

At the Edge of Homelessness: Refugees Navigating the Irish Private Rental Market

15th European Research Conference on Homelessness,
24th of September 2021, online

Cordula Bieri, School of Social Work and Social Policy,
Trinity College Dublin, bieric@tcd.ie Twitter: [@cordulab](https://twitter.com/cordulab)

Dr Paula Mayock, School of Social Work and Social Policy,
Trinity College Dublin, pmayock@tcd.ie

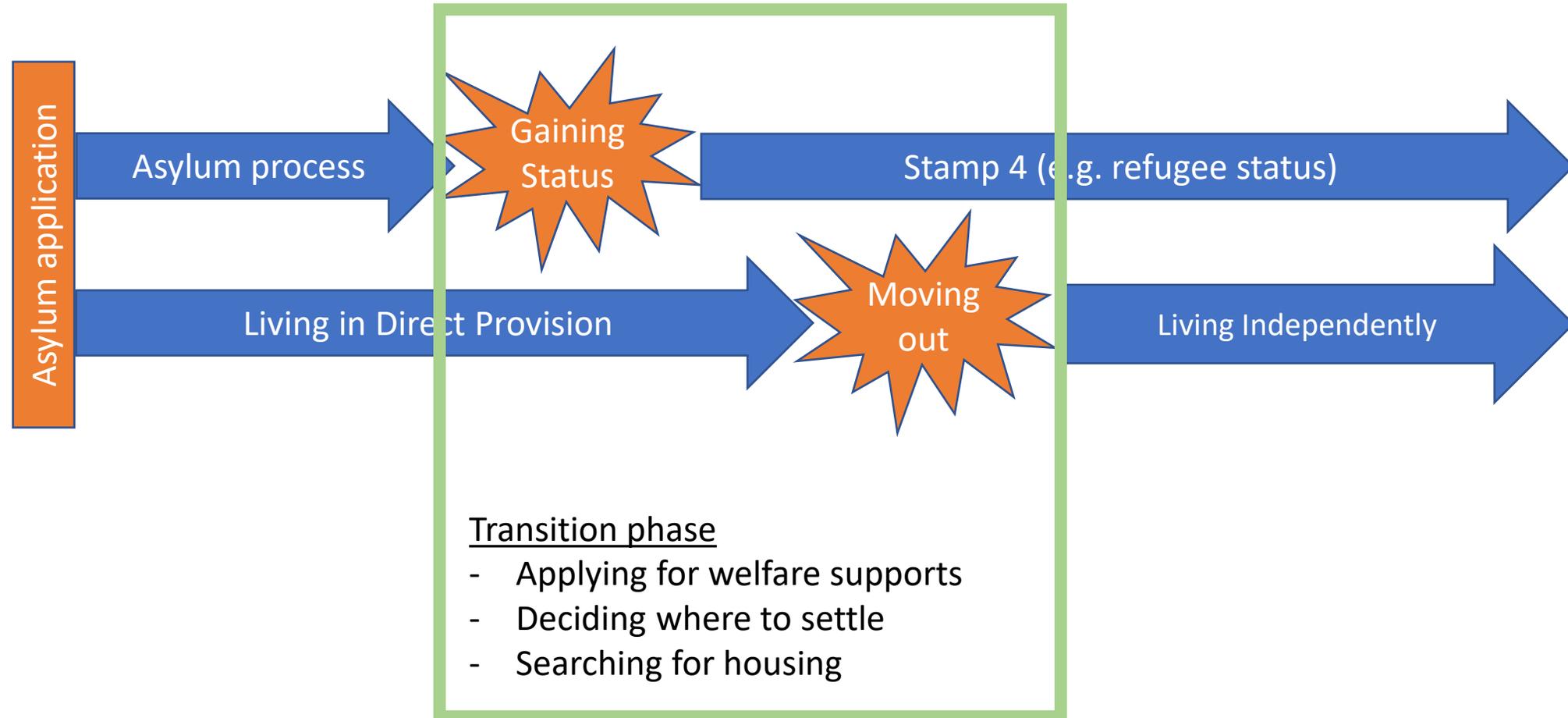


Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin



IRISH RESEARCH COUNCIL
An Chomhairle um Thaighde in Éirinn

Housing Journeys of Refugees in Ireland





The Irish Private Rental Market

- The standardised average rent almost doubled in Dublin from Eur 963 in 2012 to Eur 1820 in 2021 (RTB 2021)
- While overall only 4.2% of people experienced discrimination when accessing housing in 2014, 17.1 % of the Black respondents experienced discrimination (Grotti et al. 2018, Quarterly National Household Survey)
- A recent field experiment in the Irish housing market has shown that a Nigerian man needs to send twice as many emails to get a viewing than an Irish woman (Gusciute, E., Mühlau, P., & Layte, R. 2020).

