

# Women and Homelessness

Key Messages from Research in Europe

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# Evidence on Women's Experience of Homelessness

- There has been a 'paucity' of research on women's homelessness in the European Union (Baptista, 2011).
- Research is also limited elsewhere in the economically developed World
- Part of a general issue of homelessness research being disproportionately focused on people sleeping rough/street homelessness



# Evidence on Women's Homelessness

- Data are limited on women's homelessness because data on homelessness are limited
- Only the UK (not all the UK), Denmark, the Netherlands, Finland and a few others have reasonable ideas what their homeless populations are – but France, Italy and Germany don't know with any real accuracy what their homeless populations are, neither does Northern Ireland
- Partly an issue of definition in some societies, much of the South and East of the EU only regards people on the street or in homelessness shelters as 'homeless'
- But some countries don't count homelessness because they have (still) bigger problems



# Welfare systems 'hiding' women's homelessness

- Women's homelessness can be under recorded and under researched because of the operation of other welfare systems
- All EU societies (and the US) have at least some welfare protection for children
- If a woman has her child or children with her, benefits and social care services tend to intervene to stop extreme child poverty (and thus some homelessness) occurring on a mass scale
- If a woman has no children or her children are not with her, that could cause homelessness that would not occur if she were not on her own



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# Counting homelessness among women

- Welfare systems that women use may not record their homelessness
- Family welfare services may effectively stop homelessness or potential homelessness among women when children are present, but may not record it as such
- Gender based (domestic) violence services are a different service infrastructure in many countries. Many women in this situation are homeless, but they are *recorded* as at risk of violence, not as 'homeless'.



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# Women Migrants

- If a woman is *undocumented* or an *asylum seeker*, she is rarely counted, or indeed defined, as homeless
- Most welfare systems and (where present) most homelessness services in the EU do not work with migrants or resist working with migrants
- Migrant homelessness is recorded and reported by academics and by campaigning groups
- However it is counted and dealt with as an immigration issue
- Several countries, for example the UK, are actively using repatriation as their primary response to undocumented migrant homelessness. The UK is also repatriating homeless economic migrants from the Eastern EU and France and several other countries are actively seeking to remove Roma.



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# Fewer Women Homeless?

- In the sense that there is less street homelessness among women, though we may be undercounting that
- But if you look at housing exclusion, that is bad and inadequate housing, women are very present indeed.
- While women who have experienced gender based violence and/or had welfare services intervene because they and their children in poverty may not be literally homeless, their situation may be far from good.



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# Fewer Women Homeless?

- We don't actually know
- Inadequacy of research
- Inadequacy of data
- We know enough to know that homelessness among women linked to gender based violence is a far greater social problem than street homelessness
- But there is far, far more work on street homelessness





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# Routes into Homelessness

- There is a general argument that countries with more elaborate and extensive welfare systems have less homelessness
- This is almost certainly correct
- A country with more social housing, more generous welfare systems, more generous health provision has less homelessness, less poverty than one that does not
- Capitalism without an adequate welfare system is not a pretty sight. According to National Coalition on Homelessness, one in 50 American children is homeless, i.e. in a shelter, in a car or in a tent.



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# Routes into Homelessness



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# Routes into Homelessness

- Key theorist of the last 20 years in homelessness research is Dennis P. Culhane
- His work alongside others like Steve Metraux has pointed to different forms of homelessness existing in the US
- Transitional homelessness – poor people encountering hard times, becoming homeless and often self exiting from homelessness - the bulk of homelessness
- Chronic and episodic homelessness – people with high support needs, including severe mental illness and problematic drug and alcohol use, that often date back to childhood – a population that stays or is frequently on the street or in shelters for long periods of time



