



Offaly Traveller Movement



Travelling Through Homelessness: A Study of Traveller Homelessness in County Offaly

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Executive Summary

The mission of the Offaly Traveller Movement (OTM) is to empower Travellers and to work as a partnership between them and settled people to achieve equality and social justice for Travellers in the County. The need for this research was identified by OTM when they recognised that most of the studies relating to homelessness were undertaken in urban settings and did not take in to account rural aspects or the particular needs and circumstances of marginalised groups such as Travellers. The purpose of this research is to increase OTM's understanding of Traveller homelessness and to bring about positive change for Travellers affected by homelessness in rural areas in Ireland. This is the first significant piece of research into the experiences of homeless Travellers living in Co. Offaly and one of the first pieces of work to explore homelessness among the Traveller community in general. Ending homelessness for Traveller families can be particularly difficult not least because of widespread racism and discrimination. Travellers who experience homelessness often have an additional range of complex and multi-faceted needs which include poor literacy and education as well as poor mental and physical health.

This report is based on in-depth research with members of the Traveller community who are currently experiencing, or have recently experienced, an episode of homelessness. Using a life history approach, the research explored the research participants' pathways into, through and out of homelessness. The research examines how they experience homelessness and the ways that this impacts upon their homeless journeys and their pathways out of homelessness. This approach has shown that for those interviewed, the provision of affordable, good quality and culturally appropriate accommodation is key to a sustainable exit from homelessness.

Chapter one provides a general introduction and framework for the document. It outlines the research methodology used for this research, including information on why qualitative life histories were used for this study, as well as information on sample selection. Using a qualitative methodology, life history interviews were undertaken with 14 participants from the Traveller community. The participants were either homeless at the time of interview, or had experienced homelessness in the 12 months prior to interview. A purposive sample was used in order to gain insight from people who had experienced a variety of different homeless situations.

Aims of the research

The overarching aim of this research was to explore the experience of homelessness for Travellers in Co. Offaly and to describe how Travellers are accounted for within the definitions of homelessness used at a County level.

Research questions

1. How is homelessness defined in Co. Offaly and what does this mean for Travellers in gaining access to services?
2. Why Travellers are at risk of becoming homeless?
3. How are Travellers in Co. Offaly experiencing pathways into, through and out of homelessness?

Chapter two sets out the context in which this research has taken place. The complexities of defining and measuring homelessness are outlined; as are the risk factors associated with homelessness; the homeless statistics for Ireland and County Offaly; and the context of homeless service provision in the county. Data on the Irish Traveller population is included in this chapter as it clearly shows how Travellers are at a high risk of experiencing homelessness. Issues of discrimination and assimilation are outlined as these have an impact on Travellers access to secure and appropriate accommodation, including Traveller specific accommodation.

The issues associated with defining homelessness are well documented. In Ireland, the statutory definition is legally defined through the Housing Act, 1988. The legal definition had been criticised for its ambiguity and the way it allows for agencies to broaden or narrow the definition as they see fit. Research has shown how many of the differences between local authorities in their interpretation of the definition of homelessness, as outlined in the 1988 Act, is due to their interpretation of whether the person is considered to be in accommodation that they ‘can reasonably occupy or remain in occupation of’ (Bergin *et al*, 2005:11). This was found to be the case through a discussion with a representative from the housing department in Offaly County Council who agreed that the legislation is very ambiguous and allows for a lot of discretion when the demand on services is high. Currently, Offaly County Council is experiencing a high demand on limited homeless services, therefore the interpretation of the definition is very narrow with emergency accommodation being used as an absolute last resort for people who are roofless. For example, people who are ‘couch surfing’ or staying with someone temporarily are not considered to be in priority need of emergency accommodation as the ambiguous definition of homelessness allows for them to be considered to be in accommodation that they can ‘reasonably occupy’.¹ Under the 1988 Act, local authorities have a duty to conduct assessments of homelessness as part of their tri-annual assessments of housing need. These assessments have been criticised for understating the numbers of people experiencing homelessness. For example, O’Connor (2008) explains how the routine administrative tasks such as completing forms and attending appointments, which are essential for demonstrating and assessing need, ‘can be beyond the capacity of people experiencing homelessness who may have other, unmet support needs, related to mental health, learning difficulty or addiction’.

At a European level, FEANTSA (the European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless) have developed a typology of homelessness and housing exclusion as a means of improving the understanding and measurement of homelessness across Europe. The typology includes situations where a person is roofless, houseless, living in insecure accommodation and living in inadequate accommodation. Travellers can be found living in all of the living situations outlined by FEANTSA (Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2014; CSO, 2012a; Watson and Parsons, 2005). The understanding of homelessness and housing exclusion outlined in the FEANTSA typology, removes the ambiguity present in the Irish definition of homelessness as to where Travellers who are living on unofficial sites or doubled up in bays (which can result in severe overcrowding on halting sites), due to a lack of Traveller specific accommodation, fall in relation to homelessness, housing exclusion and related service provision.

There is no definitive list of reasons why people become homeless. However, there are various risk factors that can contribute to the possibility that someone would find themselves out of home. Explanations for homelessness were traditionally divided into two broad categories: structural and individual. Structural causes locate the issue of homelessness within social and economic structures and identify the distribution of wealth and power as a key contributing factor to homelessness (Focus Ireland, no date b). Issues such as poverty, unemployment, cost and restrictions on welfare payments, the shortage of affordable housing, poor quality housing, lack of appropriate support services for people leaving state care, and lack of appropriate mental health services tend to be cited as the leading structural causes of homelessness (Focus Ireland, no date b). Individual causes of homelessness focus on the personal characteristics and behaviours of homeless people and suggest that issues such as ill-mental health, addiction, leaving the parental home due to disagreements, marital or relationship breakdown, leaving care or an institution, a financial crisis and/or eviction are the main causes of homelessness. Like the literature discussing the definition of homelessness, the literature on the causes of homelessness is 'primarily a reflection of who is writing about the problem' (Novac et al, 1996: 4). For example, Hoch, (1986) found that homeless advocates were more likely to focus on economic distress as an explanation for someone becoming homeless, whereas service providers were more likely to focus on social or physical distress. However, it is generally accepted nowadays that it is a complex interaction between these individual characteristics and the wider structural factors that result in someone becoming homeless.

The fact that homelessness is not a 'point in time' experience but can be understood as a continuum was recognised in *The Way Home* which is the strategy to address adult homelessness in Ireland. This continuum ranges from being at risk of homelessness, through to becoming homeless, becoming institutionalised into homelessness and/or becoming entrenched in street homelessness.

The homeless strategy emphasises the importance of recognising a person's or households' position on the continuum so that appropriate and effective interventions can be provided to ensure individuals or households progress out of homelessness rather than progressing through the continuum (Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2008). This research takes a pathways approach to exploring how homelessness is experienced by the Travellers who participated in the study, focusing on entries to, the experience of and exits (or barriers to exits) from homelessness.

Clapham explains that in using a pathways approach, homelessness is viewed as an 'episode or episodes in a person's housing career' (2003: 123). These episodes can be related to each other, as well as housing circumstances before and after each episode (Fitzpatrick, 2012: 365). This approach, takes account of both the structural and individual causes of homelessness by assuming that pathways of homelessness and housing are related to other aspects of a person's life, lifestyle and life transitions, for example, employment and family maturation (Mayock and Corr, 2013). As the approach is rooted in social constructivism, a strong emphasis is placed on 'the meanings that people attached to "homelessness and home", thereby illuminating individuals' perspectives on what it is like to be homeless or housed' (Mayock and Corr, 2013: 13). This approach is also useful in bringing hidden forms of homelessness to light, for example, episodes of staying temporarily with friends or relatives (Fitzpatrick, 2012).

Traveller homelessness in County Offaly

Figures provided by Offaly County Council show that out of a total of 141 homeless presentations in the County in 2015, 27 of these, or 19.1 per cent were Travellers.² Considering the fact that Travellers make up 1.3 percent of the population in Co. Offaly as a whole,³ it is alarming to see that they account for 19.1 per cent of those presenting as homeless within the County. As well as the high proportion of Travellers presenting as homeless in County Offaly, the county has a higher proportion of Traveller families living in unofficial sites than the proportion nationally. In County Offaly, 13.5 per cent of Travellers live on unofficial sites (37 families), whereas the corresponding figure nationally is 4.4 per cent (Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2014).

Before a person can gain access to homeless services (including emergency accommodation provided by voluntary bodies) they must be considered homeless through an assessment by the local authority assessment and placement services. Once they have been assessed as homeless, they will be offered emergency accommodation if this is available. There is limited emergency accommodation available in the midlands region. Only six units are located in County Offaly so most people who find themselves homeless are required to travel to another county in order to access a bed. Currently beds are available in Tullamore, Athlone, Longford and Mullingar.

According to a representative from the Housing Department in Offaly County Council, the demand for these beds is very high, therefore availability is always limited. If a person presents as homeless and is assessed as such, they will be given a bed in emergency accommodation if there is one available at that time.⁴ There are no hostels in the region that cater for families so presenting couples with children are separated. Children can be accommodated with their mothers, although some facilities will only accept boys up to the age of 14. However, if a father with a child presents as homeless, there is no emergency hostel accommodation available to accommodate them.

Travellers are at high risk of experiencing homelessness. Lower levels of educational attainment than the general population, coupled with endemic unemployment (84.3% unemployment rate in 2011 Census), social welfare reliance, high levels of poverty, high levels of disability and other health issues, means that Travellers are less able than the wider population to source accommodation from their own resources. This leaves them heavily reliant on the local authority as a provider of accommodation. The risk of homelessness is strengthened still when the issue of ethnic denial and assimilationist accommodation provision are added to the pot. The criminalisation of trespass under Section 24 of the Housing Act, 2002 is a contributing factor as this affectively makes homeless, Travellers who have a preference to live in a trailer/caravan, but have no halting site space available to them. In County Offaly the demand for Traveller specific accommodation units/bays is high (illustrated by the number of families living on unofficial sites) yet the provision of new Traveller specific accommodation is limited (only two additional permanent caravan sites were provided in 2015 and none are proposed for 2016).⁵

Chapter three summarises the findings from the research based on peoples' pathways into, through and out of homelessness. Themes that emerged throughout the interviews are discussed including issues associated with physical and mental health, the day-to-day experience of homelessness and participants' support networks. This chapter concludes by examining how participants perceived the concept of a home and illustrates that Travellers are a heterogeneous group of people with hopes, desires and needs that vary widely from person to person.

Pathway's into homelessness

The reasons why people became homeless were varied and complex. For some of the research participants, this was their first episode of homelessness. But for most, they had already experienced a number of episodes throughout their life. Discussions around the reasons why people first entered homelessness focused on access to good quality and affordable accommodation and access to Traveller specific accommodation. Issues such as discrimination and social welfare reliance meant that the research participants felt that the limited housing available through the private market was inaccessible to them.

For those who did not want to live in standard housing, a lack of safe and secure halting site bays was cited a number of times as a reason why someone was living on an unofficial site. Others entered homelessness when they left a house to come back out to live in their trailer, due to the isolation they felt in standard housing. Therefore, inappropriate housing of people who have a preference for a different type of accommodation, appears to be contributing to repeat episodes of homelessness for some.

Pathways through homelessness

The research participants were very open and honest when speaking about their experience of being homeless. Their homeless journeys were varied and complex throughout their life histories. People experienced different homeless situations at different periods in their life and included periods of living roofless and houseless, as well as in insecure and inadequate accommodation. The length of time that people spent homeless varied from person to person and between homeless episodes. The longest periods were experienced by people living in unofficial sites and shorter periods included time spent in emergency hostel or B&B accommodation.

This research found that health was an issue of significant concern to the participants. This related to their own health, but also that of their immediate family. Participants described a range of health issues that they felt were attributed directly to their living conditions such chronic kidney infections (children living on unofficial sites), high blood pressure and depression. Poor mental health was described as a problem affecting the Traveller community in general and worries about suicide were raised on a number of occasions.

The Travellers who took part in this research were currently, or had been recently, living in very difficult situations. Some had spent periods sleeping in cars, other had spent times in emergency accommodation and almost all had spent some time in over-crowded accommodation. Many had spent considerable time living in unofficial sites without access to basic amenities such as water, sewage and mains electricity. They described how many simple things about day-to-day life become much more difficult when you are experiencing an episode of homelessness. Days needed to be well planned so that the participants could factor in time to collect water (often from a relative's place of residence); go the local gym or swimming pool to get washed; travel to use the toilet; go in to town to do the laundry; or do shopping each day for perishable foods. The lack of refrigeration was an issue for storing food but also for one participant who needed to store insulin in a fridge and instead had to store it under the car that he was living in.

The strength of families ties among the research participants became apparent throughout the research. For almost all of the participants (12 of 14), families were described as a key provider of support and played a crucial role in alleviating the burdens of homelessness. Two main themes emerged through the discussions on support networks in the interviews: the strength and importance of family as a support network and the perceived lack of support from statutory and voluntary agencies. Some of the participants described how they felt forgotten about by statutory and voluntary agencies. The relationship with the local authority was often viewed as an antagonistic one rather than supportive. Some people resented that they could only gain access to voluntary homeless services, such as the Midland Simon Community, through the local authority. At the same time, of who wanted to live in standard housing, accommodation provided by the local authority was the preferred tenure. This was due to the lack of security provided through the private rented sector and the difficulties people faced in accessing private rented accommodation in the first place. The participants felt that discrimination by landlords, the difference between the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) and the market rent, and a general shortage in rental properties in the main towns, excluded them from the private rental market.

Pathways out of homelessness

A number of themes emerged in discussions focusing on pathways of homelessness. The main enablers and barriers that were identified are outlined below. This research found that for many of the participants, accessing emergency accommodation was an issue. This was for a number of reasons including the fact that almost all of the beds were located outside of the county; there are no family units in the region resulting in families having to separate; and, for the men in the study, the fact that they feared living in another county alone due to ongoing feuding between some Travellers. All of the men felt that their name alone could leave them open to violence if they moved county.

Chapter three concludes with some findings around what a home means to the participants and their hopes for the future. Although accommodation preference and hopes differed between participants, they all had one thing in common in that they wished for somewhere to live that felt secure. For those who had spent time living in the private rented sector and on unofficial sites, the worries about being asked to leave had taken their toll. This led most of the participants to state that local authority accommodation – whether standard housing or Traveller specific – was their preference as they felt that no one would come ‘knocking on your door’ asking you to leave in this tenure. Home ownership was not mentioned once as the tenure of choice, which is not really surprising considering the difference in levels of homeownership between the Traveller community and the general population at 20.2 per cent and 69.7 per cent respectively.

Chapter four will present the conclusions and recommendations of the report. A focus on the enablers and barriers of exiting homelessness that were discussed by the research participants are outlined. Most of the people interviewed were still experiencing an episode of homelessness at the time of interview. However most had exited homelessness for a period at another stage in their lives. The research participants discussed the following as enablers to exiting an episode of homelessness:

- Access to good quality, affordable accommodation.
- Access to Traveller specific accommodation, designed in consultation with Travellers.
- Access to a bay on a small halting site in which families are accommodated together.
- Access to family units of emergency accommodation.
- The provision of more emergency accommodation within County Offaly.
- Access to employment opportunities.
- Further education – however, this was not seen as an enabler on its own as people felt that they still face discrimination in accessing employment despite undertaking further education.
- Support to maintain a tenancy for people who have no experience of living in standard housing.
- Access to information, advice and assistance on accessing accommodation.
- Mental health support.

Unfortunately, a multitude of exit barriers from homelessness were identified by the participants in the research. Some of these issues have persisted for many years, while others appeared to the participants to be getting worse in more recent times. Fatalistic thinking was evident throughout the research with most participants pessimistic about a change in their accommodation situation in the near future. The exit barriers included:

- Lack of culturally appropriate accommodation suitable to for their needs.
 - A lack of desire by the local authority to provide this form of accommodation.
 - Local opposition to Traveller accommodation.
 - A shortage of local authority housing.
 - A lack of affordable accommodation in the private rented sector.
 - The reduced level of Jobseeker's Allowance for the under 26s.
 - The difference between the HAP payment and the current market rates for rental properties.
 - Discrimination among landlords resulting in a reluctance to rent dwellings to Travellers.
 - Discrimination among employers in accessing the labour market.
 - The location of emergency homeless accommodation.
 - The lack of family units in the region.
 - Mental health difficulties.
-

The main recommendations of this research are:

Recommendation 1: Travellers living in unofficial sites should be included in local authority and Census counts of homelessness.

Recommendation 2: The local authority should take account of the different situations of homelessness and housing exclusion that Travellers face in comparison to the general population. This should be reflected in the 'Assessment of Housing Need' to ensure that homeless Travellers are included under the 'homeless' category where relevant to reflect more accurate homeless numbers.

Recommendation 3: OTM supports the call for the establishment of a Traveller Accommodation Agency, to take over the responsibility from local authorities the provision of accommodation for Travellers, as recommended by the 1995 Task Force on the Travelling Community.

Recommendation 4: The current definition of homelessness set out in the Housing Act, 1988 is too ambiguous and a more definitive definition of what constitutes homelessness is required to ensure agencies do not broaden or narrow the definition as they see fit.

Recommendation 5: It is recommended that the homeless budget for the midlands increase in line with the growing demand on services in the region.

Recommendation 6: There are currently only six emergency beds available in county Offaly. It is recommended that these increase to at least 12 units, including the provision of at least three family units.

Recommendation 7: It is recommended that emergency family units are provided within the region to ensure families are not separated when they enter emergency hostel accommodation.

Recommendation 8: The current case load of the Midlands Simon Community Regional Support Service (22 people per county) should be increased to better reflect the demand in each county. This would require an increase of funding for the service as outlined in recommendation five.

Recommendation 9: The Homeless Action Team should include more joined up thinking with regards to the Traveller Accommodation Programme to ensure that the needs of homeless Travellers are considered. More synergy between the Homeless Action Plan and the Traveller Accommodation Programme is required.

Recommendation 10: Further work and consultation is necessary to address the issue of culturally appropriate emergency accommodation for Travellers.

Recommendation 11: Travellers in County Offaly are currently represented on the Homeless Action Team by an employee of the local authority. OTM feel strongly that local authority representation of Travellers on the Homeless Action Team is inappropriate considering the issues discussed in the relationship between Travellers and the local authority. Travellers cannot expect fair representation and consideration unless they are represented by someone from within the Traveller community or from a Traveller organisation.

