Children's Voices in Family Homelessness: Generational Divergences in Residential Support

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Abstract_ *Family homelessness has become increasingly visible across Europe, yet children's perspectives remain underrepresented and are often mediated through adult narratives. This research note addresses this gap through a qualitative case study conducted in a temporary residential facility for families experiencing residential exclusion in Mallorca, Spain. The study combines semi-structured interviews with adults and an adapted participatory walking interview with children to explore how homelessness and residential support are experienced within the family unit. Rather than treating the household as a unified analytical category, the research examines the divergences that emerge between adult and childhood perspectives. More specifically, the study asks what becomes visible when children's voices are placed at the centre of the analysis of family homelessness and residential support. The findings reveal significant generational divergences. While adults tend to frame the residential resource as a space of stabilization and safety, children experience it through transience, relational disruption, institutional routines, and continuous adaptation. The study also shows that children actively negotiate their situation through peer relations, identity management, and everyday forms of agency within the resource. The findings suggest that material provision alone is insufficient to understand well-being in contexts of family homelessness. Children's accounts highlight the importance of relational, symbolic and everyday dimensions that frequently remain invisible in household-centered approaches. The article argues for the systematic inclusion of children's voices in homelessness research and for greater attention to childhood experience in the design of residential support services.*

ISSN 2030-2762 / ISSN 2030-3106 online

Keywords_ *Family homelessness; Children's voices; qualitative research; generational divergences; Childhood agency.*

Introduction

Family homelessness has become an increasingly visible form of residential exclusion across Europe, particularly in contexts marked by housing shortages, rising rental prices and growing socioeconomic insecurity (Baptista et al., 2017; Horvat and Coupechoux, 2024). Despite this trend, research on homelessness has historically focused on single adults, especially men sleeping rough, while family homelessness has remained comparatively underexplored (Brush et al., 2016; Grant et al., 2013). At the same time, studies that do examine families frequently approach the household as a homogeneous unit of experience, assuming that homelessness and residential support are lived similarly by all family members.

Within this framework, children's experiences have often remained secondary or indirectly represented through adult narratives. Although the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) recognizes children as subjects of rights, including the right to participation, research on homelessness has continued to reproduce predominantly adult-centered perspectives (Beazley et al., 2009; Liebel et al., 2018). This limitation is particularly relevant in the field of family homelessness, where children are usually considered dependents affected by housing instability rather than social actors capable of interpreting and negotiating their own experiences.

Recent research has begun to underline the importance of incorporating childhood perspectives into the analysis of housing exclusion and homelessness (Lovell, 2020; Mayock & Neary, 2025; Warren & Barnes, 2023). These studies suggest that children's priorities do not necessarily coincide with those identified by adults or institutions. While policy responses frequently prioritize material protection and housing stabilization, children tend to emphasize dimensions related to safety, belonging, routines, peer relationships, and emotional predictability (Moore et al., 2008). Incorporating children's voices therefore does not simply broaden existing knowledge but may alter the analytical understanding of homelessness itself.

This perspective becomes especially relevant in temporary residential resources for families. These services are generally designed to provide protection, stability, and support during periods of housing crisis. However, they also regulate everyday life through institutional routines, shared spaces and behavioural norms that shape family relationships and childhood experiences in specific ways. Existing research has pointed out that institutional responses to homelessness may affect family

dynamics, parental roles and children's well-being beyond material conditions alone (Mayberry et al., 2014; Milaney et al., 2019). Nevertheless, little attention has been paid to how children themselves experience these environments and how their accounts may differ from adult interpretations of the same residential setting.

This research note addresses this gap through a qualitative case study conducted in a temporary residential facility for families experiencing residential exclusion in Mallorca, Spain. The study combines semi-structured interviews with adults and an adapted participatory walking interview with children to explore how homelessness and residential support are experienced within the family unit. Rather than treating the household as a unified analytical category, the research examines the divergences that emerge between adult and childhood perspectives.

The findings show that while adults often frame the residential resource as a space of stabilization and temporary security after periods of acute housing insecurity, children experience it through transience, relational disruption, institutional regulation and continuous adaptation. At the same time, children actively negotiate their situation through peer relations, identity management, and everyday forms of agency within the resource itself.