Homelessness in Ireland

- The number of people accessing homelessness emergency accommodation tripled from 3,258 (2014) to 10,514 (2019), currently at 8,014 (Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government)
- Non-EU households are consistently overrepresented in homeless figures (Morrin, 2019, Morrin and O'Donoghue Hynes, 2018, CSO, 2012, Homeless Agency, 2008, Waldron et al., 2019), particularly nationals of African countries (Waldron et al., 2019, CSO, 2012).
- A report on family homelessness in Dublin has found that 8.8% of the families interviewed had a history of living in Direct Provision (Gambi et al., 2018)

Situation of refugees in the housing market:

- Living in poor quality and overcrowded accommodation (Carter and Osborne, 2009, Oudshoorn et al., 2019, Sherrell et al., 2007, Netto, 2011, Ziersch et al., 2017).
- At risk of homelessness (Kissoon, 2010, Strang et al., 2018, St. Arnault and Merali, 2019)
- Barriers to accessing decent housing include:
 - Labour market exclusion / affordability (Strang et al., 2018, Silvius, 2020, Pearlman, 2017)
 - Bureaucratic barriers to accessing welfare (Obeid, 2019, Strang et al., 2018)
 - Language barriers (Sherrell et al., 2007, Adam et al., 2019, Obeid, 2019)
 - Refusal of landlords to accept housing support payments (Francis and Hiebert, 2014, Sherrell et al., 2007, Adam et al., 2019, Aigner, 2019)

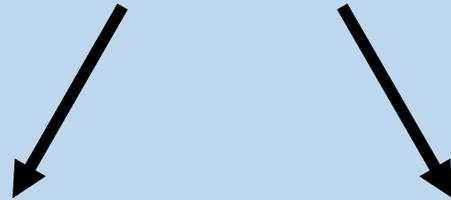
The literature focuses primarily on barriers to accessing housing and housing outcomes and tends to pay less attention to people's agency and their strategies to improve their housing situation.

Research Questions

- At what points of their housing journey are refugees particularly vulnerable to homelessness?
- What strategies do refugees employ to minimise their risk of becoming homeless?

Methodological Approach

- Case study approach underpinned by a constructivist perspective (Stake 1995)
- Method triangulation (Flick 2018)



In-depth Interview
(Mason 2018)

Go-Along (Kusenbach 2003,
O'Neill & Roberts 2019)

Flick, U. (2018). Triangulation in data collection. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data collection*, 527-544.

Mason, J. (2017). *Qualitative researching*. Sage.

Kusenbach, M. (2003). Street phenomenology: The go-along as ethnographic research tool. *Ethnography*, 4(3), 455-485.

O'Neill, M., & Roberts, B. (2019). *Walking methods: Research on the move*. Routledge.

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage.

The participants

- Ten women and 11 men, between the age of 20 and 55 years.
- Mix of family types: single households (8), family households (13)
- Average time spent in Direct Provision: 3 years
- Twenty of the 21 participants interviewed to date were living in private rented accommodation;
- 18 of them with the support of the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) scheme
- Accessed emergency homelessness accommodation: 4 (2 singles, two families)