Recommendation 12: Traveller specific accommodation should be provided within County Offaly as a matter of urgency so that Travellers who have a desire to continue to live their traditional way of life are not forced to assimilate into the general population through a move to standard housing.

Recommendation 13: Meaningful consultation should take place with Travellers to ensure that the accommodation provided as ‘Traveller specific’ is in fact that and not the local authorities view of what Travellers want or need.

Recommendation 14: Cross-community committees with representatives from the Traveller community and the local settled community should be developed in areas where Traveller specific accommodation is planned. Local opposition is a huge issue in the provision of Traveller accommodation so it is important that people work together in order to address the fears or worries of those who oppose the accommodation.

Recommendation 15: The 37 families currently living on unofficial sites in County Offaly, without access to the most basic of amenities such as water and sewage, should be accommodated appropriately as a priority.

Recommendation 16: A locally-based Traveller Homeless Team (including the OTM social worker, a representative from the Simon Community, representative from Offaly County Council and other relevant stakeholders) should be set up to as a coordinated response to tackling the issues faced by Travellers experiencing homelessness.

Recommendation 17: To avoid mental health risks associated with long term homelessness and accommodation instability, the provision of adequate, affordable and culturally appropriate accommodation should occur in a timely fashion to Travellers experiencing homelessness.

Recommendation 18: The desire of some Travellers to maintain close ties with extended family is an important part of Traveller culture. This should be enabled through the provision of Traveller specific accommodation that allows family units to live together in both halting site and group housing schemes. This would involve consultation with Travellers in the allocation of units so that family ties can be maintained, and to ensure families with troubled histories are not accommodated together.

Recommendation 19: OTM echoes the call from other Traveller organisations for the government to develop a National Traveller Employment and Career Development Strategy.

Recommendation 20: Further research is needed to examine links between Traveller inter-generational long-term unemployment, social isolation and poor physical and mental health.

Recommendation 21: Sufficient tenancy support should be provided to people entering standard housing for the first time, or for others with a high level of need. This should be a culturally appropriate version of the tenancy support offered to people availing of the homeless 'housing first' service which provides a support service built around the needs of each individual.

Recommendation 22: There is a need for significant provision of new social housing by the local authority and voluntary housing bodies. The exceptionally high numbers of people in need of social housing and the current homeless crisis, along with sharp increases in rent, mean that social housing is needed as a matter of urgency. This should be a priority focus of central and local government.

Recommendation 23: The full level of Jobseeker's Allowance should be paid to the under 26s as the reduced payment unfairly discriminates against people on the grounds of age.

Recommendation 24: HAP levels should increase in line with current market rents as the financial burden of making up the gap between the HAP and their social welfare payment, is proving to be too difficult for some people.

Recommendation 25: Previous research has examined the issue of addiction among people experiencing homeless, showing that homeless people have higher rates of substance use than the general population. The issue of addiction did not emerge as a significant theme in this research. However, this sample size was small. Therefore, it is recommended that further research on Traveller homelessness examines the issue of addiction among homeless Travellers and how this impacts on their homeless journeys.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

In June 2015 The Offaly Traveller Movement (OTM) was awarded funding from St. Stephen's Green Trust to undertake research into homelessness among Travellers in County Offaly. A research tender was advertised in July 2015 and Niamh Murphy, an independent research consultant, was contracted to undertake the research. This report presents the findings of the research undertaken between August 2015 and March 2016.

The mission of OTM is to empower Travellers and to work as a partnership between them and settled people to achieve equality and social justice for Travellers in County Offaly. The need for this research was identified by OTM when they recognised that most of the studies relating to homelessness were undertaken in urban settings and did not take in to account rural aspects or the particular needs and circumstances of marginalised groups such as Travellers. The purpose of this research is to increase OTM's understanding of Traveller homelessness and to bring about positive change for Travellers affected by homelessness in rural areas in Ireland. This is the first significant piece of research into the experiences of homeless Travellers living in Co. Offaly and one of the first pieces of work to explore homelessness among the Traveller community in general. Ending homelessness for Traveller families can be particularly difficult not least because of widespread racism and discrimination. Travellers who experience homelessness often have an additional range of complex and multi-faceted needs which include poor literacy and education as well as poor mental and physical health.

Aims of the research

The overarching aim of this research is to explore the experience of homelessness for Travellers in Co. Offaly and to describe how Travellers are accounted for within the definitions of homelessness used at a County level.

Research questions

1. How is homelessness defined in Co. Offaly and what does this mean for Travellers in gaining access to services?
2. Why Travellers are at risk of becoming homeless?
3. How are Travellers in Co. Offaly experiencing pathways into, through and out of homelessness?

Research methodology

A qualitative methodology was used in this research in order to address the issue of homelessness among Travelers in County Offaly. Qualitative research is especially good when looking for rich data to explore the experience of homelessness; taking account of entries into and exits out of homelessness. It is also a good way to explore issues as they relate to marginalised groups within society as their views are generally invisible within research based on the wider society.

A pathways approach was used in this study as this method involves a recognition that the experience of homelessness is fluid rather than static and can evolve throughout a person's 'housing career' during which time they may have an episode or multiple episodes of homelessness (Clapham, 2003). For the purpose of this study, homelessness will be defined as outlined in the Housing Act 1988, to include the interpretation outlined in The Way Home. A person is defined as homeless under the Act if:

- (a) there is no accommodation available which, in the opinion of the authority, he, together with any other person who resides normally with him or who might reasonably be expected to reside with him, can reasonably occupy or remain in occupation of; or
- (b) he is living in a hospital, county home, night shelter or other such institution, and is so living because he has no accommodation of the kind referred to in paragraph (a)

and he is, in the opinion of the authority, unable to provide accommodation from his own resources (Government of Ireland, 1988).

According to The Way Home homelessness strategy, this definition is generally interpreted as including:

- people living in temporary or insecure accommodation;
- people living in emergency bed and breakfast accommodation and hostels or Health Service Executive (HSE) accommodation because they have nowhere else available to them;
- rough sleepers and
- victims of family/domestic violence (Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2008).

In using this understanding of homelessness, Travellers who are roofless, living in emergency accommodation or other types of temporary and insecure accommodation were considered homeless, for example, unofficial and/or un-serviced sites as they await accommodation allocation from the local authority, in other words living in accommodation providing shelter from the elements but lacking the other characteristics of a 'home' and/or intended only for a short stay.

The research consists of 'life history interviews' with Travellers who are currently, or have recently (during the preceding 12 months), experienced an episode of homelessness. Atkinson describes how the life story interview is useful for social research:

Life stories can help the researcher become more aware of the range of possible roles and standards that exist within human community. They can define an individual's place in the social order of things and can explain or confirmed experience through the moral, ethical, or social context of a given situation. They can provide the researcher with information about the social reality existing outside the story that is described by the story. They also can help explain the story itself as a social construct as well as help explain an individual's understanding of social events, movements, political causes, or how individual members of a group, generation, or cohort see certain events or movement (2002: 129).

More specifically to homelessness, life history interviews can illustrate how a person sees and understands their experience of homelessness, as well as perceptions around their past, present and future (Mayock and Corr, 2013). Other recent studies have used the same method to examine homelessness and have shown this method to be particularly good at capturing biographical details which are relevant in gaining an understanding of homeless pathways (Mayock and Corr, 2013; Mayock and Carr, 2008; Mayock and Vekić, 2006; Mayock and O'Sullivan, 2007).

As the interpretation of the definition of homelessness by the local authority and other service providers is key to understanding the access that Travellers have to services, consultation with some key service providers was undertaken as part of this research. In order that the experiences of homeless Travellers and the themes arising from the life history interviews can be addressed in the service provider consultation, the interviews with Travellers took place before the service provider discussions.

Study participants

A purposive sample, which is a form of non-probability sample often used in qualitative research, was used for this study. The main goal of this kind of sampling is to focus on particular characteristics of the population of interest which will help to answer the research questions. The sample is non-probability and therefore not one that can be generalised to the whole population, but as this is not the purpose of qualitative research design, it is not an issue or limitation. The use of purposive sampling meant that respondents could be selected that fit the profile, in other words members of the Traveller community in County Offaly who are, or have recently been, homeless. The sample was identified through the research assistant who was the accommodation worker with the Offaly Traveller Movement. The research assistant had a good knowledge of the profile of people experiencing homelessness in the County and had built up good relationships with many of the Travellers living there. Two peer researchers who are members of the Traveller Community were also involved with the research and participants were given the option of a peer researcher being present at their interview. The issue of relationship and trust has been shown to play an important role in involving Travellers in programmes or research and the use of peer researchers was invaluable in this regard (see Stakem and York, 2015; All Ireland Traveller Health Study Team, 2010; Van Hout, 2011).

As the special Census report on homelessness shows that similar numbers of Traveller men and women were counted as homeless, the survey sample took account of this and similar numbers of males and females were invited to participate (CSO, 2012a). To be eligible for the study respondents must be:

1. a member of the Traveller community;
2. living in County Offaly or have been living in County Offaly directly before a movement to emergency/temporary accommodation outside of the county;
3. have experienced homelessness (as defined above) within the 12 months prior to interview; and
4. be aged over 18 years old.

A cross-section of participants from the Traveller community were invited for interview. This included couples where both were present, married persons where one of the couple was present, people with children and without, and single people. A total 14 people participated in the ten interviews, comprising eight female and six male participants.

Their experience of homelessness included living in a car, emergency accommodation, temporary and inadequate accommodation, unofficial sites with no facilities and nowhere else to go (due to a lack of provision of Traveller specific accommodation appropriate for their needs) dilapidated, unsafe and insecure accommodation, and extremely overcrowded temporary accommodation.

A selection of relevant service providers were identified and invited for inclusion in the research. The Traveller interviews make up the bulk of data used in the research. However, the service provider consultations were used to clarify issues around service provision and access figures on local service availability, as well as demand on services. The interviews with representatives from Offaly County Council were used to get an understanding of how the statutory definition of homelessness was being interpreted.

Permission to tape-record the interviews with Travellers was sought from participants so that the data could be transcribed, coded and rigorously analysed. The data was analysed using Dedoose online qualitative data analysis (see www.dedoose.com). This programme allows for qualitative data to be entered, coded and examined for trends or recurring themes. Unlike quantitative data analysis, qualitative analysis uses the computer programme as a tool for efficacy rather than to generate analysis and conclusions.

Chapter 2: Understanding Traveller Homelessness

A literature review for this research found little information in relation to homelessness and Irish Travellers. Although the issue of homelessness has been widely researched, as have issues associated with Traveller accommodation, library and internet searches for the term ‘Traveller homelessness’ garnered few returns. This chapter attempts to set out the context in which Traveller homelessness can be understood by outlining how homelessness can be defined and measured, the risk factors for homelessness and service provision within County Offaly. Statistics on the Traveller population are discussed in detail to illustrate why Travellers have an increased risk of homelessness. The current accommodation context for Travellers nationally and in County Offaly is addressed in the final section.

Defining and measuring homelessness: Ireland and County Offaly

There is no one agreed definition on homelessness, rather there are many definition ranging from those that are narrow, which focus on visible homelessness (Amore et al, 2001), to broader definitions, which view homelessness as a process rather than a static state and therefore take account of homelessness and housing exclusion. People in different situations attach significantly different meanings to homelessness. For example, definitions will differ depending on whether they are devised or interpreted by social service providers, community activists, government officials, civil servants, academics or people experiencing housing need (Focus Ireland et al, 2002). Of critical importance are methodologies used in defining and measuring homelessness as the results will be dependent on the researcher’s construction of who is counted as homeless and how they are counted (Novac et al, 1996). As well as affecting the numbers enumerated as homeless, Bentley (1995: viii) explains how it can also effect the racial and gender composition of the population considered homeless:

The definition ranges from the narrow concept of literally living on the streets, to lack of a fixed, regular and adequate night-time address, to those in temporary or potentially unstable accommodation (doubling up), to those in inadequate, marginal or vulnerable living/housing circumstances. The definition certainly affects the size of the homeless population.

According to Amore *et al* (2001: 20), this lack of an agreed and robust definition is problematic as it is necessary for the production of meaningful statistics on the size and characteristics of the homeless population and it is ‘of critical importance for informed policy-making’.

In Ireland, homelessness is legally defined through the Housing Act, 1988. A person is defined as homeless under the 1988 Act if:

- a) there is no accommodation available which, in the opinion of the authority, he, together with any other person who resides normally with him or who might reasonably be expected to reside with him, can reasonably occupy or remain in occupation of; or
- b) he is living in a hospital, county home, night shelter or other such institution, and is so living because he has no accommodation of the kind referred to in paragraph (a) and he is, in the opinion of the authority, unable to provide accommodation from his own resources (Government of Ireland, 1988).

According to *The Way Home* (Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2008: 17) homelessness strategy, this definition is generally interpreted as including:

- people living in temporary or insecure accommodation;
- people living in emergency bed and breakfast accommodation and hostels or Health Service Executive (HSE) accommodation because they have nowhere else available to them;
- rough sleepers and
- victims of family/domestic violence.

The legal definition of homelessness as outlined in the 1988 Act has been criticised as being too narrow as it does not include people threatened with, or at risk of becoming homeless (Lennon, 1998). Many of the agencies working with those who are homeless have adopted a broader definition of homelessness, for example, Focus Ireland define homelessness as constituting:

- Visible homelessness: includes those sleeping rough and/or accommodated in emergency shelters or private emergency accommodation.
- Hidden homelessness: includes those involuntarily sharing with family or friends and/or families or individuals living in housing that is woefully inadequate or sub-standard
- At risk of homelessness: includes those who currently have housing but could possibly become homeless due to economic difficulties, too high a rent burden, insecure tenure, leaving state care or physical or mental health difficulties (Focus Ireland, no date a).

The definition in the 1988 Housing Act has also been criticised for being too ambiguous as there is no commonly agreed definition of what constitutes homelessness among local authorities, homeless units and voluntary organisations (Bergin, et al, 2005; Fitzpatrick Associates Economic Consultants, 2006). Research by Bergin et al for the Simon Communities of Ireland found that:

The way the Act defines homelessness leaves considerable ambiguity, allowing agencies to widen or narrow the definition of homelessness dependent on their perspective and/or the individual that presents (2005: 1).

This research showed how many of the differences between local authorities in their interpretation of the definition of homelessness as outlined in the 1988 Act is due to their interpretation of whether the person is considered to be in accommodation that they ‘can reasonably occupy or remain in occupation of’ (Bergin et al, 2005: 11). This was found to be the case through a discussion with a representative from the housing department in Offaly County Council who agreed that the legislation is very ambiguous and allows for a lot of discretion when the demand on services is high. Currently, Offaly County Council is experiencing a high demand on limited homeless services, therefore the interpretation of the definition is very narrow with emergency accommodation being used as an absolute last resort for people who are roofless.⁶ For example, people who are ‘couch surfing’ or staying with someone temporarily are not considered to be in priority need of emergency accommodation as the ambiguous definition of homelessness allows for them to be considered to be in accommodation that they can ‘reasonably occupy’.⁷

Under the 1988 Act, local authorities have a duty to conduct assessments of homelessness as part of their tri-annual assessments of housing need. These assessments have been criticised for understating the numbers of people experiencing homelessness. For example, O’Connor (2008) explains how the routine administrative tasks such as completing forms and attending appointments, which are essential for demonstrating and assessing need, ‘can be beyond the capacity of people experiencing homelessness who may have other, unmet support needs, related to mental health, learning difficulty or addiction’.

At a European level, FEANTSA (the European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless), have developed a typology of homelessness and housing exclusion as a means of improving our understanding of homelessness and its measurement across Europe. The ETHOS typology illustrates the continuum of housing need and was developed through a review of the existing definitions of homelessness at a European level as well as the realities of homelessness which service providers are faced with daily.

As such, it is one of the few definitions of homelessness that is conceptually based and has a thoroughly explained conceptual foundation (Amore et al, 2011). The categories in ETHOS attempt to cover all the living situations across Europe which amount to forms of homelessness (FEANTSA, 2005):

- roofless (without a shelter of any kind, sleeping rough);
- houseless (with a place to sleep but temporary in institutions or shelter);
- living in insecure housing (threatened with severe exclusion due to insecure tenancies, eviction, domestic violence); and
- living in inadequate housing (in caravans on illegal campsites, in unfit housing, in extreme overcrowding).

Travellers can be found living in all of the living situations outlined by FEANTSA (Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2014; CSO, 2012a; Watson and Parsons, 2005). This understanding of homelessness and housing exclusion clearly removes the ambiguity present in the Irish definition of homelessness as to where Travellers who are living in unofficial sites or doubled up in bays (which can result in severe overcrowding on halting sites), due to a lack of Traveller specific accommodation, fall in relation to homelessness, housing exclusion and related service provision. For this research we consider people living in unofficial sites homeless as they are not in accommodation that they can be seen to ‘reasonable occupy’ if they are living under the constant threat of eviction and possible confiscation of their trailer.

Causes of homelessness

There is no definitive list of reasons why people become homeless. However, there are various risk factors that can contribute to the possibility that someone would find themselves out of home. Explanations for homelessness were traditionally divided into two broad categories: structural and individual. Structural causes locate the issue of homelessness within social and economic structures and identify the distribution of wealth and power as a key contributing factor to homelessness (Focus Ireland, no date b). Issues such as poverty, unemployment, cost and restrictions on welfare payments, the shortage of affordable housing, poor quality housing, lack of appropriate support services for people leaving state care, and lack of appropriate mental health services tend to be cited as the leading structural causes of homelessness (Mayock and Corr, 2013; Focus Ireland, no date b).

Individual causes of homelessness focus on the personal characteristics and behaviours of homeless people. Issues such as ill-mental health, addiction, leaving the parental home due to disagreements, marital or relationship breakdown, leaving care or an institution, a financial crisis and/or eviction are seen as the main causes of homelessness.

Like the literature discussing the definition of homelessness, the literature on the causes of homelessness is 'primarily a reflection of who is writing about the problem' (Novac et al, 1996). For example, Hoch, (1986) found that homeless advocates were more likely to focus on economic distress as an explanation for someone becoming homeless, whereas service providers were more likely to focus on social or physical distress. However, it is generally accepted nowadays that it is a complex interaction between these individual characteristics and the wider structural factors that result in someone becoming homeless (Mayock and Corr, 2013; Focus Ireland, no date b).

