
Homeless Non-Governmental Organisations and the Role of Research

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› **Abstract** *This paper explores the reciprocal and often complex relationships between homelessness research and NGOs, with a particular focus on the role and motives of homeless NGOs in commissioning and undertaking research and the impact this research has on NGO practice. The paper also explores the influence on NGOs of research emanating from the broader research community, using Focus Ireland, an Irish Homeless NGO, as a case study. The ethical challenges of NGO homelessness research reflect those of the wider research community whether academic or state sponsored, with additional unease regarding the potential exploitation of NGO clients. Citing such concerns, some NGOs refuse to engage in research, arguing that their primary role is to address clients' personal problems; however, such a stance may unwittingly buttress individual interpretations of homelessness with a consequent downplaying of structural issues. The paper suggests that impact of research findings on the practice of service delivery is rarely direct and sometimes hard to detect. The paper concludes with identifying possible conduits for the communication and transfer of research findings.*

› **Keywords** *NGO research on homelessness, ethical concerns, communication of research findings*

Introduction

The European Journal of Homelessness aims to provide “a critical analysis of policy and practice on homelessness in Europe for policy makers, practitioners, researchers and academics.” While a number of articles over the years have explored the relationship between research and policy-making at Government and regional levels, rather less attention has been given to the relationship between research and the organisations where most actual practice takes place – non-governmental organisations (NGOs) providing services to people who are homeless. It is timely in this reflective edition of the Journal to look at the relationship between these organisations (which I shall refer to, for convenience, as ‘homeless NGOs’) and research carried out into the causes, effects and solutions to homelessness.

There are two broad dimensions to this relationship. The first concerns the extent to which the growing body of research available has impacted on the practice of NGOs: do the findings of research programmes find their way into the practice of NGOs services to the homeless? And if so how does this transfer take place? There is limited documentation on this question, so I will reflect on the extent to which an understanding of the flows into and out of homelessness and the effectiveness of Housing First approaches have been absorbed within the sector.

The second question relates to the role of homelessness NGOs in commissioning and undertaking research. Some homeless NGOs invest a significant portion of their resources in research and NGO-funded research makes a significant contribution to the overall research undertaken into homelessness. However, by no means all homeless NGOs engage in research in this way. So, why do some NGOs invest scarce resources in this way? What are they trying to achieve? How does the role of research fit into the range of other functions carried out by homeless NGOs? Of equal interest, perhaps, is the question of why other homeless organisations do not invest in this area?

In exploring these questions, I will draw on the 30-year history of my own organization Focus Ireland. Over that time, Focus Ireland has had a commitment to commissioning and carrying out its own research, though this has expressed itself in different ways over the period. While I do not claim Focus Ireland’s experience is typical of the approach of other NGOs, I think it serves to demonstrate a range of approaches and challenges which are illustrative throughout the entire sector. The intention overall is to stimulate debate in future issues of the Journal which might throw some additional light on these issues.

Homeless NGOs

An exploration of why homeless NGOs invest in research needs to start from an understanding of the nature of modern NGOs. Depiction of homeless charities, understandably, tends to concentrate almost exclusively on the 'front-line services', the engagement with and accommodation of people who are homeless. However contemporary homeless NGOs are complex organisations with a range of functions – Fundraising, Human Resources, Communications, Marketing and Advocacy as well as Services.

Given the decision-making processes involved, a number of different interests will have to be convinced of the value of any proposed research project before it is approved. The research must fit into some plan – either to modify or launch an internal service or to garner support or funds for the service, or in some cases to seek changes in public policies.

The fact that research is commissioned with some intended purpose can itself undermine the credibility of NGO research. Fitzpatrick and Christian (2006) speak for many when they comment that NGOs 'can be more concerned with providing effective campaigning material than with obtaining reliable evidence'. Their observation can be interpreted as 'campaigning intentions result in poor research' but I don't see the problem here as an intention to generate campaign material, but rather that the NGOs are seen to have allowed this objective to deflect them from the essential task of research: credibility. In my experience, the more important lesson is that 'poor research results in poor campaign materials.'

The investment of homeless NGOs in research can be significant – 40% of Irish research into homelessness over the almost 40-year period from the 1970s until 2008 was commissioned by the voluntary sector (O'Sullivan, 2008) – so it matters whether the output is considered to be credible.

