Youth Family Mediation in Preventing Youth Homelessness: The Importance of Early Intervention

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19 Sep 2025

FEANTSA Research Conference

Presentation

- Context
- Mediation within a homelessness prevention paradigm
- Methodology
- Focus Ireland Mediation Service
  - Service stats
  - Impact of service
  - Challenges
  - **Mediation as early intervention versus crisis intervention?**
- Conclusion
- Recommendations

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Context

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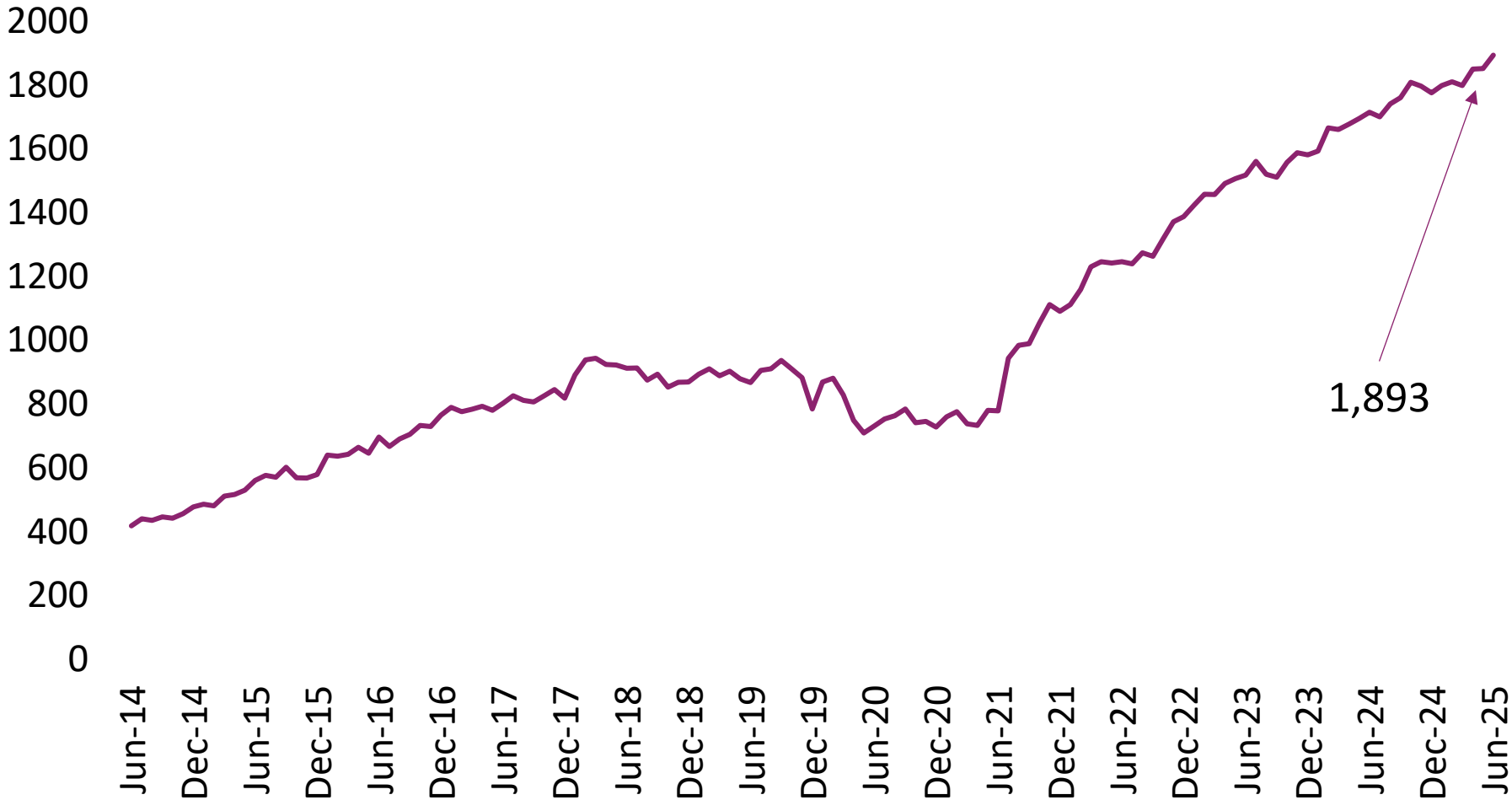
Youth Homelessness in Ireland (18-24 year olds)



Youth homelessness **increased** in Ireland **by 352%** between June 2014 and June 2025 (DHLGH, various years)

In 2023, **28%** of all young people became homelessness due to **relationship breakdown with a parent** (Maphosa & Mayock, 2025).

