Hauntology: The emotional costs of social policy for mothers experiencing homelessness.

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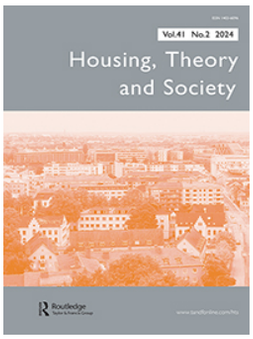

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Hauntology: The Emotional Costs of Social Policy for Mothers Experiencing Homelessness

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ABSTRACT

The article is concerned with the emotional effects of homelessness on women who are mothers. It develops a multi-disciplinary conceptualization of "haunting" to bring understanding to the ongoing grief and trauma associated with losing a home and children. It explores how women's embodied and affective experiences are not just responses to deeply distressing events, but inextricably intertwined with the unfurling of housing and child protection policies, sometimes long after a policy decision (eviction, child removal). Drawing on biographical research with 26 women, the article contributes new insights into both our limited understanding of women's homelessness but also scholarly work that recognizes the diffuse power of social policy and its harms. The article advances a novel understanding of women's lived experience of homelessness by conceptualizing and empirically investigating the emotional effects of policy decisions as hauntings that permeate past, present and anticipated futures.

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Introduction

There is a large body of qualitative research which explores the lived experience of homelessness, with more recent studies recognizing its hitherto overlooked gendered nature (e.g. Hastings and Craig 2023; Reeve 2018; Bimpson, Parr, and Reeve 2022; Reeve and Bimpson 2020; Mayock and Bretherton 2016; Mayock, Sheridan, and Parker 2015; Bretherton and Mayock 2021). While this important work draws attention to different aspects of women's homelessness, few studies foreground the affective, emotional and the embodied. This article centres these dimensions of women's experiences, bringing the "feeling-states" of homelessness to the fore (Robinson 2011). It seeks however to connect these affective experiences with governance processes, with the effects of policy.

The article draws on biographic fieldwork with a group of 26 women who were negotiating homelessness as mothers. Some had children living with them, but the children of most of the women had been taken into care or were living elsewhere through informal kinship care arrangements. The women's stories, like those of many people who experience homelessness, were complex, harrowing and marked by

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trauma (Stonehouse, Threlkeld, and Theobald 2021; Fitzpatrick, Bramley, and Johnsen 2013; Robinson 2005, 2011), not least from significant physical and emotional violence and abuse in their former homes. Poverty was also a defining feature of the women's lives. However, in addition to and intensifying that trauma was a sense of fury at the systemic injustices the women had endured. This is the emotional costs of the policies that played out in the women's lives, even long "after" a particular policy decision and intervention had ostensibly concluded.

The article foregrounds the "feeling-states" of women's homelessness through the concept of "haunting", a concept that helps us to understand and articulate connections between the past and the present day: things that are "present in their absence or absent in their presence" (Degen and Hetherington 2001, p. 1). The article develops an original conceptualization of "haunting" that draws interdisciplinary inspiration from Avery Gordon's (2008) seminal sociological text Ghostly Matters as well as the anthropological work of Tess Lea (2020) on Wild Policy. It also builds on and integrates the work of housing, social work and migration scholars (Robinson 2011; Perez Murcia 2019; Morriss 2018; McCarthy 2018; Mountz 2017; Rova, Burrell, and Cohen 2020; O'Reilly 2018) who have applied the concept and the closely related terms "unheimlich" and "liminality", to homelessness and child removal – two interconnected experiences at the heart of the stories of the women who participated in the research. Together these conceptual influences build a sociopolitical–psychological framework that connects women's affective and emotional responses to individual trauma with structural injustice, and in particular, the effects of social policies and practices past, present, and future.

The article begins with a discussion of the key literatures and ideas that form the analytical framework for the research. The methodological approach is then presented in section two, before a discussion of the research findings, where theory and data are brought together. This third part of the article is split into two core sections. Firstly, it explores how women's memories of past homes and their absent children haunt them – an always absent-presence. It foregrounds however the ways in which these spectres of previous lives are inextricably linked to "past" policies which the women carry with them. Secondly, the women's liminal existence within temporary homelessness accommodation is explored, where the women were haunted therein not only by past but also present policies, and the phantoms of impending policy decisions and imagined futures, over which they have little control. The article concludes by suggesting that the concept of "haunting" allows us to engage with the resonance of policies in the daily lives of women who are homeless, the "seething presence" of (policy) ghosts (Gordon 2008, p. 8). This makes a key theoretical and empirical contribution not only to our understanding of women's homelessness experiences but also to a growing body of literature that recognizes the differential harms of social policy (Lea 2020; Broadhurst and Mason 2017, 2020):

> Haunting thus offers a way of understanding state violence even where the state may appear absent (Mountz 2011, p. 119)

Haunting, Homelessness, and Motherhood

A small number of studies engage directly with the analytic of "haunting" to understand the lived experience of homelessness and child removal, drawing attention to affective conditions that are the result of the presence of things that are not always tangible; an absent-presence.