There is no reason to single out NGO research for special scepticism. Jacobs *et al.* (1999, p.11) characterised all research on homelessness as an attempt by 'vested interests' to 'impose their particular definition on policy debates and to push the homelessness issue as they define it either higher up or lower down the policy agenda'. In relation to state funded research, we could easily hypothesise a tendency to minimise the level of homelessness and the extent to which it is caused by state policies rather than the poor choices of the people affected.

Similar reservations can, of course, be applied to 'academic research'. A quick search on Google Scholar for the term 'homelessness' finds 12,300 scholarly articles which were published in 2015 alone. Most of these papers need to be approached with a caution concerning the, sometimes arcane, theoretical framework they explore, or the limitations of their methodology or of their data... and so on.

The truth is that any commissioner of research is going to have some expectation that it will have some purpose, and this risk of bias (either conscious or not) is the reason for the emphasis on clear and robust methodologies. However, the particular scepticism directed at NGO funded research has led NGOs – who are serious about this element of their work – to adopt a number of techniques aimed at providing confidence about the reliability of research outputs.

Two main tactics are employed to achieve this – external commissioning of independent experts and the creation of research committees comprising individuals who lend their professional reputation to the project. For example, from the beginning Focus Ireland established a ‘Social Policy Committee’ which comprised people with recognised academic credibility, one of whom (Mary McAleese) was later to be elected as President of Ireland. This structure has been continued over the history of the organisation and many of the most respected social policy researchers in Ireland have served on the committee over the years. The Chair of the committee is also a member of the organisation’s Board, bringing this expertise and credibility to the most senior level.

Nevertheless, even if the most rigorous standards are maintained in the actual research, the selection of the aspect of homelessness to be researched and the research question are inevitably framed by the objectives of the organisation commissioning them. It might be useful then to look behind the broad label of ‘providing effective campaigning material’ at the range of possible intentions that NGOs may have in commissioning research, and the effects of this.

Internal and Externally Facing Research

The most common engagement between NGOs and the research community is through commissioned evaluations of services. In general evaluations commissioned by homeless NGOs are internally focused – they look at the services which the NGO delivers to ascertain whether they are effective. Much of what homeless NGOs describe as their ‘research budget’ goes on such activities. The impact of such internally focused evaluations on public policy can be limited and, in the all too many cases where the NGO does not publish the result, non-existent.

In the case of Focus Ireland, there has been a commitment through the life of the organisation to regular evaluation of services, with evaluations published and senior staff given responsibility to ensure that their recommendations are implemented. The growing prevalence of competitive tendering of homeless services can create a reluctance to publish internal evaluations, for fear of revealing sensitive information to competitors. This is unfortunate as high quality internal evaluations can be used by homeless NGOs to gain broader public policy support for innovative

practice. In my experience, openness to undertaking and publishing critical self-evaluation is linked to a genuine broader interest in conducting and publishing externally facing research. At the very least, an evaluation programme develops expertise in constructing effective research questions and commissioning researchers. The current shift from 'process evaluation' to 'outcome' and 'impact' evaluations, as well as practices such as 'social return on investment', mean that such evaluations have the capacity to make a significant contribution to public policy (Royce *et al.*, 2015).

Homeless NGOs have also used the tactic of commissioning evaluations of public policy as a tool to influence how policy develops. Rhodes and Brooke (2010) explore the role of evaluation on homeless policy in Ireland from 1988 until 2008. In the first phase between 1988-95, two of the three evaluations they identify were commissioned by homeless NGOs (Focus Ireland and the National Campaign for the Homeless). During the second phase, all four evaluations were commissioned by state actors. In the final phase reviewed (2001-2008), two of the nine evaluations were commissioned by NGOs (Focus Ireland/MakeRoom and the National Simon Communities of Ireland).

The authors conclude that both NGO and statutory evaluations have an impact on the policy making process, concluding that "many of the recommendations in the evaluations were accepted and subsequently implemented, whether they originated in reports from the non-profit sector or from evaluations commissioned by government bodies" (p.158). All the NGO-funded evaluations used one or both of the tactics identified above: either contracting authors who can be seen as independent from the commissioning NGOs, or 'advisory committees' which serve the same function.

Research as 'Agenda Setting'.

