

Introduction

Homelessness Prevention in an International Policy Context

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Introduction

Although enforceable rights to settled housing for homeless people are unusual outside of the UK, across the developed world there is a growing interest in developing and exploring ways of addressing homelessness (Shinn *et al.*, 2001; Crane *et al.*, 2006; Busch-Geertsema and Fitzpatrick, 2008; Pawson and Davidson, 2008; Culhane *et al.*, 2011; Mackie, 2015). To date however, there is little evidence of how preventative policies may contribute to this goal and operate in practice. Accordingly, the overarching aim of this themed section is to begin to fill this gap in evidence.

The Housing Act (Wales) 2014 introduced major changes to the way homelessness is addressed in Wales, a constituent country of the UK with some devolved power. From April 2015 changes associated with Part 2 of the Act aimed at extending services to prevent homelessness and providing assistance to all eligible applicants (non-eligibility being a function of immigration status). Pursuant to this, the authors have completed two large-scale studies which were commissioned and funded by the Welsh Government. The University of Salford (partnered by Glyndŵr University, Wrexham) undertook a mixed-methods longitudinal post-implementation evaluation of the processes and impacts of the Act (study 1), while Glyndŵr University, Wrexham (partnered by The University of Salford) conducted a parallel study specifically focusing on the experiences of adults leaving the secure estate (prison leavers) (study 2). Our studies provide robust longitudinal evaluation evidence on the impacts and processes of the legislation.

Introducing the projects

The overall aim of study 1 (the longitudinal post-implementation evaluation of the processes and impacts of the Act) was to understand how the Act has been implemented by organisations involved in supporting people at risk of homelessness (local authorities, housing associations and third sector organisations) and also to gather evidence to inform the Welsh Government's understanding of the impact of the Act on people who are homeless/at risk of homelessness. This involved: evaluating the implementation of the legislation by local authorities; evaluating the short and longer term impacts of the new legislation; identifying the need for further improvements, developments and support to ensure consistently good services are delivered across Wales; assessing the impact of the

legislation on service users, local authorities and key partners; evaluating the impacts on homelessness of the much greater emphasis on prevention that is a core feature of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014. The overall aim of study 2 (a parallel study specifically focusing on the experiences of adults leaving the secure estate i.e. prison leavers) was to engage in a post-implementation process and impact evaluation of the homelessness services available to adults leaving the secure estate in Wales under the auspices of 'The National Pathway for Homelessness Services to Children, Young People and Adults in the Secure Estate'.

Before the introduction of the Housing Act (Wales) 2014 priority need status for housing had been conferred on all prison leavers in Wales by the Homeless Persons (Priority Need) Order 2001. However, a shift towards more preventative practices, to include prison leavers, from 2014 was considered to render such a status obsolete. Concerns about the potential effects of this change were expressed during scrutiny sessions for the Act (e.g. Shelter, 2013). In response 'The National Pathway for Homelessness Services to Children, Young People and Adults in the Secure Estate' was developed. It seeks to consolidate processes for providing services to prisoners with housing related needs and describes the systems for managing communication and relations between agencies to ensure that, where possible, those entering prison are not made homeless and that all prison leavers have accommodation to go to before they are released. Key aspects of the National Pathway include designated tasks allocated to particular agencies at key points in a prisoner's journey into and through custody and back into the community.

The articles

There are seven articles included in this themed section. Apart from the review article, each article examines specific aspects of the impact and processes of the prevention agenda, drawing on extensive new data from the two studies. We explain the processes involved in the adoption and implementation of a preventative approach to homelessness in Wales, and explain the premise that the evidence that has been gathered regarding how this plays out in practice – for homeless people (service users) and other stakeholders (service providers) – will provide valuable lessons for other international contexts. Such lessons relate to the challenges to policy implementation, including: wider structures, the influence of organisational culture and the agency of gatekeepers; and the effects of social norms and values regarding marginalised groups.

The articles share the following remit and contribution to knowledge:

- A critical examination of how homelessness prevention policy operates in practice and how social values and power affect policy implementation
- New evidence of the translation of policy into practice through the experiences of a marginalised group (homeless people as service users)
- New evidence of policy implementation (strategically and operationally) through the experiences of stakeholders (service providers)
- A critique of how policy and practice could be modified to improve outcomes for homeless people
- An examination of how prevention could play out in other contexts/different welfare regimes

In the review article, Ahmed and Madoc-Jones contextualise the introduction of the prevention agenda in Wales by defining homelessness and highlighting the shift towards prevention policy in an international context. We consider the benefits of prevention, and examine theoretical debates, critiques and the benefits of prevention. We conclude by offering some reflections on the progress of homelessness prevention since the Act's implementation drawing on data from the longitudinal post-implementation evaluation of the Housing Act (Wales) 2014 (Ahmed *et al.*, 2017, 2018).

