Young Men on the Margins highlights how, from childhood onwards, negative economic and social experiences combine at family and community level to create a process where some young men move from living at home to being homeless. It draws attention to the absence of appropriate economic and social supports at crucial stages in their lives to prevent the drift into homelessness.

A group of young homeless men talk about their family relationships and family circumstances, economic deprivation, their experience of the education system, how they cope with homelessness, their experiences of drug-use and associated crime and their hopes to change their lives and integrate into society.

At a broader level, *Young Men on the Margins* draws together data on the experience of marginalisation among men and boys in contemporary Irish society. This includes an exploration of the consequences of social change for men. In particular, changing family structures, male educational participation and performance, the changing nature of work and changing value systems are considered.

The concluding section of the report reflects on how the experiences of the men in the case study relate to this broader picture and attempts to draw out some lessons from the findings.
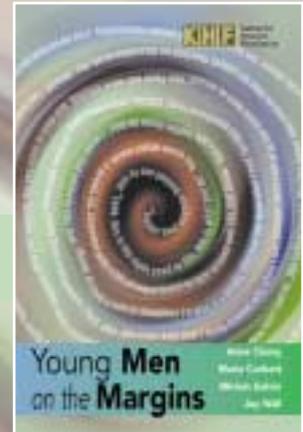
Background

Through its involvement in community development, the Katharine Howard Foundation is aware of considerable numbers of men, mostly young men, who have little or no participation in family life, community life, or employment. There is also growing concern about the numbers of men addicted to alcohol or drugs, involved in crime, becoming homeless or resorting to suicide. In order to help identify the origins and process that have led to this situation, *Young Men on the Margins* focuses on one particular group of marginalised men.

This focus is taken in the context of an overview of the nature of men's marginalisation. The report will be complemented by a further study on suicide.

The report comprises three parts.

❖ Chapter 1 reviews the context of marginalisation amongst young men in Ireland. It examines family, education,

work, crime (and the connection with drugs), changing religious values and suicide.

- ❖ Chapter 2 focuses on the lives and experiences of twenty homeless men in Dublin, aged eighteen to thirty.
- ❖ Chapter 3 examines how the experiences of the homeless men relate to the overall context set out earlier in the report.

Key Findings

The family

There have been considerable changes to family formation in Ireland over the last three decades. More diverse family forms are common. Families parented by lone females have increased. The absence of a parent may be important in relation to certain outcomes, including behavioural difficulties in the child, but this is dependent on a number of factors. Economic resources, children's access to role models outside the immediate family unit and parenting ability influence the behaviour of children in families. When these combine negatively, children in any family may be vulnerable.

Boys may be more affected, or appear to be more affected, by family difficulties because of differences in the ways boys and girls manifest distress. Young boys present to social or support services with problems earlier than girls. This may be because boys are more likely to show distress in an overt way, e.g. behaviour and conduct problems bring them to the attention of parents and teachers.

The homeless men in the study were overwhelmingly from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. There was an absence of parenting in many of their lives. A parent had left the family home or a parent was unable to cope. Their early family lives were characterised by multiple traumas. There was also an absence of role models either inside or outside the home.

> *I never had anyone behind me to say: "Look, this is the right road to life, this is what you do". You know what I mean, a grown-up, someone with a bit of experience to turn around and say, you know: "Get a job, settle down, do this". I never had anybody like that. (Mark)*

Changing masculinities

The changing nature of traditional and contemporary masculinities is considered. Predominantly working-class men are tied to traditional forms of masculinities. This offers, in part, an explanation for their marginalisation.

> *I always looked up to him, always respected him, but he never showed any emotions, never…. He's never expressed himself in front of me or the rest of the family: he's just a typical man. I couldn't go talk to him about problems, it wasn't his thing…(Sean)*

> *If I had a son or daughter I'd give it a totally different life than what I had, (at the) emotional level, talking, communicating, sit down with them, bring them everywhere. My father never done any of that… (Joe)*

Education

The educational achievement of boys and men appears to be less than girls and women at all levels of the education system, with the exception of higher-level degrees and postgraduate participation. Boys may simply appear to be under-achieving because girls are performing better.