For Travellers the structural causes could be widened to include the institutional racism faced when accessing services. For example, the fact that Travellers are often offered accommodation which may not be suitable for their needs rather than culturally appropriate accommodation. In other words, offering private rented or standard local authority housing to a family who wish to live on a halting site (Norris and Winston, 2005; Offaly Traveller Movement, 2012). Another structural issue faced by Travellers are the provisions of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 2002 which made trespass on land a criminal offence and punishable by the confiscation of property – in other words confiscation of a person's home (Government of Ireland, 2002). This means that Travellers who have no bay on an official halting site, and are therefore living on the roadside or in an unofficial site, have to live under the constant threat of eviction, up to one-month imprisonment, a €3,000 fine or having their caravan confiscated. The risk factors for Travellers becoming homeless are outlined in more detail below.

A pathways approach to homelessness

According to Mayock and Corr (2013), there has been a shift within homeless research, from a focus on the routes into homelessness towards the exploration of homeless exits, which reflects the broader conceptual developments taking place within homeless research. Homelessness is increasingly being understood as 'a complex, multicausal phenomenon and as an interaction between individual and structural factors' (Mayock and Corr, 2013: 13). This approach to homelessness is widely known as a pathways approach and it places a strong emphasis on identifying what can facilitate or act as a barrier to exiting homelessness (Mayock and Corr, 2013).

A pathways approach to homelessness takes account of the fact that homelessness is not simply a static experience. Rather, housing and household circumstances can change and evolve throughout a person's life and they may be limited in access to, or enabled to gain, a suitable home through their economic and social circumstances at any given time (Anderson, 2010). A pathways analysis of homelessness provides a means of framing and exploring the diverse experience of homelessness and focuses on 'routes into, through and out of homelessness', which offers a marked 'improvement on much of the "cross-sectional" emphasis in much homelessness research' (Fitzpatrick, 2012: 365).

Clapham (2003: 123) explains that in using a pathways approach, homelessness is viewed as an 'episode or episodes in a person's housing career'. These episodes can be related to each other, as well as housing circumstances before and after each episode (Fitzpatrick, 2012: 365). This approach, takes account of both the structural and individual causes of homelessness by assuming that pathways of homelessness and housing are related to other aspects of a person's life, lifestyle and life transitions, for example, employment and family maturation (Mayock and Corr, 2013). As the approach is rooted in social constructivism, a strong emphasis is placed on 'the meanings that people attached to 'homelessness and 'home,' thereby illuminating individuals' perspectives on what it is like to be homeless or housed' (Mayock and Corr, 2013: 13). This approach is also useful in bringing hidden forms of homelessness to light, for example, episodes of staying temporarily with friends or relatives (Fitzpatrick, 2012).

The fact that homelessness is not a 'point in time' experience but can be understood as continuum was recognised in *The Way Home* which is the strategy to address adult homelessness in Ireland. This continuum ranges from being at risk of homelessness, through to becoming homeless, becoming institutionalised into homelessness and/or becoming entrenched in street homelessness. The homeless strategy emphasises the importance of recognising a person's or household's position on the continuum so that appropriate and effective interventions can be provided to ensure individuals or households progress out of homelessness rather than progressing through the continuum (Department of Environment of Heritage and Local Government, 2008). This research takes a pathways approach to exploring how homelessness is experienced by the Travellers who participated in the study, focusing on entries to, the experience of, and exits (or barriers to exits) from, homelessness.

Homeless numbers in Ireland and County Offaly

A census of homelessness was undertaken on census night 2011 (CSO, 2012a). It was the first time such an attempt was made at measuring homelessness in this way. Homeless people were identified based on where they were that night, rather than by identifying themselves as homeless. People were included if they were identified as sleeping rough or they were staying at specified homeless accommodation (in which the majority of residents were homeless people). Of the 3,808 people enumerated that night as homeless, 163 were Irish Travellers. Of these, 88 were female and 75 were male. In every other ethnicity category – besides ‘Black/Black Irish – more males were found to be homeless than females, as is the case internationally. Irish Travellers have the highest proportion of females homeless of any other category (see table below). Of the 163 homeless Travellers enumerated, 54 per cent were female and 46 per cent were male. This compares to 33.3 per cent female and 66.7 per cent male in the figures overall. As the Census figures only include people sleeping rough or in specified homeless accommodation, the actual number of homeless Travellers is likely to be much higher. Through this research we found a strong reluctance among the Travellers interviewed to enter emergency homeless accommodation,⁸ leading us to believe that these figures significantly under-represent the real numbers of Travellers experiencing homelessness.

Traveller women have been shown to represent a very high proportion of admissions to domestic violence refuges. A study by Watson and Parsons (2005) into domestic abuse of women and men in Ireland found that in 2003, almost 49 per cent of all admissions to refuges were Traveller women (7.6% alone and 40.9% with children). This may account the gender difference between those who are enumerated as homeless in the general population and Travellers who were enumerated as homeless.

Table 1: Homeless persons enumerated on Census night 2011

Ethnicity	Male		Female		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
White Irish	1,934	68.6	884	31.4	2,818	74.3
Irish Traveller	75	46.0	88	54.0	163	4.3
Other White	208	70.3	88	29.7	296	7.8
Black/Black Irish	96	47.3	107	52.7	203	5.4
Other	54	60.0	36	40.0	90	2.4
Not stated	161	72.9	60	27.1	221	5.8
All	2,528	66.7	1,263	33.3	3,791	100

Source: Central Statistics Office (2012a) Homeless Persons in Ireland: A Special Census Report. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Of the 3,791 people enumerated on Census night as homeless, a total of 163 of these identified as Irish Travellers, accounting for 4.3 per cent of the total homeless population. Figures provided by Offaly County Council show that out of a total of 141 homeless presentations in the County in 2015, 27 of these, or 19.1 per cent were Travellers.⁹ This illustrates how using the Census figure as a guide underestimates the issue of Traveller homelessness, for County Offaly at least, as the proportions vary significantly (4.3 percent of those homeless nationally are Travellers, while 19.1 per cent of those presenting in County Offaly are Travellers). Considering the fact that Travellers make up 1.3 percent of the population in Co. Offaly as a whole,¹⁰ it is alarming to see that they account for 19.1 per cent of those presenting as homeless within the County.¹¹ It is important to remember that these figures only account for those that a presenting to the council as homeless. For example, if those on the unofficial sites were included in the figures, the proportion of Travellers counted as homeless would be larger still.

If the broader ETHOS definition of homelessness and housing exclusion was used to determine levels of homelessness in Ireland, then a number of Travellers, who fall under the category of living in insecure or inadequate accommodation, would be included in the homelessness figures. In 2014, a total of 445 Traveller families nationally and 37 Traveller families in Co. Offaly were counted as living in unofficial camps (Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2014) without many of the amenities you would generally associated with a 'home' (Offaly Traveller Movement, 2012). For example, sewage facilities, running water, electricity and refuse collection.

Homeless service provision in County Offaly

The main statutory bodies with responsibility for addressing homelessness and the needs of homeless people in Ireland are the HSE and the local authorities. For the HSE this is defined through the Health Act, 1953 and the Child Care Act, 1991. Local authorities' duties in relation to homelessness are outlined in the Housing Act, 1988 and include the direct housing of people who are homeless; funding voluntary and cooperative bodies to house them; the provision of advice and information; and the provision of financial assistance to access the private rented market (Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government, 2008). Before a person can gain access to these homeless services (including emergency accommodation provided by voluntary bodies), they must be considered homeless through an assessment by the local authority assessment and placement services. Once they have been assessed as homeless, they will be offered emergency accommodation if this is available. There is limited emergency accommodation available in the midlands region.

Only six units are located in County Offaly so most people who find themselves homeless are required to travel to another county in order to access a bed. Currently beds are available in Tullamore, Athlone, Longford and Mullingar. According to a representative from the Housing Department in Offaly County Council, the demand for these beds is very high, therefore availability is always limited. If a person presents as homeless and is assessed as such, they will be given a bed in emergency accommodation if there is one available at that time.¹²

Table 2: Emergency Homeless Accommodation in the Midlands Region and distance from Tullamore, Co. Offaly

Address	Male/Female	Distance from Tullamore	Estimated travel time (to drive direct)	Bus round trip cost
Tullamore Emergency Accommodation, Tullamore	Male and female (only 6 beds – 4 male and 2 female)	NA	NA	NA
Athlone Emergency Accommodation Service, Ballymahon Road, Athlone	Male and female (only 6 beds – 4 male and 2 female)	36.7 km	29 minutes	€15
Esker House, Retreat Road, Athlone	Female victims of domestic abuse and children	38.8 km	34 minutes	€15
TEAM (Temporary Emergency Homeless Accommodation Mullingar), Green Road	Women and children only	39.5 km	36 minutes	€16
Bethany House, Dublin Road, Longford	Women and children only	66.6km	1 hour 1 minute	€28
St. Martha's Emergency Accommodation service, Dublin Road, Longford	Men only	66.6 km	1 hour 1 minute	€28

There are no hostels in the region that cater for families so presenting couples with children are separated. Children can be accommodated with their mothers, although some facilities will only accept boys up to the age of 14. However, if a father with a child presents as homeless, there is no emergency hostel accommodation available to accommodate them.

The Traveller population: Ireland and County Offaly

A total of 29,495 people identified themselves as Irish Travellers in the 2011 Census of population, accounting for just over half of one per cent of the Irish population. This is an increase of 32 per cent on the 2006 Census figure of 22,435 (CSO, 2012b).

However, the figures included in the Census are considered to be an under-representation and the All Ireland Traveller Health Study Team (2010) estimated the number to be closer to 36,224. The number of Travellers enumerated on Census night in Co Offaly was 1,028, which consisted of 495 males and 533 females. County Offaly has a higher proportion of Travellers than most other counties in the country at 13.4 Travellers per 1,000 of the population. Only Longford (19.1) and Galway (16.5) have a higher proportion of Travellers per 1,000 people. The number of Travellers per 1,000 people for the state as a whole is 6.4 (CSO, 2012b: 60).

Despite the fact that the Census figures are considered to under-represent the total number of Travellers, the data collected did illustrate how the Traveller population is very different from the general population in terms of its structure. For Irish Travellers, the average age was 22 years old, compared with an average age of 36 for the general population. When you look at population aged nine or under you can see a sharp contrast with the general population as 29.1 per cent of Travellers fall in this age category compared with 14.8 for the general population. That is almost double the proportion for Travellers in this age range. A similar demographic is observable when you look at the percentage of the Traveller population aged over 65, which is just 2.5 per cent, compared to 11.7 per cent for the general population (CSO, 2012b: 27).

Households

Travellers have a tendency to marry younger than the general population. According to the Census 2011, within the 15-29 age range, 33.4 per cent of Irish Travellers were married compared to just 8.2 per cent of the general population. The predominant type of household among Travellers were 'family households' (85.9% compared to 70% in the general population). The general make-up of the family households was different for Travellers than that of the general population as there were proportionately more lone-parent households (20.5% compared to 11.9%); fewer co-habiting couples without children (2.1% compared to 5%); and more households containing more than one family (2.5% compared to 1.1%) (CSO, 2012b: 30). Traveller households had an average of 4.2 people per household making them bigger than the general population, who had just 2.7 people on average. The proportion of households with six or more people was much higher for Travellers at 26.4 per cent of households, compared with just 4.4 per cent for the State (CSO, 2012b: 31).

Education

For many years, Traveller organisations have voiced concerns on the area of Traveller education in terms of equality of outcomes, data collection, and lack of interculturalism in the curriculum (All Ireland Traveller Health Study Team, 2010: 13). These concerns are validated by data collected through the 2011 Census. On average, Travellers ceased their full time education 4.7 years earlier than those in the general population. By age fifteen, 55 per cent of Travellers had ceased education, compared with just 11 per cent for the general population. The figures are just as startling when you look at those who continued their education past the age of 18. Only 3.1 per cent of Travellers continued past this age, compared to 41.2 per cent for the general population. Female Travellers were more likely to stay in education for longer, as 15 per cent of females finished their education by the age of 17 compared to 11 per cent of males. An alarming difference is observable when examining the figures for third level completions as only 1 per cent of Travellers completed third level in 2011, compared to a figure of 30.7 for the population as a whole. The proportion of those with no formal education also shows a stark difference to the general population as 17.7 per cent of Travellers fall into this category, compared to just 1.4 per cent of the population as a whole (CSO, 2012b: 32).

Notwithstanding the huge differences between Travellers and the general population in terms of educational achievement, among Travellers themselves the Census 2011 shows an improvement since the 2002 Census. In 2011, 21.8 per cent of Travellers whose education had ceased, were educated to lower second level compared with just 15.2 per cent in 2002. The figures for those who completed upper secondary level more than doubled and show an increase from 3.6 per cent in 2002 to 8.2 per cent in 2011 (CSO, 2012b: 32).

Economic status

Poverty levels for Travellers are high due to a number of factors including exceptionally high levels of unemployment and the resultant dependency on social welfare (Norris and Winston, 2005). Research into Traveller specific economic activities illustrates how income generation, rather than waged employment is emphasised (All Ireland Traveller Health Study Team, 2010). However, opportunities for self-employment have become more difficult to come by as the 'Traveller economy' has faced a decline in recent times due to increasing regulation and enforcement in areas such as recycling, waste disposal and horse trading (Norris and Winston, 2005: 804).

Some of the barriers that Travellers face in accessing the labour market include level of educational attainment, lack of employed role models and discrimination (All Ireland Traveller Health Study Team, 2010). A report by the Traveller Health Unit (2007: 18) identified a number of other factors that contribute the low level of labour market participation among Travellers, including:

- a lack of recognition of Traveller culture;
- a lack of outreach or specific efforts to recruit Travellers, and poor tailoring of recruitment documentation to meet the needs of Travellers;
- a lack of additional support for Travellers, for example, childcare supports;
- a lack of progression options as a result of participating on (particularly) labour market programmes; and
- loss, or fear of loss, of welfare and secondary benefits.

The vast majority of Travellers are unemployed and the Census figures show an increase between 2002 and 2011. In 2011, 84.3 per cent of Travellers were enumerated as unemployed (up from 74.9% in 2002). This compares to a figure of 19 per cent unemployment in the general population (CSO, 2012c: 15). When broken down by sex, the figures are 86.6 per cent for males compared to 22.3 per cent for the general population and 81.2 per cent for females as compared to 15 per cent for the population as a whole (CSO, 2012b: 33; CSO, 2012c: 15).

Health and disability

Health, both physical and mental, is another area where Travellers fare worse than the general population. Both the Census 2011 and the All Ireland Traveller Health Study have shown how self-rated health deteriorates more rapidly with age among Travellers than other population groups. According to the Census 2011, self-assessed health was rated as either good or very good by 86.6 per cent of Travellers (compared to 90.2 per cent for the general population). For those in the 30-49 age range, 23.7 percent indicated fair, bad or very bad health compared to seven per cent for the general population. For the 50-69 age range, this figure had increased to 48.9 per cent compared to 18.5 per cent for the population as a whole (CSO, 2012b: 35). The All Ireland Traveller Health Study Team (2010: 62) had similar findings in that those from the Republic of Ireland rating their health as fair or poor, accounted for 9.5 per cent of respondents under the age of 30; 16.7 per cent aged 30-44 years; 35.6 per cent aged 45-64; and 49.2 per cent aged over 65.

Despite the positive overall self-rated health among Travellers, the All Ireland Traveller Health Study found that they actually have substantially higher rates of ill-health affecting them daily than is evident in the comparison populations:¹³

[Travellers] have a higher burden of chronic disease, and higher measures of risk factors such as smoking, high blood pressure, cholesterol, and dietary consumption of fried foods. Fewer Travellers drink alcohol than do the general population, but those who do drink, drink more frequently. They have similar rates of injury than the comparator populations, but have higher rates of non-accidental injury. Breastfeeding rates are extremely low (2010: 78).

As a result of these health differences, the life expectancy for Travellers is considerably less than the general population. Whereas females in the general population have a life expectancy of 81.6 years, the figure for female Travellers is just 70.1 (11.5 year deficit). For males the deficit is even wider as the male general population have a life expectancy of 76.8 years, while the corresponding figure for Travellers is just 61.7, amounting to a 15.1 year deficit (All Ireland Traveller Health Study Team, 2010: 94). According to the All Ireland Traveller Health Study Team, the premature mortality among Travellers – especially the younger men – ‘reflects the high rates of suicide and accident related mortality’ (All Ireland Traveller Health Study Team, 2010: 161).

When Travellers were asked about disabilities, very similar figures were found through the Census 2011 and the All Ireland Traveller Health Study. The Census 2011 (CSO, 2012b: 34) found that 17.5 per cent of Travellers had one or more disability (compared with 13% for the general population), while the All Ireland Traveller Health Study (2010: 63) found that 17.8 per cent of people reported a limiting or long-term illness or disability. A study based on the AITHS found that Travellers have a lower health expectancy¹⁴ than that of the general population and are likely to spend a higher proportion of their life in poor health and with a disability (Abdalla et al, 2013).

Traveller ethnicity

In Northern Ireland and Great Britain, Travellers are officially recognised as a minority ethnic group. However, the Government of Ireland (2004: 90) has explicitly stated that Travellers do not, in their view, constitute a separate ethnic group:

The Government’s view is that Travellers do not constitute a distinct group from the population as a whole in terms of race, colour, descent or national and ethnic origin.

They based this on an argument that support for the recognition of a distinct Traveller ethnicity is controversial within academic research. In response to this, the Equality Authority undertook a review of the main academic literature on Traveller ethnicity and concluded that since the 1970s, academic work on Travellers has increasingly identified them as a distinct ethnic group, most notable through anthropological and socio-linguistic research. As well as this, they identified some historical evidence that identifies Travellers as a distinguishable group in earlier centuries, although very little historical work has been carried out to date (Equality Authority, 2006). The Equality Authority also examined in detail the ‘academic controversy’ referred to by the government:

In particular we have argued that the arguments set out in McLoughlin (1994) do not convincingly challenge the wider body of anthropological and other academic work that supports the case for recognising Travellers as an ethnic group. In conclusion it is important to note that McLoughlin’s article, which was published over ten years ago, appears to be the only significant contribution in the academic literature arguing explicitly against the recognition of Travellers as an ethnic group and this, rather than the coherence of its arguments, may explain why it continues to be referred to in this context (2006: 63).