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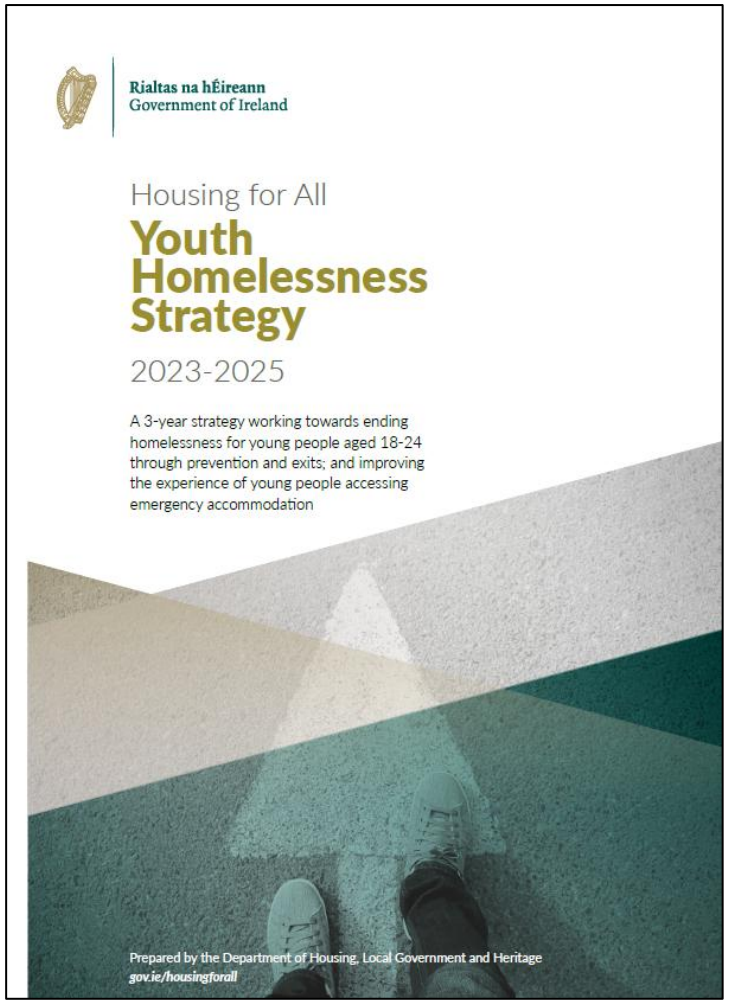
Policy Context
Youth Homelessness Strategy 2023-2025



Primary objective No. 1:

1. To **prevent** young people from entering homelessness

Action No. 3.2:

To **strengthen support structures** for young people and families who are experiencing domestic conflict and breakdown.

Action No. 4:

Enhance connectivity between local authorities and Tusla to ensure that appropriate supports can be provided.

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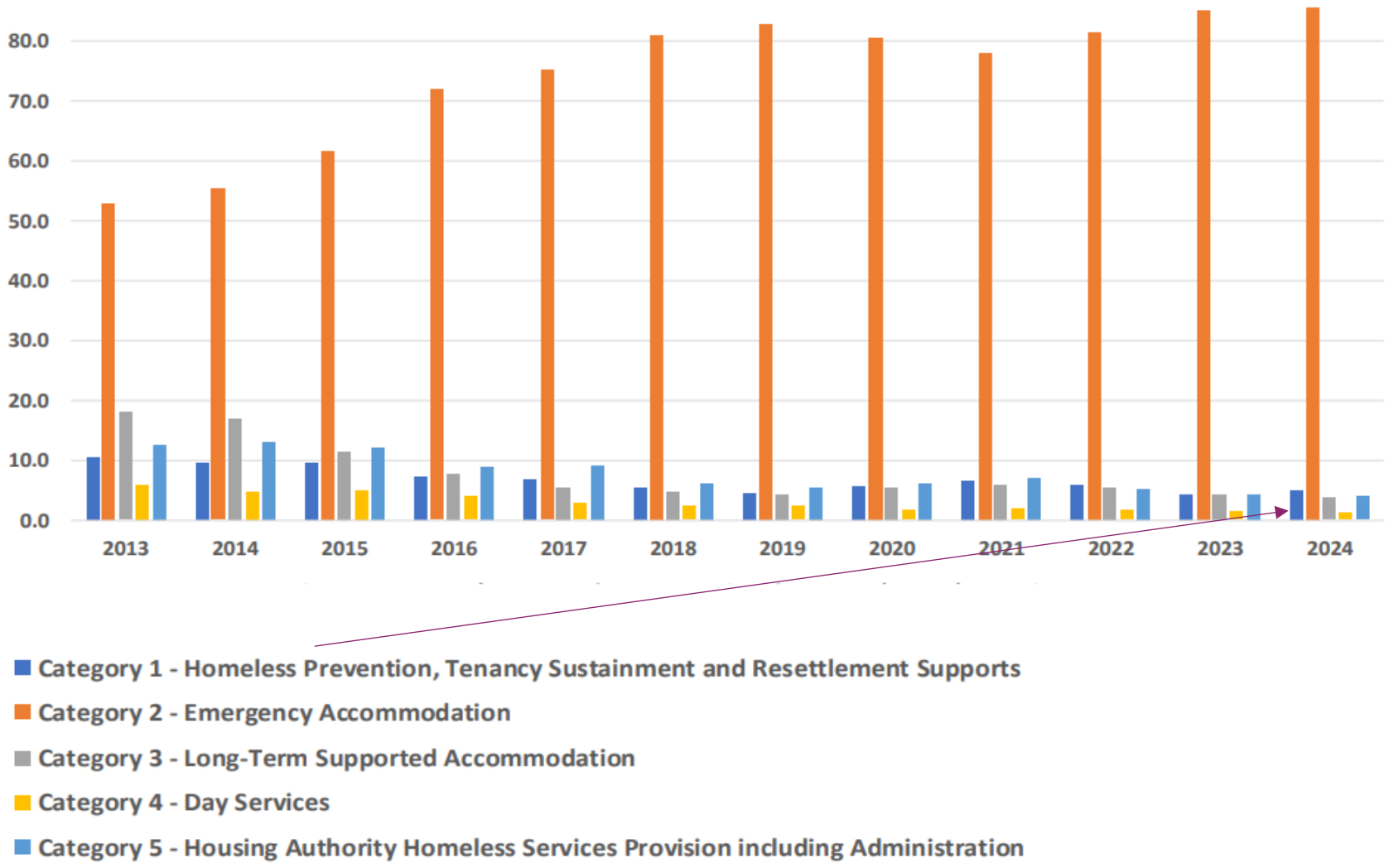
Section-10 Homelessness Expenditure