Catherine Robinson's (2005, 2011) "emotional geography" explores not just how emotions structure experiences of homelessness, but also the ways in which feelings are embodied in particular ways for homeless people, and the connections between emotion, affect and place. In her ethnographic research, Robinson uncovered the centrality of trauma in the histories of young homeless people and the way in which "the ghosts of trauma" haunted their daily lives. These traumatic experiences (often of childhood physical and sexual abuse) had usually taken place within their former homes. These harmful home experiences and "place memories" (Robinson 2011, p. 69) acted as a powerful force in the present, causing, shaping, and perpetuating young people's experiences of homelessness. The remembrance of trauma was lived at the site of the body – through flashbacks, anger, crying, hypervigilance, mental and physical ill-health, self-harm and chronic drug and alcohol use. Within a homelessness context – where trauma support was rarely available – these measures allowed young people to "manage" and repress trauma, and thereby become temporarily disembodied from the terrors of their past homes.

The ghosts of trauma are equally relevant to the experiences of women who have become homeless because of domestic violence perpetrated by male partners – a leading cause of homelessness among women. Henze-Pedersen's (2022) research with homeless mothers gives voice to this affective experience revealing how the memories or ghosts of the violence women experienced prior to homelessness (re)appear and shape their everyday life, thereby blurring the boundaries between a past violent reality and a new, present context.

These notions of haunting draw our attention to the temporal dimension of trauma and a non-linear sense of time whereby past events resonate in the present. The concept of liminality (Turner 1967; Van Genne, 1960) is instructive here, referring to an in-betweenness or threshold between two transitory spaces (neither fully here nor there). Social theorists have employed the concept of liminality in migration studies in ways that have relevance for an understanding of women's homelessness. Like women who are homeless, refugees and asylum seekers exist within "spaces of liminality", housed temporarily (homeless and stateless) within detention facilities, reception centres or hostels where they wait – for days, months or years – with their life "suspended in time" (Mountz 2017, 78). For Rova, Burrell, and Cohen (2020, p. 208), women living in asylum accommodation are "neither fully here (not settled, unknown legal status and onward journey) nor there (they have been forced to leave home)". Here too, the past is always present; past traumas continue to haunt leading, in turn, to more acute trauma (Mountz 2017). In Mountz' work haunting expressed itself through "affective eruptions": "moments when trauma seeks expression, makes itself known" (Mountz 2017, p. 77). Rova, Burrell, and Cohen (2020) describe the ways in the trauma of civil war, grief for children left behind, the impact of treacherous journeys, together with their current "suspended state of disempowerment" make invisible marks on women's bodies – migraines, depression, anxiety, back and joint pain, poor sleep, and stomach disorders.

Women who are homeless are not only haunted by the ghosts of trauma but more nostalgic memories too of happier times. McCarthy (2018) draws attention to the uncanny experiences of haunting with her use of the concept "the unheimlich" to comprehend the inherent complexity of women's home and homelessness experiences. The unheimlich refers to: "a disturbing combination of dread and horror in which 'the homelike' and 'the unhomely' merge" (McCarthy 2018, p. 692). The concept allows for an understanding of how a space can be at once both "home" and "un-home", and how these feelings fluctuate and shift. McCarthy illustrates the ways in which home, or heim, is gradually turned into the unheimlich for one of her research participants who is haunted by her former "ideal" family home, which asserts its presence in her hostel accommodation, stirring up feelings of grief because of the impossibility of return.

Many women who experience homelessness are haunted by homes (that may or may not have been havens) but also by children living elsewhere, and it is often their absent presence that drives and shapes their homelessness journeys:

> Reports of trauma related to the loss of their child(ren) at the point when they were removed to relative or state care permeated the narratives of these women … Anxiety about the absence of their children was an ongoing reality for mothers and the stigma of 'spoilt' motherhood was ever-present. (Mayock, Sheridan, and Parker 2015, p. 889)

There is limited research into the affective and emotional experiences of mothers who have had children removed (Boddy and Wheeler 2020; Morriss 2018; Broadhurst and Mason 2020, 2017, 2013; Povey 2023), and fewer studies primarily concerned with the experiences of child removal among women who are homeless (Bimpson, Reeve, and Parr 2020). Morriss (2018) however describes children living apart from their mothers because of state-ordered court removal as a "ghostly presence" in the lives of women: "there and not there at the same time" (Morriss 2018, p. 821). The mothers who Morriss interviewed existed in a state of what she calls "haunted motherhood", where past, present and an imagined future when their child reaches adulthood become intertwined:

> Being haunted is overwhelming and affective, and almost impossible to put into words. Their children are there and yet not there; they are living and yet out of reach and invisible. (Morriss 2018, p. 826)

Morris also draws attention to the way in which mothers are compelled to remain silent following the loss of their children, either through the shame and stigma that surrounds child removal (Boddy and Wheeler 2020; Broadhurst and Mason 2013) or because they are forcibly silenced through court-ordered reporting restrictions as well as through fear of future children also being taken into care.

