'Hidden' Homelessness
in Northern Ireland

#HiddenHomeless

1st March 2020
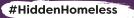
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Running Order

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- Hidden Homelessness – a person's experience

- Research findings and recommendations

- Recommendations – making them work

- Q&A

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Hidden Homelessness – a person's experience

Simply click the image to view Donald's story.

Research Findings

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Context

Simon Community commissioned this first ever study of hidden homelessness in NI (funded by Nationwide)

- Underpinning research questions:

- How is hidden homelessness defined and measured?

- What factors increase vulnerability to hidden homelessness?

- What individuals/groups are most likely to experience hidden homeless?

- What are the main impacts on those who experience hidden homelessness?

- What are the challenges to seeking and receiving effective support?

- What are the implications for policy and practice?

Methodology

Stage 1

Literature and policy review; collation and analysis of relevant statistical data and secondary data analysis

Engagement with public institutions and NGOs to establish a qualitative framework

Stage 2

3 facilitated workshops with youth sector (Belfast; Derry/L'Derry; Newry)

45 interviews with NGO and statutory sector stakeholders

5 in-depth interviews with people who had experienced hidden homelessness (case studies)

Analysis: Thematic analysis using NVIVO 12

Ethical approval granted by Ulster University

Defining and measuring hidden homelessness

- Lack of consensus regarding definition and concealed nature of this form of homelessness makes it difficult to quantify

- This is reflected in variance of estimates - in NI estimates range from 11,000 to between 70,000 and 112,000

NIHE (2017, 7)

"Hidden homelessness includes people living in a range of circumstances, for example, households that may be staying with friends or sharing with family because they have no accommodation of their own. Those households may be unknown to the Housing Executive."

NI Audit Office (2017: 19)

"Hidden homelessness refers to people who could be considered homeless but are not visible on the streets or in official statistics, for example, households staying with friends or sharing with family members or squatting."

Defining and measuring hidden homelessness

Most comprehensive definition formulated by Prof Suzanne Fitzpatrick et al (2016, 1) in their work on the 'Homelessness Monitor' series of reports:

"… people who may be considered homeless but whose situation is not 'visible' either on the streets or in official statistics. Classic examples would include households living in severely overcrowded conditions, squatters, people 'sofa-surfing' around friends' or relatives' houses, those involuntarily sharing with other households on a long-term basis, and people sleeping rough in hidden locations."

Findings: How did interviewees conceptualise hidden homelessness?

More than a roof over your head:

'So, our hidden homeless, because Derry is such a young, young demography, … young people that are sofa surfing, and it is the young single parent families, and I'm not just talking about women, I'm talking about men as well, that are single parents, that are basically living from relative, to relative, to relative, and that is our hidden homeless, and that's very, very hard to capture'.

'The word home is in homelessness, it's being place-less it's something different to being homeless. That sort of language. Before we get anywhere near getting people to recognise 'hidden homelessness,' we need to help people understand.' [

'Is a home a roof over your head or is a home warmth and security and sufficient space, and permanency?

Also very interesting points re how some older and some disabled people can be hidden homeless because the houses they live are so inaccessible and inhibit any form of independent living

Findings: Factors increasing vulnerability to hidden homelessness

- Gambling
- Paramilitary threat
- Family Breakdown
- Sexuality of young people – LGBTQ – can cause friction with family members
- Prisoners released from prison but rejected by family (and society)
- No home = no abode = no eligibility for welfare
- Drugs and Alcohol issues
- Young people are susceptible to being misinformed by peers and often then do not take the advice from professionals, instead believing their friends/peer group
- Homes are uninhabitable yet someone can be classified as having a house but become 'hidden' homeless because of the state of disrepair of their house.

- Debt
- Scared to go to social services because of the stigma/perception
- Overcrowded homes and societal expectation of leaving the family home at a certain age
- Unintended pregnancy
- Welfare Reform and Universal Credit
- People don't know where or how to access support services
- Some people often don't realise how difficult it is to get and then manage a home/house so can end up in a cycle of being in and out of housing/homelessness
- Estate agents and landlords can be selective and refuse to offer accommodation to certain people because of profiling.

Impact of being hidden homeless

- Loneliness and isolation

- Lack of self-worth and confidence

- Emergence or deterioration in mental health issues

- Awareness of being stereotyped, stigmatised and demonised by the wider community

- Unable to convey the impact of 'hidden' homelessness on their overall health and well-being

- Detrimental effect on relationships and ability to maintain employment, hobbies or other social activities

- Prevailing sense of fear and uncertainty

Humanising hidden homelessness

- 'In terms of our family services, generally it is to do with family breakdown. We would have a lot of young mothers that would come to us, who have maybe been living at home with their generations above them, so the grandparents, or great-grandparents, and as the family increases the stress and pressures within that house will increase and makes it almost unbearable for them to live there, and so they end up needing to seek accommodation.

- 'We would have a number of 16 and 17 year olds. At the moment, I can think of a couple that I'm working with that won't engage with social services, as they don't trust them. So they choose to sleep on any sofa they can find, or any street they can find, because the Housing Executive don't have an obligation to house them at that age, it's down to social services. So until they're 18, the Housing Executive can't do anything. And sometimes it feels like a waiting game until they are 18. Then you can also have the factor that they may be deemed to be intentionally homeless because the parents are maybe saying, "Oh, they're welcome back here here." But maybe things have happened that they can't return.'