Despite the government’s refusal to recognise Travellers as a distinct ethnic group, McVeigh argues that Traveller ethnicity has arguably been accepted as a *de facto* reality in both the voluntary and statutory sectors. McVeigh cites examples such as major government initiatives in terms of Traveller Health which present Traveller ethnicity as a given; the government partnership initiative ‘Citizen Traveller’ which defined its work as supporting Travellers as an ethnic group; and the previous and current President of Ireland (at the time of publication of the research in 2007) who routinely spoke of Travellers as an ethnic group. As well as this, the Minister for Justice who set up the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI) named Travellers among other ethnic groups when speaking about the objectives of the committee. The National Action Plan Against Racism (2005) integrates Travellers across its analysis and recommendations and the Census in 2006 and 2011 include a question asking for the ethnic or cultural background of the respondent and specifically names Irish Travellers as a possible response (McVeigh, 2007). This has led McVeigh to conclude that:

...we find the Republic of Ireland in a deeply anomalous situation in which the current President, the current Taoiseach, the Departments of Health and the National Action Plan Against Racism say that Travellers are an ethnic group that experiences racism while the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform say that they are not an ethnic group. Moreover, we find the Government position in direct contradiction to the position of its own Equality Authority.’ (McVeigh, 2007: 100).

So what are the features of Traveller Community that warrant recognition as a distinct ethnic group? In their examination of the literature, the Equality Authority showed how the understanding of ethnicity, as set out in the seminal work of Fredrik Barth (1969) and other anthropologists, has been applied to Travellers, highlighting:

- biological self-perpetuation as Travellers typically marry within their own community and group membership is determined by descent;
- shared fundamental cultural values in relation to self-employment, occupational flexibility, priority of social obligations based on kinship, nomadism and distinctive pollution beliefs;
- a field of communication and interaction in that Travellers have their own language;
- a distinguishable category as Travellers have a name for themselves as a group and know who belongs and does not belong to it, just as non-Travellers have names for Travellers as a group and know to whom these names apply (Equality Authority, 2006: 63).

According to Berthoud an essential ingredient of the social boundary which separates the 'us' of one ethnic community from the 'them' of another and distinguishes it from other social categorisations such as gender or class is 'heritage'. Your ethnicity comes directly from your parents, who in turn got it from their parents. Words such as 'inherit' and 'heritage' imply nothing about 'whether the mechanism of transmission is social or genetic' (Berthoud, 1998: 54).

In the context of the evidence to suggest that Travellers are a distinct ethnic minority, McVeigh (2007: 101) argues that the government's position on Traveller ethnicity can be viewed as 'ethnicity denial'. This denial of ethnicity, which 'forms part of a long and problematic discourse on "Gypsies" and ethnicity across Europe', directly suggests a denial of the ability of Irish Travellers to experience racism due to their status as Travellers (McVeigh, 2007: 103). And if they are defined as a group which cannot experience racial discrimination, then it is impossible for them to receive the protections afforded by anti-racial discrimination legislation and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (McVeigh, 2007). McVeigh argues that a denial of ethnicity by a Government should be backed up by rigorous examination and is a matter worthy of more than placement in a footnote:¹⁵

Ethnicity denial represents a specific intervention by a state to deny and/or withdraw protection afforded by EU and other international law – legislation represented as central to both equality and social cohesion. It follows, therefore that the denial or removal of recognition of ethnicity for a particular group should be conducted under rigorous scrutiny and supported by the most robust argument.

It is not, therefore, sufficient to argue that, “it is far from clear that they constitute a different ethnic group”. A State which denies or removes the protection afforded by ethnic status should be absolutely clear that the group does not constitute a different ethnic group before it takes this profoundly disempowering step (McVeigh, 2007: 104).

This ethnic denial has come in for criticism by the UN committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), who have expressed concern at the State’s ‘persistent refusal’ to recognise Travellers as a distinct ethnic group despite their recommendations that they do so in light of the fact that Travellers satisfy internationally recognised criteria for such a group (Mulcahy, 2011: 310). According to Kruckenberg, it is possible to argue that this debate is merely one of terminology and that differences in wording do not guarantee differences in practice, experience, or recognition of exclusion. However, ‘language is meaningful – how Travellers are identified in policy and legislative texts affects their treatment, the way settled people view them, how they view themselves, and particularly, their ability to seek redress under international law’ (Kruckenberg, 2008: 310).

Discrimination and assimilation

An article written by Meav-Ann Wren in 1980 argued that Travellers experienced ‘blatant discrimination’ from the settled population, including those in positions of power. In the article entitled ‘The Travelling People – Racialism in Ireland’, Wren argued that:

...[Travellers] non-conformism to the Irish norm specifically to the norm of urbanized affluent Ireland is used to justify refusing them jobs, health care, education and housing. Irish attitudes to travellers are not unlike the attitudes of the Boston Irish in their opposition to bussing, or the attitudes of the white minority in South Africa. For the attitudes are those of racialism (Wren in Hederman and Kearney, 1982: 756).

Despite the fact that this article was written 35 years ago, it could easily be written about the discrimination Travellers still experience today. According to Hayes, Travellers have been ‘Othered’ in Irish society for a long time. In an analysis of the ‘Tinker Questionnaire’ (1952, Irish Folklore Commission), Hayes shows that this identity, as constructed by the settled community, was primarily a negative one that defined Travellers ‘in terms of reductive essentialism based on a series of mostly negative stereotypes, including licentiousness, secrecy, dishonesty, and violence’ (Hayes, 2006: 137). Hayes argues that many of the general characteristics that were ascribed to the Irish by those that ‘othered’ them, for example, nomadism, beggary, backwardness, superstition, anarchy, sexual profligacy, and violence, were simply transferred onto a new ‘other’ – Travellers – following the achievement of Independence (2006: 138).

This ‘othering’ of Irish Travellers can be viewed alongside the ‘othering’ of groups such as Jews in Europe and linked to the formation of the new nation-state and to the new mediating preoccupation of previously colonised peoples with the question of their own self-definition’(Hayes, 2006: 140).

Mulcahy argues that the ‘problem’ of mobility is a defining feature of settled peoples’ views on Travellers:

Despite the common characterization of late-modern society in terms of mobility, fluidity and ‘liquidity’, this is applied in highly contrasting ways. On the one hand, it involves an appreciation and facilitation of the globalized economy and the mobility of capital and corporate executives, and the vast tourism industry. On the other, it involves deep concern over their ‘problem’ of mobility as represented and practised by illegal immigrants, global criminal networks and other ‘disreputable’ individuals and groups’ (Mulcahy, 2011: 307).

As a result of their mobility and thus their rejection of the norms of sedentary society and the territorial governance requirements of the nation state, Travellers were viewed as ‘out of step’ with the mores and practices that define modern society: sedentarism and predictability, wage-labour and private property, restraint and self-control, respectability and law-abidingness (Mulcahy, 2011). As a consequence of this, much policy related to Travellers after 1922 was assimilationist in that it focused on containing the mobility of Travellers (Mulcahy, 2011) and ‘absorbing’ them into the general population to solve the Traveller ‘problem’ (McVeigh, 2008: 92). According to McVeigh, the state policy of ‘Anti-Travellerism’ continues to the present day and can be seen under four key intervention:

- the criminalisation of trespass under Section 24 of the Housing Act 2002;
- the winding up of Citizen Traveller (almost immediately after they came out against the housing act);
- the removal of discrimination cases involving licensed premises from the Equality Tribunal to the District Court; and
- the ongoing denial of Traveller ethnicity by the Irish Government (McVeigh, 2008: 92).

McVeigh argues that, this hostility towards Irish Travellers does take place in other states. However, only in Ireland:

...has this generated a discrete and integrated culture and politics – and associated state intervention. The state in Ireland, north and south, has routinely insisted that the existence of Irish travellers (or "tinkers" or "itinerants") – rather than anti-Traveller racism – is 'the problem'. The state has also been gradually implementing a 'satisfactory solution of the problem' – settlement and absorption' (2008: 93).

McVeigh acknowledges that the state discourse has changed since the publication of the Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Committee, 1995 from 'problem' to 'respect'. However, he argues that intentions can be 'just as brutal and sometimes even more engaged when the state begins to act 'in the interests of Travellers'' (McVeigh, 2008: 93). Norris and Winston found that although the discourse and state policy goals with regards to Traveller accommodation have moved from assimilationism, through integrationism and on to 'weak' multi-culturalism, the opposite is in fact true when outcomes are examined. They identified a significant 'implementation deficit' in relation to housing and accommodation policy as it applies to Travellers, manifest in two ways. Firstly, as the actual output of accommodation has generally failed to meet targets set by central government and has failed to reduce the numbers of Travellers living on unofficial sites. Secondly, the type of accommodation provided has often been at variance with that recommended by central government (Norris and Winston, 2005: 815):

This implementation deficit is related to a number of long-standing barriers to the implementation of policy in this area (specifically, the opposition of local politicians and the general public and the practices of local authority staff), some of which have shifted focus in recent years, coupled with the emergence of the planning system as a very significant barrier to expediting the supply of halting sites in the last two decades. Thus, the assimilationist Commission report effected multicultural outcomes (halting sites), while the multiculturalist Task Force resulted in assimilationist outcomes (standard housing).

Traveller homelessness: a multitude of risk factors

The preceding sections clearly show how Travellers are at high risk of experiencing homelessness. Lower levels of educational attainment than the general population, coupled with endemic unemployment, social welfare reliance, high levels of poverty, high levels of disability and other health issues, as well as local opposition to Traveller accommodation, means that Travellers are less able than the wider population to source accommodation from their own resources.

This leaves them heavily reliant on the local authority as a provider of accommodation. The risk of homelessness is strengthened still when the issue of ethnic denial and assimilationist accommodation provision are added to the pot. The criminalisation of trespass under Section 24 of the Housing Act 2002 is a contributing factor as this affectively makes homeless Travellers who have a preference to live in a trailer/caravan, yet have no halting site space available to them. In County Offaly the demand for Traveller specific accommodation units/bays is high (illustrated by the number of families living on unofficial sites) yet the provision of new Traveller specific accommodation is limited (only two additional permanent caravan sites – site for individual caravans – were provided in 2015 and none are proposed for 2016).¹⁶

The next section will outline the current policy context for Traveller accommodation, as well as data on the types of accommodation that Travellers are accessing in recent years, through their own means or with Local authority assistance, both nationally and in County Offaly.

Traveller accommodation

Since the Task Force on the Traveller Community published its report in 1995 there have been a number of policy developments in the provision of accommodation for Travellers. This includes the establishment of the Traveller Accommodation Unit in the Department of Environment, and the Local and National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committees (LTACC and NTACC) under the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act, 1998. The NTACC and LTACCs were developed to provide an arena for consultation with Travellers and Traveller groups with regard to the provision of Traveller accommodation. The 1998 Act provided for the development of five year Traveller Accommodation Programmes (TAP) to be reviewed on a three-yearly basis. However, many local authorities have failed to adopt or implement these programmes (Coates et al, 2008). The NTACC has no power to influence the implementation of the TAPs. The report on Local Authority Service Indicators (2013), published by the Local Authority management agency, presents data on Traveller families actually accommodated as a percentage of the targets set in the local TAP. The most recent report (2013) shows that the figure for Offaly County Council is just 13.8 per cent (accommodation provided as a percentage of targets set), leaving them the second lowest of 33 local authorities (Local Government Management Agency, 2013). The figures for 2012 were better at 57.9 per cent. However, it is still well below the targets set out in the TAP (Local Government Management Agency, 2012). This implementation deficit is evident throughout the country and has led to repeated calls for the establishment of a specific Traveller Accommodation Agency, which was recommended by the Task Force in 1995.

However, to date, the provision of Traveller accommodation has remained the responsibility of the local authorities.

Despite the problems with implementation of the TAPs, the inclusion of Traveller consultation in issues of accommodation can be viewed as a positive policy development. Unfortunately, there were some legislative changes over the past two decades that have had more of a marginalising effect on Travellers including the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 2002 which made trespass on land with an object (such as a caravan) illegal. The Act has ‘effectively curtailed Travellers’ freedom to move as guaranteed in a number of different policy documents’ (Coates et al, 2008: 52).

Some of the issues with the provision of Traveller Accommodation have been outlined by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) in its reports on Ireland. The lack of progression was noted in its report published in 2013, in which it stated concerns around the lack of provision of Traveller specific accommodation:

ECRI regrets to note, that while the 1998 Traveller Accommodation Act placed an obligation on local authorities to produce multi-annual Traveller accommodation programmes, with the aim of improving the rate of provision of accommodation for Travellers, in practice many local authorities failed to provide adequate accommodation for Travellers. It is particularly disturbing that resistance from local residents, resorting in some cases to physical destruction of new halting sites or homes, coupled with lack of political will on the part of local authorities and lack of incentives and sanctions for non-implementation of the Act, hamper significantly the pace of improvement of Traveller accommodation (pg. 22).

The following tables give some indication of the recent accommodation situation of Travellers both at a national level and within the county of Offaly.

Table 3: Number of Traveller families by accommodation type 2012-2014, National

	2012		2013		2014		2012-2014
Specific accommodation type	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	Trend over time ¹⁷
Accommodated by/with local authority assistance	5,559	56.2	5,574	56.3	5,782	56.5	+223 (+4%)
unofficial sites	330	3.3	361	3.6	445	4.4	+115 (+35%)
Own resources (estimate)	580	5.9	584	5.9	600	5.9	+20 (+3.4%)
Private rented accommodation (estimate)	2,818	28.5	2,717	27.4	2,672	26.1	-146 (-5.1%)
Sharing housing	604	6.1	663	6.7	727	7.1	+123 (+20%)
Total	9,891	100.0	9,899	100.0	10,226	100.0	+335 (3.4%)

Table three shows that the number of Traveller families accommodated with local authority assistance increased nationally from 5,559 families in 2012 to 5,782 families in 2014 accounting for an increase of four per cent over this time. The trend for those in private rented accommodation for this time period shows a decrease of 5.1 per cent. The most noticeable trends over this time show that the number of families in unofficial sites increased by 35 per cent (from 330 to 445 families) and the numbers sharing accommodation rose from 604 to 727, which is an increase of 20 per cent. Overall, the number of Traveller families increased by 3.4 per cent between 2012 and 2014.

Table 4: Number of Traveller families by accommodation type 2012-2014, Offaly

Specific accommodation type	2012		2013		2014		2012-2014
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	Trend over time
Accommodated by/with local authority assistance	144	52.9	149	53.8	168	61.3	+24 (+16.6%)
Unofficial sites	36	13.2	36	13.0	37	13.5	+1 (+2.7%)
Own resources (estimate)	5	1.8	4	1.4	4	1.5	-1 (-20%)
Private rented accommodation (estimate)	77	28.3	83	30.0	57	20.8	-20 (-26%)
Sharing housing	10	3.7	5	1.8	8	2.9	-2 (-20%)
Total	272	100.0	277	100.0	274	100.0	+2 (+0.7%)

Source: DECLG Annual Count 2014

The figures for County Offaly are somewhat different. The number of families in accommodation with local authority assistance rose from 144 to 168 accounting for an increase of 16.6 per cent. The increase in the numbers on unofficial sites is nowhere near as startling as the national figure increasing just 2.7 per cent. However, it is important to note here that the proportion of Traveller families living on unofficial sites is a lot higher in County Offaly than it is nationally, as can be seen in table five (4.4% nationally, compared to 13.5% in County Offaly). The trend from 2012 to 2014 shows that the numbers in private rented accommodation has fallen by 26 per cent from 77 to 57. Although the figures show a decrease of 20 per cent of families sharing housing, the numbers in this category are quite low falling from ten in 2012 to eight in 2014.

Table 5: Number of Traveller families by accommodation type 2014, National and in County Offaly

Specific accommodation type	National		Offaly	
	No.	%	No.	%
Accommodated by/with local authority assistance	5,782	56.5	168	61.3
unofficial sites	445	4.4	37	13.5
Own resources (estimate)	600	5.9	4	1.5
Private rented accommodation (estimate)	2,672	26.1	57	20.8
Sharing housing	727	7.1	8	2.9
Total	10,226	100.0	274	100.0

Source: DECLG Annual Count 2014

The figures for the accommodation situation of Travellers in County Offaly was different in a number of ways from the national picture. In 2014, 4.4 per cent of Traveller families nationally were living in unofficial sites, compared to 13.5 per cent in County Offaly. A total of 5.9 per cent of Traveller families nationally provided accommodation from their own resources in 2014, compared to just 1.5 per cent in County Offaly. Of those who were living in private rented accommodation, the proportion was 26.1 per cent nationally and 20.8 per cent in County Offaly. Finally, 7.1 per cent of Traveller families nationally were in shared housing, compared to just 2.9 per cent in County Offaly.

Table 6: Number of Traveller families in local authority and local authority assisted accommodation 2012-2014, National

Specific accommodation type	Standard housing	2012		2013		2014		2012-2014
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	Trend over time
Standard local authority housing		3,260	58.6	3,279	58.8	3,418	59.1	+158 (+4.8%)
Private houses (with local authority assistance)		511	9.2	494	8.9	504	8.7	-7 (-1.4%)
Unknown	Provided by voluntary bodies (with local authority assistance)	156	2.8	162	2.9	183	3.2	+27 (+17.3%)
Traveller specific	Local authority group scheme	722	13.0	728	13.1	732	12.7	+10 (+1.4%)
	Local authority halting sites	910	16.4	911	16.3	945	16.3	+35 (+3.8%)
	Total	5,559	100.0	5,574	100.0	5,782	100.0	+223 (+4%)

Source: DECLG Annual Count 2014

Table three, four and five presented data on families living in all types of housing. Tables six, seven and eight look in more detail at those who are living in local authority owned and local authority assisted accommodation. The trends nationally from 2012 to 2014 show that the number of Travellers in standard local authority housing has increased from 3,260 to 3,418, accounting for an increase of 4.8 per cent. The numbers in private housing with local authority assistance have fallen slightly by 1.4 per cent from 511 to 504. The most noticeable increase is the numbers of Traveller families in accommodation provided by voluntary bodies which has increased by 17.3 per cent from 156 in 2012 to 183 in 2014. The percentages of families accommodated in Traveller specific accommodation have increased slightly by 1.4 per cent in local authority group housing schemes and 3.8 per cent in local authority halting sites.