Policy Hauntology

The article builds on the literatures above by exploring not only how women are "haunted" by the ghosts of past homes and absent children but by connecting these affective experiences with the ecology of social policy (Lea 2020). Following Gordon (2008), the state of "being haunted" is therefore understood as sociopolitical–psychological one that discloses the harm and social injustices associated with violent past, present and future policies and the marks they leave on women who are homeless.

Through ethnographic work concerned with racial capitalism, slavery and militaristic state violence, Gordon (2008) developed the concept of "haunting" as a language and method for understanding how social violence and abusive systems of power make themselves known, even when they are "supposedly over and done with"; or when their oppressive nature and effects remain ignored and/or denied. The effects of the past are real, felt and sensed yet not always empirically evident; they are "hidden in plain sight" (Lea 2020). In this sense, hauntology brings with it an ontology that is reminiscent of critical realism with its de-prioritization of actualism and presence (Wood 2023). As a process of knowledge production, haunting lays bare harmful social forces. It is a way of knowing that is fundamentally concerned with past injustice left unrecognized and unaddressed but still holding power on the margins or in the shadows (Van Wagenen 2004). It draws attention to the ways in which power operates and the way that injustices present and remembered, manifest in the everyday:

> I used the term haunting to describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future. These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view. (xvi)

The concept of haunting is closely aligned to that of trauma yet is distinctive for producing a "something-to-be-done", a demand for justice. Gordon describes haunting as:

> … that moment—long or short—when things are not in their assigned places, when people meant to be invisible or absent or dead show up without any sign of leaving, when the present seamlessly becoming the future gets jammed up, when cracks in the whole infrastructure of repression are exposed. (Gordon, Hite, and Jara 2020, p. 339)

As the quote above infers, haunting is intrinsically concerned with silenced or marginalized voices that have been left unheard, including those of women. Haunting has a rich history of academic theorization within psychoanalysis (Freud 2003 [1919]) and sociology (Derrida 1999), but in developing her ideas, Gordon also draws insights from literature and in particular the novels of Valenzuela and Morrison whom she considers social theorists within their own right (Radway 2008). The literary figure of the ghost has often been used metphorically describe women's experiences in the world and reclaim their marginalized voices (McCory 2021; Salmonson, 2019):

> Ghosts tell you what happened … those things that society doesn't want to see... My ghosts are angry because they've been ignored... So, most of the time they are women, because women have been silenced, were not able to tell their stories, were not believed … (Enríquez 2019)

Building on Gordon's work, Lea (2020) has developed the notion of "policy hauntology" to explain the impacts of social policy on indigenous people and is one dimension of her wider conceptualization of the ecology of social policy and its inherent "wildness". Lea's policy hauntology draws attention to the blurred and porous boundaries of social policy. It looks for the residues, trace effects and sediments of "ghost policies", their absent-presences:

> … the ways policies past and present are physically incorporated, having (insidiously or noisily) seeped into lives, affecting probable destinies and shaping overall circumstance, if not immutably then certainly as powerful stimulus. Individuals are hindered or facilitated by the ghosts of policy pasts manifesting … past policies adhere to bodies and things, making privilege feel earned and inequality feel natural" (Lea 2020, p. 117)

Like Gordon's understanding of how abusive systems of power impact on people, Lea conceives of policy not as a force that operates smoothly and straightforwardly, thereby having a direct and clear "impact" on people but rather unfurls in a series of "project stutters, misdirects, and meanderings" (Gordon, Hite, and Jara 2020, p. 16). Lea cautions against understanding this as the "unintended consequences" of social policy, however. Echoing the arguments of critical policy theorists, she pushes back against the notion of the "unanticipated", arguing that this hinders more politically engaged discussions of power. Broom et al. (2022) similarly seek to re-centre intentionality arguing that harm and human flourishing are differentially administered through social systems and therefore "instituted by design". This perspective resonates with a wider body of literature concerned with the blurred boundaries of the state and the dispersed nature of state power, redirecting attention to "the nooks and crannies of everyday life where state practices may lurk, away from obvious sites of power" (Shipley Coddington 2011, p. 749–750).

Methodology

The article is based on research with 26 women experiencing homelessness in the midlands and north of England, UK. The research was carried out in 2019, funded by Sheffield Hallam University and approved by the institution's Ethics Review System (ID: ER13862459). Most research participants were living in temporary homelessness accommodation including refuges, hostels and supported housing, and many had previous experiences of homelessness, including rough sleeping. The women were all mothers of between one and six children. Nine were living with at least one child, while 18 were living apart from one or more of their children.