The article argues that incorporating children's voices is not only an ethical or participatory requirement but also an analytical necessity for understanding family homelessness more comprehensively. By foregrounding childhood experience, the study challenges the assumption of the household as a homogeneous unit of well-being and highlights the importance of relational, symbolic, and everyday dimensions in the experience of residential exclusion.

Children's voices and family homelessness

Research on family homelessness has traditionally relied on adult-centered perspectives, with children's experiences commonly mediated through parental narratives, institutional assessments or household-level indicators (Lovell, 2020; Mayock & Neary, 2023). Even when children are identified as one of the groups most affected by housing instability, they frequently appear as passive recipients of care and protection rather than as social actors capable of interpreting, negotiating, and giving meaning to their own circumstances.

This tendency reflects broader adult-centric traditions in social research. Different authors have questioned the historical marginalization of children's voices in knowledge production, arguing that childhood has often been approached through frameworks that privilege adult interpretations and concerns (Beazley et al., 2009; Liebel et al., 2018). Within this context, participation is not understood merely as

consultation, but as the recognition of children as competent social subjects whose experiences provide situated forms of knowledge that cannot be fully replaced by adult accounts.

The incorporation of children's perspectives becomes especially relevant in the analysis of homelessness and residential exclusion. Existing literature suggests that children's priorities and perceptions may differ significantly from those of adults. Whereas institutional responses tend to focus on material provision, housing access, and safety, children frequently emphasize aspects linked to everyday life, emotional stability, peer relationships, belonging, and predictability (Moore et al., 2008).

In recent years, some studies have begun to explore childhood experiences of homelessness more directly. Research has shown that children experiencing housing instability actively develop strategies of adaptation, negotiate social identities, and interpret institutional environments in complex ways (Martorell & Carrasco, 2020; Warren & Barnes, 2023). At the same time, homelessness may affect dimensions that exceed material deprivation alone, including emotional security, continuity of relationships and the capacity to sustain routines and social belonging (Murran & Brady, 2023).

This perspective challenges approaches that implicitly assume that improving household material conditions automatically translates into well-being for all family members. Family homelessness involves shared material circumstances, but these conditions are experienced differently according to generational position, social roles, and everyday interactions. Incorporating children's voices therefore has important epistemological implications, as it questions the household as a homogeneous subject of experience and highlights dimensions of institutional life, belonging and well-being that frequently remain obscured in adult-centered analyses.

In this study, incorporating children's voices was not conceived as an additional or complementary dimension of the research but as a central analytical strategy. The objective was not simply to compare adult and childhood accounts, but to examine how children's experiences reconfigure the understanding of family homelessness itself. By foregrounding children's perspectives, the study explores dimensions of residential support that remain less visible in adult-centered analyses, particularly those related to institutional everyday life, peer relations, agency and the relational dimensions of well-being.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case study design centered on a temporary residential resource for families experiencing residential exclusion in Mallorca, Spain. The case study approach was selected to explore in depth how homelessness and residential support are experienced within the family unit, paying particular attention to generational differences between adults and children.

The research was carried out in *Es Convent*, a temporary residential facility managed by the Sant Joan de Déu Foundation in collaboration with public administrations. The resource accommodates families with dependent children who are experiencing different forms of residential exclusion and operates under a staircase model combining temporary accommodation with social and professional support. Families access the resource after experiencing situations such as overcrowding, housing insecurity, temporary accommodation with acquaintances, informal subletting, or episodes of homelessness.

The study combined two qualitative techniques designed to gather both adult and childhood perspectives. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with adults responsible for the household, while an adapted participatory walking interview was developed specifically for children. The objective was not only to compare perspectives but to examine how childhood experience contributes distinct forms of knowledge regarding homelessness and residential support.

Twelve family units participated in the study. The adult sample included ten two-parent migrant families, one migrant female single-parent family, and one Spanish female single-parent family. Adult participants ranged in age from 22 to 58 years old, with the exception of one 75-year-old grandmother who played a caregiving role within the household. The interviews lasted approximately one hour and explored residential trajectories, experiences within the resource, family dynamics, and expectations regarding the future.

