent in causal studies into youth homelessness internationally. The large population of young people leaving care, leaving prison, and former mental health patients that drift into homelessness is evident in many studies into homelessness (Maycock et al 2008; Glover and Clewett 2011; Howard 2006). It is clear that there is a lack of services available to assist in easing individuals back into the community after being released from institutions. This lack of social protection for young people leaving care has resulted in many falling out of the housing market completely, with Focus Ireland (2010) reporting that as much as 68% of young people leaving care experiencing homelessness within two years. A recent Barnardos report (Glover and Clewett 2011) highlighted the numbers of young people in the United Kingdom who become homeless upon leaving prison. It is estimated that "one youth homelessness service in the north of England, estimated that 30 to 40 per cent of those on the service caseload are young people who were released from custody approximately a year ago and who have exhausted their

'sofa surfing' options with family and friends. Furthermore, it was highlighted that 69 per cent of these offenders with "an accommodation need reoffended within two years, compared to 40 per cent who were in suitable accommodation" (Howard 2006). A number of commentators (Focus Ireland 2011; Maycock et al 2008) contend that a similar situation exists in Ireland with homelessness playing a significant role in incidences of re-offending and re-imprisonment among youth who have exited the prison system.

Recent research would indicate that the most insightful research into homelessness is of a 'holistic' nature, taking a micro and macro approach to the study of homelessness (Bridgman and Glasser 1999, p.44). Homelessness cannot be reduced to one or two causal factors. Only by examining both structural and individual factors, can a greater understanding of the most common pathways into homelessness emerge. Duffy (2001) argues that it is important to look beyond structural and economic factors for a full understanding of the causes of homelessness. Fitzpatrick (2005, 9) concurs with this argument, asserting that 'economic structures, housing structures, patriarchal and interpersonal structures and individual attributes interact variably in the causation of homelessness'. For Focus Ireland (2010)

> "Structural causes underpin almost all pathways into homelessness. Structural issues relate to how we organise our society and distribute wealth and power and are acknowledged as being a key contributing factor to homelessness. These issues must be considered in order to meet the needs of a person out of home and also to address the factors leading to homelessness".

This change in policy direction is now also evident at Irish governmental level with policy papers now acknowledging that 'understanding the dynamics of homelessness must involve a complex interrelationship of social and economic factors' (Ireland Department of Environment and Local Government 2000).

Additionally, it is clear that one cannot simplify the distinction between structural and individual causes, as individual factors such as family breakdown and drug abuse are themselves closely linked to structural factors such as unemployment, low educational attainment, and poverty (Foord et al 1998, p.12). Moreover, while mental illness, and drug and alcohol addiction are posited as individual causes of homelessness, there remains a gap in the literature that explores the extent to which homelessness 'may exacerbate a pre-existing mental illness or a drug or alcohol condition' (Lang,1989, p. 12)), and the greater the time spent homeless the higher the probability that contact will be made with a greater combination of drugs and criminal activity (Snow, and Anderson 1993).

Furthermore, experience has shown that providing housing is not always sufficient to prevent or solve homelessness (Kemp et al 2001), Without acknowledging the array of social problems experienced by the homeless, makes the maintenance of a tenancy extremely difficult even when provided with full housing allowance (Kemp et al 2001). The prevalence of alcohol and drug problems and mental illness cannot be ignored, but viewed within the broader context of the lack of structural supports (Glasser and Bridgman 1999). Polakow and Guinean (2001, 20) argue that the social exclusion experienced by the homeless can render then incapable of reintegrating back into society without the appropriate supports

> "As a rule, homeless people lack the resources, opportunity, and ability to make use of social institutions. Their exclusion is associated with social stigmatisation and isolation, low self-esteem, the feeling of not belonging, and never having been given a chance to be included in society".

Many homeless agencies now concur with this argument and suggest that the solution to homelessness is about more than providing a house or shelter, and that only by deepening our understanding of the causes into homelessness, can

secure sustainable pathways out of homelessness be found (Focus Ireland 2011; FEANSTA 2002; FEANSTA 2009). Furthermore, Countries, such as who in the past have had the best record in tackling homelessness, (Denmark, Sweden and Finland), have all acknowledged that homelessness is about more than a housing issue (Avramov, 2001).