Domestic violence had been the immediate cause of homelessness for most of the women. Several had faced homelessness after escaping violence and in the absence of interventions to remove a violent partner from the family home or the provision of an alternative safe home. In these circumstances, children had sometimes been placed "temporarily" with relatives or foster carers, although separation often became permanent (see "findings" below). For some, domestic violence had led to children being placed into the care of the local authority, prompting the women to leave their abuser, in turn rendering them homeless. In other cases, problems associated with rent arrears, mental health and substance abuse led to or followed child removal, resulting in women being evicted from their homes. These intersecting housing and social care needs meant that women found themselves subject to a raft of complex and often misaligned housing, homelessness, and child protection policies (Reeve and Parr 2023a, b).[1]

Participants were recruited through organizations that provide temporary homelessness accommodation, and women's support services. Each received an information sheet with details about the study shared with them by a member of staff from the recruiting organization. Participants then volunteered to take part in the research, allowing their contact details to be shared with the research team or interviews were arranged on behalf

of the team by a trusted professional. Before interviews began, the study was explained again and written consent to participate was obtained. Informed consent remained an ongoing process however that was closely related to strategies to safeguard the well-being of the women during interview encounters i.e. checking they were happy to continue the interview if they became upset (see further below).

The interviews took a biographical approach, in the sense that they sought to elicit details, memories or feelings about past events to help us understand the women's journeys into and out of homelessness, and how this was related to their identity as mothers. A focus on personal histories allowed participants to prioritize the experiences that they viewed as most important. This helped to avoid any potential for re-traumatization that can occur through the requirement placed on women to re-tell their stories to multiple professionals to secure welfare support (Sharpen 2018). It did not mean that interviews always followed a linear narrative, however. Researchers approached the interviews much like a conversation, largely unstructured and flexible, and with the direction of the conversation being led by the participant (without denying an inevitable power dynamic).

The interviews explored very sensitive topics and researchers remained alert to the emotional needs of the participant. Often, the women became upset as they told their stories. They were advised at the start of each interview that they could stop the interview at any time or move onto a subject that was easier to discuss. Most however wanted to talk about the thing (often their absent child/ren) that caused them pain. The ethicality of allowing research participant distress is not straightforward; trying to eliminate emotional or psychological discomfort is not necessarily desirable or the outcome participants want or need (Kostovicova and Knott 2022). Participants might be driven by an imperative "that they must contribute to knowledge about the situation that resulted in their suffering" (Kostovicova and Knott 2022, p. 62). Researchers made ongoing careful judgements about whether to probe sensitive topics relevant to the research and this was negotiated with participants as the interviews unfolded. They were also equipped with tools to respond to high levels of participant distress such as referral resources.

While it was a priority to protect the women from any mental or emotional harm during the fieldwork, the wellbeing of the researchers was also a key consideration given the distressing nature of the subjects discussed. Emotional support and debriefing were provided within the team, and no more than two interviews were conducted on any one day to avoid emotional over-load. Researchers were also briefed on safeguarding procedures to follow should they suspect past or present harm to the participant or her child/ren. Women were made aware of this requirement to report safeguarding concerns before they consented to taking part in interviews.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed and manually coded. The methodological approach, including the analysis of research data, was aligned with Layder's (1998, 2021) adaptive method. This is a mode of research practice that integrates description, explanation, and theory, to better recognize a complex and multidimensional model of social reality. It advances an approach to research that centres subjective understanding but supplements this with "objective" observations more concerned with the properties of social contexts – "systemic" or structural features. This generates explanatory theory which both "adapts to, or is shaped by, incoming evidence at the same time as the data themselves are filtered through (and adapted to) the extant theoretical materials that are relevant" (Layder 1998, p. 38).

Research Findings

The Presence of the past and the Ghosts of Social Policy

Haunting has been described as a "relentless remembering". The relentless nature of the ghosts of their former lives tormented the women who participated in the research. Echoing the work of Robinson (2011) and McCarthy (2018), the past homes of the women were a potent force in their present. Entangled with their memories of home, the women were haunted too by the ever-present ghosts of their children (Morriss 2018; Mayock, Sheridan, and Parker 2015). This was manifest in an agonizing grief but also a visceral resentment and anger about what had been unjustly "taken" as an effect of brutal social policies.