There are some, mainly faith-based, voluntary organisations providing services to people who are homeless which seek to do so without drawing attention to their work or the lives of the people they serve. However, it would appear that the majority of homeless NGOs wish to draw attention to the extent of homelessness. The motivations for this are numerous and will be discussed later, but at the most fundamental level the organisations are saying: "we are tackling a problem here that, for a variety of reasons, society at large is not paying enough attention to. Pay attention."

Research is one attractive and effective instrument for attracting this attention. The publication of research reports is one of the most effective ways to generate media coverage and public debate (Davis, 2009). In this sense, NGOs can be seen as using research to further their attempts at 'agenda setting' – that is trying to influence 'what issues are talked about' (McCombs and Shaw, 1972).

The emergence of Focus Ireland in 1985 is closely related to an agenda setting piece of research concerning women and homelessness carried out by the organisation's founder, Sister Stanislaus Kennedy (Kennedy, 1985), a member of the Irish Sisters of Charity. The research came at a time when homelessness in Ireland was perceived to be largely a male problem, and female homelessness was represented only by the image of the 'eccentric bag lady' (Focus Ireland, 2011, pp.13-15). The research report, "But Where Can I Go?", revealed a substantial level of 'invisible' female homelessness in Dublin. Furthermore, it identified a significant population of 'hidden homeless' women who were not availing of the official shelter system. For the first time, it characterised as 'homeless' the women who had been part of Ireland's Magdalene Laundry system (Smith, 2007) and were now living in convents without tenancy or other rights (Kennedy, 1985). The first services provided by Focus Ireland grew out of a response to these research findings. This set a model of organisational development involving research and service deployment which characterised the next ten years of growth.

Beyond Agenda Setting

But agenda setting is not a value free activity – the issues which are selected and the research question posed have a crucial impact on the how the issue is 'framed' when it gets onto the agenda. As has been noted, the selection of the research question is strongly influenced by the objectives of the organisation, and the particular balance of different functions within the organisation at a particular time.

Both O'Sullivan (2008) and Rhodes and Brooke (2010) note the extent to which homeless NGO research included recommendations proposing that statutory organisations produce more accurate data on the extent of homelessness. Since 2014, there has been a substantial improvement in such data and the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government now publishes the number of individuals using state-funded accommodation on a monthly basis (O'Sullivan, 2016), and the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive publishes 'infographics' setting out the use of its services. Thus, there is less need for homeless NGOs to commission work on the extent of homelessness.

The impact of this better access to reliable data has been uneven. Since 2005, the Dublin local authorities have published a twice-yearly point-in-time count of rough sleepers. Even though the NGOs participate in this count, the practice of conducting independent counts persists. The announcement of the 'official' figure is frequently preceded or followed by the announcement of 'unofficial' counts by one or other of the NGOs with a strong engagement in street work. While the quoted unofficial figure is invariably higher than the official figure, the variance is not sufficiently large to suggest a radically different picture. Nevertheless, the unofficial figure frequently gets more coverage than the official figure, with a regular media implication that the NGO figure is better informed.

This reflects another role which publication of research can have – in particular the publication of a regular measurement of a public phenomenon. It not only fills a gap in knowledge, it also asserts 'ownership' of the issue and control over when and how it is discussed. A strange expression of this is the way in which media reports frequently attribute ownership of Government statistics to homeless NGOs, who may be only quoting the official figures to comment on them (for example, Newstalk, 2016; Irish Times, 2016a).

In their eventually successful pursuit of more accurate data, the homeless NGOs were fulfilling one of their traditional tasks – taking on roles which should be the role of the state but which have been neglected. This reflects the role of the NGO as a 'social innovator' or 'pathfinder', developing areas of social action which the state is too impoverished or hidebound to deliver – and then at some later stage hand them over to the state (National Economic and Social Council, 2005).

Focus Ireland does not see itself as having a responsibility to undertake all the research that is needed, any more than we see ourselves having the overall responsibility to end homelessness on our own. In both cases the task must be completed with other civic society actors with the central role being played by the state (through policies that deliver affordable secure housing, access to income, health service etc.). In line with this, we have recommended in our pre-budget submission to Government (Focus Ireland, 2016) that they should ring-fence 0.1% of expenditure on homelessness for research and evaluation – central government funding of homeless services in 2016 was approximately €100m. While this seems a tiny proportion of expenditure when compared with, for instance the research investment in the Canadian Chez-Soi project (Aubry *et al.*, 2015) or the Australian 'Journeys Home' project (see Herault and Johnson, this issue) it would represent a massive increase in the research budget in Ireland. Equally we have proposed that the Department of Housing establish a 'Research Co-ordination Committee' through which NGOs engaging in research could collaborate to avoid duplication and maximise the impact of our expenditure. At the time of writing, neither proposal has been met with success.