Table 7: Number of Traveller families in local authority and local authority assisted accommodation 2012-2014, Offaly

		2012		2013		2014		2012-2014
	Specific accommodation type	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	Trend over time
Standard housing	Standard local authority housing	81	56.3	83	55.7	98	58.3	+17 (+21%)
	Private houses (with local authority assistance)	21	14.6	21	14.1	23	13.7	+2 (+9.5%)
Unknown	Provided by voluntary bodies (with local authority assistance)	6	4.2	6	4.0	10	6.0	+4 (+66.6%)
Traveller specific housing	Local authority group scheme	4	2.8	4	2.7	4	2.4	0
	Local authority halting sites	32	22.2	35	23.5	33	19.6	+1 (+3.2%)
	Total	144	100.0	149	100.0	168	100.0	+24 (+16.7%)

Source: DECLG Annual Count 2014

There are some differences between the trends associated with living in local authority owned and local authority assisted accommodation in Co. Offaly and nationally. However, it is important to be aware that the Co. Offaly trends are based on much smaller numbers than the national ones. For example, the percentage increase for Traveller families accommodated in housing provided by voluntary bodies is 66.6 per cent, but this is based on an increase from six to ten families over the time period. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see that the number of families accommodated in standard local authority housing has increased from 81 to 98 (+21%) between 2012 and 2014. Only one more family was accommodated in local authority halting site accommodation in 2014 than in 2012 (increasing from 32 to 33). The number of families accommodated in local authority group housing remained the same at four.

Table 8: Number of Traveller families in local authority and local authority assisted accommodation 2014, National and County Offaly

		National		Offaly	
	Specific accommodation type	No.	%	No.	%
Standard housing	Standard local authority housing	3,418	59.1	98	58.3
	Private houses (with local authority assistance)	504	8.7	23	13.7
Unknown	Provided by voluntary bodies (with local authority assistance)	183	3.2	10	6.0
Traveller specific housing	Local authority group scheme	732	12.7	4	2.4
	Local authority halting sites	945	16.3	33	19.6
	Total	5,782	100.0	168	100.0

Source: DECLG Annual Count 2014

When you compare the national and County Offaly figures for 2014 you can see that nationally, the proportion of families living in standard local authority housing is 59.1 per cent. The corresponding figure for County Offaly is 58.3 per cent. Those living in private housing with local authority assistance account for 8.7 per cent nationally. The proportion is higher in County Offaly at 13.7 per cent. Again County Offaly has a higher proportion when you look at the figures for those in housing provided by voluntary bodies which accounts for 3.2 per cent nationally and six per cent in County Offaly, and those in halting sites at 16.3 per cent and 19.6 per cent respectively. However, the situation is reversed when you examine the figures for local authority group housing schemes as the proportion is 12.7 per cent nationally, compared to just 2.4 per cent in County Offaly.

The figures show that a large proportion of Travelers are accommodated in standard housing, both local authority and private rented. The proportions of Travellers living in Traveller specific accommodation provided by the local authority is quite low at 29 per cent nationally and 22 per cent in County Offaly. The number of Traveller families living in unofficial sites and in shared housing accounts for 11.5 per cent nationally and 16.4 per cent in County Offaly. Both of these living situations have potential to lead to problems of overcrowding and poor living conditions.

Chapter 3: Homeless Pathways

This chapter will outline the main findings of the research, paying particular attention to the participants' pathways into, through and out of homelessness.

Current living situations

The current living situations of the participants in this study varied widely. Although all of the participants had experienced homelessness in the year previous to the research, not all were homeless at the time of the research. Of those who were housed since their experience of homelessness, issues of overcrowding were evident in their current living situations. For example, one family of five, which included both male and female children, was living in a two-bedroom house provided as temporary accommodation through the local authority. As one of the children had just reached the teenage years, the family were quite uncomfortable that this child had to share a room with a sibling of the opposite sex who was just a few years younger. Another family, which included a male and female teenager, were living in a similar situation. Again they were living in a two-bedroom house and one of the siblings was sleeping in one of the bedrooms upstairs, while the other was sleeping on the couch in the sitting room. Another sibling and her spouse were currently homeless so they slept on the floor of this house when they had nowhere else to go:

Interviewee: this is a daughter that got married there...so now where are they going to sleep tonight, I don't know? That's my story and basically I am overcrowded because I can't double up with the young one and the young fella, the young fella needs his own room. This is only a two-bedroom house, with three people in it. Now I have all my stuff...I've all my stuff all in boxes, all [son's] clothes is all in cases, so it's just basically, it's just too small.

Interviewer: and what ages are your children?

Interviewee: [son] is [late teens] and [daughter is early teens]. So I mean you couldn't put them together, do you know what I mean? It's not fair for him to be thrown there, with a throw over him, he's freezing.

One of the interviewee was in a local authority property after a few months sleeping in a car. This participant was very happy with the location and condition of his current property. However, his three children come to stay with him every weekend and have to sleep on the floor as it is a one-bedroom property.

One of the couples and two individuals interviewed were living on unofficial sites. One family had recently lost their trailer in a fire and were staying in a borrowed caravan at the time of the interview. As the caravan that they had a loan of was small, one of their teenage children had to sleep in the car. Another family comprised two parents and two children living in a trailer with two beds. A single woman interviewed lived on an unofficial site with her parents. All of these interviewees were living without basic amenities such as running water, sewage facilities and mains electricity (they used generators for periods throughout the day). The people living in the unofficial sites all cited a lack of alternative Traveller specific accommodation as the reason why they were living there. All had been offered, or had lived in, standard housing at some point but found that it was not suitable for their needs as Travellers.

Two recently married young couples were interviewed, both of whom were expecting their first child. One of these couples were living separately in each of their parental homes which were located in different towns. One of the participants described how the family home was already seriously overcrowded before he moved back home and his wife explained how she is currently living in a situation that puts her family home at risk as her parents are in breach of their tenancy agreement as long as she is staying there. The other recently married couple were living in a trailer out the back garden of the wife's parents house. This couple had both grown up in a house and it was their first experience of living in a trailer:

Interviewee 1: I know they would say well you're Travellers, you would be used to it, this, that and the other, but it's not necessarily like that...

Interviewee 2: you are used to it if you were reared like that.

Interviewee 1: if you were reared in a trailer, good and well you would get used to it like, you would be used to it from an infant. But we're reared in a house and then you actually have to go from our house to a trailer because you can't afford accommodation it's a lot harder like, do you know what I mean like? Especially then when you are trying to keep it warm, like when the child comes please God, like how are we supposed to keep it warm when the heater doesn't work, you know? Like it's very hard and then you can't have an oil heater because the fumes is very dangerous, you know what I mean?

Another participant was living in a temporary structure on an overcrowded un-serviced site (privately owned by a family member) which was prone to flooding. The final interviewee was living with his wife and children in private rented accommodation affected by plumbing issues and flooding. This participant has been issued a notice to quit. However, with nowhere else to go, has stayed in the property, despite the fact that the kitchen and one bedroom are not in use due to a broken water tank which has flooded parts of the house.

Pathways into homelessness

The reasons why people became homeless were varied and complex. For a small number, this episode was their first, while most had experienced homelessness on a number of occasions throughout their life. One participant, who had multiple experiences of homelessness as a child, became homeless when he got married and himself and his wife were unable to access private rented accommodation. The landlord at the property they were living in immediately after their wedding, gave them just a few hours to leave when he found out that they were both living there as he said that it was too small for the two of them due to fire regulations. They have been unable to find a property since.

The formation or breakdown of families had a major impact on homelessness for a number of other participants as well, as they found it very difficult to access accommodation, whether that was in the private rented sector, standard local authority housing or Traveller specific accommodation. This issue of housing accessibility for Travellers was echoed in a consultation with a key representative of the midlands Simon Community which provides the regional homeless support service. This representative felt that accommodation in the region is in short supply generally. However, the support workers in Simon feel that it takes them even longer to access private rented accommodation for Travellers than other homeless people.¹⁸ Many of the research participants feel that this lack of access to private rented accommodation is due to discrimination by landlords.

Some participants entered homelessness when they left council housing and entered the unofficial site. These participants were generally older than those who had a desire to live in standard housing and had grown up travelling the country themselves. Although they all found life without basic amenities very tough, for some of these participants standard housing was a worse alternative as it was so far removed from what they considered a home:

Well I am 11 years here, where I am now and all my family, a good few of the boys were out here before I came out and I suppose just to say, I came from the side of the road and I did take a house at one stage. I didn't like it and it was only ever temporary, for five years. I found it very hard to cope with mental illness and that, I struggled for a long, long time. And I suppose I just came to the stage where I just couldn't take any more so when I came out here 11 years ago, I was on a lot of medication and I would have had been on medication for a long time, still struggling to sleep fully at night, still have problems up and down, but nothing like what I suffered when I was in the house... But I am 11 years here now, living in a caravan.

Of the 14 participants, nine spoke of multiple moves throughout their life. On some occasions these moves were by choice as they travelled from place to place. However, the desire to travel was not a constant for any of the participants and many spoke of a wish to become more settled – either in a standard home or more permanent Traveller specific accommodation – when they found that their living conditions became too tough to deal with. For example, if they had a number of young children and living on the roadside became more difficult or as they found it more challenging to find places to park trailers. A number of the older participants reminisced about the past and discussed how they feel it is more difficult to travel nowadays than it was in the past, as there are less places that you can park your trailer and the public and authorities are more hostile.

On many occasions, the need to move was not by choice and instead was caused by increased rents, overcrowding, being issued a notice to quit from a landlord, poor living conditions, fear of violence, a court order, or the breakdown of a relationship. One participant, who is currently living in overcrowded accommodation, describes how the family has lived in six different places over the past seven years:

We were in [estate 1] for two and a half year. The reason why we left that, he put up the rent. It was €750 a month. We went into [estate 2]. We were a year and a half [there], when he sold the house to one of his friends or cousins... We went back down to stay in the official halting site, we stayed in a caravan. The council promised me that time that if I left it, I wouldn't go for them, but they promised me if I left it that I would get a council house within three to four weeks. That two year ago, two and a half year ago, still no further on. Then we were a year and a half in [estate 3], she had the house up for sale, she sold the house so we have to get out of it and we had no place to go so we were in a B&B... for two weeks, two weeks wasn't it? Yeah two weeks we were in that and then we came in here. They said this was only temporary, we are here since last [year] we moved in here, we are here since.

Such instability and/or lack of tenure security was the main reason most people interviewed had a preference for local authority provided accommodation (Traveller specific and standard housing), as they viewed it as more stable than the private rented sector or living on unofficial sites.

Pathways through homelessness: the experience of the participants

As discussed above, the participants' homeless journeys were varied and complex throughout their life histories. A number of different homeless situations were experienced by the participants, which are outlined in Table nine below.

Table 9: ETHOS typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion, including living situations experienced by research participants

		Operational Category		Living Situation		Generic definition	No .
C o n c e p t u a l C a t e g o r y	R o o f f l e s s	1	People living rough	1.1	Public space or external space	Living in the streets or public spaces, without a shelter that can be defined as living quarters	2
		2	People in emergency accommodation	2.1	Night shelter	People with no usual place of residence who make use of overnight shelter, low threshold shelter	0
	H o u s e l e s s	3	People in accommodation for the homeless	3.1	Homeless hostel	Where the period of stay is intended to be short term	3
				3.2	Temporary hostel		
				3.3	Transitional supported accommodation		
		4	People in Women's shelter	4.1	Women's shelter accommodation	Women accommodated due to experience of domestic violence and where the period of stay is intended to be short term	1
		5	People in accommodation for immigrants	5.1	Temporary accommodation/reception centres	Immigrants in reception or short term accommodation due to their immigrant status	0
				5.2	Migrant workers' accommodation		
	6	People due to be released from institutions	6.1	Penal institutions	No housing available prior to release	1	
			6.2	Medical institutions	Stay longer than needed due to a lack of housing		
			6.3	Children's institutions/homes	No housing identified (e.g. by 18 th birthday)		
	7	People receiving longer term support (due to homelessness)	7.1	Residential care for older homeless people	Long stay accommodation with care for formerly homeless people (normally more than one year)	0	
			7.2	Supported accommodation for formerly homeless people			
I n s e c u r e	8	People living in insecure accommodation	8.1	Temporarily with family or friends	Living in conventional housing but not the usual or place of residence due to lack of housing	9	
			8.2	No legal (sub)tenancy	Occupation of dwelling with no legal tenancy, Illegal occupation of a dwelling		
			8.3	Illegal occupation of land	Occupation of land with no legal rights		
9	People living under the threat of eviction	9.1	Legal orders enforced (rented)	Where orders for eviction are operative	0		
		9.2	Repossession orders (owned)	Where mortgagee has the legal order to repossess			
10	People living under threat of violence	10.1	Police recorded incidents	Where police action is taken to ensure place of safety for victims of domestic violence	0		
I n a d e q u a t e	11	People living in temporary/ non-conventional structures	11.1	Mobile home	Not intended as place of usual residence	3	
			11.2	Non-conventional building	Makeshift shelter, shack or shanty		
			11.3	Temporary structure	Semi-permanent structure, hut or cabin		
12	People living in unfit housing	12.1	Occupied dwelling unfit for habitation	Defined as unfit for habitation by national legislation or building regulations	2		
13	People living in extreme overcrowding	13.1	Highest national norm of overcrowding	Defined as exceeding national density standard for floor-space or useable rooms	6*		

Source: FEANTS A (2005) 'Ethos Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion'.

*based on children over 10 of opposite sex sharing a room, as well as size of living space

Table nine is based on the ETHOS typology of homelessness and housing exclusion. It is used here as a way to show the different ways that the participants in this research have experienced homelessness and housing exclusion. The last column includes a count of one per person interviewed if they spoke about experiencing homelessness in a given way. For example, some participants spoke about living on a number of unofficial sites (which would include them in the typology under the illegal occupation of land) on a number of different occasions. However, the table is meant to show the different ways that the participants have experienced homelessness, rather than the number of times they have experienced each type. Were people spoke of multiple experiences in different ways, for example leaving prison and using temporary accommodation, a count of one was included in each section.

The table shows the range of homeless situations that the research participants experienced, including roofless, houseless, insecure and inadequate accommodation. This typology provides a useful tool through which to understand pathways through homelessness and illustrates how homelessness is a fluid experience as people move from one category or living situation to another. This was typical for the participants in this study. For example, one participant described a move from an institution (houseless) into emergency homeless accommodation (roofless) and on to living in unfit housing (inadequate). Another participant had experienced multiple moves throughout his life which included sleeping in a car as a child (roofless), living on unofficial sites (insecure) and living in extremely overcrowded conditions (inadequate).

Length of homeless episodes

The length of time that each homeless episode lasted varied from person to person, as well as between episodes. Some people experienced long term homelessness, while others were experiencing their first ever episode of homelessness at the time of the interview. For some of those who had spent considerable time travelling, the constant threat of being moved on, or having your trailer confiscated meant that they never really felt that they were not homeless. One participant who is living in a cabin on land owned by a family member for the past three years described how she has always felt homeless and her adult children are now experiencing the same issues in accessing appropriate and secure accommodation:

Interviewer: so in all that time, was there a time that you felt yourself that you were homeless...?

Interviewee: like I've always felt like that, homeless. Like I have my daughters, my oldest children now they're married and they have children of their own and my older son... but now they are grown up and they have their own children, so and like they're still homeless, they are still.

Another participant described how she has lived on an unofficial site with her family for almost 20 years without basic amenities:

There was Travellers there before we came, we're there since 96, December 96 we are there since... So we're there and we have no facilities like. We used to have a skip and they took it because they said that they had no funds, we used to have portaloos, back eight or nine year ago, they took away them because they said they had no money to keep emptying them...

This participant explained how her family have been in this situation for such a long time as they have never been offered accommodation suitable for their needs. Rather they were offered standard housing or a place on a large halting site, which the family were reluctant to live on. This experience was typical of those living on the unofficial sites. The participants who were living in this situation all expressed a desire to live in Traveller specific accommodation. However, all felt that the larger halting sites, that some had been offered a bay on, are not really Traveller specific as they would never choose to live with that many other people who were not immediate or extended family or friends:

Interviewer: so what kind of sites were you offered?

Interviewee: just a bay in the permanent site. That didn't suit like, it didn't suit us cause it's not what we want so what's the point in going down there and then a local authority house, a council house in an estate and we don't want that.

Interviewer so what is it about the bay... What is available doesn't suit your needs at all?

Interviewee: well that particular bay like, the site is too big. There are 16 bays in it, do you know what I mean?...so whereas if you had a four bay or six bay site, it would be only your own family, do you know what I mean, you might be able to whatever manage it...16 bays is way too big, eight tops, six. Even at 10 you are pushing it...it is a very, very good site now like do you know what I mean... It's a good site like but, just to me, I would be able to live in it because it's too big for me like, I'm saying just me and my family. Whereas if you have four, six, even 10 you would be pushing it you know what I mean? Because 10 is a lot to live with... I'd say four, six is plenty .

Travellers who took part in research examining why Travellers leave Traveller specific accommodation made similar suggestions around the size of halting sites. They suggested that smaller halting sites accommodating a small number of compatible families would work better. They recommended that these sites have room for some expansion to accommodate growing families and that they be developed in consultation between the local authority and Traveller families (KW Research and Associates, 2014).

For some participants, it was the feeling of security, the feeling that no one would come and move them on, that would end the feeling of homelessness that they have felt for many years:

Interviewee 1: that you know that six months, a year, two years down the road, that you don't have to leave it, that it's yours for life.

Interviewer: and what it is about that that you really want? Is it the feeling of security or?

Interviewee 1: security for the childer, that they know right this is it, this is our home we don't have to move out of it again

Interviewee 2: that you are not, you're not, you're not thinking every night when you're going to bed, who is going to knock on the door in morning, how long more we going to be left here? When is [landlord] going to approach us and say '[name] you have six weeks to go' or whatever, do you know? Just something that's, that you can lie down, that you have no worries going to bed at night like. Do you know?