In sum, personal factors and individual behaviours may determine who becomes homeless under unfavourable structural conditions, while structural factors determine the total extent of homelessness in society (Kemp et al 2001 p.1). Structural factors such as poor economic and social conditions must exist for even the most vulnerable to become homeless (Elliot and Krivo 1991). By maintaining the focus purely on individual explanations, leaves the problem of homelessness consequently depoliticised, with no real answers as to why homelessness continues to exist as a major social problem in the Western societies today (Buchner et al 1993). Therefore, to gain a fuller understanding of the proximate and underlying causes of youth homelessness, one must explore and examine homelessness from an individual and a structural perspective.

The discourses that society has used to construct homelessness in general, ranging from 'a behavioural pathology and asocial lifestyle' to a 'structural outcome of inequality, poverty, and deficient social policies' have left our understanding of youth homelessness lacking. (Polakow and Guillean 2001, p.1). Only by acknowledging the complexity of the pathways into youth homelessness, can a greater understanding be developed, and only with a greater understanding will come more effective policies and programs to successfully respond to those youths at risk of homelessness with the appropriate services. The implications of this 'structuralist / individualist causal dichotomy' has resulted in the failure of a more profound understanding of homelessness emerging, resulting in the homeless continuing to suffer the most

extreme manifestation of social, political, economic, and cultural exclusion in society today (Blasi 200, p.1).

**References**

Avramov, D. (2001), 'The changing face of homelessness in Europe' in V. Polakow and C. Guillean, (ed's), *International perspectives on homelessness,* Connecticut, Greenwood press, pp. 3-38

Bassuk, E. (1984), 'The Homeless Problem', *Scientific American* 25: pp. 40-46

Bergin, E. and Lalor, T. (2006) 'Away from Home and Homeless', Dublin, Homeless Agency

Blasi, G, (2001), *Advocacy and attribution: shaping and responding to perceptions of the causes of homelessness,* [online], available: http://igs.berkeley.edu/events/homeless/papers/Blasipaper.html

Buchner, J. C., Bassuk, E. L., and Zima, B. T., (1993), 'Mental health issues affecting homeless women: implications for intervention', *American journal of orthopsychiatry,* Vol. 63, no. 3, pp. 385-399

Burrows, R. (1997) The Social Distribution of the Experience of Homelessness, in: R. Burrows, N. Pleace and D. Quilgars (eds) Homelessness and Social Policy, London, Routledge

Burrows, R., Pleace, N. & Quilgar, D. (1997) Homelessness and Social Policy. London, Routledge,

Busch-Geertsema, V., Edgar, W., O'Sullivan, E., and Pleace, N., (2010) Homelessness and homeless policies in Europe: Lessons from research, Brussels, FEANSTA

Carlisle, B., (1999), 'England' in C. O. Helvie, W. Kunstmann, (ed's), *Homelessness in the United States, Europe, and Russia: A Comparative Perspective,* Connecticut, Bergin and Garvey

Chance, F., Coughlan, H. and Schickle, W. (1976) 'Children Sleeping Rough'. Dublin, HOPE.

Combat poverty, (2006), Combat poverty agency fact sheets [online], available: http://www.cpa.ie/factsheets.html, [accessed3/4/2007]

Clover, J., Clewett, N., (2011) 'No fixed abode: The housing struggle for young people leaving custody in England', London, Barnardos

Cox, G., Lawless, M.,(1999) 'Wherever I lay my hat', Dublin, Merchants Quay Ireland

Daly, M. (1990) 'New perspectives on homelessness', in Housing: Moving into Crisis?, J. Blackwell, B. Harvey, M. Higgins and J. Walsh (eds.). Dublin, Combat Poverty Agency and National Campaign for the Homeless

Department of Environment and Local Government. (2000) Homelessness: an integrated strategy. Dublin, Department of the Environment and Local Government

Devereux, E., (1998) *Devils and angels: television, ideology and the coverage of poverty*, Luton, University of Luton press

Duffy, Katherine, (2001) 'Housing and homelessness in England' in Valerie Polakow and Cindy Guillean, (ed's), International perspectives on homelessness, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, pp. 135-161

Duffy, Patrick and Corcoran, Mary and Keaveney, Karen (2007) Transformations in Housing: Understanding Contemporary Ireland. Dublin, Pluto Press, pp. 249-263.

Elliot, M., and Krivo, L.J., (1991), 'Structural determinants of homelessness in the U.S', *Social Problems,* vol. 38, no. 1, Feb. 1991, pp.113-131

Fahey, Tony (ed.) (1999) Social Housing in Ireland: A study of success, failure and lessons learned,  Dublin, Oak Tree Press,

FEANTSA (2002) Immigration and Homelessness in the European Union: Analysis and Overview of the Impact of Immigration on Homelessness Services in the European Union, Brussels, FEANTSA

FEANTSA (2009) Access to Housing: Anti-Discrimination Toolkit, Brussels: FEANTSA

Fitzpatrick, S. (2005) 'Explaining homelessness: a critical realist perspective', Housing, Theory and Society 22(1), 1-17.