Prevention and Tenancy sustainment = 5% of total Section 10 budget in 2024.

See O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2025.

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Mediation within Homelessness Prevention Paradigm

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Mediation within a Homelessness Prevention Paradigm

Prevention and temporal dimensions of 'risk' (Fitzpatrick et al., 2021)

1. Universal – population at large
2. Upstream – early-stage intervention
3. Crisis – homelessness likely to occur
4. Emergency - at immediate risk
5. Repeat categories – preventing recurrent homelessness

Upstream Prevention (Mackie, 2023)

Early intervention with high-risk groups – e.g. vulnerable young people and 'risky transitions', such as leaving care, prison, hospital or mental health in-patient treatment.

Plugging services and supports at point of discharge (e.g. Critical Time Intervention)

Early intervention via effective inter-agency work (potentially harnessing data and statistics)

International Examples of Youth Family Mediation

Geelong Project (Upstream Australia)

- Established 2010
- Population screening process (MacKenzie, 2018)
- Community of Schools and Youth Services (COSS) model (Kania and Kramer, 2011)
- Three types of supports
  1. Active monitoring
  2. Short-term support
  3. Wrap around case management

→ 40% reduction in YP entering homelessness

→ 20% reduction in early school leaving

Upstream Cymru (Mackie, 2023)

- Established 2020
- Particular schools targeted via data
- Mediation offered via direct referrals at first; screening tool piloted in 2021
- Strong legislative footing – Housing (Wales) Act 2014
- Results of intervention forthcoming

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Focus Ireland Youth Family Mediation Service

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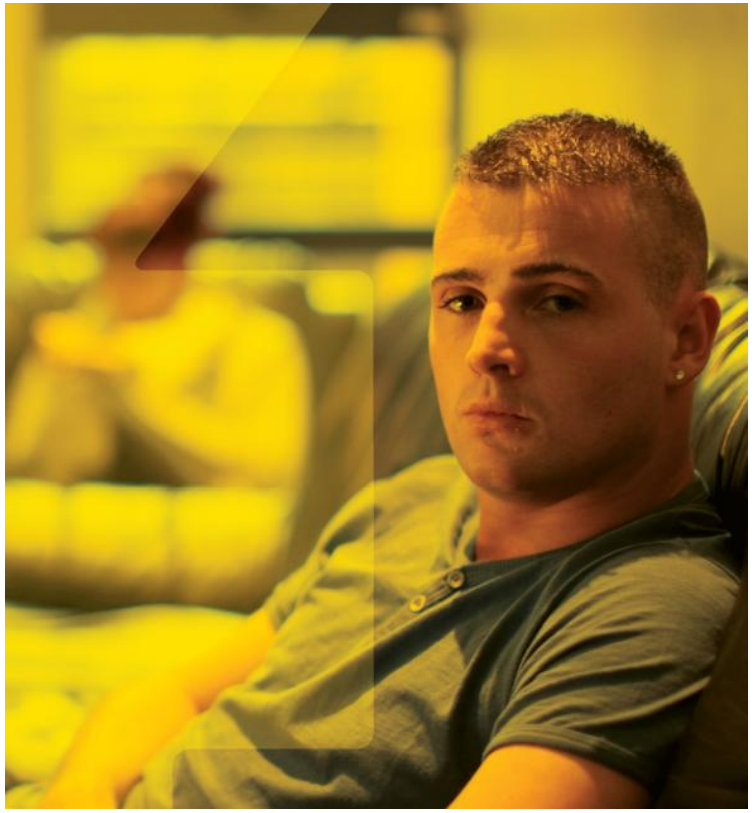
Focus Ireland Youth Family Mediation (YFM)