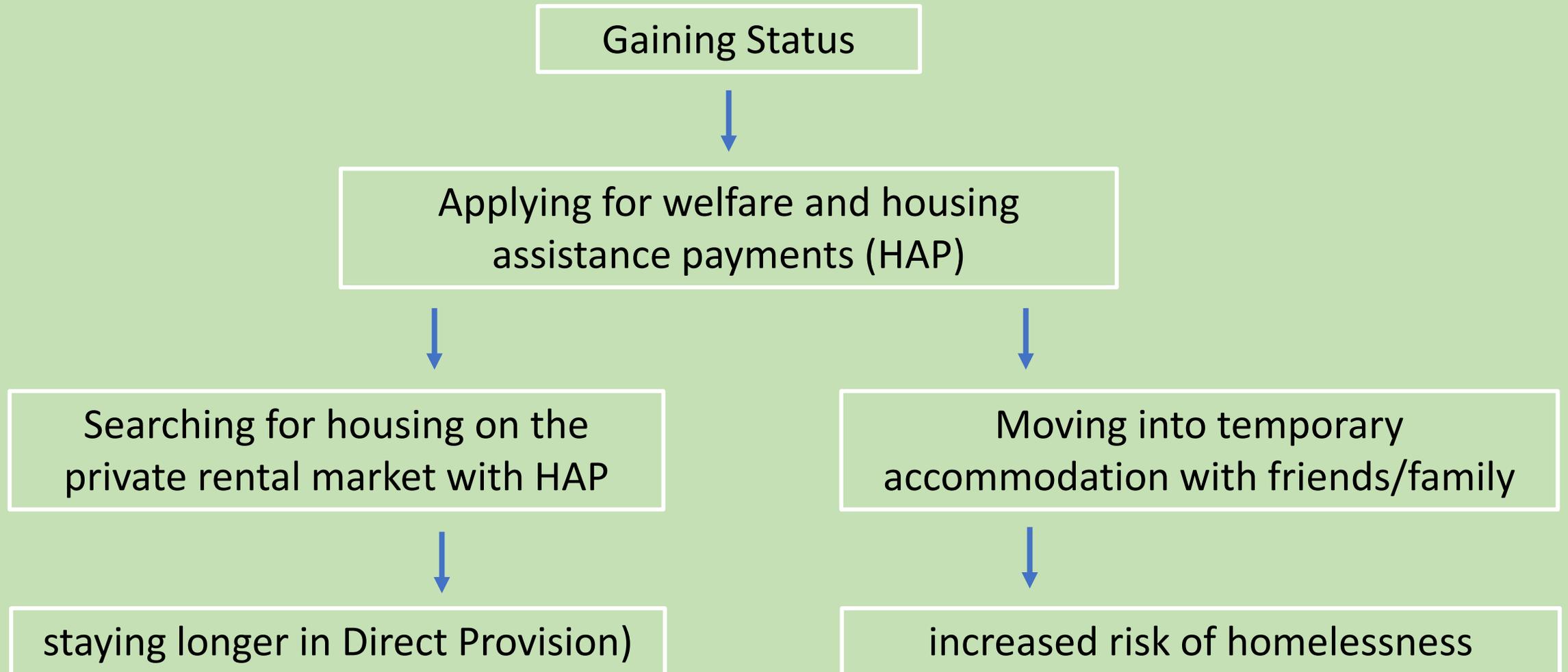
Direct Provision as a form of homelessness

- *“it was a hostel, like a room in a hostel, you know. Very limited space and a small shower. So... you couldn't, you didn't have that freedom that comes with having a home.”* (RP19)
- *“I am in Ireland, I like it, but that, especially that [name] accommodation is not home. It's a jail! Can I say jail? No, I can say, it's not a safe place, a jail is too hard, because at least we had the liberty to go out, but it's not a safe place.”* (RP20)
- *“they have sent us to ahem [name] centre, it was hard, because it's like, it's no like ... home, you know, it's like emergency accommodation or something.”* (RP7)

Risk of homelessness during the asylum process

- Not living in DP during the asylum process (due to DP, due to fear of deportation)
 - *“we were scared, we were afraid that they would lock us down and that they would take our freedom”* (RP18)
 - “I ran away. and for one and a half years, for 18 months, I was homeless.” (RP10)

Risk of homelessness when gaining status





Points of vulnerability while living on the private rental market

- Evictions due to sale of property, growth of family and rent increases
- Approval of family reunification
 - *“they say until your family comes here ... we cannot accept... I mean, we cannot take them into the system, so the problem is that, when they will come here, I have a very small studio flat in [street name] yeah, so in that flat, even two people cannot live, that is designed for only one person, but I have three kids and... one wife. So... ahem... it’s impossible to live there, so this is still a riddle for me” (RP10)*