Five children between 6 and 11 years old participated in the childhood activity. The group included children of Spanish, Central American, and South American origin. The activity lasted approximately four hours and took place entirely within the residential centre. The sample was not intended to be statistically representative, but rather exploratory and analytically oriented within the framework of qualitative research.

The incorporation of children as direct research participants responds to an epistemological position that questions the traditional adult centrality in homelessness research. Existing literature has shown that children's experiences frequently remain mediated through parental narratives, even in studies focused on families

(Beazley et al., 2009; Liebel & Markowska-Manista, 2021). In contrast, this study sought to access children's experiences directly through a methodological design adapted to their everyday environment and forms of expression.

The childhood research tool was constructed through a contextual adaptation of the child well-being indicators developed by UNICEF's Innocenti Research Centre (Adamson et al., 2007). Rather than applying these indicators abstractly, the study translated them into dimensions associated with concrete spaces inside the residential facility. This adaptation aimed to facilitate situated conversation grounded in children's daily experiences.

Different areas of the centre were linked to specific dimensions of well-being. The room or apartment was associated with privacy, family coexistence, and personal belongings; the dining room with food and everyday routines; outdoor spaces with leisure and friendships; the study room with schooling and relationships with teachers and classmates; the playroom with emotions, autonomy, and the experience of being listened to; and the offices with relationships with professionals. Finally, the entrance of the building was used to discuss connections with the neighbourhood and life outside the centre.

The activity adopted the form of a walking group interview. Children moved collectively through the different spaces while questions linked to each dimension were introduced progressively. This format reduced conceptual abstraction by situating discussions within familiar environments and concrete experiences. At the same time, the group dynamic facilitated interaction between participants, enabling shared reflection, collective validation of experiences, and spontaneous conversations between peers.

The methodological design also sought to minimize the imposition of adult categories during the research process. The gamified and mobile structure of the activity generated a more flexible environment than conventional interview settings and allowed children to redirect conversations toward dimensions they considered relevant. This proved particularly important in identifying aspects of institutional life and peer relationships that were less visible in adult interviews.

All interviews and activities were audio-recorded and fully anonymized. The qualitative material was analysed through thematic analysis using Atlas.ti. Coding was carried out inductively to identify recurring patterns and divergences between adult and childhood accounts. Particular attention was paid to dimensions related to well-being, institutional routines, safety, relationships, and experiences of everyday life within the resource.

Participation was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from adult participants and assent from children. The objectives of the research and the possibility of withdrawing at any moment were explained using age-appropriate language. Given the context of vulnerability, special attention was paid to emotional safety during the fieldwork process. The research team coordinated with professionals working in the resource to ensure that participation did not interfere with ongoing support processes.

The study presents limitations associated with its single-case design and the small number of participating children. In addition, the group format may have influenced individual expression in some moments. Nevertheless, the methodological approach allowed access to dimensions of childhood experience that frequently remain absent in research on family homelessness, particularly those related to institutional everyday life, peer dynamics and children's situated interpretations of residential support.

Findings

Stabilization for adults, transience for children

Families' trajectories before entering the residential resource were marked by different forms of residential instability, including overcrowding, temporary accommodation with acquaintances, informal subletting and, in some cases, episodes of homelessness. For many participants, arrival in Mallorca had initially been linked to expectations of safety, employment opportunities, or support from social networks. However, these expectations frequently collapsed after arrival, leading to situations of housing insecurity and progressive exhaustion of available resources.

"The friend of hers received her at the time, but when we arrived, we discovered that there were ulterior intentions. On the first day the baby was already born and this person told us to leave. From there, well, the whole panorama changed for us, we went out onto the street to look, we spent a terrible week." (William, father)

Within adult narratives, access to the residential centre is predominantly described as a turning point that interrupts situations of acute uncertainty and instability. Participants emphasize the importance of having a protected place to stay, regular meals, and the possibility of reorganizing everyday life after periods marked by insecurity and the absence of housing alternatives. The resource is therefore experienced primarily through a logic of stabilization and temporary relief.