- Established 2016 in responses to research recommendation (Mayock et al., 2014)
- Tusla funded mediator began 2018
- Facilitative mediation model of mediation

Referral channels evolved over time:

- **Crisis and emergency services (CIS & EOHS)**
- **Community social work referrals**
- **School absenteeism (post COVID-19)**



→ Between 2016 and late 2024 – Focus Ireland YFM supported **148 young people** and their families

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Methodology

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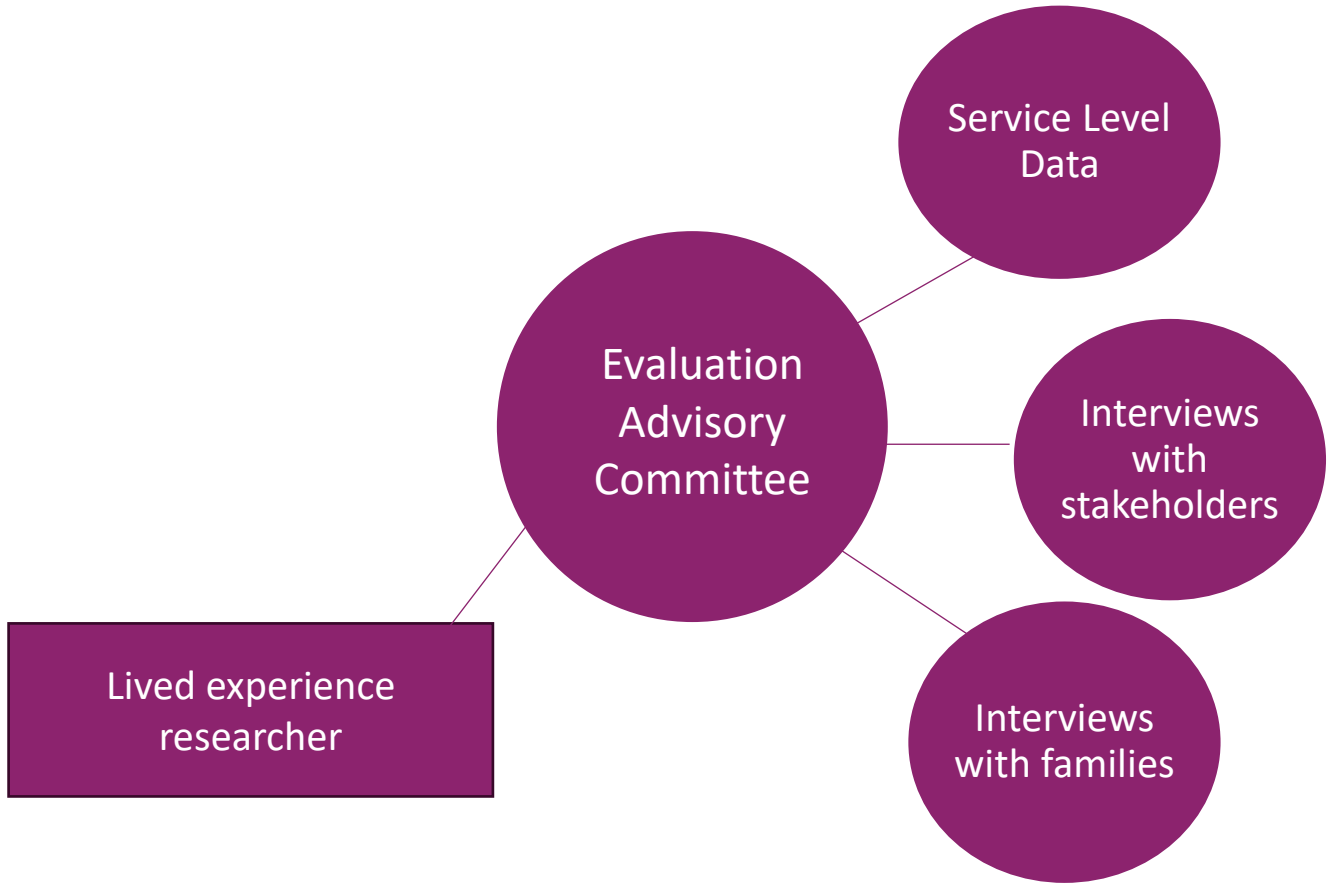
Evaluation Methodology



Aimed to assess whether YFM…

- met the needs of young people and their families;
- met its objectives;
- had a positive impact;
- operated efficiently and cost-effectively
- added value to service landscape

