

Children and homelessness

Information sheet



Introduction

Homeless children are one of the most marginalised groups of children in Ireland. Children become homeless when a number of different life events merge but the overall root cause is poverty.

Children experience 'hidden' and 'visible' homelessness. Children can experience 'hidden' homelessness either with or without their parents where they are living in temporary informal accommodation situations, for example, B&B accommodation or sleeping on a relative's couch.

Children already on the streets face a litany of risks include exposure to drug and alcohol abuse, violence, crime, prostitution, assault and abuse.

In 1999 there were 774 homeless children, although this is an underestimate given the difficulty in quantifying the number of 'hidden' homeless children. According to the latest figures from 2004, there were 495 homeless children which show a strong downward trend in the figures. These figures demonstrate that coordinated strategies to address child and youth homelessness, together with adequate resourcing of those strategies, can and do make a difference in taking children off the streets.

However, while progress has been made, there are still vital links that are missing. The reality for a newly homeless child or young person is that to be admitted to a place of refuge for the night they have to go through a lengthy process. For instance, they have to wait until after 8pm, they are then expected to go to a Garda station for the Gardai to make contact with the out-of-hours social work teams to carry out a needs assessment on the child. Such a process is not child friendly to an already vulnerable child or young person.

Recommendations

- Establish a 'drop-in' centre type service in urban areas to provide initial advice and support for these vulnerable children.
- Introduce a nationwide 24/7 social work service to enable children and young people access help immediately.
- Resource the new action programme on youth homelessness as promised in the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion

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Using the information currently available the following picture emerges:

- The COPINE project found in 2003 up to 60,000 individual child victims when studying online newsgroups. Worryingly, these children were identified as being younger in age than previous years, with the abuse being more serious and the venue for abuse usually taking place in a domestic setting
- There are up to 300 separated children who have gone missing from State care in Ireland in the past five years and an unknown portion of these children are feared to have been trafficked into the Irish sex industry. Barnardos 2007 Childhood Poll found that 59% of children surveyed used the internet on a weekly basis. Also 52% of them go onto social networking sites including Bebo and Myspace at least once a week. Both the majority of parents and children either did not know or incorrectly presumed that these sites were responsible for their content.

Given the large scale internet usage among children and young people, their potential exposure to exploitation is heightened yet many are unaware of this. Parents can feel inadequate in monitoring their child's internet usage as they can have less computer skills than their children. Parents also are found to underestimate their child's negative experiences of the internet.

- One third of 9-19 year-olds in a UK study who go online at least once a week report having received unwanted sexual (31%) or nasty comments (33%) via email, chat, instant message or text message. But their parents substantially underestimate their children's negative experiences – only 7% of parents think their child has received sexual comments and 4% think that their child has been bullied online
- 46% of 9-19 year olds who go online at least once a week say that they have given out some personal information on the internet but only 5% of parents think their child has given out such information.

In Ireland, one in ten children (aged 9 to 16 years) who arranged to meet someone they first met on the internet experienced physical threats and abuse and in all these cases the person who had introduced themselves online as a child turned out to be an adult. The study also found that almost 30% of children had encountered someone online who asked for information such as their photo, phone number or address, representing an increase of 19% on a similar study two years ago.

Some educational materials for both children and adults have been issued by the Department of Education including www.webwise.ie and www.watchmyspace.ie. Also plans for the establishment of an Office for Internet Safety and an Internet Safety Advisory Council were unveiled in September 2007, with responsibility for all aspects of internet safety in the interest of protecting users from potential exploitation, including children.

Recommendations

- The introduction of a criminal offence for grooming a child for sexual abuse as recommended by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Child Protection in November 2006. This offence would cover acts preparatory to or intended to facilitate the sexual abuse of a child at a later date and would include, for example, arranging to meet a child for that purpose, or showing pornographic material to a child.
- Extensive child friendly and parent friendly educational materials to be available in all youth settings warning children and young people of the dangers and risks of online sexual exploitation
- Introduction of common police and government protocols in the area of online sexual exploitation to increase communication and effective policing between jurisdictions to help curb the extent of online child sexual abuse.

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