# Women's Routes into Homelessness

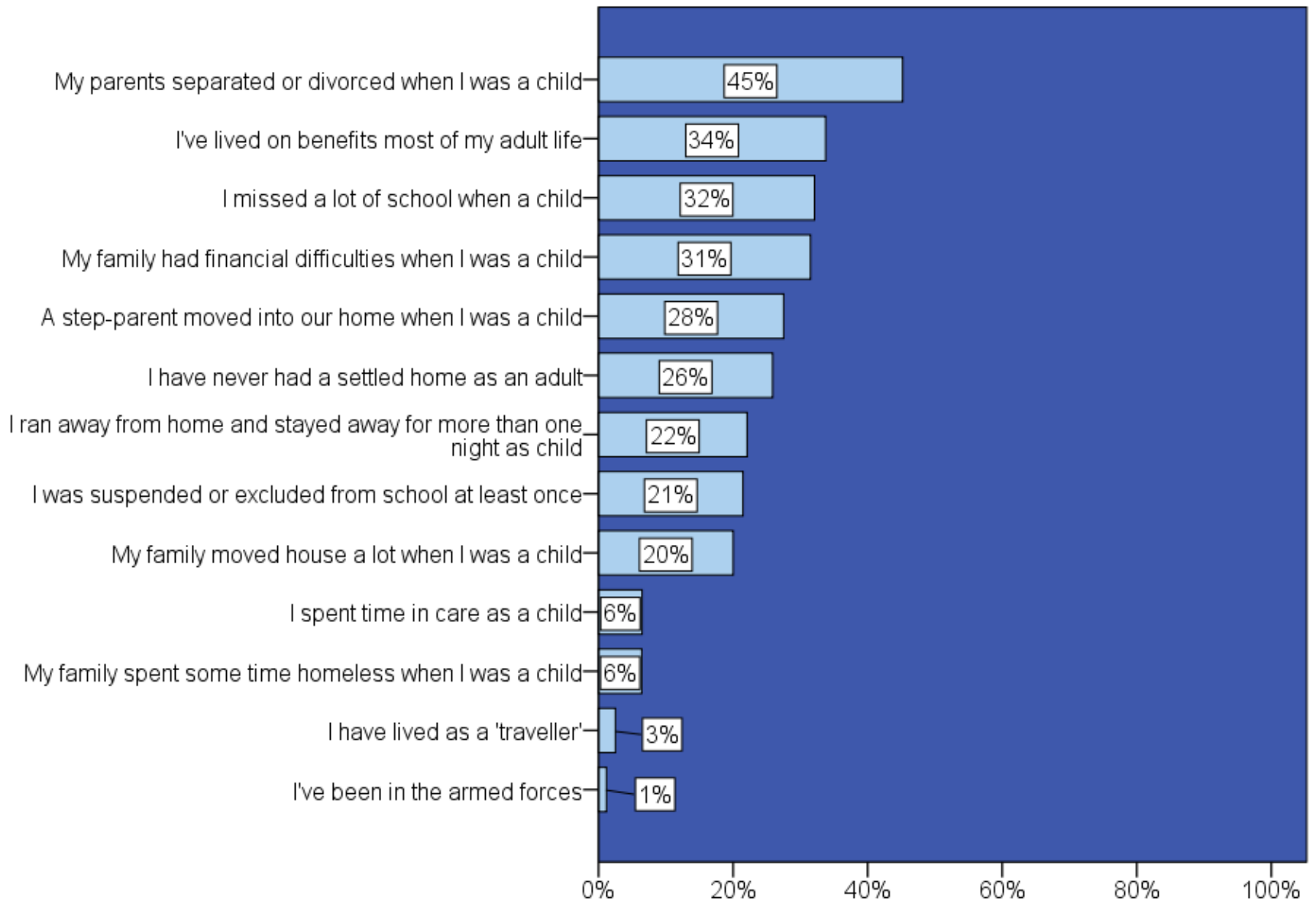
- Women's homelessness is different, it has different causes and responses to it by welfare systems are different
- But does the transitional /chronic distinction hold when you just look at women?
- Tentatively yes, to an extent, though in the case of women, there is a less obvious line between transitional and chronic