In the extract below, Marianne juxtaposes her use of the facilities in a Subway sandwich shop for washing, to her former "beautiful home" when she had "everything". "Everything" was a word used by several women to describe their former pre-homelessness lives, with "everything" signifying the typical markers of adulthood, family, and ontological security (Stonehouse, Threlkeld, and Theobald 2021; Dupuis and Thorns 1998):

> I had my own house, I had my car, everything, but due to my relationship breakdown and social services […] I used to go to Subway and use that foamy soap to wash my body down. I had my beautiful house and my little car, take the kids to school. Why, why, why? (Marianne)

> I had everything in life, a good job, family and everything and then just everything fell apart and it just happened at once (Aabida)

Emma spoke of the "normal things" from her previous life – before her children were taken into care and she was evicted from their family home – evoking memories of the everyday and the ordinary (gardening, colouring, watching films). She was plagued by the thoughts of what she was missing out on as her children grew up elsewhere, without her. Emma agonized over the highly symbolic knowledge about her children that she no longer possessed, including her daughter's shoe size. This "crushed" her. The women were not only disconnected from their homes and children, but they were also displaced from their sense of self, including their identities as mothers:

> I was a stay-at-home carer and mum and now they're not there, there's no purpose and there's no reason getting up in the morning, it's really, really difficult … I can't find the words for it (Emma)

These present-absences in the women's lives and their powerlessness to reclaim what had been lost gnawed away at them. Their absent children represented what Boss (2010) calls an "ambiguous" or "uncanny" loss, one not as clearly demarcated as a bereavement, physically absent but always psychologically present. The loss of her children and the chain of events that led to them being taken into care was "all" Corey could think about. This past saturated her present and, echoing McCarthy's (2018) use of unheimlich to describe her research participant's experiences of temporary accommodation, rather than a space of safety and sanctuary, Corey's "home" was a place where she could not find solace; rather, it was a place she hated:

> … all you can think about is everything that's gone wrong, everything you could have changed, and all I think about is my boys and how much I miss them and it's awful. I absolutely hate being at home (Corey)

The women yearned for their lost children and the pain of living without them was almost unbearable, a "lifelong punishment" (Povey 2023). The women described wanting to "give up". Even when their children had been permanently removed from their care, the women could not detach from motherhood and desperately tried to retain some connection with their children:

> I thought if I kill myself, I can watch them grow up, cos I thought I could watch over them, watch them grow up (Karina)

The emotional complexities associated with managing their mothering identities bears similarities to Siverns and Morgan (2021) research with mothers of children in care who they describe as "liminal mothers", at once both holding on and letting go of motherhood. Like those in Morris et al.'s (2018) study too where the past, present and future of motherhood was co-present, the women held on to the possibility of reunification. This gave them hope, yet their lives felt like a painful waiting game:

> It's so easy to give up, and then I think, if I did give up, and then they did come looking for me, I'm not gonna be there, and that's no good for them, so I need to keep going, it's just such a long time to wait … I've only got 15 years left (Corey)

The haunting that the women experienced was not simply an "inconsolable mourning" (Gordon, Hite, and Jara 2020) for their former lives, but contained a visceral anger too. Intensifying their grief and preventing any kind of "healing" (Siverns and Morgan 2021), the women were haunted by a deep sense of injustice which punctured the present. The "emotional aftershocks" (Wooff and Skinns 2018) of child protection and housing policies were enduring, affective and embodied. The women felt that their former lives (their homes, their children) *should* still be theirs; that their lives had been unjustly *taken* from them by a punitive welfare and legal system. Participants felt failed by past policies, even long after a policy intervention in their life had ostensibly run its course e.g. statutory child removal or forced eviction. The "outcome" of policies and legal interventions were not therefore standalone events. Rather, policies resonated within the present, illustrating the way in which policy and their harms "unfurl" and "seep" into everyday life over time (Lea 2020; Broom et al. 2022; Broadhurst and Mason 2017, 2020).

The women used a language of violence to describe being "shot down", "pushed aside", "chucked aside" and "punished" by legal instruments, policies and the welfare professionals who enacted them. Particularly pernicious policy included that which governed the lives of women who had been subjected to domestic violence. These women raged at child protection interventions that implicitly held them responsible for the impact of violence (perpetrated against them) on their children, and which overlooked their housing needs (Bimpson, Reeve, and Parr 2020; Reeve and Bimpson 2020). In such circumstances, they had been forced to flee their homes to avoid the initiation of care proceedings or had no choice but to remain in an unsafe situation through lack of housing assistance, triggering the involvement of children's social care and the eventual removal of their children (Bimpson, Parr, and Reeve 2022; Bimpson, Reeve, and Parr 2020; Reeve and Parr 2023a, b). Marianne summed this up as being "punished twice" – by her former partner and by social services.

> I did everything legally that I was supposed to do as a parent but cos they couldn't protect me, I then had to leave, why? "Cos if not we'll look at taking your kids", "what cos I can't look after them?", "No, because you can't stop him from coming to you" (Nadine)

The women who had children removed through statutory care orders similarly described what Broadhurst and Mason (2017, 2020) identify as the "cumulative and enduring collateral consequences" of that event, in part, due to a complete lack of therapeutic support to help them recover. Child loss brought overwhelming emotional pain that left the women isolated, grieving and with a feeling that they had been literally "left" (by social care services) with "nothing".