For adults, this stabilization is closely linked to the possibility of protecting their children. The reduction of immediate concerns regarding accommodation, safety and daily survival generates a perception of "breathing space" that allows families

to recover a minimum capacity for planning and organization. In this sense, the residential resource is not described as resolving structural vulnerability, but as temporarily containing it.

Children's accounts, however, reveal a different experience of the same trajectories. Rather than narrating housing instability through categories such as exclusion, homelessness, or loss, children frequently reconstruct these movements as a succession of places, journeys, or temporary stays. Their narratives are less structured around rupture and more around movement and adaptation.

"In how many rooms or houses have you lived in your life?" (Interviewer)

"Eight… And in hotels too." (Alejandro, son)

"Four." (Keyla, daughter)

"Do hotels count? Ah, then twelve." (Alejandro, son)

These accounts suggest that children do not necessarily conceptualize residential exclusion using the same interpretative frameworks as adults. Nevertheless, their narratives clearly reflect continuous mobility, instability, and the absence of long-term residential reference points. The experience of homelessness therefore appears less as a singular event and more as an ongoing condition of transience.

This divergence becomes particularly visible in relation to the meaning attributed to the residential resource itself. Whereas adults emphasize safety and stabilization, children's experience is strongly shaped by adaptation to new routines, shared spaces and changing social relationships. The centre is identified as a safe environment, but this perception is mediated less by housing conditions themselves than by changes observed in adult behaviour.

Children frequently associated improvement with the emotional transformation of their parents after entering the resource. Reduced tension, greater availability for interaction, and the disappearance of immediate fear emerged as key indicators that the situation had improved. In this sense, children's sense of safety appears relationally constructed through observation of adult emotional states rather than exclusively through material conditions.

At the same time, the resource does not fully eliminate experiences of uncertainty for children. Everyday life within the centre remains marked by temporariness, changing relationships, and the anticipation of future movement. While adults often focus on administrative procedures, employment and housing searches, children place greater emphasis on peer relationships and continuity in everyday interac-

tions. Their accounts reveal the importance of maintaining friendships, negotiating coexistence, and adapting to institutional environments structured by rules and collective organization.

These findings challenge approaches that treat the household as a homogeneous unit of experience. Although adults and children inhabit the same material conditions, they interpret and experience residential support differently. For adults, the residential resource primarily represents protection from immediate housing insecurity. For children, however, the experience is shaped more strongly by mobility, adaptation and the relational dimensions of institutional everyday life.

Institutional life through children's experience

Beyond providing temporary accommodation, the residential resource actively structures everyday life through rules, schedules, and shared spaces. While adults generally interpret these organizational dynamics as necessary for coexistence and institutional functioning, children's accounts reveal a more situated experience shaped by peer relationships, negotiations around rules and the management of everyday interactions within the centre.

One of the dimensions that emerges most clearly in childhood narratives is the importance of social relationships within the resource itself. Given the instability associated with homelessness and frequent changes of residence, peer relationships inside the centre acquire particular relevance. Children describe the resource not only as a place to live temporarily, but also as a social environment where friendships, alliances, and internal hierarchies are constructed.

Within these dynamics, length of stay becomes a significant element of recognition among peers. Children who have spent more time in the centre occupy more visible positions within the group and acquire a certain symbolic status linked to their familiarity with the institutional environment.

"The one who has been here the longest is Alejandro." (Matías, son)

"But I'm the first one who is going to leave." (Alejandro, son)

This exchange illustrates the unstable nature of belonging within the resource. Recognition and social position are constructed around permanence, yet permanence itself remains temporary and uncertain. The same element that generates status simultaneously contains the threat of rupture, since leaving the centre implies losing relationships and social references built within it.

Children's accounts also reveal forms of agency that are less visible in adult narratives. Institutional rules regulating movement, coexistence, and use of space are not experienced solely as external restrictions, but as norms that children continu-

ously negotiate in everyday practice. Certain spaces of flexibility acquire particular importance because they allow children to exercise decision-making capacity and autonomy within an otherwise highly regulated environment.