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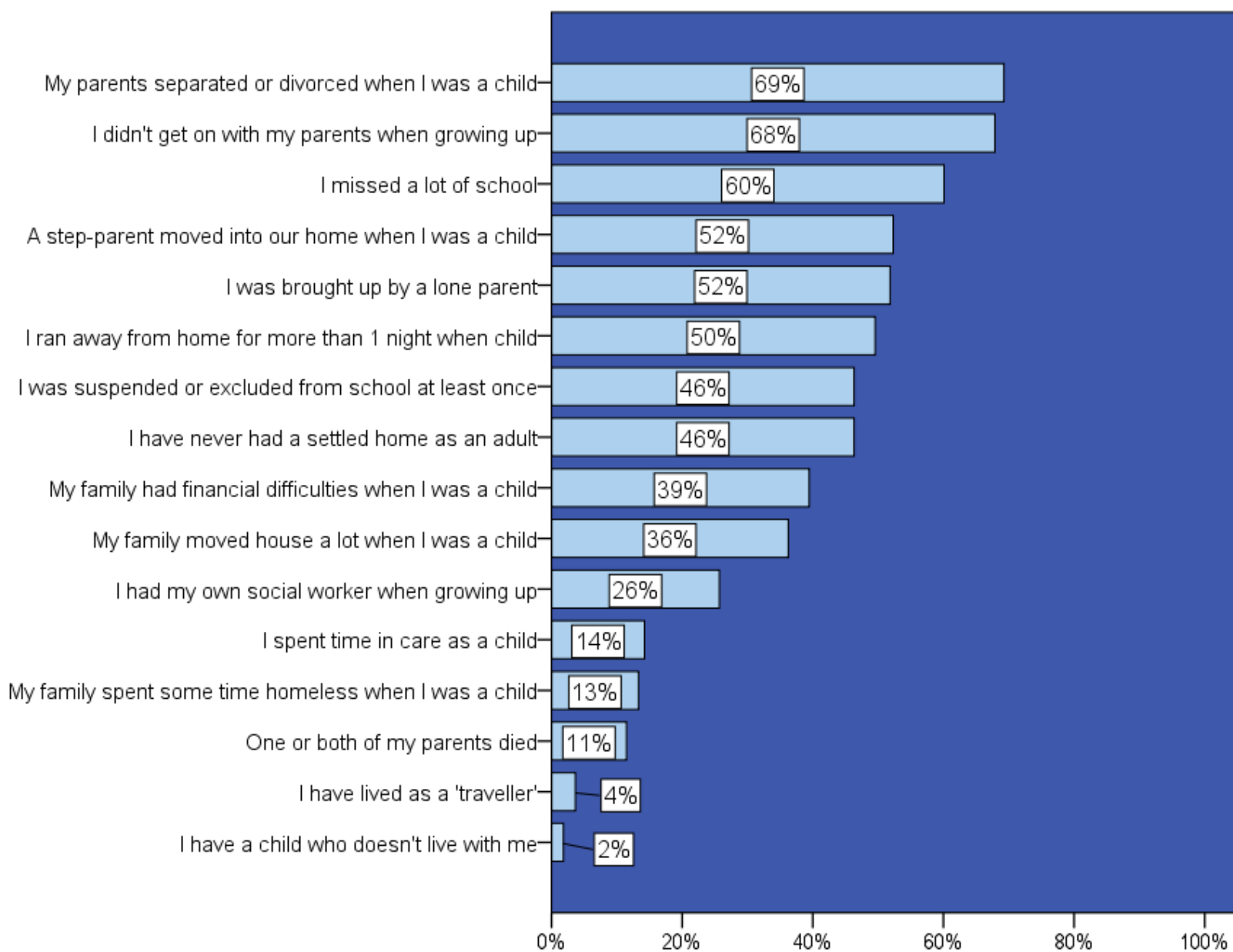
# Immediate causes

