

The Impact of Homelessness on Children

- a Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children and Youth Affairs

May 2019



Executive Summary

Threshold is a national housing charity, with regional advice centres in Dublin, Cork and Galway, that provides frontline advice and support services to people with housing problems across of Ireland.

Despite the recording and reporting of homeless figures, it is unknown how many adults and children are actually experiencing homelessness in Ireland and for what duration. Due to the lack of adequate, affordable housing households are spending longer in homelessness which compounds the trauma of the experience.

Children who have experienced homelessness are more likely to have health problems, go hungry, experience developmental delays and have higher rates of depression, anxiety and behaviour disorders than other children¹.

Excessive noise, the lack of space, laundry, bathroom and cooking facilities, the absence of play, no visitor rules, shame, displacement and daily uncertainty all have a negative and long lasting impact on children. The long lasting effects of such trauma and displacement can put the child at increased risk of poverty, social exclusion and adult homelessness long after they have moved out of homeless services.

Approximately half of families who registered as homeless in 2018 did so on foot of a notices of termination (NOT) from the private rented sector (PRS). Notices were issued on grounds of sale, family use or renovation; all of which are valid and legitimate grounds for a landlord to terminate a tenancy.

Threshold is the expert organisation in preventing homelessness from the PRS. Threshold's interventions are primary and secondary in nature with the purpose of preventing homelessness before it occurs in the first instance. An increase in such prevention measures is necessary to ensure further children do not have to experience homelessness. We recommend also an Interim Tenancy Sustainment Protocol (ITSP) for the Housing Assistance Payment

(HAP) (details on pg 10) and an increase in the HAP caps. There is a need for increased security of tenure in the PRS as well as increased social housing build.

¹ Homeless Families and Children, (1996) E.M. Lewit, L. Schuurmann Baker, The Future of Children Vol. ^, No.2, pp146-158, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1602424> (accessed 28/05/19)

1. Introduction

Threshold is a national housing charity, with regional advice centres in Dublin, Cork and Galway, that provides frontline advice and support services to people with housing problems across of Ireland. Last year Threshold's housing advisors took over 76,000 calls and carried out almost 68,000 actions on behalf of tenants. The calls come principally from tenants living in the private rented sector (PRS) but also from social housing tenants and from households in owner occupation. Through our advice and advocacy work we seek to prevent homelessness from occurring. Threshold is also engaged in research and policy work, drawing on the experiences of our clients to contribute to meaningful change at national level.

This submission to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs sets out the scale and duration of homelessness, the impact of homelessness on children's physical, mental, educational and social needs, the causes of family homelessness, the work Threshold carries out to prevent homelessness and recommendations for the prevention of homelessness.

2. Context

With a focus on the ever increasing numbers of adults and children in homelessness we risk losing sight of the fact that the 3,794 children² most recently recorded as experiencing homeless are individual children living in extremely challenging circumstances and that the trauma of that experience continues to impact them when they leave homelessness. The initial loss of home, the experience of emergency accommodation and moving from one accommodation to another impact negatively on a child's physical and mental well-being, their education, their social development and future outcomes. This is all further compounded by the duration of the family's time in emergency accommodation. Families are at risk of spending a longer time in emergency accommodation as housing options lessen.

² <https://www.housing.gov.ie/homeless-report-april-2019> (accessed 30/05/19)

Drawing on the Local Authority Regional Performance reports it is possible to get a sense of the depth and breadth of homelessness experienced by children.

The reports show that, in 2018, up to 70% of all persons residing in emergency accommodation did so for longer than 6 months³ ⁴. Those who have resided in emergency accommodation for 6 months or more are considered to be experiencing long-term homelessness.

The reports do not record the “hidden homeless”; those who are sleeping on floors and couches with friends and family. Worryingly a substantial number of exits from homelessness in 2018 were to family and friends⁵. Those who exited to family and friends are no longer counted in the homeless figures. While they are counted in the exits they may well be without a home or secure place to live. There are also an unknown number of individuals and families living in insecure housing situations⁶ who may never come to the attention of the local authority. As a result of recording in this manner the number of children experiencing homelessness and the duration for which they experience it is likely underreported.