Research and Service Users

One of the great strengths of homeless NGOs in conducting research is their access to the service users themselves. This can give an insight into the real experiences of people who are homeless which is hard to access through other means. There are real ethical and practical limitations to the extent to which a homeless NGO can see its customer base as a population to be researched. Research can be seen as intrusive and an abuse of the power that the service provider has in relation to the person who is homeless.

One of the strongest proponents of this view in Ireland is Alice Leahy, the CEO of the homeless NGO 'Trust'. Irish Times (2016b, see also Leahy and Dempsey, 1995) has objected to people who are homeless being used by what she called the 'research industry'. Her argument is based not only on the level of intrusion ("we must never forget that we are working with human beings, who for the most part have been battered by our society and who for so long have been pushed about as just another number in a cold inhuman bureaucracy."), but also on the fact that a lot of research has no impact – "we know research is required, but we all know reports are gathering dust all over the place".

These broad objections to 'research' tend to come from homeless NGOs which have a moral stance of 'asking no questions' and refusing to ask people anything at all about their circumstances. While these views can be seen as overstated they cannot be dismissed. Given the clandestine lives of some people who are homeless (which may derive from mental health issues or real well-founded concerns about the consequences of the state becoming aware of their whereabouts) such services can reach people who would not engage with services which collect and share information on service interactions. However, this approach tends to go along with a conception of homelessness which is individualistic and a model of service which helps people cope with homelessness while doing nothing to bring it to an end. 'Accepting people as they are' can easily result in accepting the world as it is, while lamenting it loudly but ineffectually.

The ethical questions raised by using services data for research have long been understood in the sector, and Focus Ireland established a written research ethics policy over 20 years ago. In recent years, this has been augmented by an independent Research Ethics Committee which can scrutinise relevant research proposals coming either from the organisation or originating from external researchers seeking our cooperation in contacting service users.

One way to avoid intrusion into the privacy of service users can be to use the data which services collect anyway in the course of their work. However, this 'gold mine' of data can prove hard to refine – data collected for services purposes often proves

frustratingly difficult to organise for research purpose. Whenever researchers seek additional data fields, it involves another question to an individual who is in crisis, and diverts the front-line worker from their primary role of supporting the client.

Even in an organisation like Focus Ireland, with a commitment to research going back 30 years, this distance between how services and research staff think runs very deep. Only in the last 12 months has Focus Ireland adopted a practice of requesting permission from customers to allow us to contact them after disengagement. Without this it has proven impossible, for data protection reasons, to conduct follow up or longitudinal studies with the customers which we have housed. It took a lot of discussion to build a shared set of priorities with our services so that this permission is now obtained. From next year we will follow up every customer we have housed or prevented from becoming homeless, six months after we have disengaged from them, to ascertain their current status. This will generate not only management information on the effectiveness of our work but also a substantial research base for housing outcomes. While we hope this will produce some insights, we need to remain conscious of the limitations of this data – of course, it only includes people who we already know.

One of the dangers for an NGO which invests in research is that it can become determined to get research corroboration of what it ‘already knows’. While researchers almost always have some expectation of what they will find, some expectation or hypothesis that they are testing, it should deliver some surprises – if it does not then there is probably something wrong with the research programme.

It is self-evident that problems will arise for commissioner and researcher where what the organisation ‘already knows’ is not substantiated by the evidence. How such problems are resolved largely depends upon the contract and integrity of the organisation and the researcher. However, a much more significant problem is nothing to do with integrity, but arises through the unconscious process by which homeless NGOs establish their research question in the first place.

There is an inevitable tendency for an organisation to understand a problem through its own day-to-day experience and the stories related by the people it works with. This is what Sen (1993, 2011) calls ‘positional objectivity’, the process through which an honest and unbiased observer can draw what s/he believes to be an objective conclusion about a situation which turns out to be erroneous because the picture is not fully observed. A judgement can be said to be ‘positionally objective’ if any observer in that position would accept the same judgement.