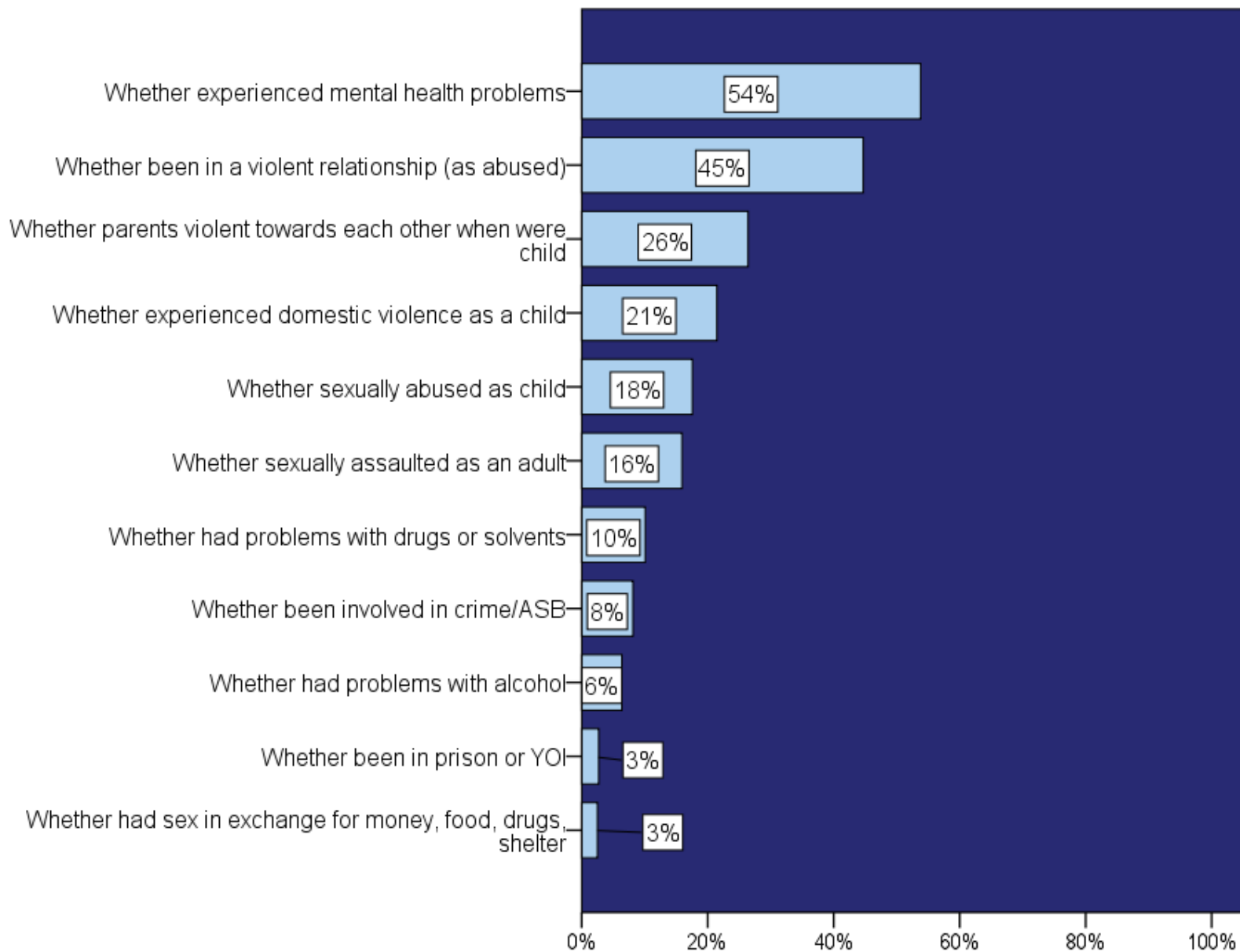
- Evidence is not extensive but there is work from UK and USA that women in poverty become homeless and often self exit
- Main cause is relationship breakdown with a male partner
- A very significant part of which involves gender based violence from a male partner
- Another major cause is that a series of interim arrangements have broken down, women (and often kids) have been effectively homeless for some time, but have been living with relatives and friends until they exhaust their welcome