Focus Ireland (June 30, 2002) Housing and Homelessness, http://www.focusireland.ie/htm/housing_homelessness/facts_figures/index.htm [accessed 30/11/11]

Focus Ireland, (2010) Homeless: Understanding homelessness, [online] available: http://www.focusireland.ie/index.php/researchpolicy-a-education/publications/archive/134-information-sheets-and-magazines, [accessed 30/11/2011]

Focus Ireland (2011) About homelessness, [online] available: http://www.focusireland.ie/index.php/researchpolicy-a-education/publications/archive/134-information-sheets-and-magazine. [accessed 30/11/11]

Foord, M.,et al (1998), *Bricks without mortar: 30 years of single homelessness,* Crisis, [online] available: http://www.crisis.org.uk/page.builder/researchbank.html, [accessed 2/11/11]

Fountain, J., Howes, S., (2002) *Home and dry?* Crisis [online] available: http://www.Crisis.org.uk/index.php, accessed 4/4/2007

Glasser, I., and Bridgman, R., (1999), *Braving the streets: the anthropology of homelessness,* New York, Berghahn books

Government of Ireland (2000a) 'Homelessness: An Integrated Strategy', Dublin, Stationery Office.

Government of Ireland (2000b) 'Ireland: National Development Plan, 2000-06', Dublin, Stationery Office.

Government of Ireland (2002) 'Homeless Preventative Strategy', Dublin, Stationary Office.

Helvie, C.O., Kuntsmann, W. (1999) 'Homelessness in the United States, Europe, and Russia: a comparative perspective', New York, Greenwood Publishing Group

Hickey, C., et al (2002) *Findings of joint research on the local housing strategies and homeless action plans,* Dublin: Focus Ireland, Simon Communities of Ireland, Society of St Vincent de Paul, Threshold. [online] available: http://www.threshold.ie/documents/housingacc.pdf, [accessed 6/4/2007]

HOPE (1979) Out in the Cold: A Report of unattached youth in Dublin in the winter of 1978/79. Dublin, HOPE.

Howard, P (2006) The Offender Assessment System: an evaluation of the second pilot. London, Home Office

Kemp, P. A, Lynch, E., Mackay, D., (2001), 'Structural trends and homelessness: a quantitative analysis', Edinburgh, Scottish executive

Lang, M. H., (1989), 'Homelessness amid Affluence: Structure and Paradox in the American Political Economy', New York, Praeger Publishers

Levinson, D, (2004) 'Encyclopedia of homelessness', vol 1, London, Sage

Maycock, P., Vekic, K., (2006) 'Understanding youth homelessness in Dublin City', Dublin, Children's Research Centre, Trinity College

Maycock, P., et al, (2008) 'Young people's homeless pathways', Dublin, Trinity College

Miller, P., et al (2004) 'Experiences of being homeless or at risk of being homeless among Canadian Youths', *Adolescence*. Vol. 39. (156) 2004. Pp. 735- 795

McCarthy, P. and Conlon, E. (1988) 'A National Survey of Young People Out of Home in Ireland' Dublin, Streetwise National Coalition

Kehily, M., and Nayak, A., (2001). 'Learning to laugh?': a study of schoolboy humour in the English secondary school. In: Martino, Wayne and Mayenn, Bob eds. What about the boys?: issues of masculinity in schools. Buckingham, Open University Press, pp. 110–123.

O'Sullivan, E., (1996) 'Homelessness and social policy in the Republic of Ireland', Dublin, Trinity College

O'Sullivan, E., (2004), 'National Report for the Republic of Ireland, 2003-4: Data, Policy and Research Up-Date' [online], available: http://www.feantsa.org/files/national_reports/ireland/Ireland_combined_updates _2004, accessed: 6/4/2007

Pleace, N. and Quilgars, D. (1996) Health and Homelessness in London, London, The King's Fund

Pleace, N., Fitzpatrick, S., (2004), 'Centrepoint youth homelessness index: an estimate of youth homelessness for England', York, University of York

Pleace, N.; Fitzpatrick, S., Johnsen, S., Quilgars, D., Sanderson, D. (2008) Statutory Homelessness in England: The experience of families and 16-17 year olds, London,  Department for Communities and Local Government

Polakow, V.,  and Guillean, C., (2001), (ed's), *International perspectives on homelessness,* Connecticut:, Greenwood press