"There is a rule that says you cannot go to other people's rooms. But well, we do this without some of them finding out. Some know it, but they let us." (Alejandro, son)

Rather than interpreting these practices simply as transgression, children frame them as opportunities for interaction, friendship, and collective play. The selective flexibility shown by some professionals is experienced positively because it creates spaces where children can negotiate institutional control and produce their own forms of sociality. These dynamics reveal that children are not passive recipients of institutional regulation, but active participants in the production of everyday life within the resource.

At the same time, children's accounts highlight dimensions of institutional experience that remain less visible in adult interviews, particularly those related to fear and emotional security. Although adults generally describe the centre as safe compared to previous housing situations, children identify specific moments and spaces associated with insecurity, especially where supervision decreases or where movement through common areas becomes more uncertain. Safety therefore appears as a situated and relational experience linked not only to material protection, but also to how institutional spaces are inhabited and interpreted in everyday life.

The organization of collective spaces also shapes children's experiences in ways that differ from adult priorities. Rules designed to preserve family privacy and facilitate coexistence may unintentionally limit opportunities for peer interaction. One example is the assignment of tables in the dining room according to family units. Adults rarely identify this rule as especially relevant, whereas children place strong value on the occasions when they are allowed to sit with other children during weekends. In a context where maintaining friendships outside the resource is often difficult, these moments acquire particular significance as opportunities for belonging and social continuity.

Children's narratives further reveal how institutional life exposes them to adult tensions, concerns and conflicts that are difficult to separate spatially within the residential environment. Shared living conditions and limited privacy mean that conversations related to housing insecurity, family problems or institutional processes frequently become part of children's everyday experience. As a result, children inhabit an environment where distinctions between adult and childhood spaces are often blurred.

These findings show that the experience of residential support extends far beyond accommodation itself. From children's perspectives, institutional life is shaped by negotiations around rules, the search for autonomy, peer relationships and the management of emotional security within shared spaces. These dimensions remain partially obscured when residential resources are analysed primarily through adult-centred frameworks focused on housing stabilization and service provision.

Family routines, rituals, and constrained agency

Beyond regulating coexistence and everyday interactions, the residential resource also reshapes family routines, rituals, and forms of care. These transformations affect not only the practical organization of daily life but also the relational and symbolic dimensions through which families construct well-being, parental roles, and senses of normality.

Adults frequently describe the loss of control over everyday practices previously associated with family autonomy. One of the most significant examples concerns food and cooking. Within the resource, meals are institutionalized through collective organization, schedules, and standardized provision. Although families generally value having guaranteed access to food, many adults experience the impossibility of cooking as a disruption of their parental role and their capacity to care for their children according to family preferences, cultural practices, or everyday routines.

This transformation extends beyond material provision itself. Cooking appears in adult narratives as a relational activity linked to intimacy, care and family cohesion. Its absence therefore affects not only daily organization but also the ways parents understand and perform caregiving responsibilities. Similarly, the need to discuss administrative procedures, housing searches, or institutional processes within collective spaces alters the meaning traditionally associated with moments such as shared meals or family time.

Children's accounts reveal how these institutional dynamics are also experienced through changes in rituals, celebrations and everyday forms of belonging. Within the centre, some family practices continue to exist, but under formats strongly shaped by institutional organization. Birthday celebrations provide a particularly illustrative example.

"I've already eaten the cake like four or five times. It's always the same one. Do you know what's not cool? What's not cool is that there should also be cake for the grown-ups. I mean, when an adult has a birthday, they should get one too." (Alejandro, son)

Rather than rejecting the celebration itself, children emphasize its standardized and repetitive character. The repetition of the same cake and organizational format produces a sense of homogenization that reduces opportunities for personalisation and family differentiation. Celebrations remain present, but they are reorganized through institutional logics that partially replace family initiative and autonomy.

Children also identify how these dynamics affect family roles and perceptions of normality. The fact that celebrations are organized by the institution rather than by parents alters the symbolic role traditionally associated with caregiving and family rituals. At the same time, the absence of equivalent celebrations for adults introduces asymmetries that children themselves recognize and question. These observations reveal children's active interpretation of institutional life and their awareness of how everyday practices shape family relationships and social meanings.