Not all males are equally affected. Boys from better off backgrounds perform significantly better than boys from lower socio-economic groupings. The reasons why children and men from lower socio-economic groupings are more likely to underachieve and or opt out of school may be personal, familial, pedagogical or socio-economic.

School did not present an opportunity to overcome previous negative events and experiences for the homeless men interviewed. The most common theme in relation to school was its lack of significance.

> *Like, the other kids that I hung around with when I was younger were sort of in the same boat as meself, like. Their das were missing, and most of them had big families and their families were struggling as well, you know what I mean. So they were sort of ... like school wasn't, like [for them], they had no time for school, they had no discipline at all, like. (Donal)*

Work

Men's identities have often been formed through certain kinds of jobs and occupations. Men from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to have lower levels of education and vocational training. Now, in a changing jobs market they do significantly less well than men from higher socio-economic backgrounds. Economic factors, especially unemployment, influence the ability to set up an independent home and also affect access to marriage or long term relationships and fatherhood.

The educational deficiency of the homeless men interviewed was complicated by a lack of familiarity with the world of work as well as by other problems, usually substance abuse and or a criminal record. Several stated that getting work was the key to "getting back on my feet" but they also saw obstacles.

> *You can't get a job, when you're ringing up jobs and asking them to ring you back, what do you say? I'm staying in a hostel! Nobody wants to know when you're homeless... they think it's your own fault for being homeless, (they think you) deserve it, it's crazy, it's totally not true. (Colm)*

Crime and drug use

Young working class men are over-represented among criminal groups. The link between crime, lower socio-economic group and disadvantage may be a feature of the way crime is defined, detected and recorded, but the association remains important.

Drug users and offenders often have a low level of education and few vocational skills. They are both overwhelmingly from lower socio-economic backgrounds and both appear to cluster in specific geographical, primarily disadvantaged, areas. The majority of drug users have a criminal record and this usually involves relatively minor crime – the type of crime necessary to maintain a drug habit.

Drugs were viewed as a major stumbling block to leaving homelessness and moving for those who were addicted amongst the men interviewed.

Changing Values

Changing values and beliefs are explored and the impact of those transformations on the psychological health of young people.

Young single men are more likely to complete suicide, and explanations range from the impact of work and family change on men to masculine behaviour and expectations - in particular men's lack of confiding relationships and their inability to disclose

problems. Men who attempt or complete suicides are more likely to be single and to have low levels of educational and work skills. Males are also more at risk because of their membership of marginalised groupings such as the homeless, partly because the rate of suicide is much higher in these populations and also because males may be more affected than females by their relatively poor position in the economy.

Implications for Policy

The Katharine Howard Foundation believes that the research highlights the critical need for the continued development of a wide range of integrated, community-based preventative and support programmes for children, families and communities.

There is also a need for greater intervention to support boys or men who are already "on the outside" to develop the resources, skills and confidence to actively change their lives.

The interviews with homeless young men showed clearly that they wanted to break away from homelessness and they often maintained strong links with their families. Yet it was apparent that they needed a wide ranging programme of intervention to succeed.

" Get my job back, get proper counselling, stay away from the drugs, and get back with me girlfriend. (Brendan)

I am homeless, but I wouldn't like to think of myself as really really down in the dumps, homeless… down and out… I just like to think of meself as having a spot of bother… and I'll work myself out of [it]. (Mark)

The Katharine Howard Foundation is an independent grant-making body that supports initiatives concerned with addressing poverty and disadvantage in Ireland. Previous issues of Community Matters are:

Community Matters No. 1: *Social Housing in Ireland. A study of success, failure and lessons learned.*

Community Matters No. 2: *The Interim Report of the Community Playgroup Initiative.*

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