3. Impact of Homelessness on Children

Children who have experienced homelessness are more likely to have health problems, go hungry, experience developmental delays and have higher rates of depression, anxiety and behaviour disorders than other children⁷.

a) Mental Well-being and Social Needs

Children living in homeless accommodation can experience frequent moves from one accommodation to another. This further compounds the trauma they have experienced

³ Various Local Authority Regional Performance Reports

<https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/homelessness/other/homelessness-data>

⁴ The reports do not differentiate between a single person's and a family's length of time in emergency accommodation.

⁵ Various Local Authority Regional Performance Reports

<https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/homelessness/other/homelessness-data>

⁶ As per the ETHOS typology of homelessness <https://www.feantsa.org/download/fea-002-18-update-ethos-light-0032417441788687419154.pdf> (accessed 29/05/19)

⁷ Homeless Families and Children, (1996) E.M. Lewit, L. Schuurmann Baker, The Future of Children Vol. ^, No.2, pp146-158, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1602424> (accessed 28/05/19)

from the initial loss of their home. This loss of home and frequent moves results in feelings of displacement which can manifest as poor emotional well-being or challenging behaviour.⁸ There are scenarios in which the family will not know where they will be moving to or if they will have somewhere to go on a night by night basis. They must sit with that uncertainty until they arrive at their destination. When they arrive in a new emergency placement they do not know what to expect: what are the rules of this new place?; what are the expectations?; how will I get to school in the morning?; will I get to school in the morning?; will there be breakfast?; will there be noise during the night?; will I have my own bathroom?; are the staff nice?; how long will we be staying here?; will Mammy cry?; and will I be safe?

As a result of moves such as this and living in small cramped spaces, children struggle to keep track of their possessions for example a favourite toy, schoolbooks, homework or uniform. Limited access to laundry facilities can also mean children's clothes cannot be washed on a regularly basis. They may also have limited access to shower and toilet facilities risking a deterioration in hygiene or the development of gastric issues. This results in children arriving to school in unclean clothes, possibly unwashed, uncomfortable, self conscious and dishevelled.⁹ Being without a home is in itself an alienating experience, arriving to school in a dirty uniform or without a school bag or no homework deepens this sense of alienation.

Children living in emergency accommodation struggle to maintain friendships and relationships. This is a result of strict visitor policies whereby they cannot have friends to visit or stay, or their emergency accommodation is far away from their friends and school, or children withdraw from friends as they are embarrassed by their situation. In a report published by the Ombudsman for Children Office this year, children and young people consistently expressed embarrassment and shame about living in homeless accommodation. "These expressions of shame and failure underscore the very real

⁸ Impacts of Homelessness on Children – research with teachers
https://england.shelter.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/1474652/2017_12_20_Homelessness_and_School_Children.pdf (accessed 28/05/19)

⁹ Impacts of Homelessness on Children – research with teachers
https://england.shelter.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/1474652/2017_12_20_Homelessness_and_School_Children.pdf (accessed 28/05/19)

corrosive impact that homelessness can have on people’s sense of their own dignity and worth.”¹⁰ Children also have limited to no space to play when residing in emergency accommodation. Play is the pure expression of innocent, unencumbered childhood and a basic right of all children.

There can be excessive noise in the emergency accommodation, causing children fear and anxiety and disrupting sleeping routines. Increased tension among stressed families living in close proximity to each other can result in raised voices and arguments, even physical altercations. In such scenarios it is difficult for parents to shelter their children from witnessing or hearing such disruptive behaviour.¹¹

b) Physical Well-Being

Children who experienced homelessness have a 25% greater risk of poor health and have higher mortality rates compared to those with stable childhood homes. Families experiencing homelessness have little autonomy over their food choices and must rely on expensive, convenience, pre-packaged food. A lack of food storage facilities means restricted access to fresh fruit, vegetables and dairy products. Long commutes to and from school, with limited or no cooking/dining facilities means breakfast is missed and dinner is often from a take away eaten on the bed. Children experience hunger and nutritional deficits. Families living in emergency accommodation reported increased health issues, excessive weight gain and constipation.¹²

Parents in emergency accommodation have reported the easy transfer of illness and infection as a result of cramped conditions in emergency accommodation. The lack of nutritional food and the fatigue caused by lack of sleep can result in increased instances of illness. Parents also reported difficulty in accessing health care for their children as a result of their change in address.¹³

¹⁰ No Place Like Home <https://www.oco.ie/app/uploads/2019/04/No-Place-Like-Home.pdf> (Accessed 28/05/19)