> Everything just got took away and then you feel like you've got no-one or nothing (Nicola)

> … social services are shocking, once they've got that kid that's it, they're not bothered, that kid's out of that situation but I got left with all the trauma of losing them … they just took them, and they left me with nothing (Corey)

Despite an urgent need for help, support was absent, and women recalled suicidal thoughts and self-harming behaviours aimed at numbing immense emotional pain, triggering a downward spiral for Karina into drug addiction and what she described as "chaos":

> I had no support or anything like that. The first conversation I had with my ex-partner was 'go get me some crack and smack'. I never took these drugs in my life (Karina)

The participants felt that they were treated unjustly, disempowered by a process they did not understand, and which did not understand them. They felt both stigmatized and misrecognized by the services they encountered which marked them with a spoilt identity, "maternal outcasts" (Broadhurst and Mason 2013) held intentionally responsible for their problems (Bimpson, Parr, and Reeve 2022, Boddy and Wheeler, 2021; Mayock, Sheridan, and Parker 2015). These discursive forces seeped into the women's daily lives, positioning them in a way that conflicted with their understanding of themselves and their circumstances. Although the women often acknowledged their agency within the chain of events that led to homelessness and their children being removed (e.g. Emma had begun drinking heavily when she got into rent arrears and blamed herself to a degree for the eventual loss of her home and children), they did not deem themselves failures, they did not internalize pernicious judgements:

> They think "oh you're homeless you don't give a shit about your kids", we're not like that at all … you've got children, so they kind of look down at you more in the fact that you shouldn't be in that situation cos you've got children, "but you put yourself in that situation, if you're kicked out it's your fault" (Sam)

The women blamed housing and social care services for failing to provide the protection, support and understanding that might have prevented problems becoming crises. They expressed profound anger at the harm inflicted on them through child protection and housing policy, and the loss of further welfare entitlements that followed. This long-lasting distress was not just the profound grief associated with child removal and loss of home, but the differential effects of policies, a "seething presence" (Gordon 2008). The research revealed the ways in which policy harms are not just immediate but also felt long after policies have been "implemented", harms that are sometimes realized later and

often intensify with time (Lea 2020; Broom et al. 2022; Siverns and Morgan 2021). Haunted themselves but also now doing the haunting, the women represented those ghosts who are "meant to be invisible or absent" but who "show up without any sign of leaving" (Gordon 2008, p. 339):

> I've got back in contact with social services, now I'm asking "why weren't you there?". Now I'm not on drugs they can't say 'go away, you're on drugs'. They have to address me (Karina)

The Liminal Present and Spectres of Future Policy

Most of the women were living in temporary homelessness accommodation and were struggling to come to terms with displacement from their former life and an unknown journey towards establishing a new one. Like the nomadic figure of the ghost (Degen and Hetherington 2001), they inhabited these interstitial spaces, stuck at a threshold between an ending (losing a home and their children) and a nebulous new beginning (remaking home and family reunification). This was experienced as both a spatial and temporal liminality (Perez Murcia 2019; Robinson 2011; O'Reilly 2018). By their very definition, liminal spaces bring uncertainty and the women's affective experiences within temporary accommodation were defined by overwhelming feelings of being trapped and powerless in the face of a significant lack of certainty about their futures.

While nearly all the women in our research had a physical place to live and therefore some minimal level of material security, they did not "feel" security (Chamberlain and Johnson 2018; Easthope 2004; Perez Murcia 2019). The women felt ill at ease within homelessness accommodation not only because such places are often very poorly maintained, overcrowded, unpredictable and stressful (Watts and Blenkinso, 2022), but because of an inherent spatial liminality: "the spaces themselves a daily reminder of an in-between existence" (O'Reilly, 827). This spatial liminality is conceived of as "part of the architecture of control" (O'Reilly, 826) into which homeless women are placed by homelessness policy regimes and institutional structures (Broom et al, 2023). Liminality was not just an *affect* or feeling but an *effect* of policy.