If you are running a homeless shelter, the majority of your interactions with people who are homeless are likely to be with people who are chronically homeless and have multiple and complex needs. It is reasonable – and appears to be an objective,

experience-based observation – to say that this is what people who are homeless are like. This perception is reinforced when you have a commitment to listening to the ‘lived experience’ of the people you are supporting. Everything they tell you corroborates this understanding of the nature of homelessness. Further corroboration can then be found when you conduct research which finds a high prevalence of mental health problems, addiction and adverse childhood experiences among the people you are working with. And all this is true. But it turns out not to be the whole story.

A genuine commitment to research must involve a willingness to stand back from the day-to-day reality which dominates your vision and see what the broader picture reveals. Kuhn and Culhane’s (1998) paradigm-shifting research directed attention to a very different picture of homelessness. Their review of administrative data on public shelter use in New York City and Philadelphia provided the insight that people who are chronically homeless represent around only 10% of the total number of people who used public shelters over several years. A further 10% were ‘episodic users’ and 80% only used the shelter for very short periods. The chronically homeless, though only comprising 10% of the individuals who uses the shelters, took up over 50% of the bed-nights and therefore appear to be the authentic face of homelessness.

This dynamic picture of homelessness does not match with the everyday experience of front-line staff dedicated to responding to the problem. The divergence can lead experienced front-line staff and volunteers to be dismissive of all research. The staff of homeless NGOs know for certain what ‘homeless people are like’ because that is what most of the homeless people they engage with do actually look like. It is not surprising perhaps that researchers who contradict what staff and volunteers see with their own eyes are met with cries of “What do these researchers know anyway?!”

Kuhn and Culhane’s insight has become axiomatic in some parts of the homeless sector, but remains totally unknown in others. Homeless NGOs which are not research-informed will still describe ‘the homeless’ as exclusively consisting of people with complex needs and long-term experience of homelessness. Those who are more informed by Kuhn and Culhane’s work will contextualise what they see in their work with an understanding of patterns of inflow and exit from homelessness. In this context, Sen’s ‘positional objectivity’ comes down to not being in a position to tell the difference between ‘stock’ and ‘flow’. If Kuhn and Culhane’s insight can be seen as a genuine paradigm shift in the understanding of homelessness (or allowed to stand as a marker of a broader range of research, including the Housing First research, which resulted in a paradigm shift), the shift is by no means yet complete. There are major organisations, key policy makers and whole systems which continue to operate within the old understanding – and commission research structured in such a way that it appears to confirm the old, static conception.

Research and Fundraising

A frequent motivation for publishing research is to attract the attention of potential donors. In Ireland, like many other countries, NGOs working with people who are homeless rely to a significant extent on fundraising to provide their services. For instance, 45% of the income of Focus Ireland comes from public fundraising. As a result of this, the fundraising departments of homeless NGOs exert a significant influence on the identity and communications strategy of the organisations. This has a number of potential impacts on the way in which the organisation may wish to portray homelessness, and this may influence any research programme it has.

Government funding in many countries increasingly comes with strings. The constraints which can be imposed by public sector commissioners on service provision have been widely documented, sometimes explicitly shaping only the nature of the service but also applying performance indicators which are so demanding as to exclude certain hard to reach groups. In Ireland, State commissioning of homeless services has not significantly shifted service approaches away from the approaches favoured by the NGOs themselves, and has to date largely proceeded within a shared perspective of what services need to be delivered. Nevertheless, in the broader NGO sector there has been a perception that some state agencies have used the commissioning process to limit the traditional role of NGOs as the 'voice for the poor' (Harvey, 2014). Generating a significant proportion of funds from private donations can be seen both as a means of funding innovative front line services and a way of achieving some degree of freedom of expression. However, things are never that simple and the expectations and perceptions of potential donors create a new set of constraints.

To encourage people to donate you need to package homelessness in a way that evokes emotional engagement. Throughout the homeless sector, this consideration has led to a tendency to present the public with the images of homelessness that they are expecting to see, largely involving rough sleepers and street life. As a body of research has emerged which demonstrates that the majority of people who experience homelessness are not chronic rough sleepers (Kuhn and Culhane, 1998; Bejaminsen and Andrade, 2015), there has been increased pressure on homeless NGOs to review the way in which they present homelessness for fundraising purposes. In addition to reinforcing public misconceptions of homelessness, these images serve to shape public policy responses to the problem. A case can be made for a strong interaction between the dominance of the 'rough sleeper' image of homelessness and the dominance of shelter provision as the primary response to the problem.