Physical health

A range of physical and mental health issues were mentioned by study participant, that they experienced themselves and/or were experienced by other family members. These include health problems that they felt were directly attributed to their homeless status or living conditions, such as chronic kidney infections (on site with no toilets), stress and depression. One participant discussed the frustration and stress that he is experiencing over his accommodation situation and how he feels this is effecting his health:

I never had blood pressure in my life, never in my life. Now the last year and a half, ever since the time we have to leave [the rented house], I'm taking blood pressure tablets. I've never had blood pressure tablets, I never, I never had to take a tablet in my life. I'm taking blood pressure tablets... They are just driving me nuts. There are enough, if they came out and said right because so-and-so, so-and-so, so-and-so, whatever, you might be able to try and sort it out. But they won't give you no reason at all.

For those on the unofficial sites, the lack on any facilities was cited as both a cause of poor health and a barrier to improving health status. For example, a number of participants spoke about the frequency at which the children on the site got ill, as well as frequent accidents on the sites:

Interviewee: yeah I was saying [daughter] got dysentery...yeah like the Third World condition, she got dysentery and the whooping cough as well... She ended up in Cherry Orchard Hospital in Dublin and she was there for weeks, she was very sick with it, we didn't think she was going to make it, she was very sick.

Interviewer 1: what age was she then?

Interviewee: she was three

Interviewer 2: so have you had many incidents of illnesses over the years?

Interviewee: oh, we have had a lot of illnesses over the years like and the children have had a lot of accidents over the years, with falls and cuts and broken bones.

Interviewer 2: accident that you think are a direct result of where you were living?

Interviewee: yeah, yeah, yeah, it's been very bad over the years.

One of the participants described the stress and anxiety he experienced as a child during an episode of homelessness were his family had limited access to electricity. His mother had a serious sleeping disorder that required the use of an oxygen machine while sleeping:

Interviewee: My mother is on a breathing machine because she has a sleeping disorder so in the, in the night-time if she would knock it off, she goes into her, what's it, a coma. And with the sleeping disorder it cut's your oxygen from your throat to your brain, so that leads to a heart attack or a stroke. So every night we had to be up in time, within a 10 minute space to knock on the generator and to get her out of a coma every single night for two year

Interviewer: so you couldn't leave the machine on because...

Interviewee: no we couldn't leave it because the generator couldn't be on. It could go on fire with the electric and all that. We only had to put it on a certain amount of days, with one of us being there.

A lack of refrigeration to store medication was an issue for another participant. He explained how he had to store insulin outside during the months he spent sleeping rough as he had nowhere else to keep it. During this time, he found it very difficult to control his diabetes as he had little control over his diet as he had no cooking facilities and little money so ate most of his meals from takeaways:

Interviewee: I was getting sick over it I was. And I was in the hospital...and I got a letter from the doctor there for the council as well, he was a great help with the house as well he was. And he was explaining the story more proper, he told the council if they didn't house me, I was going to have the loss of limbs and all like because I am a diabetic and that's basically what comes out of it when you are living rough, you will lose limbs and all like that, as worse you're getting.

Interviewer: because of diet and medication?

Interviewee: I hadn't got a place to keep my medication.

Interviewer: would you need to keep that in the fridge?

Interviewee: Oh in the fridge yeah. And that was a problem with the hostel as well, I couldn't leave that out of my hands either cause I don't know who is in the hostel. If it goes missing I was into trouble over it...

Interviewer: [you said]... your diet is so important when you have diabetes, how did you find managing this when you were in the car? You were saying you have to eat a lot of takeaway and stuff, did that affect the diabetes?

Interviewee: it did, affected it big time it did. I went to about 18 stone weight

Interviewer: you found that you put on a lot of weight?

Interviewee: put on a lot of weight out of it. I wasn't doing proper exercise, I wasn't proper dieting, basically the diabetes went out of control, it went out of control it did. Because you need a place for to sort all that out you know? When you have that illness you need to buy fresh food, all that sort of thing.

Mental health

The issue of mental health came up in most of the interviews and the findings would indicate that it is an issue of serious concern in relation to the Travellers involved in this study and their wider network of family and friends. People spoke about their own mental health issues, those of spouses, children (young and adult), siblings and the wider community.

Feelings of isolation and loneliness were common among those who moved to standard housing after spending most of their life in a trailer. The sense of identity, community and belonging that they gained from a more traditional Traveller lifestyle, was such that the difficulties of living in the unofficial site were outweighed by the alternative which they saw as surrendering their Traveller culture and identity. One participant explained how this isolation affected her mental state, leading to a deterioration of her mental health:

Interviewee: At that stage my mental illness was quite serious.

Interviewer: so what was it for you about the house?

Interviewee: because the four walls. I just couldn't cope, I didn't see my own community. I wasn't living in my own community. It was all settled community that was around me, do you know what I mean? And we as Travellers are so used to people coming in and out the door and no one, I felt lonely. Here if I felt lonely I could go down to [neighbour 1] or go down to [neighbour 2] or go into any caravan here and they feel the same with me. I mightn't see [neighbour 2] down the road for three months, I mightn't see [neighbour 1] down the road for three months, but suddenly all of a sudden they could have a down day and they would come up and come in here for an hour, I'd go down and go in there for an hour. And its grand if I never talk to them, to be able to see the people coming in and out, that's what keeps you sane, you know? That you see the people coming in and out and that's the type of culture that the Travellers live in. That's what we need to have, do you know? We need to be able to live in our own community, do you know our own way. And it is hard, I have to say, it is hard. There is no running water, there is no electricity and there is no toilets. But like they've took everything else from us. They can't take this from us. Do you know what I mean? They really can't take this window.

In some cases, participants spoke about mental health issues as something that effected multiple members of the family. A woman, who herself was dealing with depression, spoke about how two of her children were suffering from depression and one of them with anxiety as well. This woman was worried that her youngest child would get depressed as well. She felt that because they all had poor mental health, this was preventing any one from getting better:

Interviewee: The three of us is here, all hospital cases depression... She goes out the door like and she is wondering where is she going to sleep tonight?...

Interviewer: so how she coping with her situation?

Interviewee: not really, she's not. For one she has no home, for two she suffers with depression and with no home this makes her depression worse. And you have no home and her being depressed is making me depressed. And you've to look at me depressed is making you more depressed so we're all depressed, if you look at it that way.

Another participant, who was being treated with medication for depression, explained why she thought mental health issues were so prevalent among Travellers. To her, the issues are related to the increasing pressures that Travellers find themselves facing in trying to access secure and appropriate accommodation:

...there is an awful lot of that going, depression now... The Travellers are under pressure, they took everything away from the Travellers. Took their, their livelihood and took everything from them, know what I mean? And they are trying harder and harder to take everything from them. Sure they have the camps gone now like and they shove you into houses and that it. We won't have sites, they won't build sites. They will shove you into houses and whatever. And you mightn't want to go into one but you have no other choice, you know what I mean?...I think years ago was better for Travellers. They are taking everything away from Travellers now...they get depressed over it, they get depressed over it like do you know what I mean, too much pressure, too much pressure on top of people. Here like, we were supposed to be gone out of here in January, we've nowhere to go. Now we know if we go out that gap we are going to be touring around the country, we will be left nowhere so that's an awful lot of pressure too like, you know what I mean. It's an awful lot of pressure when you have no place to go, do you know what I mean like?

The issue of uncertainty, lack of accommodation security and the stress that this caused was raised time and time again throughout the interviews and was a central theme to emerge from the research.

Suicide

Suicide is a serious issue for the Traveller community and one that has directly affected a number of the participants in this study. Some of the participants felt that it was becoming more of an issue recently as they feel that life as a Traveller has become more difficult:

Interviewee 1: sure look with hanging, look with hanging alone in the Traveller's community.

Interviewee 2: that's only lately now.

Interviewee 1: that's only for the last 10 or 12 years, do you know what I mean? She lost a sister... hung herself, mother of two childer, do you know what I mean?

Two of those interviewed spoke about how suicide was something that they had contemplated themselves. For one participant, this moved past ideation, to an attempted suicide a number of years ago when everything seemed to get too much to cope with:

[A number of] years ago I tried to commit suicide. And in that shit hole of a place... I just went down a road...I went down the road and I thought I couldn't come back with everything, with the house, family issues, everything, everything like the whole weight is on your back so I just took a load of drugs and threw myself...with a rope around my neck...so after that then I went up and got my head sorted and took weeks, a couple of months so I just sat down and realised like I had to cop on for the sake of the kids.

Day-to-day life

The Travellers who took part in this research were currently, or recently had been, living in very difficult situations. Some had spent periods sleeping in cars, other had spent times in emergency accommodation, almost all had spent some time in over-crowded accommodation and many had spent considerable time living in unofficial sites without access to basic amenities such as water, sewage and mains electricity. They described how many simple things about day-to-day life become much more difficult when you are experiencing an episode of homelessness. For example, one participant described all the tasks she needed to undertake every day due to the lack of facilities:

Interviewee: well we have to get a sup of water here every day. I have a generator running our own bit of electricity. My kids go to school every day and they come up at 3:30, [husband] will pick them up today now. But I picked them up at 3:30 every day in the secondary school there and they go into the caravan there and they can do their homework or whatever, into the girls caravan there, they do their homework and, for an hour...

Interviewer: but like, doesn't a lot from here use the swimming facilities to shower?

Interviewee: we use the, yeah, well for to shower, well for to- shower we use the local gym... But em, we go to the local gym to use the shower and it is a tenner for a week, and three times or whatever week, that's the way it works here. And they go to the local swimming pool...but they are doing up the swimming pool there now. And we use the church, parish church in, our parish priest tell the truth of him now, he's very, very supportive of us...but he has a toilet in the side of the church we use that quite a lot, we use the toilets at the town shopping centre or when I go into work, I can use the toilets. That's the only way. Other than that, if you want to walk down the field there, walk across the quarry the far side, that's the only toilets you have to use.

The other participants who had spent time living on unofficial sites described similar situations with regard to water and sewage. Toilets were a particular issue for those sleeping rough or in unofficial sites and participants spoke about the need to get children up and into the car to drive to the nearest town to use a bathroom.

As well as this, people spoke about the storage of food as an issue. This was an issue for people who had lived on unofficial sites, in emergency accommodation, in unfit accommodation and had spent time sleeping in a car. For example, two participants spoke about the need to shop on a daily basis for food as they had limited refrigeration facilities (it only worked when the generator was turned on). They felt that this significantly increased their food bill as they could not buy perishable items in bulk, but rather had to buy smaller, and often more expensive items. Another participant spoke about how he could only eat take away food during an episode of homelessness as he was sleeping in his car at the time and had nowhere to cook or store food. One family described how they relied on family so that they could prepare food during the time that they lived in emergency B&B accommodation:

Interviewee 1: There was nowhere to make food. We couldn't stay there all day, there was nowhere to make food. To make food we had to go to either my mother's house or my aunt or my sister's house.

Interviewee 2: [We] had to be gone by 9 o'clock in the morning

Interviewee 1: and they wouldn't let us back in until six.

Interviewee 2: six in the evening. And if we wanted breakfast for the kids in the morning before they go to school we'd have to give them an extra €15 for to give the kids breakfast before they go to school.

Interviewee 1: per child, per adult, an extra €15

Interviewer per person?

Interviewee 1: yeah.

For those relying on family for temporary accommodation, the feeling of being a burden or living 'on-top' of people was mentioned a number of times. A male participant who was living with his wife in a small trailer out her parents' back garden described how he felt uncomfortable with the situation:

When we are out here, it's hard, come in here to have a shower, come in here use their water, come in here and use their sink to wash our delft you know? People like to have their own comfort, they like to be able to come and use the toilet...it's just, it's still not nice like no matter, no matter what, you're living up on top of people. You are homeless, basically like you're relying on someone to actually let you stay out the back out the back of their house in your trailer. You're relying on them to let you use their shower and let you use their sink to wash your delft and use their toilet.

For a number of the research participants, day-to-day life during an episode of homelessness became mainly about finding accommodation. This was usually through local estate agents, the county council, online (using websites such as daft.ie), or finding out about vacant properties through other Travellers. Children were involved nine of the ten cases and people spoke about the desire to provide adequate and secure accommodation for their children throughout the research interviews. For some this made the need to find accommodation the main focus of their life during the homeless episodes. For example, the two couples expecting their first child felt an urgent need to find accommodation before their babies were born. Both of these couples described their stresses and worries about how they would cope with a new baby if they couldn't find somewhere to live. The fact that both of these couples were under 26 years old and therefore in receipt of the reduced level of Jobseeker's Allowance, exacerbated their worries as they were not hopeful of being able to afford a property on their income of €200 per week.

Support networks

The strength of families ties among the research participants became apparent throughout the research. For almost all of the participants (12 of 14), families were described as a key provider of support and played a crucial role in alleviating the burdens of homelessness. Two main themes emerged through the discussions on support networks in the interviews: the strength and importance of family as a support network and the perceived lack of support from statutory and voluntary agencies.

Family support

The support that families were providing to the study participants ranged from practical support with their day to day living, to emotional support in dealing with stresses during homeless episodes. The practical support included things like providing a place to get water for those living in unofficial sites, somewhere to get showered or use the bathroom. For some, homes of other family members provided a place to prepare food or do other household tasks like washing clothes. Some people lived in situations where large number of their family were in the same circumstances, either living on the unofficial site with them or on another one located elsewhere. One of the interviewees explained how they tried to work together to lessen the burden of their living conditions through doing their food shopping together to reduce cost, minding each other's children when mothers needed help or taking it in turns to do tasks such as the laundry:

I have nowhere to put clothes. I have to pay to get them washed and dried, yeah. That's the only way we can do it here like you know. And usually like if the girls are going over, we say that anybody was going over they would bring my two bags over, or if I was going I would bring her two bags, [sister's] two bags or [sister-in-law's] two bags you know. Usually we take turns at going like, you know like the kind of spare the costs like as much as you can like you know.

While appreciating the support from families, some participants explained how they had to rely a lot on parents and siblings during homeless episodes, which they felt was unfair on their family. One interviewee explained how her parents' tenancy was at risk because she was staying at their home without agreement from the landlord, which made the property overcrowded. Another described how she felt generally ok about the amount of support she received from family but that her husband found it quite difficult as they were so heavily reliant on her parents while they were homeless:

They would never give out about it, because they are my mother and father, they wouldn't give out about it because it's me like or him, but it's not the same for me and for him because I wouldn't feel comfortable up in his house at all if I had to keep running in...cause he'd feel like that where I wouldn't because they're my mother and father I can do what I want you know that sort of way? But he wouldn't because it's not his mother and father.

Family was described as an important provider of emotional support for some. When asked who they would turn to when they needed support or someone to talk to, most people said that it was their family that they would turn to. This was generally immediate family such as mothers and fathers, siblings, grown-up children and spouses.

For some people who were experiencing mental health issues, family was their only support. Three participants spoke about support from their GP but the level of contact here was limited. None of the participants were accessing mental health services, despite the fact that some had described quite serious bouts of depression and even suicidal ideation and attempts. Two of the participants spoke about their children accessing mental health services.

Statutory and voluntary organisation support

Many of the participants felt that there was very little statutory and voluntary support available to them. Conversations around statutory housing support tended to focus around peoples' frustrations with not being able to access accommodation, whether that was standard housing or Traveller specific accommodation. The communications with the local authority were often viewed as points of conflict in which you must fight for access to housing:

Like we know what to expect, and what not to expect. Like we don't expect to put in that and then after Christmas to get a house, no things don't work like that. It's common sense like. But when you put in it, you are going to have to fight for a house because if you sit down, like if you sit down or sit on your arse like, do you know for a week or two weeks or for a month and not go up and fight, while they're gonna say well sure you're not bothered about getting a house, like you're sitting, you haven't been up here in the last six months and then all of a sudden then because you're being [evicted] or you automatically want a house like, so you kind of have to keep fighting. If you leave it say for three weeks, every two weeks go up and just say, look any word or, you have to show them that you're willing to fight for a house, that you really want one like, you just have to show them. Because if you don't, if you sit back and just relax it's not gonna work for you.

People living on the unofficial sites described an additional frustration at feeling forgotten about by both the statutory and voluntary service providers:

That they are not seeing the homelessness in us, you know what I mean? Like if the [charity] are not seeing it, they are the first priority of homelessness. Now we know there is people going in crisis, we know there is people with big mortgages and that, but for God's sake like, in 11 years that not one of them stepped there inside that gate to see is there a family in there that needs anything from us. Like it might be small or whatever, do you know?

A conversation with a representative from the local authority confirmed that the poverty charity referred to in this exchange do not go in to any of the unofficial sites anymore. However, she explained that people can apply to the charity for support if they wish to.¹⁹

Privately accessing accommodation was very problematic for those interviewed, whether they were looking for standard housing or Traveller specific accommodation. Therefore, they were heavily reliant on the local authority as their accommodation provider. Because some participants viewed their relationship with the local authority as somewhat antagonistic, they were frustrated that they could not access other homeless services unless they were referred by the local authority, for example the homeless support service offered by the Midland Simon Community or emergency accommodation. Our finding that the Travellers interviewed are very disillusioned with the local authority is not unique. A mixed methods study by the National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee and Housing Agency found that there was a lot of disillusion with, and distrust of, the local authority among Travellers (KW research and Associates, 2014). This was due to issues such as having to wait very long times for responses about particular sites only to be told that there was no funding available and the closure of sites and relocation which left families feeling isolated and vulnerable. The attitude of some local authority staff was also considered an issue as you can find both staff members that have a reasonable open attitude towards Travellers, or a particular family, and those that have a very negative attitude.

Most of the participants in this research voiced similar concerns about staff attitudes and how they changed depending on the staff member. The frequent staff changes in the housing department of the local authority was viewed as an issue. For example, one woman explained how her family is completely worn down by the process as she feels their hopes are constantly raised and then dashed again. For her, the problem is that you spend time working with a particular staff member and you feel like you have made some progress, and then the staff in the housing department change and you have to start all over again:

Interviewee: And you keep telling them the same thing every time over and over again, you get sick of telling them the same thing. And then they go in, you don't see them for a long time again. And, maybe back 10 year ago, maybe 12 year ago we had different families living with us so we kind of got meetings going with the council and we went to view group housing in [town] and everything was going ahead, everyone was happy but then there was a stop put to it and nothing happened and then that family got up and left.

Interviewer: so do you know why there was a stop, do you know where that came from?

Interviewee: em, they said they had no money or something, or the fella that was promising us every thing got up and went.

Interviewer: so this was a person in the council, a change of staff was it?