Temporary accommodation brought with it a rule-bound existence (Watts and Blenkinso, 2022), which placed numerous restrictions on women's ability to exert control over their environment. Women expressed feelings of infantilisation due to a lack of agency over living arrangements and daily routines, such as not being allowed to make meals at certain times of the day, requirements to be in the accommodation at certain times, and not being allowed visitors (Bimpson, Parr, and Reeve 2022; Watts and Blenkinso, 2022). This was akin to a haunting, a feeling that they were under surveillance and being watched (Bennett 2011), feelings that were only intensified as they played out in the shadow of the women's lost homes and motherhood identities (McCarthy 2018). These institutional policies worked to generate and reinforce a sense of being in-between, an emotional and existential homelessness (Perez Murcia 2019):

> You don't even feel like it's your own house, you can't even have pictures of your kids up on walls, you can't have nothing like that, you can't do owt, it don't feel like a home, does it? (Sam)

Iram rejected any encouragement to make her hostel room more "homely", feeling a constant sense of lack, perceiving the hostel as a necessarily deficient space where you "end up" against your will, antipathetic to a space for recovery from the trauma she had experienced: "It's just not somewhere you can be ok and settle". Within this context, it was extremely difficult for women to retain a sense of identity, and contributed to the perception of professional misrecognized by hostel staff:

> It's horrible, cos like, I'm 31 and I feel like I'm a child getting told what I can and can't do, I'm not even in control of my own life (Sam)

Invoking a sense of the unheimlich (both home and un-home) (McCarthy 2018), participants also articulated an inherent ambivalence about their experience of this spatial liminality. While Alana appreciated the support available in her women-only hostel, the accommodation felt institutional, a mere "building" only "appropriate for staying"; a place to sleep temporarily, rather than "home". Her small bedroom – the only part of the building that was her private space – felt like a "prison cell" and she found the communal living arrangements a challenge for her mental health. Similarly, despite offering some material security – "better than nothing" – for Aabida her hostel was a space that lacked familiarity, making her feel uneasy and paranoid (like a haunted home) with its unsettling atmosphere that put her on heightened alert and was a daily reminder of her in-between existence where she was no longer in control of her own life, an ontological insecurity (O'Reilly 2018; Stonehouse, Threlkeld, and Theobald 2021):

> I came in and was a bit paranoid, it was scary … even though you've got so many people around you and you've got a support centre there with the staff, it's not home and you feel scared. I've got a single small room and it is cramped but it's ideal, you can't knock it, coming from the situation and having something you can't really complain, it's better than nothing, better than being on the streets (Aabida)

The women described this liminal state of disempowerment as being "stuck," "trapped," "in prison" and "limbo", an emotional state that for Nadine was "soul destroying" and which "petrified" Aabida:

> … we're in a prison, we didn't do anything wrong but we're the one that's trapped, we're stopped from getting on with our life. How much more do we need to lose (Nadine)

Homelessness accommodation was also underpinned by a temporal ambiguity (O'Reilly 2018). The women had little knowledge of how long they would be without a permanent home or where they might go next. This precariousness was a result of the uncertainties around how housing and children's social care policies would play out. A key policy that impacted on those women in the research who had children in temporary care arrangements was that associated with homelessness legalization and housing allocation. This included local authority assessments of whether the women were deemed "intentionally homeless" and interpretations of parental status. After children are temporarily placed in care, women are often considered to no longer have dependent children living with them, and, as a result, housing entitlements fall away. This might mean the allocation of a smaller property, without the space for children to stay or be returned (Reeve and Parr 2023b; Broadhurst and Mason 2020, 2017). Many women were cognizant of these legislative challenges and contradictions

within the system that would determine their futures. It was not therefore just past policy failures and present institutional restrictions but also the effects of future policy decisions that haunted the women:

> … one of the stipulations of maybe getting my children back is that I'd have a three-bedroom house but being here as a single person you only got offered a one-bedroom flat, so it leaves me in a position where 'how am I supposed to do that?' (Aaliah)

Without the social capital to effect the required changes in their circumstance (e.g. having money for a deposit and rent on a suitably sized private rented property), the immense frustration and bewilderment felt by the women was compelling. In their research, Mayock, Sheridan, and Parker (2015) identified a pervasive sense of powerlessness among mothers who are homeless, and this was evident in our research too. Despite their best efforts to meet the requirements of children's social care, the women felt powerless and endured an agonizing wait for their lives to move on. They existed in what Rova, Burrell, and Cohen (2020) call a "suspended state of disempowerment" with no control over their futures:

> But the council, the government system, it's all so wrong, it's all so, so wrong. I pay my taxes, I pay my rent, what more do they want? I don't know what else do I do. What do I do? I'm sticking by the rules. What do I do? (Marianne)

The women who had children in temporary foster or kinship care explained how policy effects reverberated through their family network with their children facing the same uncertainty about their future. The women's inability to provide answers about when they would be reunited further undermined their motherhood identity. This fed a fear about what prolonged separation would do to the bond the women had with their child(ren).

