

January 2009

## **Children and Homelessness**

All children deserve to have a place they can call home. Somewhere they feel safe, warm and protected. 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 both 'hidden' and 'visible' homelessness. Children can experience 'hidden' homelessness either with or without their parents where they are living in temporary informal accommodation situations, such as, B&B accommodation or sleeping on a relative's couch. Children living on the streets face a litany of risks include exposure to drug and alcohol abuse, violence, crime, prostitution, assault and abuse.

### **Extent and Experience of Homelessness**

According to *Counted In*, covering the 4 Dublin local authorities, 576 child dependents live in households that are presently homeless<sup>1</sup>. In addition the most recent statistics available showed that 449 children were alone and homeless as of the end of 2006. Thus at least 1,000 children are homeless in Ireland.

Some children, especially those who are living in the HSE care system are particularly vulnerable to experiencing homelessness when they turn 18 and have to leave that accommodation. There are no guaranteed structured after care services offered to them. Focus Ireland estimates that as many as two-thirds of young people leaving the care of the State experience homelessness within two years<sup>2</sup>.

During the implementation of the Youth Homeless Strategy 2001 some progress was made as initiatives were resourced and well coordinated. Unfortunately, there are still vital links 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, when they are then expected to go to a Garda station for the Gardaí to make contact with the out-of-hours social work teams to carry out a needs assessment on the child<sup>3</sup>. Such a process is not child friendly to an already vulnerable child or young person.


This situation is now being compounded by the fact that the HSE has recently closed two residential centres based in Dublin city centre which catered for 20 homeless boys and girls aged between 12 and 18 years of age. These centres provided hostel-type beds for up to three months until more suitable accommodation could be found. It is intended to replace these centres with an 8 bed unit in Portrane, Co.Dublin. While it is useful to have services that are based outside the city to cater for those vulnerable young people in the suburbs, this unit is already being criticised for

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<sup>1</sup> Homeless Agency (2008) *Counted In*

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Irish Times 13<sup>th</sup> January 2009

<sup>3</sup> Office of the Minister for Children and Children's Research Centre *Understanding Youth Homelessness in Dublin City* (2006)



catering for fewer young people and mixing younger and older teenagers together, which is a departure from current policy. It is not good practice to have a 12 year old mixing with a 18 year old who could be taking drugs or engaged in criminal activity.

For adults who experience homelessness it is intended that the response from services would be towards a longer term solution through the private rented sector rather than relying on emergency hostel beds as outlined in *The Way Home: A Strategy to Address Adult Homelessness in Ireland 2008-2013*. However, a clear implementation plan with dedicated funding and resource allocations for this strategy has yet to be determined thereby already limiting its full implementation and positive outcomes for individuals.

## **Social Housing**

The number of children experiencing homelessness could potentially increase: 59,000 households are already waiting for social housing and the Government is significantly behind in achieving its own targets of social housing output.

Towards 2016 outlines commitments to provide 27,000 new social units by 2009, including Local Authority and Voluntary sector housing and new units provided through the Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS). The Agreement also commits Government to providing 17,000 affordable units during the same period. However, based on current output, Government will be 25,000 units or over 40% short of its social and affordable housing target by the end of 2009 (10,000 short on affordable targets and 15,000 short on social targets)<sup>4</sup>.

These shortfalls will result in families living in private rented premises which may be substandard or alternatively remaining in informal accommodation such as B&B's which is inappropriate for children given the lack of space and the transitory resident population. Also the stagnation of rejuvenation projects in St. Michael's Estate, Inchicore, Dublin, amongst others, through the withdrawal of the Public Private Partnership initiatives can result in these families continuing to live in substandard accommodation.

## **Recommendations**

- Proactively increase the number of social housing units across the country.
- Remove all children and families from B&B accommodation.
- Ring-fence funding for the establishment of a 24hr nationwide social work service as a matter of urgency.
- Improve provision of aftercare services for young people leaving the care system as frequently those leaving care experience homelessness.
- Conduct a review of the Youth Homelessness Strategy as promised in Towards 2016.
- Establish a 'drop-in' centre type service and 'helpline' service in urban areas to provide initial advice and support including accessing emergency accommodation for these vulnerable children.
- Give clear budget and timelines for implementation of The Way Home strategy.

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<sup>4</sup> Dept of Environment, Health and Local Government (2008) Quarterly Housing Statistics