While homeless NGOs are not the only organisations putting out these stereotypical images of homelessness – even broadsheet media stories concerning homeless families are routinely illustrated with an image of a rough sleeping man – but it is hard for a more complex public perception of homelessness to emerge from the research when the organisations most deeply engaged with the issue use images which reinforce traditional understandings.

The growing proportion of homeless NGO funding which comes from corporate and foundation donors opens up some interesting new opportunities here. Corporate donors bring with them the practice of looking closely at outcomes and are open to arguments about the importance of, say, prevention and long-term sustainable solutions. They are also much more likely to directly support research projects. The last three years have seen Focus Ireland more than double the budget it is able to invest in projects which are broadly defined as ‘research.’ All this increase has come from corporate and foundation support, and includes funding for detailed studies of the impact of homeless prevention programmes, the causes of family homelessness and what can be done to reduce the impact of that experience on children. Such funders also recognise the power of randomised control trials (RCTs), and it is only practical limitations which have prevented such donors funding such research to date.

Research, Timing and People

Both O’Sullivan (2008) and Rhodes and Brooke (2010) show a strong emphasis on research in the early, formative stages of organisations. While the Simon Communities of Ireland have contributed to research over their 40-year history, their most active and influential period of research was in their early years where they produced research which continue to shape policy and legislation today (e.g. Hart, 1978; Collins and McKeown, 1992). Similarly, Focus Ireland followed up the research on homeless women, with significant projects on youth homelessness, care leavers and on standards in emergency shelters (Focus Point and the Eastern Health Board, 1989; Kelleher, 1990; Kelleher et al, 2000; Kelleher et al., 1992), with much lower output from the mid-90s onward.

Both these organisations can be seen to use research to ‘set out their stall’ and mark out the understanding of homelessness which they will address in their services. The predominance of state-funded research from the mid-1990s can be seen as a reflection of the development of state institutions tackling homelessness (Rhodes and Brooke, 2008). It can also be seen as the state and NGO sector playing different roles – the NGO sector having mapped out the main contours of a new understanding of homelessness, with the State sector then responding and filling

in the key operational elements, while the NGO sector stood back. It is important to note that funding for homelessness increased dramatically during this period, so access to resources was not an issue.

The introduction and continuance of a research tradition is also dependent on the particular influence of individuals. Sr. Stan in the case of Focus Ireland and, in the case of the Simon Communities, their Head of Policy, Brian Harvey – who incidentally was one of the founders, and later President of FEANTSA and helped establish the European Observatory on Homelessness. While both Focus Ireland and the Simon Communities continued to commission occasional influential research projects from the mid-1990s until 2008, the emphasis on research of both organisations declined as these individuals became less active or left for other roles. Of the two other organisations noted as making a research contribution by O’Sullivan, Merchants Quay Ireland’s research programme declined from about 2008 when key staff left, while the National Campaign for the Homeless (where the approach had been highly influenced by Harvey) wound up in 1995.

The Focus Ireland research programme has continued and has recently found new energy with adoption of a Strategic Plan which commits the entire organisation to only engage in activities which either serve to prevent homelessness or support sustainable exits from it.

The rapidly changing nature of homelessness in Ireland in recent years has put a high premium on obtaining timely and reliable insights in the housing market. The situation in, for instance, the private rental sector, is changing so quickly that detailed, elaborate research is out-dated before it can be published. Focus Ireland has responded to this by publishing a series of short ‘Insights’ papers, which, for instance, present the detailed trajectories of all families becoming homeless every three months. Much of what is reliably known about the reasons behind the growth of family homelessness over the last three years comes from this Focus Ireland commissioned work.

Conclusions

Homeless NGOs undertake research for a wide variety of reasons and motivations. In undertaking that research they face a range of methodological, conceptual and data challenges, which can reduce the value and impact of their work. A lot of the work commissioned simply serves to corroborate the scale of the health, mental health and addiction problems faced by people who have spent a long period in homeless services. But it is hard to conclude that these challenges are notably more severe than the challenges facing other individuals or groups carrying out research – or that NGOs have responded less well to these challenges.