Objectives:

1. To refine design and delivery
2. To support service evidence-based expansion of programme

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Ethical Protocol

- Strict inclusion criteria to ensure families not still in active conflict
- Proactive and reactive protocol established
- Confidentiality (and limits)
- Support of lived experience researcher in refining instruments

Research Limitations

- Service level data
- Sample size
- Under-representation of young people

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Evaluation Findings

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Service Stats

- Service supported **148** young people between 2016 – 2024

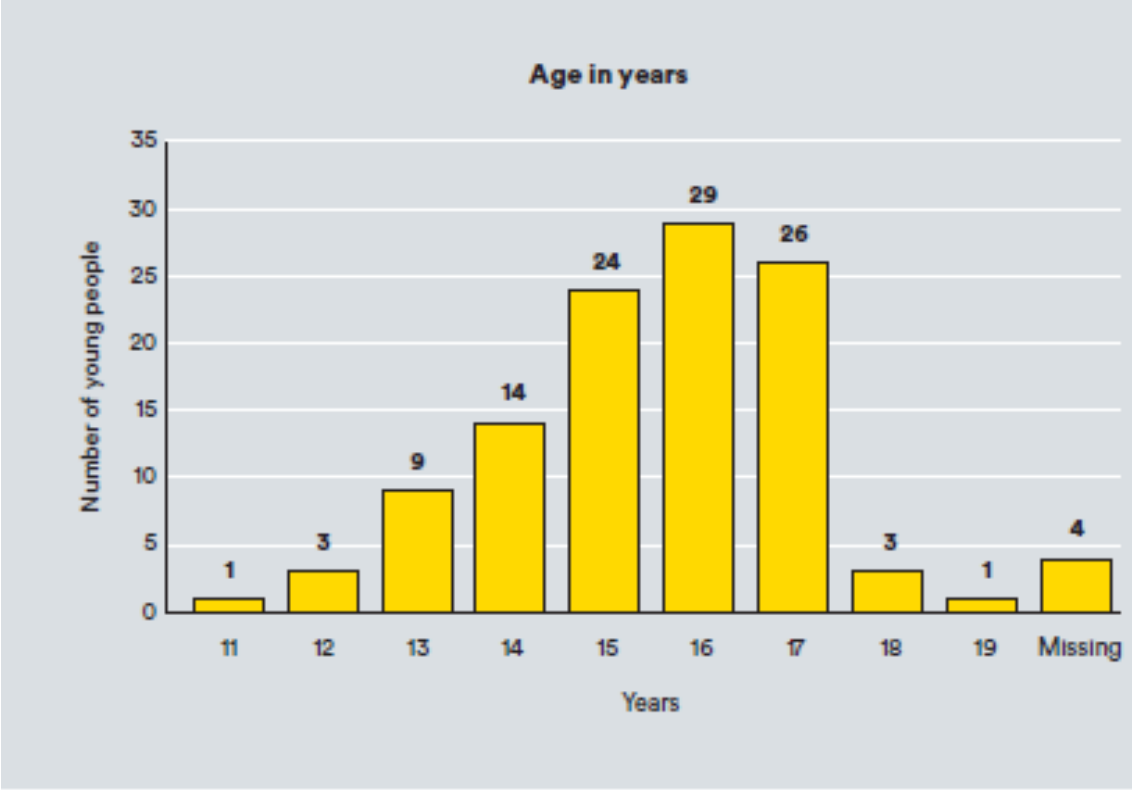

Figure 4: Age of young people when first referred to the programme

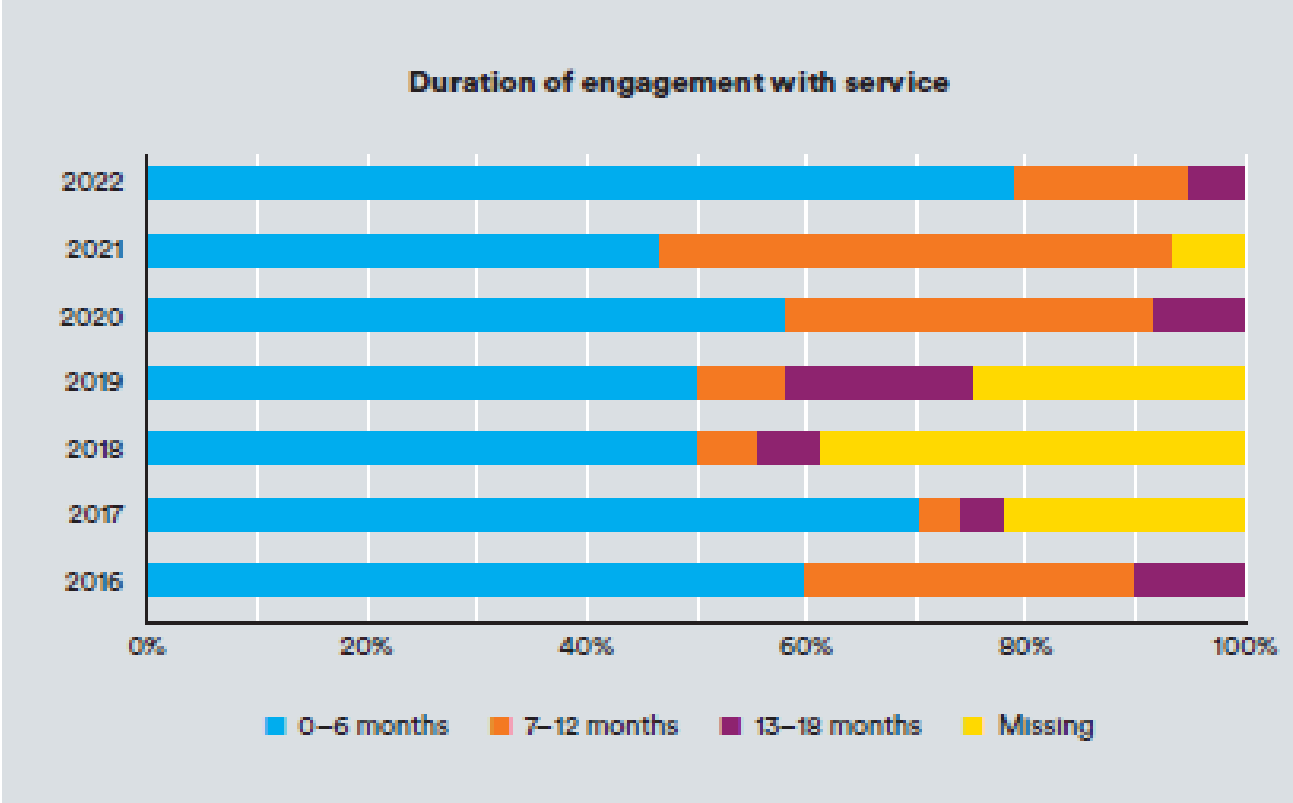

Figure 5: Duration of engagement with service

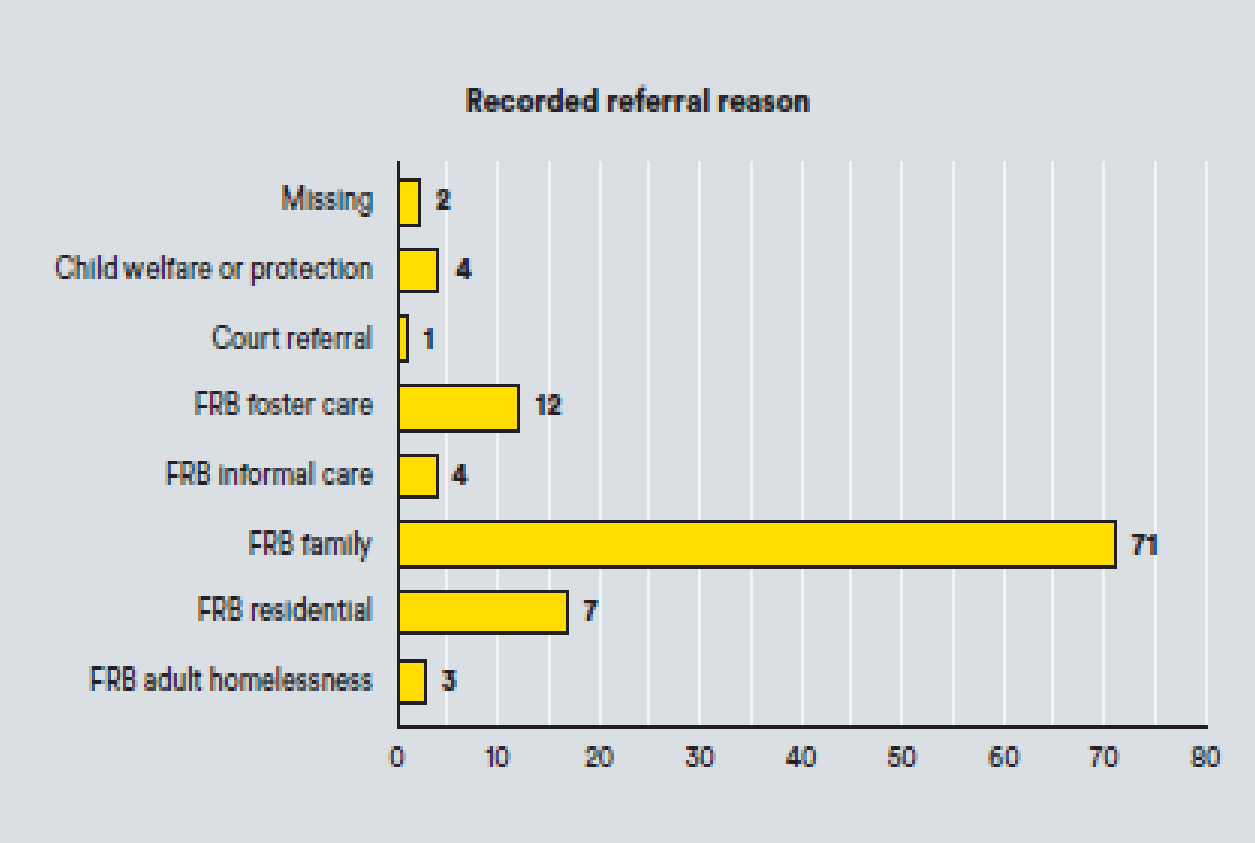

Figure 6: Recorded referral reason for service

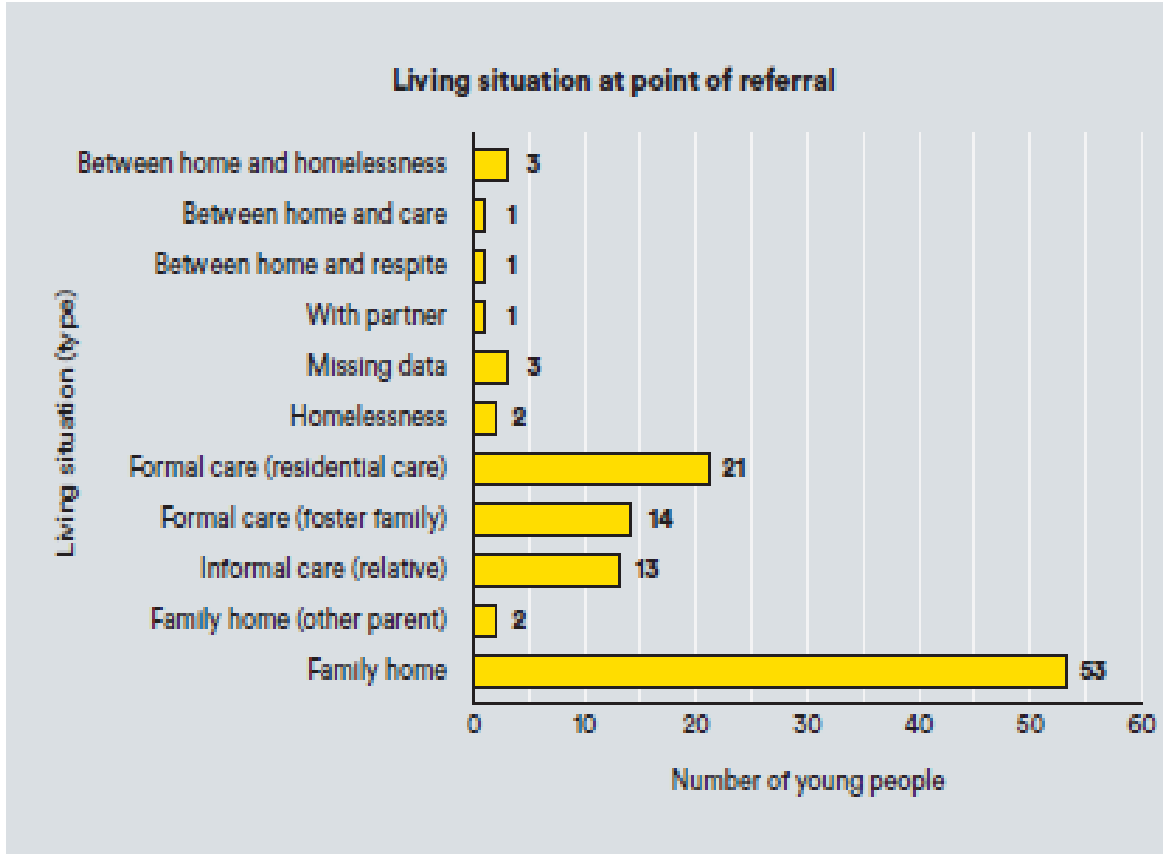

Figure 7: Living situation at point of referral

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Key Findings

1. **Positive Impact of Services on Families**

- Improved communication
- Bringing sense of stability
- Enhancing empathy and compassion for others
- De-escalation strategies
- Preventing YP leaving home
- Avoiding breakdown of care placements
- Preventing early school leaving

"Just being nice to each other. When we are yelling - trying not to yell back. I was like always thinking, it's only her, it's only her, I'm not bad at all. But I was also a part of the problem." – Young Person No. 1

"But I think at the end it helped in her absence from school because I started to talk to her about why I am concerned about this, it's not because I am overprotective or controlling … And she started to open more, to trust more"– Mother No. 3

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2. Non-judgemental, impartial approach → unique service offering