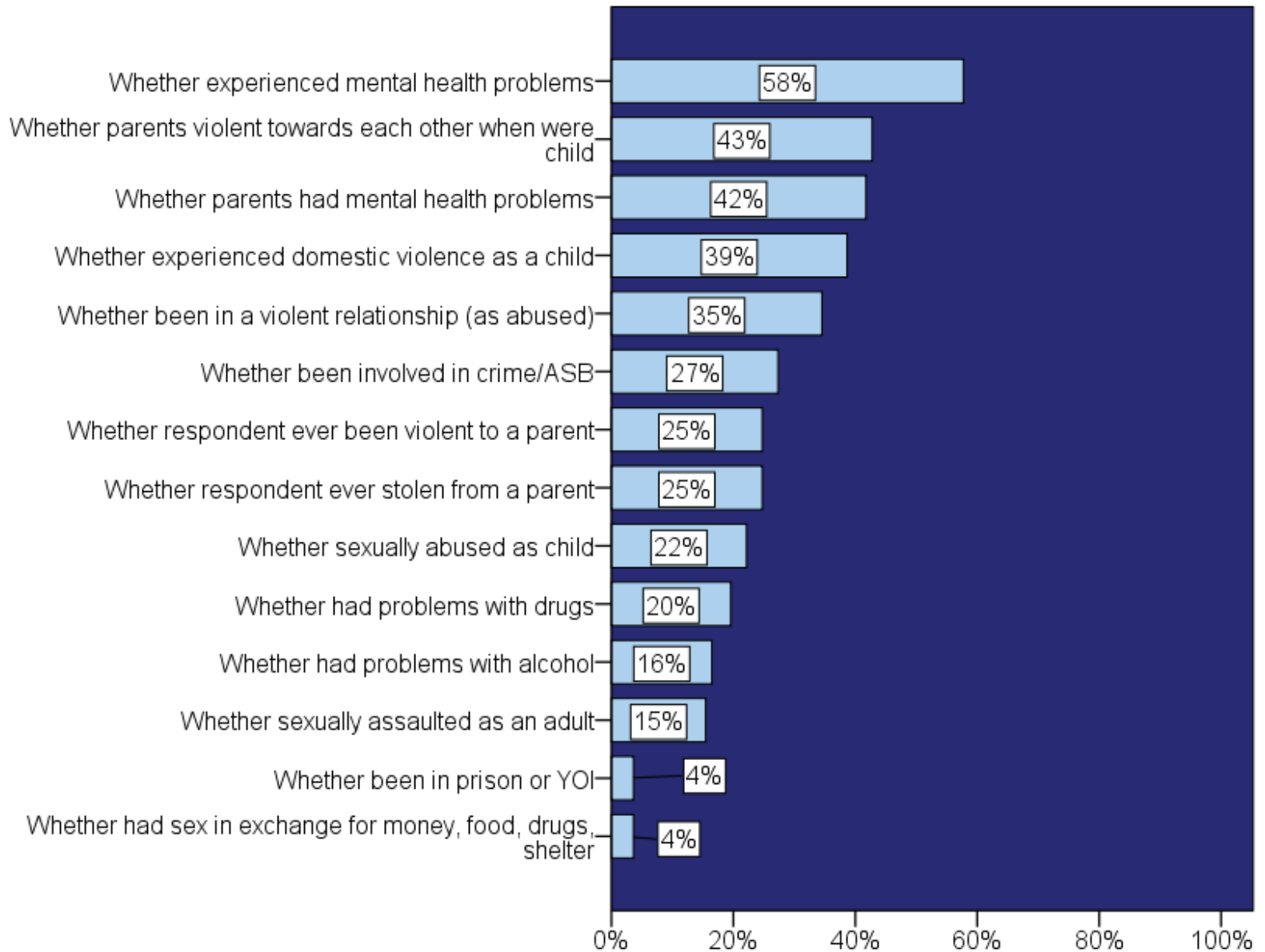


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