¹¹ No Place Like Home <https://www.oco.ie/app/uploads/2019/04/No-Place-Like-Home.pdf> (Accessed 28/05/19)

¹² Food Access and Nutritional health among Families in Emergency Accommodation, <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Share-and-Hennessy-2017-Food-Access-Report-%E2%80%933-Main-Report-FINAL.pdf> (accessed 28/05/19)

¹³ No Place Like Home <https://www.oco.ie/app/uploads/2019/04/No-Place-Like-Home.pdf> (Accessed 28/05/19)

In January 2019, it was reported that 842 children who attended the Temple St Hospital were discharged to homelessness, an increase of 29% on the 2017 figure. The majority of these children (85%) presented with abdominal pain, high temperatures, chest infections, asthma, seizures and vomiting. Alarming 23% presented with trauma including hand and arm injuries, head lacerations, burns and self-harm. Staff of the hospital reported that the majority of the complaints are a result of living in unsuitable and cramped temporary accommodation and such injuries are unlikely to occur in a family home.¹⁴

c) Education

Children's education performance and attainment can suffer as a result of experiencing homelessness. Their education can be hampered by; a long commute to school or increased absences as they may not be placed in emergency accommodation nearby or may often have to move; no space to do homework; excessive noise disrupting study time; high levels of anxiety; hunger; lack of nutrition; lack of sleep; inability to concentrate; missed days; and falling behind on school work, unable to "catch up".^{15 16} This experience increases the likelihood of early disengagement from education which results in reduced employment opportunities, social exclusion and greater risk of poverty in adulthood¹⁷. These factors can lead to adult homelessness and a cycle of intergenerational homelessness.

4. Causes of Family Homelessness

¹⁴ Children's Health Ireland, <https://www.cuh.ie/2019/01/842-children-who-attended-temple-streets-ed-in-2018-were-discharged-with-no-fixed-home-address-29-increase-on-2017-figure/> (Accessed 28/05/19)

¹⁵ Home Works: a study on the educational needs of children experiencing homelessness and living in emergency accommodation, https://www.childrensrights.ie/sites/default/files/submissions_reports/files/Home%20Works%20Study%20on%20the%20Educational%20Needs%20of%20Children%20Experiencing%20Homelessness%20-%20Full%20Report.pdf (accessed 28/05/19)

¹⁶ Impacts of Homelessness on Children – research with teachers https://england.shelter.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/1474652/2017_12_20_Homelessness_and_School_Children.pdf (accessed 28/05/19)

¹⁷ Home Works: a study on the educational needs of children experiencing homelessness and living in emergency accommodation, https://www.childrensrights.ie/sites/default/files/submissions_reports/files/Home%20Works%20Study%20on%20the%20Educational%20Needs%20of%20Children%20Experiencing%20Homelessness%20-%20Full%20Report.pdf (accessed 28/05/19)

In 2018, over 1,400 of the families who sought our assistance in 2018 were at risk of homelessness on foot of receiving a notice of termination (NOT) from their landlord. NOTs were issued on grounds of sale in 45% of cases, on grounds that the landlord or a family member was moving in 16% of cases and on grounds of renovation in 9% of cases.

Research from the Dublin Region Homeless Executive shows that approximately half of families who registered as homeless in 2018 did so on foot of a NOT from the PRS. The breakdown of reasons are similar to those seen by Threshold advisors; the majority were for the purposes of sale, family use or renovation^{18 19}. Approximately 40% registered as homeless was due to family circumstance, for example family breakdown or overcrowding. It is possible that a proportion of these families had previously lost their home in the PRS, resided with family and friends for a time before registering as homeless.

Under the Residential Tenancies Act 2004, a tenancy can be ended if the landlord intends to:

- Sell the home
- Substantially refurbish or renovate the home
- Change the use of the dwelling

