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# Women and Homelessness in Ireland: A Biographical Pathways Analysis

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Paula Mayock and Sarah Sheridan

School of Social Work and Social Policy & Children's Research Centre,  
Trinity College Dublin  
pmayock@tcd.ie

## Background

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The impetus for this study arose from the identification of a significant gap in knowledge within the homeless research literature in the Irish context. Women have received little dedicated research attention over the past twenty years and, as a consequence, remain largely invisible within dominant discourses on homelessness. This situation is not unique to Ireland; women's homelessness has in fact been noted as a lesser-explored area of homelessness research throughout Europe.

## Objectives

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The core aim of the research was to conduct a detailed investigation of the lives and experiences of homeless women in Ireland with specific attention to their homeless 'pathways', that is, their entry routes to homelessness, the homeless experience itself and, possibly, their exit routes from homelessness. The study sought to contextualise women's homelessness within a continuum of precipitating, perpetuating and/or enabling factors, crossing both structural and individual factors, that help to explain their homeless/ housing 'careers'.

## Methods

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A cross-sectional research design, integrating biographical interviewing and ethnographic observation, was employed. A survey instrument, covering topics including homeless history, children, violence/victimisation, and physical and mental health, among others, was also administered to all participating women. At a later stage in the data collection process, a sub-sample of ten women participated in an 'auto-photography project'. This project was designed to complement the study's other data collection methods and to provide additional and more nuanced insights in homeless women's lives. The eligibility criteria for entry to the study included: (1) a woman who is homeless or has lived in unstable accommodation during the past 6 months; (2) aged 18 and upwards; (3) single and without children or a parent living either with, or apart from, her children; (4) Irish or of other ethnic origin. Participating women were recruited from a range of strategically chosen sites including hostels and other temporary or unstable living situations in four urban locations in Ireland, including Dublin. Recruitment to the study was guided by a combination of purposive and snowball sampling.

## Progress to-date

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Sixty homeless women, aged 18-62 years, have been interviewed and the data collection phase of the research is now complete. The majority of the study's participants are aged between 20 and 40 years. Just over a quarter of the sample are migrants. At the time of interview, the study's women were living in a wide variety of accommodation types including emergency homeless hostels, domestic violence refuges, transitional accommodation, informal and temporary housing arrangements such as staying with friends or family members, or in newly-acquired private rented accommodation. Only one woman was sleeping rough at time of interview although many more reported that they had done so in the past. Three quarters of the women had children or were pregnant at the time of interview, but not all were caring for their children at the time of interview. A significant number of the women reported lengthy histories of homelessness and had engaged with homeless services on multiple occasions for varying periods of time. 72% of the sample had been homeless for more than one year at the time of interview and 56% for more than two years; a smaller number had experienced more than 10 years of homelessness over the course of their lives. For a large number, periods of homelessness were interrupted by multiple temporary exits from homelessness, often via private rented accommodation.

Data analysis is currently ongoing. The first written dissemination of the research findings is expected to take place in February 2012 when a number of research briefing documents will be launched at a public lecture in Trinity College Dublin.