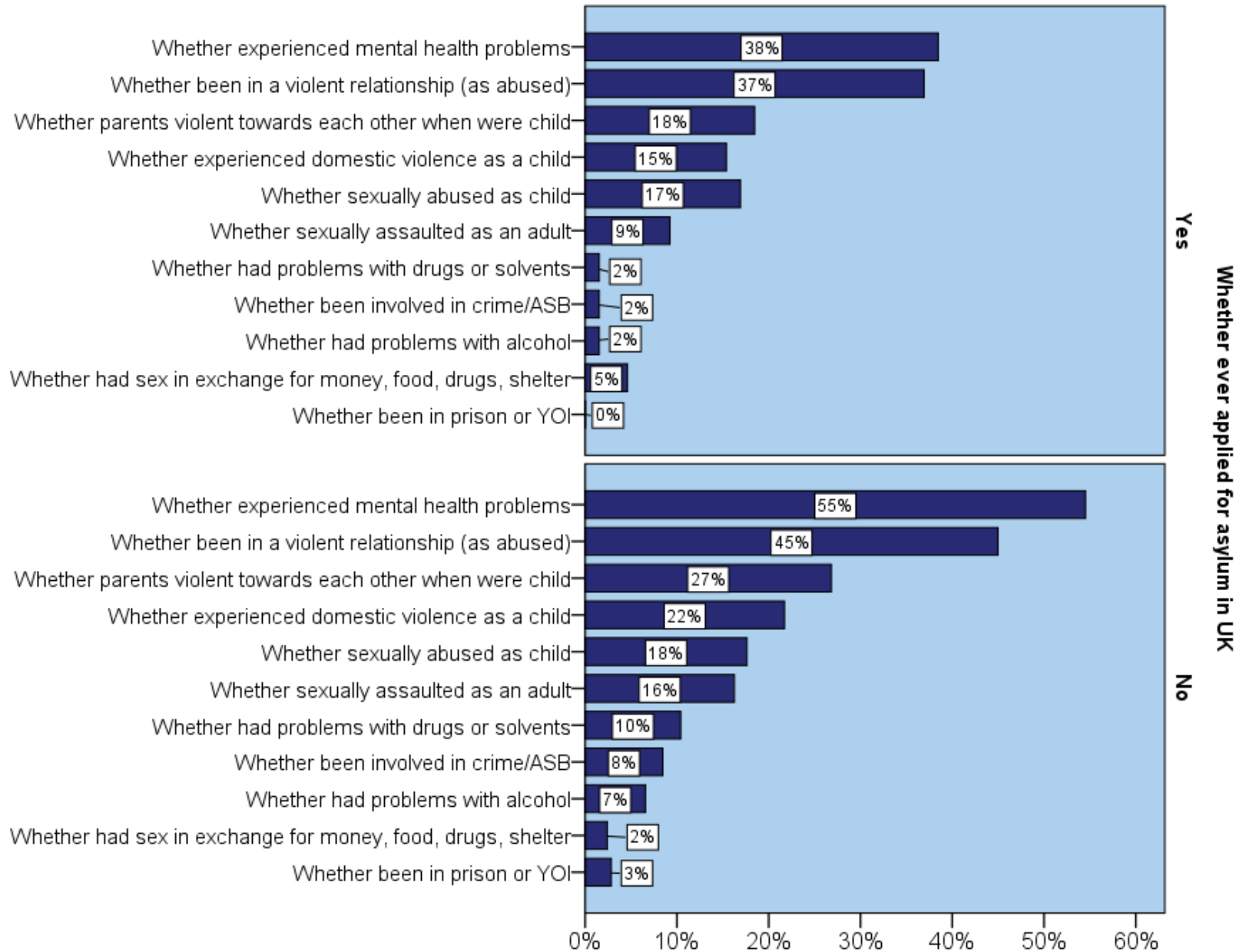