Interviewee: yeah. And then em, kind of things died down again for a while, do you know? And then maybe a year or two after again someone comes around and says 'well I'll do something on your case for your case for ya' and the same thing over again, you know that way?

The research participants in the KW Research and Associates study (2014) felt that local authority staff (including the Traveller Accommodation Officer, Senior Housing Officer and the local authority Social Worker) had a lot of power and discretion which could be used either positively or negatively depending on the staff members' attitude towards Travellers. Again, this was an issue that the participants in our research voiced concerns over as the issue of 'why' some people were allocated housing or bays and other were not was raised time and time again.

Those that accessed the support of the Midland Simon Community regional support service were very positive about the experience and found the process beneficial:

Interviewee It was just mostly, the people that were mostly helping me was...[OTM worker]...she gave me good help as well and the Simon gave me good help as well.

Interviewer: what kind of help did you get from Simon?

Interviewee: will they were really doing everything and anything for me, try and get me a place. They actually got me this house you might as well say, they tried to put me in a homeless [emergency accommodation], I wouldn't go into the homeless I already explained that them, but eventually they did get me this house, it was the best help I got...

Consultation with both the county council and the Midland Simon Community confirmed that a significant proportion of the people that they are providing homeless support to are Travelers. However, the case load that the support service in Simon can manage at any one time is capped at 22 people per county. Both representatives explained how there is high demand for the service, which is always full. A problem they are facing at present is moving people on from the service as there is such a shortage of accommodation at present.²⁰

Some people were heavily reliant on the Offaly Traveller Movement as a provider of support. A number of the participants said OTM is the first organisation they turn to if they need help or support from a service provider:

...Can ring [OTM worker], and say this is happening, that is happening, whatever and she'll give me advice and [other worker] is the same. I feel that there is no one else that we can turn around to...

As mentioned in the previous section, when asked about service provider support with regard to mental health issues, GPs were the only provider of support outside of the family for the research participants.

Pathways out of homelessness: A multitude of exit barriers

Affordability

Many of those interviewed were still experiencing an episode of homelessness at the time of the interview. However, some of these people had previous episodes of homelessness and spoke about ways which they had exited homelessness on previous occasions. For some people, the main barrier to exiting homelessness was a lack of affordable accommodation. The two young married couples interviewed, and one young male who was married with children but interviewed alone, all wanted to live in standard housing, be that private rented or local authority housing. However, none of them could access accommodation in the months preceding their interview. The reasons for this were multiple. All spoke about discrimination as a barrier, a lack of available properties and affordability:

Interviewee 1: there are a few houses up that they are looking for 800 and all these kind of things, we're only on 200 a week. So that kind of like, you have to think like, can you afford it? There's a lot of things that comes with a house like, there's the rent, there's the shopping and electric, everything is with it. So...we are looking for a place to take the HAP and all this so

Interviewer: and can you find many places that are willing to take the HAP?

Interviewee 2: no

Interviewee 1: a good few places won't. Saying that they have to be working people.

The reduced level of Jobseeker's Allowance payment for people under 26 assumes that young people can remain living at home and therefore need lower levels of income. However, Travellers have traditionally married younger than their settled peers and are more likely to be setting up their own home as a married couple under the age of 26. The young couples in this research were all in their late teens or early 20s and reliant of social welfare as their source of income, which meant that they had a joint income of €200 per week as they had no dependents at the time of interview.

The gap between the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) and the market rent was seen as an issue in this research. The maximum HAP available, for example, to a family of two adults and three children in €540 per month. However, searches on Daft.ie and consultation with the social worker in Offaly county council would indicate that the average monthly rent for a house suitable for a family of this size (three bedroom) is closer to €700-€750.²¹ For a family dependent on social welfare payments as their main source of income, this is a sizeable gap that would preclude them from renting housing on the private market. Very few of the respondents believed that their financial situation was likely to change through employment, with fatalistic thinking evident in relation to employment opportunities. The AITH study team (2010) had similar findings in the qualitative section of their research.

Availability of suitable accommodation

The lack of available accommodation was cited by most participants as a barrier to exiting homelessness. This was also considered an issue by the service providers consulted. The shortage of available accommodation was discussed by those who were looking for standard housing (mainly private rented) and those who had a preference for Traveller specific accommodation. Some of the participants who had a preference for local authority housing felt that there were a lot of vacant local authority properties in the town and they took a long time to be re-let.

However, it is worth noting that Offaly County Council actually have one of the fastest turn-around times in terms of re-letting vacant properties averaging 14 weeks, compared to the national average of 27.3 weeks (2013 figures).²² Consultation with representatives from the council indicated that they see the issue of housing supply as the biggest barrier to people trying to exit homelessness.

When those who stated a preference to live in Traveller specific accommodation spoke about a shortage of appropriate accommodation and they felt that there was no desire or will to build accommodation that would be suitable to their needs as Travellers:

...and like we had meetings with the council, they keep telling us that there is nothing available only private house or like standard house in like a council house or bay in the site and like there is waiting lists for all of them.

Another interviewee who was living on an unofficial site had stated that he would be happy to live in a house as the conditions were so bad on the site. When probed a bit further on this, he admitted that he was just settling for a house as he did not believe that the council would provide appropriate Traveller specific housing for his family (group housing in this case). The issue of people settling for standard housing when they really wanted Traveller specific housing was raised a number of times throughout the research and was discussed as a potential reason why people often give up their tenancies after a period in local authority or voluntary housing association standard housing.

Discrimination

One couple described how they feel that their surname prevents many landlords from renting properties to them. They felt that people are more open to letting them view the property when they use the wife's maiden name which is not a recognisable Traveller surname:

Interviewee 1: we would like to get like a house or something, we have nowhere to go like. We ring up people and saying [surname], they say there is a waiting list, if it comes up again we will call you. But if you say [wife's maiden name], when can you come view it.

Interviewer: so you can notice a difference depending on the name you use?

Interviewee 2: yeah, they don't like me for some reason.

This issue of discrimination came up in all the interviews with people who were trying to access the private rented market. As mentioned in a previous section, support workers in the Midland Simon community feel that this is an issue as well when they try to support Travellers to access this type of accommodation.²³

One of the men in the study described how a landlord found out that he was a Traveller and decided he would not rent the man a property as a result of this:

We went about a house up here...It was 700 a month. So we scraped up the deposit and I went up to meet him and he said yeah no bother. And I brought up a rent supplement form with me just in case he did...He was happy to give it to me...We filled in the application form, I gave him €700 deposit. So he was supposed to give me the keys on the Friday. He...text me Thursday night, sorry [name], can't make it tomorrow, tomorrow evening, see you Saturday morning...Three men got out of the car, this man and two other men...He said [name], he says, I can't give you the house. Why? Didn't I give you a deposit says I? Didn't I give you the application form says I? And you filled in your half, says I. I filled in my half. I'm bringing it into the dole office now to get their half filled in. He says no. He said I've done a bit of homework on you he said and I found out you were a Traveller...I've done a bit of homework on you he says that you are a member of the Travelling community, Gypsy he called me, that's what he said. I said what difference is that going to make? Says I, I can get references for you, says I, of houses we have already, already been in. Says I, you can ring the county council, they will tell you about me as well. No he said, I'm not having it'.

Emergency accommodation

There was a reluctance to enter emergency hostel accommodation for most of the participants. The fact that most of the hostel accommodation was located outside of the county was cited as a big issue. There were only six beds available in Tullamore and none of the participants had been offered one of these. There were no family units that could house couples and their children together and they could be offered accommodation in different counties.

All of the men in the study who had been offered hostel accommodation stated that they would fear living in the counties where the emergency accommodation was located due to ongoing feuding. Although they all stated that they were not directly involved, the men feared that their surname was enough to put them in serious danger if they moved there:

Interviewee:...I went up to [local authority staff], I said...I'm getting kicked out of my house, 'why don't you go to [county]?' She goes, I can get you a place up there. Now I'd get to stay in a hostel and my wife and kids would stay in another place, in [the county], a [surname] in [county]! I'd be chopped up. Like there's Travellers, there's, this is the other thing as well, there's Travellers that are arguing with other travellers and that's an issue as well like do you know what I mean?

Interviewer: about where you are placed?

Interviewee: where you get, yeah. Like if they had me up to [county] there, if I want to die I'll find another way... Do you know what I mean? If I go up there by myself, it's stupid like.

Consultation with housing staff in the county council confirmed that this reluctance to enter hostel accommodation is not limited to the participants in our study. It is their experience that the Travellers that come to Offaly County Council will generally try to find anywhere else to stay other than a hostel, for example staying with their families in overcrowded conditions.²⁴

Sustainable exits from homelessness for those on unofficial sites

For those on unofficial halting sites, an enabler of an exit from homelessness in the past was the allocation of a place on a halting site or in standard housing. However, for the reasons discussed in the preceding sections, these accommodation options were unsustainable for the participants. In order to facilitate sustainable exits from homelessness, the importance of consultation with the families was stressed on a number of occasions. For example, one participant described how she felt issues that have arisen in the past on halting sites could be dealt with to prevent repeat episodes of homelessness:

Interviewee: Ways that I would run a halting site is, if the families are one family grouping going in, because or maybe two or three people that get on very well with one another do you know? Listen to the families that want to go in together, that's what it is all about. It's not about 20 or 60 bay site, halting site, because it doesn't work, it doesn't work. The smaller halting site and group housing is, the better it works...It's only when you put those people in, maybe 50 or 60 people living on top of one another do you know, that things get out of hand like. And you could have an odd strange person that the council might decide that there is a bay empty, we will put that person in without discussing it with the family that's in there. So you might have to get up and go, you couldn't live like that like, do you know? You wouldn't be able to live like that like.

Interviewer: That's really important?

Interviewee: yeah that's very important, very important. That they listen to the family that's there. It's like putting you into a group housing scheme or anywhere tomorrow morning and saying to themselves we are going to put this one up here now, we're going to put that one up there now. Well we don't care what she says because she is in a house now, we are putting this person in now because there is no where else to put them. So they would rather do that then talk to the family before they cause hassle like do you know? That's not good.

As discussed earlier, some Travellers leave tenancies because they find that they are unsuitable to their needs and conflict with their identity as Travellers. The provision of Traveller specific accommodation is of vital importance so that people are not pushed into a situation of repeat homelessness due to a lack of culturally appropriate accommodation.

Hopes for the future and the meaning of a home

Travellers are not a homogenous group and their hopes and desires with regards to accommodation vary widely. For some of the participants, home is a house they can call their own:

Interviewer: so for you then what would it be that you would call home?

Interviewee 1: a warm roof over our heads, a house like.

Interviewee 2: a house that we can call ours, not say well that we are living in like my mother and father's cause still at the end of the day it's my mother and father's but you are still not, it is still not ours the get me? The trailer is ours but when you have your own home you can make, you can do what you want with it. Where a trailer you can't, you might put your few bits of crystal that you get around, but you won't do nothing major with it like. Were a house you can do what you want and you can call it yours because you are paying the bills. So it's different like.

Interviewee 1:...You move into the, to a house you would struggle to go and by a telly and chairs and tables and you know? But still it is, if I had a house and I had no chairs or table at least I could call it my home, you know, even if I had no telly, I could say look my bedroom is upstairs, I have a bed, I have filled in the press. Once I have food in the press and a bed and a proper roof over my head I can call it a home, you know?

Whereas for others, home is living surrounded by your family and other Travellers:

Interviewee: it would be nice now, it would be nice if they did build group housing.

Interviewer: so if that was an option, would you still prefer house or what if you could have group housing?

Interviewee: oh I would go for a house or group housing, it makes no difference the house would be a house love to me, to be honest. I'd sooner have a house or a group... I'd be the happiest man...

Interviewer: so you would be happy, either one of these would feel like a home?

Interviewee: yeah, yeah I'd sooner have the group housing now hand on my heart, I'd sooner have a group house now.

Interviewer: that would feel like home to you?

Interviewee: the group house, ah Jesus yeah.

Interviewer: so what is it about that then that would make you feel like this is home?

Interviewee: well at least you have other Travelling people beside you who you can get on with... And it wouldn't be 15 or 16 or 17 houses... It would be a small group, do you know what I mean, you could get, even eight people, eight families who you could get on with... It's 25 families down here, you know what I mean? And every one of them is very close to one another but for me, to move in with another 25 families in a group house, no way, no way.

Another participant described freedom and control as core to her feelings about 'home'.

Interviewer: what is home mean to you? When you say 'home' what are the kind of feelings you get?

Interviewee: well the feeling, the feeling I get about home is a caravan. A caravan on a halting site, that's my feeling of home, do you know? And I have, I mean, I don't mean a county council halting site, I mean a proper Travellers designed halting site, I don't mean four walls put up... Something that you feel freedom in yourself, that you have the control over, that you are able to manage and that you are able to do your own things in, you know? And you would be able to take care of it yourself and not have other people coming in to do it for you, because we are not invalids, we are able to look after ourselves and take care of our own that they need to trust that in us, do you know what I mean so? Like the real reality would be Traveller designed accommodation, it has to be Traveller appropriate and having the bit of control over it.

One thing that almost all the participants had in common was their desire for somewhere to live that felt secure. For those who had a preference for standard housing this meant local authority rented housing. The private rented sector was not viewed as a tenure through which this security could be provided as participants cited the worry of the landlords serving a notice to quit:

But when I was in the rented accommodation, I knew, the private rented accommodation, the landlord could come to the door at any minute and say well listen you have to go out now, I have different tenant, or you've to go out now I'm selling, that was always in my mind, always.

Consultation with representatives from Offaly County Council confirmed that landlords serving tenants a notice to quit was currently an issue in the county and accounted for a large proportion of those who are presenting to the local authority as homeless.²⁵

This security was related to security of tenure, but also the security of living with your family to provide you with support:

The Traveller community never, they never put elderly people in nursing homes or anything like that now, they look after them their self, mind them their self. And I suppose it would be nice to think that my grandchildren, if I was alive...which I don't think I will but, if it was a real reality and it was alive then, I would like to think that my grandchildren would be able to take care of me, come in and out and be able to visit and do a few things for you. And I would be nice to have your family around you, to do that like, giving you that extra bit of security in your old age like do you know? That's if, if we get to see it like do you know?

Home ownership was not mentioned once throughout the study as a hope for the future. This is not really that surprising given that the Census 2011 found that home ownership among those enumerated stood at 69.7 per cent for the general population and just 20.2 per cent for the Traveller population (Central Statistics Office, 2012b: 36). Considering the differences in numbers enumerated and the estimates of Traveller population through the AITHS, it is possible that the proportion of Traveller who own their own homes is even lower than stated here.

Chapter 4: Conclusions and Recommendations

Traveller homelessness in County Offaly

This research has shown that Traveller homelessness is a matter for extreme concern in County Offaly. Using a pathways approach to homelessness, this research has examined how the study's participants have experienced homelessness at different times in their lives and in different ways. It has helped to bring to light episodes of hidden homelessness such as staying temporarily with family or friends, or staying in halting sites without a lease (doubling up on bays), when there is no alternative Traveller specific accommodation available.

The issues associated with defining and measuring homelessness are well documented and they are evident through this research. For example, we can say that a large proportion of those presenting as homeless (19.1% in 2015) are Travellers. However, we do not know the actual number of Travellers experiencing homelessness as the data on those presenting only includes people who actually go to the county council seeking assistance. Unless people living in severely overcrowded accommodation, living on unofficial halting sites or temporarily with family or friends actually come to the local authority and present as homeless, they would not be included in these figures. Even if they do present, they must be deemed to be in accommodation which they cannot 'reasonably occupy or remain in occupation of' in order to be assessed as homeless. Research has shown how the statutory definition of homelessness is very ambiguous and can be interpreted in a broad or narrow sense. For example, in the broad sense by recognising the different ways that people can experience homelessness or narrowly by including only those who are, or about to become, roofless. Correspondence with the county council in Offaly illustrated how a narrow interpretation is being used at present, in an attempt to ration resources.

Travellers face a multitude of risk factors for becoming homeless. These include lower levels of educational attainment than the population generally, as well as endemic unemployment, social welfare reliance, high levels of poverty and high levels of disability and other health issues (including mental health issues). The state denial of Traveller ethnicity and assimilationist accommodation provision are additional factors to consider. When addressing the causes of homelessness, it is generally accepted that both individual characteristics and structural factors play a part in someone becoming homeless.

Although many of these factors are similar for Travellers and the settled population,²⁶ it is important to note the additional structural factors which Travellers face including institutional racism and the provisions of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 2002 which made trespass on land a criminal offence and punishable by the confiscation of a person's home. These factors are especially problematic when there is an apparent lack of desire to build more Traveller specific halting sites within the county as is evidenced by the removal of the halting site proposed in an early version of the TAP 2014-2018, to be replaced by group housing and standard housing.²⁷ The fact that 37 Traveller families were living on unofficial sites in the county in 2014, is an indication of the high demand for Traveller specific housing within the county, including halting sites. Local opposition to Traveller accommodation continues to be a major issue which needs to be addressed. The level of difficulty faced by local authorities in providing Traveller specific accommodation was illustrated by the opposition to the relocation of the Travellers made roofless by the Carrickmines halting site fire in 2015 which saw ten people die. Even though those who were to be relocated were grieving families, including an elderly couple who lost a son, a daughter-in-law and three grandchildren, local residents blockaded the council land where the families were to be located on a temporary emergency site (Holland, 2015).

A major issue for Traveller currently living in the private rented sector is the issuing of a 'notice to quit' by landlords. This is evidenced through consultation with the local authority which confirmed that many of the Travellers approaching them with accommodation issues were in this situation. Access to adequate and affordable accommodation is an issue for the population in general at present so people who are issued a notice to quit can find themselves homeless. As well as this, Travellers often face discrimination by landlords in accessing accommodation where it is available. Anecdotally, some participants felt that landlords were not always selling up or making the property available to a family member. Rather, they suggested that they wanted to get the family out of the property so that they could rent it to someone else. More research into this issue would be useful to see if this is in fact the case.

Recommendation 1: Travellers living in unofficial sites should be included in local authority and Census counts of homelessness due to the current legislative context, which means that they are not in accommodation which they can 'remain in occupation of' and they live under the constant threat of eviction and confiscation of their trailer/caravan, imprisonment and/or a €3,000 fine.

Recommendation 2: The local authority should take account of the different situations of homelessness and housing exclusion that Travellers face in comparison to the general population. This should be reflected in the 'Assessment of Housing Need' to ensure that homeless Travellers are included under the 'homeless' category where relevant to reflect more accurate homeless numbers.