In the Irish context, there is a strong case that research undertaken by homeless NGOs has made a substantial contribution at a number of key points in the development of responses to homelessness. In the 1980s and 1990s, NGO commissioned research played a significant role in shifting public policy responses to homelessness away from individualistic, behavioural understandings of homelessness towards structural explanations which 'locate the reasons for homelessness in social and economic structures...' (O'Sullivan, 2008, p.21). Simultaneously, consistent pressure from NGOs for better data on the numbers of people experiencing homelessness has resulted in very substantial improvements in data collection and publication, which in turn must feed into better policy making.

As public policy response to these insights, NGO-led research shifted to a different role of attempting to hold the state to its commitments through independent evaluations of progress. These served not only to highlight shortfalls but also successes, and enabled the NGO sector to engage constructively in the review and formulation of strategy in the mid-00s (Brownlee 2008, p.37).

A number of new challenges arise now in setting out a constructive research agenda for NGO commissioned research. Longitudinal research and RCT studies are now recognised as providing the most credible understanding of homelessness and the impact of policies to tackle it, and both raise real challenges for NGOs. Longitudinal studies require a long-term, multi-annual budgetary commitment which is difficult for NGOs to make. Focus Ireland found resources within its own budget to fund the first phase of a substantial research project into the experiences of young people facing homelessness (Mayock *et al.*, 2014), but to carry out the second phase and turn it into a longitudinal study we needed to bring in funding from a number of other homeless NGOs. This form of collaborative funding of research was used in the past (through the National Campaign for the Homeless and MakeRoom) and may be a useful way forward. However, the third phase of the study, scheduled for 2018, is by no means secure. Establishing RCTs for homeless policies raise both logistical and ethical questions which are difficult for NGOs to navigate.

The decision of an organisation to invest some of its resources in research must reflect a particular pre-existing understanding of homelessness within the organisation (or of an influential person within it). It is appealing to think that organisations which invest in serious research must be predisposed to see homelessness as a problem that can be solved and they are looking to identify what solutions actually work. However, it is equally possible to envisage an organisation committed to, say, providing a soup run, commissioning research to show the beneficial effects of soup or to determine how much soup is required to meet all needs – thus leading to fund raising campaign. There appears to me to be a lot more research which at least aims at ‘problem solving’ than there is ‘soup research’, but this may be due to selective reading.

There remains the deeper question of how homeless NGOs absorb broader research findings and adapt their programmes in response. The research programme associated with the Housing First programme is the most substantial and purposeful strand in homeless research over the last two decades. Many homeless NGOs have now adopted the HF approach, albeit with a wide variation in substantive change or rhetorical adoption. There can be little doubt that a large number of published RTC trials and other detailed analysis is one of the key factors in the widespread adoption of Housing First approaches. However, there can be equally little doubt that this influence did not take place through service managers and policy maker actually reading the published papers – or indeed even the abstracts of them. Most people do not read research papers and few enough people read anything at all after they have completed their formal training – lessons get communicated in other ways, they trickle down, or get brought into the team by younger staff who have just completed formal training. The question is what trickles down and whether, after it has trickled down, it still means the same thing as it did when it started.

For this reason, one of the fundamental challenges for homeless NGOs in relation to research is communicating it to the right people, inside the organisation and in the policy sphere. One of the most important innovations in the Focus Ireland research programme over the last number of years has been our regular ‘lunchtime talks’ and occasional evening talks, both delivered in partnership with Trinity Colleges’ School of Social Work and Social Policy. These talks are open to everyone interested in homeless policy and research in Dublin and regularly attract an audience of around 40 people. Plans in the new year to stream the talks to Focus Ireland services in other cities should increase the audience further. For a number of years we published a regular summary of contemporary relevant research. This was largely superseded by the availability of updates from Canada’s excellent Homeless Hub, but the publications of a localised research summary tailored to the current issues facing front line staff remains a part of our work programme.

Addressing the question of how to communicate research findings to the staff who interact with people who are homeless in a way which improves practice and outcomes inevitably throws attention back on the most basic of questions – how do we make our research questions relevant? This perhaps is one of the most significant contribution which homeless NGO-led research can bring to the project of research. A constructive and critical dialogue with the front-line staff and service users can lead us to ask the right, timely questions. If we get this right, while standing well enough back to give ourselves the wider perspective, research and learning can contribute to the effective elimination of persistent homelessness as a social phenomenon.

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