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# Causes in UK as a Comparison

- Women's homelessness is different
- Gender based violence is a significant cause
- Male on Male violence does occur, but it is associated with a tiny fraction of male homelessness, whereas English administrative data suggest gender based violence is a direct cause of loss of housing in 40% of cases of homelessness among women
- There is evidence suggesting a group of lone women with higher support needs, both from the statistics and from qualitative research in England (e.g. Anwen Jones). Sustained homelessness is highly 'risky'.
- Women with children still have support needs at a somewhat lower rate, but are difficult to see as simply lacking housing.
- Migration makes a difference



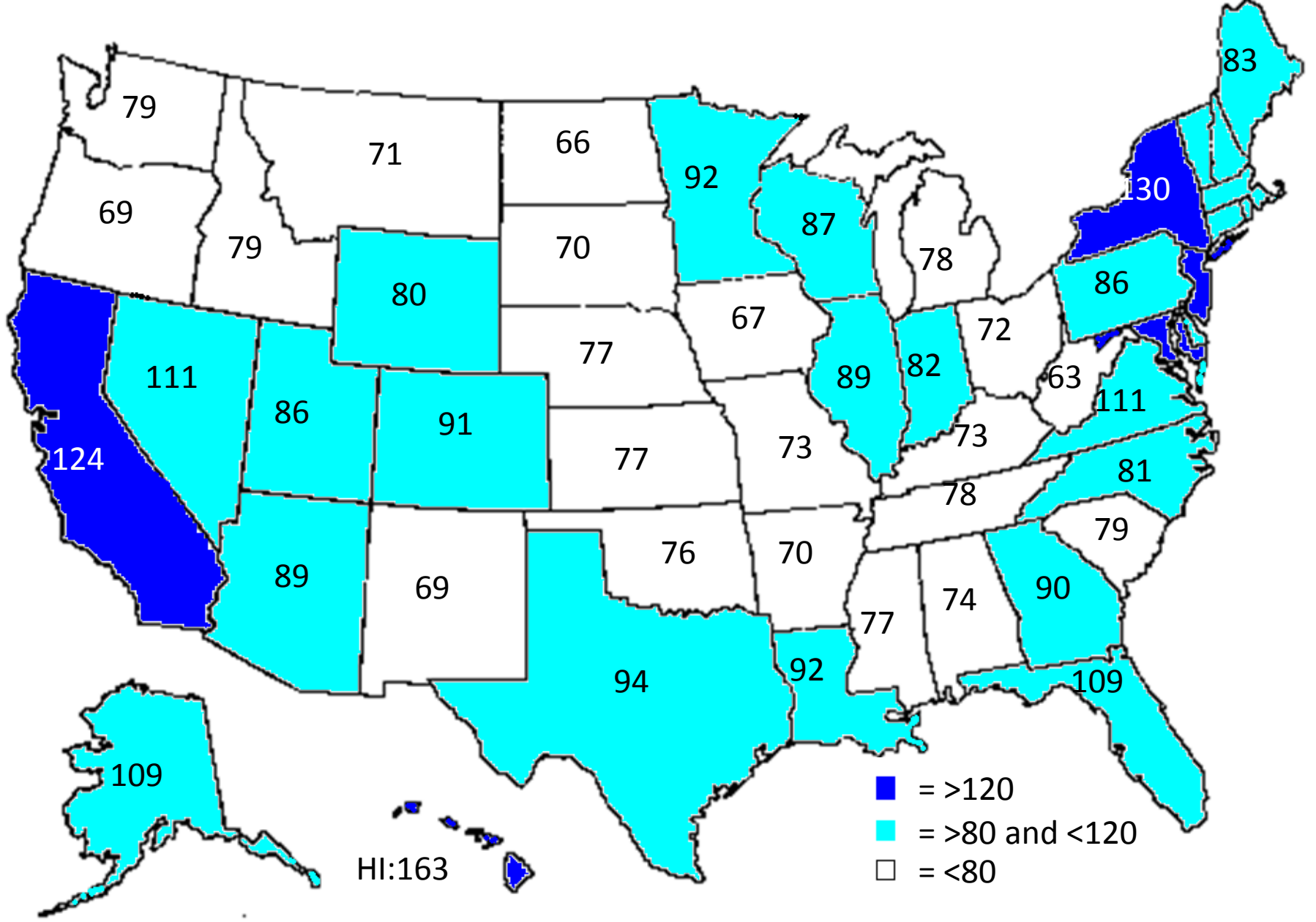
# Differences between UK and Ireland

- Population of lone women facing sustained homelessness with high support needs looks fundamentally similar
- Key differences centre on the (still unique) operation of the homelessness law in the UK, since 1977 there has been specific provision for women with children and women at risk of gender based violence
- The presence of this system *may* count a population that is actually present in Ireland, homeless women with lower support needs and children living with them, who are less visible because systems do not exist in quite the same way.



# Causes in the USA as a Comparison

- Again the association with gender based violence
- And complex interplay of factors in causing women's homelessness, a mixture of structural disadvantage and personal experiences and needs
- Work of Mary Beth Shinn and others in USA suggests a high rate of family homelessness associated with economic disadvantage and *inability to afford housing*, the largest part of which is lone women parents with lower support needs
- Evidence of a chronically homeless population which is mainly, but *not exclusively*, male.





# Differences between the USA and Ireland

- USA probably has more structural or transitional homelessness
- It has little social housing
- Access to housing benefits is restricted
- So homeless women and homeless women would perhaps have lower support needs overall, because ordinary women (and men) are less protected from the economy by welfare system



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# Ethnicity

- Ethnicity can be a possible signal of structural causation of homelessness
- Some ethnic minority groups are strongly over-represented among homeless women in the UK and USA
- The same ethnic minority groups who research has shown to be at economic disadvantage, educational disadvantage
- 2005 in England, 21% of homeless women with children were non-White European ethnic background, compared to 12% of general population.