Navigating the risk of homelessness

When searching for housing

Accepting inadequate accommodation

- *“They say that the least that they can do is to put you in emergency accommodation and this you have to accept the circumstances and you might be separated from your family so we will give you accommodation for men and your family and children will be in other emergency accommodation. And it was a problem. So I found myself forced to leave this place and go back to a small town, or small village.” (RP5)*

Convincing landlords of their deservingness

- *“I took all my references and I showed them to him. I am not the one who won't pay you, like, this will be like from the government, they will pay you and I will pay you some, I am a student, I explained to him, I am in homeless service, I told him everything honestly and then he was with his wife in the room, I told him, I don't drink, I don't, I don't do anything, I just need a place, that's all. And I will not make any dirty, I don't like, I want to, I will tidy my room and everything” (RP4)*

Prioritising affording rent

Prioritising rent over other expenses

“I am conscious of the fact that I have... the responsibility of paying rent now, so whatever money I get, I basically like just put aside for rent, so... I don't run into a problem where I'd have to struggle with rent.” (RP15)

Delaying employment to not lose access to housing supports

“my husband's ready to do some work but we can't if he is just working and ... we should pay rent as well, you know? Because if some people work in your family all the Government fees going to be.... stopped and you should pay all from your pocket, but if you both working, that's why I am studying, you know, to get a good job and he can start as well.” (RP7)

Limits of preparing yourself for the worst

- *“Even if you prepare from now, you cannot, you will prepare for nothing, it depends on the house itself not on the plan. Yes, I can put a very good and clear plan, but where is the house? That’s it. “ (RP12)*
- *“you don’t want something to happen to you and your kids are sent out on the streets or sent out into a homeless accommodation or something like that, so.. for me, the thing is just, to plan for your family, yeah. So buying a house, is something on my to do list. [...] So... if that happens, then, happy days, and if I get a council house before then, happy days as well.” (RP17)*

Policy recommendations

End system of Direct Provision

- Include asylum seekers in mainstream housing and welfare supports
- Initial reception centres for new arrivals with integration, transition and medical supports
- Cease policy of dispersal
 - Choosing where to settle is essential to access education and employment
 - Reduces necessity of onward mobility once gained status
- Extend access to labour market and education
 - To improve economic outcomes and ability to afford rent as well as well-being



Transition

Transition supports

- Keep (and possibly extend) current transition supports in place
- Prioritise finding adequate housing over leaving as fast as possible

Family Reunification

- HAP payments need to be increased to the level appropriate for the size of the family before the family members arrive in Ireland.
- If a refugee sponsor is not able to find housing in time, adequate emergency accommodation needs to be in place

Acknowledge that homelessness affects migrants (incl. refugees) particularly

On a national level:

- Establish an intercultural housing strategy
- Establish housing as a key issue in the Migrant Integration Strategy
- Improve data collection (e.g. taking stock of legal status history)

On a local level

- Local authority housing strategies need to recognise migrants as a group with particular challenges to access decent housing
- Local authority integration strategies need to recognise housing as a key topic for migrant integration policy



Fight discrimination on the housing market

- Equality and anti-racism training for housing providers
- Strengthen diversity hire in all housing providers
- Introduce an equality/anti-racism charter as a licence requirement for landlords registering with the Residential Tenancies Board (Crosscare Refugee Service 2018)
- Strengthen the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC)

Provide homeless shelters where people are safe from (racialised) harassment and that are underpinned by an appreciation of difference



Work towards long-term secure tenancies

- Protect tenants on the private rental market
 - Work towards a private rental market for long-term secure tenancies, not as short-term investment objects.
 - *“put home at the centre of policy in the PRS”* (Byrne & Sassi 20201)
- Improve access to council housing as well as quality/safety of council housing
- Improve access to homeownership

Conclusion

- Refugees in Ireland, as in other European countries, are especially vulnerable to becoming homeless
- Refugees are actively working towards reducing the risk of becoming homeless
- Targeted housing and transition supports are necessary and should be extended
- In terms of housing, early access to mainstream housing and welfare supports and the freedom to choose where to settle are the best protection against homelessness