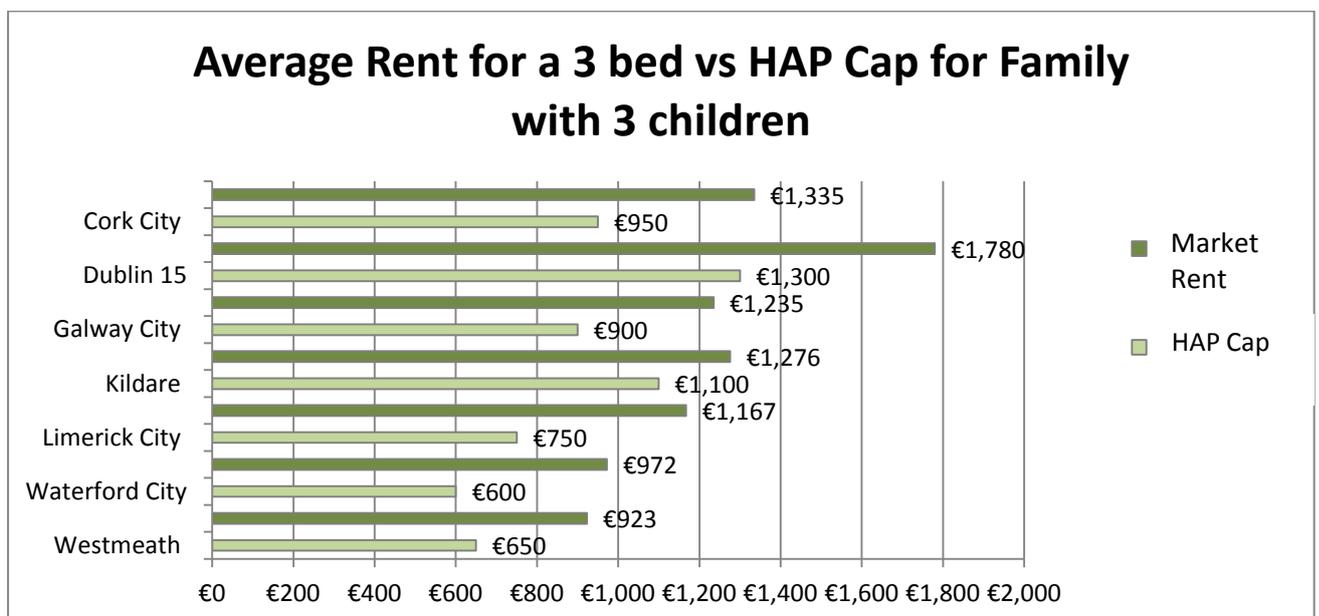
OR

- If the landlord or a family member requires the home for their own use
- If the home is no longer suited to the tenant's needs
- For no reason if the Part 4 tenancy is coming to an end of its duration (on grounds of 34(b))

¹⁸Reported Reasons for Family Homelessness in the Dublin Region: January to June 2018
<https://www.homelessdublin.ie/content/files/Reported-reasons-for-family-homelessness-in-the-Dublin-Region-January-to-June-2018.pdf> (accessed 27/05/19)

¹⁹ Reported Reasons for Family Homelessness in the Dublin Region: July to December 2018
<https://www.homelessdublin.ie/content/files/Reported-reasons-for-family-homelessnessin-the-Dublin-Region-July-to-December-2018.pdf> (accessed 27/05/19)

In instances such as these it is difficult for a tenant to challenge a notice and they must set about searching for a new home in the rental sector. This is becoming increasingly difficult as there are less and less homes available to rent. It was reported in the Quarter 1 2019 Daft Rental Report that on the 1st of May 2019 there were only 2,700 properties to rent on daft.ie nationwide; the lowest number on record²⁰. This number reduces even further for those families reliant on HAP to secure a home in the private rental sector (PRS) as HAP caps fall far short of market rents. The rise in and the duration of homelessness can be linked to the lack of social and affordable housing, as well as, the reduced amount and affordability of properties to rent in the PRS²¹.



Earlier this year we conducted a survey²² among our clients who are receiving HAP or searching for a property to rent with HAP. Almost half were paying a “top-up” to their landlord. This is an additional sum of money paid by the tenant directly to the landlord on top of the rent paid by HAP. These “top-ups” place families in significant financial distress. Many of those paying a top up cited they had difficulties paying utility bills, buying

²⁰ <https://www.daft.ie/report/ronan-lyons-2019q1-rental> (Accessed 27/05/19)

²¹ Investing in the Right to a Home: Housing, HAPs and Hubs <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/sites/default/files/assets/document/Investing%20in%20the%20Right%20to%20a%20Home%20Full%201.pdf> (accessed 28/05/19)

²² The Cost of HAP, https://www.threshold.ie/publications/toppinup_survey/ (Accessed 27/05/19)

groceries affording school costs and the “day to day expenses”. Almost all of those surveyed pointed to the incredible difficulty in securing a home within the HAP caps. An additional factor was landlords or agents unwillingness to accept HAP despite this being a contravention of equality legislation.