- Families considered YFM more effective than other services
- Flexible, approachable, "less intimidating"
- Mediation in family home
- Feeling of being heard
- Impartiality
- Flexible

"Social workers are trained to offer solutions and try to fix people. Mediation is all about 'what's going to work for you" – Social Worker No. 2, Tusla

"I am doing my best in the way I know and the way I can. I don't need someone to come and tell me I am a shitty mother. […] [The mediator] She was different. She was warm. You know what I mean?" – Mother No. 2

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3. Effective Inter-agency collaboration

- Effective and productive collaboration between Focus Ireland and Tusla
  - In design and delivery
  - Regular meetings
  - Referrals, outcomes
- Mediator engaged with schools in some cases
- Mediator as service coordinator
- Mediation as gateway to other services

"The mediator's approach was fantastic, she was open to engaging with me, and working together and to find the most appropriate thing for the family and when I would refer a family in [to mediation], she would call me and there was an eagerness to use my knowledge to make sure she'd take the right approach and she helped me with families too to make sure I was going in the right direction. The collaboration piece was fantastic!" – Social Worker No. 1, Tusla

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4. Limited Reach and Operational Challenges

- Remains a niche service offering
- Gap between referral and case opening
- Lack of available mediation training
- Lack of skilled mediators
- Equating Focus Ireland as homeless service
- Challenges around data collection practices
  - Inconsistencies, missing data
  - Challenges measuring ‘success’ among families

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Youth Family Mediation:

Early Intervention
Vs
Crisis Intervention

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5. Focus Ireland YFM referral channels - offering both crisis intervention and early intervention

Early intervention

- Tusla prevention or early intervention channels(PPFS)
- School absenteeism (TESS)

Crisis intervention

- Crisis Intervention Service (CIS)
- Out of Hours (OOH)
- Other emergency referrals

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Mediation most effective at *early* intervention stage (1)

Early Intervention

- Preventing further conflict, trauma
- Communication not fully broken down
- Family members more *open* to reconciliation
- Higher service throughput rates
- Clarity for Theory of Change and outcomes tracking

→ ***More effective intervention in ultimately preventing homelessness?***

→ ***Screening tool could help identify appropriate families***

Crisis Intervention

- Case of "last resort"
- Referrals reflects pressures in social work service / homeless system
- Communication mostly broken down
- Requires pre-mediation work
- Lower service throughputs rate
- Can lead to staff burnout?
- Theory of change and outcomes less clear

→ ***Could potentially prevent repeated / long-term homelessness***

→ ***Referral systems already in place***

Mediation most effective at *early intervention* stage (2)

"Once it comes to the attention of Tusla, it's already escalated… If a 15-year-old had someone to talk through this stuff at 11 or 12, things might have been a bit different." – Mediator No. 2, Focus Ireland

"When the problems are not that great and where the conflict is not that high. The younger the child is, the more likelihood that it [mediation] will be successful." – Social Worker No.2, Tusla

"With mediation if it would have been a little earlier, it would have been a different ball game. But she came in, we were in a bad shape. There was massive damage." – Mother No. 2

"I would have been an awful lot more receptive if I got the meditation before things got that big." – Mother No. 4

"Yes. It would have been helpful earlier. It's not their fault though. It's just – we probably should have gotten it earlier which they couldn't have known that. We didn't know that. Looking back, yeah." – Young person No. 2

Conclusion

- YFM an innovative and unique service offering that should be expanded to make a meaningful impact
- Harnesses and promotes inter-agency collaboration
- Flexible, non-judgemental and impartial
- Enhances communication and reduces conflict
- Prevents early home leaving
- Promotes continued engagement in schooling / alternative route
- Far cheaper than care/ residential care/ homelessness (see report)
- ***Mediation as early intervention*** **found to be more effective and efficient**
- **Leads to key question:**
  - **With early intervention, who do you target and how?**

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Recommendations

Short-term

- Focus Ireland/Tusla to reassess target group (early / crisis intervention)
- Overhaul data collection practices
- Clear and accessible info on service for families

Medium-term

- Upskill pool of staff with mediation qualifications
- Support mediators through stress management and self-care strategies
- Strengthen international partnership and connections

Long-term

- For Dpt of Housing to significantly increase investment and resources to mediation
- For Tusla to allocate more budget to mediation under early intervention efforts
- To consider replicating a Community of Schools and Youth Services (COSS) as seen in Australia, Wales and Canada (Kania and Cramer, 2011).
- Harness data initiatives, data merging and cross-sectoral collaboration to develop Upstream Ireland.

Focus Ireland

Acknowledgments

- Focus Ireland as funders
- Research advisory group
- Kathleena Twomey, Research Assistant, Focus Ireland
- YFM Services Team
- Stakeholders who participated in evaluation
- Families who shared their views and personal experiences

Download report here:
https://www.focusireland.ie/knowledge-hub/evaluations/

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Thank you.
Any questions?

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