# Causes of Women's Homelessness

- There is a very important difference between female and male homelessness which is the extent of homelessness causation linked to gender based violence
- Unmet support needs also a cause
- But social class and economic position
- And factors related to social class and economic position, including *ethnicity* and *gender*, also important.



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# What works?

- Affordable and adequate housing
- Yes, you provide advice and assistance, you can help make those women who have support needs “housing ready” (able to live independently)
- But that’s no good if there is nowhere suitable to house them
- US research on homeless women with children found that they were 21 times more likely to avoid a return to homelessness if they were provided with affordable housing



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# What works?

- Housing First or housing-led responses to chronic and high need homelessness are more effective than staircase services
- Passing homeless people with high needs through several stages, requiring them to stop drinking, stop using drugs and to become housing ready is extremely ineffective
- Services that try to rehabilitate chronically homeless people and change their behaviour lose 60-70% of the people they try to engage with
- Don't work any better for women than for men
- Housing First model services, that provide housing, use floating support services and follow a harm reduction approach are far more effective at producing housing stability



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# What works?

- Homelessness prevention
- Advice and assistance
- Social lettings/rental agencies
- Floating support services
- Sanctuary schemes



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# What works?

- Migrant homeless is never simple
- Real difficulties and dilemmas exist in how to deal with undocumented migrants who have no right to be in a country
- Western EU cannot 'import' homeless people from the South and East
- But striking a balance between a humanitarian response and an inclination to repatriate homeless women and men is difficult
- Popular opinion is against migration in many societies



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# Conclusions

- This valuable research on women's homelessness in Ireland adds significantly to the European and global evidence base in what is still an under-researched social problem.
- International comparisons suggest that women's homelessness in Ireland is similar to that existing in comparable societies
- Evidence from some of those comparable societies indicates that there may also be other forms of women's homelessness in Ireland.