Recommendation 3: OTM supports the call for the establishment of a Traveller Accommodation Agency, to take over the responsibility from local authorities the provision of accommodation for Travellers, as recommended by the 1995 Task Force on the Travelling Community.

Recommendation 4: The current definition of homelessness set out in the Housing Act, 1988 is too ambiguous and a more definitive definition of what constitutes homelessness is required to ensure agencies do not broaden or narrow the definition as they see fit. The new statutory definition should be devised based on empirical research to ensure it includes a range of homelessness situations and not just rough sleeping and emergency accommodation, as well as including the more hidden forms of homelessness experienced by Travellers.

Homeless service provision

Consultation with service providers in the midlands region would indicate that services available to homeless people in County Offaly are oversubscribed. Currently, the homeless budget for the midlands accounts for just 1.5 per cent of the national homeless budget at €800,000. This is despite the fact that the numbers of people presenting homeless in County Offaly alone has increased from around 30 people in 2011 to around 150 in 2015. At the time of interview with a county council housing department representative (February 2016), the figures were already on course to increase for 2016.

There are three major issues with current homeless service provision that were identified through this research. The first is the location of emergency accommodation, which was a serious issue for the participants. For some it was the distance from extended family and for others it was the distance from their husband or wife and children (if they had been offered accommodation in different counties). The men in the study were worried for their safety if they moved to another county on their own. For them, the risk of getting caught up in a feud outweighed the lack of accommodation they faced in County Offaly. One participant chose to stay in his car for several months without facilities to refrigerate his medication, rather than move to one of the counties where the emergency hostel was located as he feared for his safety due to his surname.

The second issue is the fact that there are no emergency beds in the region that cater for families. Therefore, couples are separated and could be sent to different counties if there is no bed available for either the husband or wife (with or without children) in the same county. If a man presents to the local authority with children, there are no emergency beds available to accommodate them.

Although B&B accommodation is used on occasion as emergency accommodation for families, the councils budget to provide this is limited and it is only supposed to be used in exceptional circumstances for a maximum of three nights.

The third issue identified was the reluctance of Travellers to enter in to emergency accommodation even where a bed was available. This was evidenced through the interviews as some people described being offered a hostel bed almost as an insult, and through the consultation with service providers. A number of the participants and the service providers consulted described how some Travellers would try to find any other alternative to having to access this kind of accommodation, resulting in people living in some pretty dire circumstances.

Recommendation 5: It is recommended that the homeless budget for the midlands increase in line with the growing demand on services in the region. The numbers presenting as homeless in Co. Offaly have increased from 30-150 in the past few years, representing an increase of 400 per cent. At a regional and national level, figures should be collated to calculate the increase across the counties. The budget should increase in line with the number of homeless people presenting in each county and be reflective of the demand on services. O'TM recognises that budgets are tight throughout the country and call on the Government to focus on restoring services that have been cut during the recent recession.

Recommendation 6: There are currently only six emergency beds available in county Offaly. It is recommended that these increase to a minimum of 12 units, including the provision of at least three family units. The importance of family in Traveller culture meant that, at least for the participants in this research, emergency homeless accommodation was not considered an option if it meant that families would be separated or where a person would have to go to another county for a bed.

Recommendation 7: It is recommended that emergency family units are provided within the region to ensure families are not separated when they enter emergency hostel accommodation. This would also ensure that there is emergency accommodation available if a man presents with a child/children as currently there is are no units if this situation arises. Analysis of local authority data across the region would be necessary to count the numbers of families presenting as homeless and calculate the level of need for these types of units. However, it is recommended that at least three such units be provided in County Offaly.

Recommendation 8: The current case load of the Midlands Simon Community Regional Support Service (22 people per county) should be increased to better reflect the demand in each county. This would require an increase of funding for the service as outlined in recommendation five.

Recommendation 9: The Homeless Action Team should include more joined up thinking with regards to the Traveller Accommodation Programme to ensure that the needs of homeless Travellers are considered, as they account for a high proportion of those who are experiencing homelessness within the county. More synergy between the Homeless Action Plan and the Traveller Accommodation Programme is required as it is not sufficient to conclude that Travellers are adequately provided for with regard to homelessness under the TAP. For example, to consider culturally appropriate emergency homeless accommodation.

Recommendation 10: Further work and consultation is necessary to address the issue of culturally appropriate emergency accommodation for Travellers.

Recommendation 11: Travellers in County Offaly are currently represented on the Homeless Action Team by an employee of the local authority. OTM feel strongly that local authority representation of Travellers on the Homeless Action Team is inappropriate considering the issues discussed in the relationship between Travellers and the local authority. Travellers cannot expect fair representation and consideration unless they are represented by someone from within the Traveller community or from a Traveller organisation.

Traveller specific accommodation

Like other research using a pathways approach to homelessness, this research has shown that for most of the participants, their experience of homelessness has been episodic in nature and has illustrated a variety of reasons why people enter homelessness at different times throughout their life. For a number of the participants in this research experiencing repeat episodes of homelessness, at least some of the entries to homelessness are due to placement in culturally inappropriate accommodation. For example, one woman spoke about leaving a local authority house as her mental health deteriorated due to the isolation she felt having spent her whole life in a trailer. The issue of Travellers leaving social housing is worth more research as it was mentioned a few times throughout the study. It appears that some people are accepting tenancies in standard housing as they feel there is no other option and conditions have got so bad for them in their current living situation. However, their acceptance of housing is likely, for some at least, to have more to do with a desire to leave an unofficial site without any amenities or a halting site where they are experiencing difficulties, than it has with a desire to settle in standard housing. Therefore, ensuring people are accommodated in the way that truly takes cognisance of their preference, could reduce the issue of repeat homelessness for some at least.

However, it is important to be aware that this is just one of the reasons why people entered homelessness. The issues effecting the general population with regard to homelessness, for example poor mental health, poverty, unemployment and social welfare reliance, also played a significant role.

Recommendation 12: Traveller specific accommodation should be provided within County Offaly as a matter of urgency so that Travellers who have a desire to continue to live their traditional way of life are not forced to assimilate into the general population through a move to standard housing. The plans set out in the current TAP are insufficient to meet the level of need within the county and therefore need to be revised as a matter of urgency. The continued growth of young families and the high number of people living on unofficial sites indicates a much higher demand for Traveller specific accommodation than is planned for in the Co. Offaly TAP 2014-2018.

Recommendation 13: Meaningful consultation should take place with Travellers to ensure that the accommodation provided as ‘Traveller specific’ is in fact that and not the local authorities view of what Travellers want or need. It is recommended that the Croghan Road and Millbrook estate halting sites in Birr, Co. Offaly are used as examples of best practice in the development of successful traveller specific accommodation.

Recommendation 14: Cross-community committees with representatives from the Traveller community and the local settled community should be developed in areas where Traveller specific accommodation is planned. This will provide a forum in which Travellers and the settled population can interact and engage in order to alleviate fears around the provision of Traveller specific accommodation. Local opposition is a huge issue in the provision of Traveller accommodation so it is important that people work together in order to address the fears or worries of those who oppose the accommodation.

Health

The issues of poor physical and mental health were addressed repeatedly throughout the research. The differences in health status between Travellers and the general population are well documented through the AITHS. Our research found that for the people we interviewed, their own health, that of their spouses and their children were all matters for concern. For those living on the unofficial sites, problems such as repeat kidney infections among children were discussed, as were other more serious illness and infections. Some spoke about children having accidents on the sites and worries about children getting knocked down by a car when living on the roadside. One participant, who is currently living in unfit housing, described how his child who had a serious health condition was unable to sleep in his room anymore as the damp and mould was so bad there.

The research participants spoke about health issues affecting the adults in the family as well, including heart issues, diabetes and stress related illness. A worrying number of the participants spoke about suffering from depression for a prolonged period of time and more spoke about mental health issues experienced by other family members. The AITHS found that statistically, Traveller males are 6.6 times more likely to commit suicide than their counterparts in the general population. Although not statistically significant, Traveller females appear to be more likely to commit suicide as well. These findings resonate with our research which found that the issue of suicide is one that has directly affected many of our research participants. The people in our study spoke about their familial support networks as key to alleviating some of the pressures associated with homelessness and depression. However, it is important to ensure that an over reliance on this familial support does not prevent treatment seeking behaviour for issues of ill-mental health.

Another issue discussed by the participants focused on how episodes of homelessness affected the ways they could treat their health conditions. For example, one participant spoke about the problem of storing insulin when sleeping in a car. Another two people spoke about the worsening of their mothers' health conditions due to an inability to use breathing apparatus when living on an unofficial site (except when the generator was in use). This has resulted in repeat hospital admissions for both women. It is crucial that people are facilitated to exit episodes of homelessness as quickly as possible so that they do not spend significant periods of time living in these conditions putting their health at serious risk.

Recommendation 15: The 37 families currently living on unofficial sites in County Offaly, without access to the most basic of amenities such as water and sewage, should be accommodated as a priority. It is important that these families are not simply offered standard housing, rather they should have the option of culturally appropriate accommodation that allows them to continue to live their Traveller way of life.

Recommendation 16: A locally-based Traveller Homeless Team (including the OTM social worker, a representative from the Simon Community, representative from Offaly County Council and other relevant stakeholders) should be set up to as a coordinated response to tackling the issues faced by Travellers experiencing homelessness. These issues include social isolation, disruption of service provision (when movement out of the county is required to access emergency accommodation) and continuity of care, which are contributing risk factors for mental ill health.

Recommendation 17: To avoid mental health risks associated with long term homelessness and accommodation instability, the provision of adequate, affordable and culturally appropriate accommodation should occur in a timely fashion to Travellers experiencing homelessness.

Support networks

For almost all of the research participants, strong family bonds were apparent through the research. Many of the participants spoke about the different ways that their families have helped them through an episode of homelessness, both in emotional and more practical ways. Emotionally, families were the only form of support for some of the participants. In terms of practical support, family members' homes were providing a location for day-to-day tasks such as cooking and cleaning. In terms of alleviating homelessness, the most significant support offered by families was an offer of somewhere to stay. This included parking trailers on a family members land, parking a trailer in the parents back garden, staying temporarily in over-crowded conditions with family members (including couch surfing) and loaning of trailers. Most of the participants were very positive about the support they received from their families. For some, these family ties are a key element of what it means to be a Traveller and the accommodation that they have a preference for enables this close-knit family unit which can include extended as well as immediate family.

People were less positive when it came to support received from statutory and voluntary agencies. People felt that there are very limited services in the midlands when you are homeless and some spoke about feeling like they had been forgotten about by both the state and charities. The local authority was discussed many times throughout the interviews. However, very often this relationship was seen as antagonistic rather than as a support. Those who had used the Midlands Simon Community homeless services were positive about their experience, but disliked that they had to go through the local authority to access it in the first place.

Recommendation 18: The desire of some Travellers to maintain close ties with extended family is an important part of Traveller culture. This should be enabled through the provision of Traveller specific accommodation that allows family units to live together in both halting site and group housing schemes. This would involve consultation with Travellers in the allocation of units so that family ties can be maintained, and to ensure families with troubled histories are not accommodated together. This was cited a number of times throughout the research as a reason for leaving Traveller specific accommodation and therefore it is possible that this consultation could help to address the issue for repeat homelessness for some Travellers.

Enablers to exiting homelessness

Most of the people interviewed were still experiencing an episode of homelessness at the time of interview. However many had exited homelessness for a period at another stage in their lives. The research participants discussed the following as enablers to exiting an episode of homelessness:

- Access to good quality, affordable accommodation.
- Access to Traveller specific accommodation, designed in consultation with Travellers.
- Access to a bay on a small halting site in which families are accommodated together.
- Access to family units of emergency accommodation.
- The provision of more emergency accommodation within County Offaly.
- Access to employment opportunities.
- Further education – however, this was not seen as an enabler on its own as people felt that they still face discrimination in accessing employment despite undertaking further education.
- Support to maintain a tenancy for people who have no experience of living in standard housing.
- Access to information, advice and assistance on accessing accommodation.
- Mental health support.

Recommendation 19: According to Census 2011, 84 per cent of Travellers were unemployed. The links between unemployment, poverty, social exclusion and homelessness are well documented. Employment can provide greater self-esteem, social relationships, support networks and prevent isolation. As such, OTM echoes the call from other Traveller organisations for the government to develop a National Traveller Employment and Career Development Strategy.

Recommendation 20: Further research is needed to examine links between Traveller inter-generational long-term unemployment, social isolation and poor physical and mental health.

Recommendation 21: Sufficient tenancy support should be provided to people entering standard housing for the first time, or for others with a high level of need. This should be a culturally appropriate version of the tenancy support offered to people availing of the homeless 'housing first' service which provides a support service built around the needs of each individual

Barriers to exiting homelessness

Unfortunately, a multitude of exit barriers from homelessness were identified by the participants in the research. Some of these issues have persisted for many years, while others appeared to the participants to be getting worse in more recent times. Fatalistic thinking was evident throughout the research with most participants pessimistic about a change in their accommodation situation in the near future. The exit barriers included:

- Lack of culturally appropriate accommodation suitable for their needs.
- A lack of desire by the local authority to provide this form of accommodation.
- Local opposition to Traveller accommodation.
- A shortage of local authority housing.
- A lack of affordable accommodation in the private rented sector.
- The reduced level of Jobseeker's Allowance for the under 26s.
- The difference between the HAP payment and the current market rates for rental properties.
- Discrimination among landlords resulting in a reluctance to rent dwellings to Travellers.
- Discrimination among employers in accessing the labour market.
- The location of emergency homeless accommodation.
- The lack of family emergency accommodation units in the region.
- Mental health difficulties.

The reliance on the private market to provide accommodation for the most vulnerable people in our society is not working. Rather, local authorities need to increase their capacity as direct providers of social housing in order to cater for those most in need. Along with the increased provision of standard social housing, local authorities need to increase their provision Traveller specific accommodation, planned and designed in consultation with Travellers.

Recommendation 22: The private rental market has proved to be insufficient in meeting the needs of the most vulnerable in our society. The policy of using the market as a means to provide accommodation in place of local authority built social housing has failed and as such, there is a need for significant provision of new social housing by the local authority and voluntary housing bodies. The exceptionally high numbers of people in need of social housing and the current homeless crisis, along with sharp increases in rent, mean that social housing is needed as a matter of urgency. This should be a priority focus of central and local government.

Recommendation 23: The full level of Jobseeker’s Allowance should be paid to the under 26s as the reduced payment unfairly discriminates against people on the grounds of age. It assumes people are in a position to remain living in the family home, which is not the case for many young Travellers that have married long before they reach 26.

Recommendation 24: HAP levels should increase in line with current market rents as the financial burden of making up the gap between the HAP and social welfare payments, is proving to be too difficult for some people. HAP levels should be reviewed bi-annually as the pace at which rents are rising currently means that HAP levels would need to increase at least once yearly to stay anywhere close to market rent levels.

Recommendation 25: Previous research has examined the issue of addiction among people experiencing homeless, showing that homeless people have higher rates of substance use than the general population. The issue of addiction did not emerge as a significant theme in this research. However, this sample size was small. Therefore, it is recommended that further research on Traveller homelessness examines the issue of addiction among homeless Travellers and how this impacts on their homeless journeys.

Appendix 1: Footnotes

1. Discussion with Offaly County Council Housing Department representative, 1st February 2016, Offaly County Council.
2. Figures provided by the Housing Section of Offaly County Council, 25th February 2015.
3. Figures from the Small Area Population Statistics interactive tables. Available from <http://census.cso.ie/sapmap/> (Accessed 25th February 2015).
4. Discussion with Offaly County Council Housing Department representative, 1st February 2016, Offaly County Council.
5. Data received from Offaly County Council, 24th February 2016.
6. People whose only other option would be to sleep rough.
7. Discussion with Offaly County Council Housing Department representative, 1st February 2016, Offaly County Council.
8. The reasons for this are discussed in Chapter 3.
9. Figures provided by the Housing Section of Offaly County Council, 25th February 2015.
10. Figures from the Small Area Population Statistics interactive tables. Available from <http://census.Central Statistics Office.ie/sapmap/> (Accessed 25th February 2015).
11. It is important to note that these figures represent the numbers presenting as homeless and not necessarily the numbers that the County Council assessed as being homeless. However, given the narrow definition of homelessness being used by the County Council at present, it is highly likely that that the number of those assessed as homeless significantly under-represent the issue within the county. Neither figure provides a satisfactory measure of homelessness within the county and the figures are used for indicative purposes only.
12. Discussion with Offaly County Council Housing Department representative, 1st February 2016, Offaly County Council.
13. The study used a number of other health data sources from the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland to compare their data to.
14. Health expectancy is a generic term encompassing a wide range of measures that vary by the underlying definition of health used in their construction.

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15. McVeigh is referring to the fact that the Irish Government's case against the recognition of Irish Traveller ethnicity is outlined in a footnote in their response to the first CERD report in 2004.
 16. Data received from Offaly County Council, 24th February 2016.
 17. Trend is calculated as follows: $2014 \text{ figure} - 2012 \text{ figure} / 2012 \text{ figure} * 100 = \% \text{ trend over period } 2012-2014$.
 18. Discussion with CEO Midlands Simon Community, 2nd March 2016.
 19. Discussion with Offaly County Council Housing Department representative, 1st February 2016, Offaly County Council.
 20. Discussions with Offaly County Council Housing Department representative, 1st February 2016, Offaly County Council and Midland Simon CEO, 2nd March 2016.
 21. Discussion with Offaly County Council Housing Department representative, 1st February 2016, Offaly County Council. Daft.ie property searched in February and March 2016.
 22. Figures calculated using Service Indicators in Local Authorities 2013. Available from: <http://www.lgma.ie/en/serviceindicators/2004to2013> .
 23. Discussion with CEO Midlands Simon Community, 2nd March 2016.
 24. Discussions with Offaly County Council Housing Department representatives, 1st February 2016, Offaly County Council.
 25. Discussion with representatives from Offaly County Council, 1st February 2016.
 26. It is worth noting that addiction was only mentioned once as an issue in this research. However, this could be due to the small sample size for the research or a reluctance to speak about something which is still considered taboo within the Traveller community.
 27. Minutes of Offaly County Council monthly meeting, 27th January 2014.
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