In the second article, Rogers, Ahmed, Madoc-Jones, Gibbons, Jones and Wilding interrogate the intersection of homelessness, poor mental health and the policy response in Wales, beginning with the premise that rates of homelessness and poor mental health are significant challenges across the globe. They explore how these intersecting issues have been addressed in Wales through Part 2 of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014, highlighting that although The Act intended to more systematically target support to vulnerable populations, including people with mental health needs, through a paradigm shift towards a prevention model, a critical examination of how the policy works in practice shows that social values and power affect implementation. They offer new evidence of the translation of policy into practice through the experiences of two stakeholder groups: a marginalised community (people with mental health needs as a subset of homeless people) and service providers. In doing so, they offer a critique of how policy and practice could be modified to improve outcomes for homeless people with implications for prevention policy in Wales and in other contexts and different welfare regimes.

In the third article, Jones, Ahmed, Madoc-Jones, Gibbons, Rogers and Wilding focus on working and homeless and explore the interaction of housing and labour market insecurity. They highlight that alongside an increasing focus on 'prevention', moving homeless adults into paid work is frequently considered an important part of helping them overcome homelessness and sustain an 'independent' life. They demonstrate that a growing evidence base shows that work does not always offer the means to escape poverty, and many who are in employment continue to face housing insecurity. Relatedly, there is increasing concern about the phenomena of 'in-work homelessness'. Drawing on new data from a study of people's experience of homelessness in Wales, this article considers the hitherto underexplored topic of being both in work and homeless. The article provides a critical examination of how homelessness policy operates in practice, through presenting new evidence of the experiences of a marginalised group (namely, working homeless people as service users). It also considers how policy and practice could be modified to improve outcomes for homeless people and how prevention could play out in other contexts and welfare regimes.

In the fourth article, Gibbons, Madoc-Jones, Ahmed, Jones, Rogers, and Wilding focus on rural homelessness and prevention practices in Wales, highlighting how homelessness is largely understood as an urban issue and so rural homelessness is made invisible in both academic literature and in policy and practice discussions. This article draws on extensive interviews with homeless service users and providers in three rural authorities in Wales to give a clearer sense of the nature and challenges of rural homelessness. Insight is provided into the nature of homeless people's connection to, and struggle to remain within, rural spaces. The article also documents and explores the very different strategies employed by rural local authorities to provide preventative and

person-centred support to homeless people in the rural context. They show how many rural households' struggles to remain in place, often at the cost of homelessness and lowered ability to access services, will have resonance in a range of contexts and has implications for policy makers and practitioners in rural contexts beyond Wales.

In the fifth article, Madoc-Jones, Ahmed, Hughes, Gorden, Dubberley, Washington-Dyer, Lockwood and Wilding focus on homelessness amongst Prison Leavers highlighting that in spite of a move towards more preventative practices, policy objectives to help prison leavers find accommodation on release in Wales have not translated into effective local delivery and improved outcomes for this group. In this article they engage in a critical examination of why this might be the case and the difficulties associated with preventing homelessness amongst prison leavers. They suggest that in the contradictory space created in Wales between policy objectives and the social and practical conditions in which those objectives have to be met, prevention practice could be ritualistic; concerned with agency over structure and responsibility over rights and orientated towards public protection rather than promoting resettlement. In response they advocate for the development of non-exclusionary and non-punitive housing policies, underpinned by the right to permanent housing for all and wherein, in respect of prison leavers, stable accommodation is understood as the starting point for resettlement. The analysis presented in this article provides insights into how homelessness policies could play out in jurisdictions where more joint working between housing and criminal justice agencies are being pursued and/or preventative approaches to managing prison leaver homelessness are being considered.

In the sixth article, Ahmed, Madoc-Jones, Gibbons, Jones, Rogers, and Wilding consider some of the challenges to implementing the prevention agenda. They argue that there is dissonance between the policy behind the Welsh Government legislation (homelessness prevention) and practice (implementation) by critically examining the effects and potential future effects of: structural challenges (for example austerity and budget restrictions, Welfare Reform and the availability of affordable accommodation); institutional processes (operational challenges facing local authorities); and the agency of front-line staff (gatekeeping and resistance to the adoption of person-centred approaches).

In the final article, Wilding, Madoc-Jones, Ahmed, Gibbons, Jones and Rogers consider the potential for international policy transfer from Part 2 of the Act. This article views the Act through the lens of prospective international policy transfer in order to draw lessons for other governments looking to change their policy approach to homelessness. The article builds on the Evaluation of the Homelessness Part of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 and associated data, including a survey of all twenty-two local authorities in Wales (two-waves), and interviews with national stakeholders, service users, and service providers. The data is used to understand perspectives on changes relating to the Act, and to assess factors impacting upon its programmatic and political success. The article also considers the international transferability of provisions in the Act to different types of housing and welfare systems, and the level of adaptation and modification that would be necessary. Overall, the articles present new evidence of how homelessness prevention policy operates in practice and the potential to effectively address homelessness within the context of growing interest in such approaches across the developed world.

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