- 'I think we would generally consider that any LGBT person whose experience of homelessness or housing is probably hidden. And all the housing that we deal with is hidden because it's either people who are not going to the Housing Executive and they're sofa surfing instead because they don't want to risk a hostile interaction with a housing officer'

Humanising hidden homelessness

The case studies in the report show that while some of the manifestations of 'hidden' homelessness varied slightly depending on individual circumstance:

- Roger slept on a mattress in the back of his work van;

- Michelle stayed in a hotel;

- Amy was in and out of temporary accommodation such as Bed and Breakfasts;

- Robert went between prison and hostels to 'sofa surfing'; and

- Margaret and her daughter rented their own house but felt it wasn't their home due to the actions of an abusive landlord

The feelings of fear, anxiety, shame, worthlessness and not knowing who or where to turn to were experienced by all five participants.

Barriers to seek and receiving support

Practitioners and those with experience of hidden homelessness provided insight into some of the barriers and challenges.

Some factors were described as being 'directly related to systemic issues with statutory organisations,' other challenges were issues with housing supply and housing security and with the social and personal circumstances of those who are 'hidden' homeless.

- Lack of funding for service providers;

- Accessibility and capacity of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive;

- Lack of availability of suitable accommodation;

- Cost of PRS rent and deposits required

- Criminal record of individuals applying for housing;

- Complex needs that contribute to 'hidden' homeless, for example drug and alcohol addiction or relationship breakdown

- Stigma of being seen as homeless or 'hidden' homeless;

- Isolation and loneliness, plus lack of knowledge about support and systems;

- Inability to maintain employment or budget for maintaining a house.

Policy context of hidden homelessness

Any discussion of hidden homelessness needs to be placed in a broader context, not just of housing policy but Social Policy more generally.

- Changes to housing tenure in NI in recent decades and, in particular, the decline in NIHE tenure and growth in private sector rental tenure has *impacted disproportionately on some of the most vulnerable groups* and has undoubtedly contributed to hidden homelessness.

- An Expert Evidence Review completed for the development of an anti-poverty strategy in Northern Ireland (Horgan et al, 2021) has identified housing as one of the *cross-cutting issues* for a new anti-poverty strategy. It draws attention specifically to the vulnerability and precarity of low income households in the PRS due to higher rents and poorer conditions (including less security of tenure) than in the public sector, **a point made by many participants in this research.**

Policy context of hidden homelessness

- In 2021 the Department for Communities and the NIHE published a number of strategies on or related to homelessness including a *draft Homelessness Strategy* (NIHE, 2021a), a *draft Strategic Action Plan for Temporary Accommodation* (NIHE, 2021b) and a consultative *Housing Supply Strategy* (Department for Communities, 2021).

- These contain laudable and welcome measures – but there are fundamental issues re housing supply and without specific detail, including on funding and implementation, it is difficult to comment on the adequacy of some of the proposed measures. There is, for eg, no reference to protecting the stock of increasingly scare public sector houses by ending the mandatory sale of NIHE houses under the 'right to buy' - despite the fact that Northern Ireland is the only devolved region which has not done so.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations are made. In summary:

Definition and measurement: an agreed definition which would be the basis for collection and collation of additional data on hidden homelessness;

Rebalancing of housing provision in Northern Ireland - with a much stronger focus on publicly owned housing. The focus on social housing in the draft Housing Supply Strategy is to be welcomed but should include the end of the mandatory sale of NIHE properties which would bring NI into line with other devolved jurisdictions;

Stronger legislation to protect the rights of vulnerable tenants and reduce their housing precarity in the private rented sector. The loss of rented accommodation is one of the top three causes of homelessness in Northern Ireland; low income households in the private rented sector are among those most likely to live in poor quality housing;

Statutory duties should be strengthened with regard to prevention and relief support along the lines of the Homelessness Reduction Act (2017) which increased the period within which support can be sought if threatened with homelessness from 28 to 56 days;

A review of the implementation of priority need to establish the impact upon those demographic cohorts which tend to fall down on this element of the test;

Implementation of a bond scheme which could help support those in the PRS with access to small grants to cover deposits. Such a scheme could be publicised via service provider websites;

Strengthen identification and assistance to the vulnerable groups and individuals who are at greater risk of 'hidden' homelessness as a result of their circumstances and lack of social/family support. Section 2 of the report contains information on a range of initiatives developed and implemented in NI which address many of these challenges and highlight the benefits of inter-agency collaboration. However, such opportunities need to be more widely accessible and promoted - this requires **longer term and more stable funding**;

Need for awareness raising to highlight the forms that 'hidden' homelessness can take and to draw attention to the support structures (statutory and community/voluntary) that are in place to assist those who are either in or at risk of such forms of 'hidden' homelessness. This includes bespoke information to agencies outside of housing to help them identify hidden homelessness and sign post for best advice and support.

Questions & Answers

Reflections