Approximately 10% tenants registered as homeless in 2018 in Dublin were issued notice on the grounds of rent arrears. The loss of home as a result of arrears puts a tenant at much greater risk of entering and remaining in homelessness as they will likely be in severe financial distress, have no deposit and be without a reference. Of the arrears cases we dealt with in 2018 66% were due to affordability issues arising from a rent increase, job loss or other financial commitments in particular large utility bills, 18% were a result of administrative delays in HAP or rent supplement and 16% were a result of personal issues such as illness or family separation. Threshold advisors have success in assisting tenants to resolve arrears. Arrears do not have to result in homelessness. Positive, early targeted interventions are key. Threshold is experienced and successful in bringing about positive resolutions for tenant and landlord to save the tenancy and prevent homelessness.

5. Recommendations

a) Primary and Secondary Prevention Measures

Threshold carries out what are known as primary and secondary homeless prevention measures. These are distinct from most tertiary measures in that they are instigated prior to homelessness occurring. Primary measures seek to prevent new cases of homelessness at a wider population level. Secondary measures are aimed at groups identified as at risk of homelessness and prevent homelessness at the time of crisis point, for example when a tenant receives a Notice of Termination or an unaffordable rent increase. In Ireland, however, the majority of prevention services are tertiary in nature. Tertiary prevention measures are aimed at persons already experiencing homelessness, they aim to reduce the impact homelessness has on the person and move people out of homelessness into housing. Tertiary services are essential for those already experiencing homelessness.

However, there is insufficient emphasis on or funding for primary and secondary homeless prevention measures. The Financial Report from the Dublin Region Homeless Executive, for example, shows that only 3% of the 2018 expenditure was on prevention, the remainder was on homeless service provision, emergency accommodation and supported housing. A further analysis separating the services into those providing primary, secondary and tertiary prevention measures shows that only 1% of the total expenditure was on primary prevention measures. This equals just less than €1.6 million out of the €141 million plus spent on homeless service provision in 2018 in Dublin alone.²³

b) Interim tenancy Sustainment Protocol and HAP

Threshold operates the Interim Tenancy Sustainment Protocol (ITSP), whereby an application can be made to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection for an enhanced rent supplement payment in designated areas when a rent increase puts the tenants at imminent risk of homelessness.

The ITSP has been a key homeless prevention service of Threshold since its inception in 2014 and is a highly successful, effective and efficient prevention measure. Since 2014, we have supported over 2,000 households to avail of the enhanced rent supplement payment and keep their home. In 2018, we supported 84 households to avail of an uplift in their rent supplement payment using the ITSP. The number of households in need of the ITSP uplift is decreasing as rent supplement recipients transition to HAP. We anticipate that many of these tenants and those paying “top-ups” will struggle to pay rent and risk losing their home.

HAP payments need to be increased to remain in step with the PRS. The HAP rates need to be flexible, responding to a difficult and challenging PRS, so as to meet the needs of the tenant and prevent homelessness. A protocol similar to the ITSP is required for HAP as rents continue to rise. The HAP caps must be reviewed on a regular basis; they were last

²³ Dublin Regional Homeless Authority Homeless Financial Report End of Year 2018, https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/financial_report_end_of_year_2018_-_dublin.pdf (Accessed 28/05/19)

reviewed in Q2 2016. Alternatively, we recommend the undertaking of a cost-benefit analysis to determine the impact of removing HAP caps entirely.

c) Security of Tenure and Increased Social Housing supply

The recent changes to the Residential Tenancies Act will give people more time to find a place to live if issued with a NOT and will result in a sanction for a landlord breaching the regulations surrounding a termination. These changes however, only provide a family with more time to find a home. While a landlord may receive a fine for abusing the provisions set out for the issuing of a NOT, once the family has left the home it is lost to them and they may find themselves homeless or if fortunate settled elsewhere.

To prevent homelessness and reduce the numbers entering homelessness long term measures to increase security of tenure and access to affordable, secure and sustainable housing are required. This can be done through the creation of indefinite tenancies and support for long term tenancies in the PRS. The PRS, however, does not have the capacity to supply the level of housing expected of it (over 60% of all social housing provision under Rebuilding Ireland is to be sourced in the PRS). Increased local authority and AHB build, affordable purchase and affordable housing are all necessary elements to reduce homelessness and prevent future occurrences.



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