> She doesn't want to live with them anyway, she wants to come home, she's constantly telling me 'when can I come home with you?' and I can't answer it (Maggie)

This "perpetual state of uncertainty" (O'Reilly 2018) took a toll and was inflicted invisibly onto the women's bodies through "stress", "exhaustion", "depression" and "anxiety". Rest and sleep did not come easy for the women. Emma was not sure she would "make it":

> I've struggled to sleep since the day I come (Tracey)

> I'm just constantly stressed all the time … (Carrie)

> I feel anxious, I feel depressed, I don't feel like me (Hannah)

Keeping going was a deeply affective experience, what Emma described as "a physical try"; some days Aliah was unable to get out of bed. As Broom et al. (2022) suggest, the violence that social policies do is deteriorative and slow. The institutional policies and wider system of governing that the women found themselves embroiled within ate away at their mental, physical and emotional health:

> I have to tell myself every day that this ain't forever, but right now there's still a long, dark tunnel and there's no light in view … I have that family and there is something out there for me but there's many doors closed (Emma)

The women were trapped in a liminal state between two worlds haunted by the ghosts of their former lives and past policies but also by possible *future* lives defined by "security" and "safety"; the women desperately willed for a better future:

> I just want a flat, be settled and not have to move again. Where I go next time, I want to stay there for life, I want me son to come home, I want to have me grandkids over, I want to be a normal person (Sandra)

> … a forever house … I hope it's just a nice, homely home where we can make loads of happy memories (Charlie)

Conclusion

"Haunting" is a language, method and framework for understanding how abusive systems of power make themselves known (Gordon 2008). By applying the concept to the "feeling-states" (Robinson 2011) of mothers experiencing homelessness, this article has articulated how women's daily lives were permeated by the harrowing absent-presence of children no longer in their care, former family homes, and imagined futures. It also reveals how the women's anguish and hopelessness was inextricably linked with the unwinding of housing and child protection policies across their lives. The women's affective stories demonstrate the ways in which past policies (e.g. eviction from their home, the removal of children) remained effective in the present and how policies not yet fully played out (social housing allocation and family reunification plans) were already wielding power, with devasting consequences. Given the comparable housing and support responses (and adverse consequences) to women experiencing homelessness in other jurisdictions and countries (e.g. Bretherton and Mayock 2021; Valentine et al. 2020), it is likely that these findings have relevance beyond the English legislative and policy context considered here.

The research presented contributes to the efforts of housing scholars to give voice to and understand women's homelessness experiences, as well as researchers working within a critical social policy tradition who are drawing attention to the temporal and diffuse effects of policy and its harms (Lea 2020). Notwithstanding the value of hauntology as an explanatory framework, it cannot do all the work in explaining how past (and future) policies shape the present (Wood 2023). To further develop hauntology as a framework for understanding the effects of specific policies on women who are homeless, supplementary theories are needed. As indicated here, the concepts of stigma and misrecognition might be particularly helpful for explaining the power and ills of housing and children's social care policies.

The article has implications beyond the academic and speaks to policy communities as well. It frames the women who took part in the research not just as being haunted but as the hitherto silenced ghosts: "the forgotten, overlooked, neglected, rubbished coming back to demand recognition" (Degen and Hetherington 2001). It asks that we listen to their "stories", with their destabilizing effects and calls for justice (Morriss 2018; Gordon 2008). In response, housing and social care professionals must recognize that policy (and associated duties, decisions, systems, and practices) can (and often do) cause harm and have far-reaching consequences for mothers experiencing homelessness. It is vital therefore that work is done to ameliorate the harsher effects of the policies that govern these women.

There are specific policy recommendations that could be implemented relatively quickly that would support this aim. This includes establishing a mandated requirement to provide women with support following child removal, as advocated by Broadhurst and Mason (2020). It is also crucial too that housing officers are better trained and work in closer collaboration with children's social care to actively enquire about non-resident children when "single" women (those without dependent children living with them) present as homeless. Likewise, a full assessment of a family's housing needs should form a core component of decisions to instigate child protection measures. This is particularly relevant where domestic violence is a trigger, as provision of alternative safe housing for mother and child(ren) might prevent the need for child removal as well as mitigate against subsequent homelessness (Reeve and Parr 2023b; Bimpson, Reeve, and Parr 2020).

These specific changes must be accompanied by a shift within professional cultures from viewing women who experience homelessness through a "problem-saturated" lens that stigmatizes and misrecognizes them (Reeve and Parr 2023a; Bimpson, Parr, and Reeve 2022; Bimpson, Reeve, and Parr 2020; Boddy and Wheeler 2020). Morris et al. (2018) suggest that to "do no harm" organizations need to nurture cultures that better-support ethical and humane relationship-based practice. Ensuring that good supervision and reflective practice is embedded within welfare services and systems is central to this. It also entails embedding legal literacy so that practitioners act in accordance with their duties and powers to prevent homelessness and identify safeguarding concerns, and ensures that "doing the right thing" is a fundamental consideration within chains of decision-making (Reeve and Parr 2023b; Bretherton, Hunter, and Johnsen 2013). As Lea (2020) suggests "good" policy is possible.

Note

1. For an overview of the legislative, policy and practice frameworks that mothers who are homeless are required to negotiate in England see Reeve and Parr (2023a, b).

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