The findings further suggest that institutional organization may unintentionally limit forms of agency and relational continuity that are central to well-being. Routines cease to be structured primarily around family rhythms and instead become organized according to collective schedules, behavioural norms and operational requirements. Although these arrangements are necessary for coexistence within the resource, they also constrain families' capacity to sustain autonomous forms of everyday life.

Discussion and Concluding Reflections

This study shows that incorporating children's voices into the analysis of family homelessness does not simply add a complementary perspective to existing knowledge but rather reconfigures the understanding of the phenomenon itself. The findings challenge approaches that implicitly treat the household as a homogeneous unit of experience and demonstrate that homelessness and residential support are lived differently according to generational position.

Whereas adults predominantly interpret the residential resource as a space of stabilization following periods of acute housing insecurity, children experience it through transience, institutional regulation, and continuous adaptation. For adults, access to the centre represents protection from immediate residential uncertainty and the possibility of reorganizing everyday life. Children, by contrast, place greater emphasis on disrupted relationships, changing routines, peer dynamics, and the negotiation of everyday life within the institutional environment. These divergences reveal that shared material conditions do not necessarily produce shared experiences of well-being.

The study also highlights the analytical limitations of approaches that understand well-being primarily through material indicators. Although the residential resource guarantees accommodation and basic needs, children's accounts show that well-being is also constructed through relational, symbolic and everyday dimensions. Experiences of belonging, opportunities for friendship, privacy, emotional predictability, and spaces for autonomous interaction emerge as central aspects of childhood experience within the resource. These dimensions remain less visible in household-centred analyses focused mainly on housing stabilization and material protection.

At the same time, the findings show that children are not passive subjects within contexts of residential exclusion. They actively interpret institutional life, negotiate peer relationships, and develop forms of agency within the constraints of the resource. Children identify spaces of flexibility, construct informal hierarchies among peers, and produce their own readings of institutional norms and family life. This reinforces perspectives that recognize childhood as an active social position rather than solely a dependent condition mediated through adults.

The research further demonstrates that residential resources do not operate exclusively as protective services but also actively shape everyday family experience. Institutional routines, schedules, and norms reorganize family life in ways that affect parental roles, privacy, and family rituals. Practices such as cooking, celebrating birthdays, or managing intimate conversations become mediated by institutional logics that prioritize collective organization and coexistence. While these dynamics are often necessary for the functioning of the resource, they may also limit family autonomy and alter forms of care and relational continuity that are central to well-being.

In this sense, the findings suggest that the impact of residential support cannot be understood solely in terms of housing provision or immediate protection from homelessness. Temporary residential resources also configure social relations, emotional environments, and possibilities for agency. Listening to children makes these dimensions more visible and reveals aspects of institutional everyday life that are frequently overlooked in adult-centred accounts.

Methodologically, the study highlights the importance of developing research tools capable of accessing childhood experience directly in contexts of vulnerability. The adapted walking interview facilitated situated conversations grounded in everyday spaces and allowed children to articulate dimensions of institutional life that may not emerge through conventional interview formats. This approach proved especially useful in identifying how children experience rules, routines, friendships, fears, and forms of belonging within the residential environment.

The study has limitations associated with its single-case design and the reduced number of participating children. The findings are therefore not statistically generalizable. Nevertheless, the research offers transferable analytical insights regarding the importance of incorporating childhood perspectives into the study of family homelessness and residential support.

Ultimately, the principal contribution of this research note lies in showing that children's voices do not merely complete adult accounts of homelessness but fundamentally alter the understanding of what homelessness and residential support mean within family life. By foregrounding childhood experience, the study demonstrates the need to move beyond household-centred approaches and to recognize the differentiated, relational and everyday dimensions through which family homelessness is lived and negotiated.

Acknowlegements: We would like to thank the families and the Fundación Sant Joan de Déu Serveis Socials Mallorca for their collaboration and/or participation. Also, thanks Jaume Font Cirer for his translation.

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