

Faces Behind the Figures of Child Homelessness



Briefing Paper: February 2017

Introduction

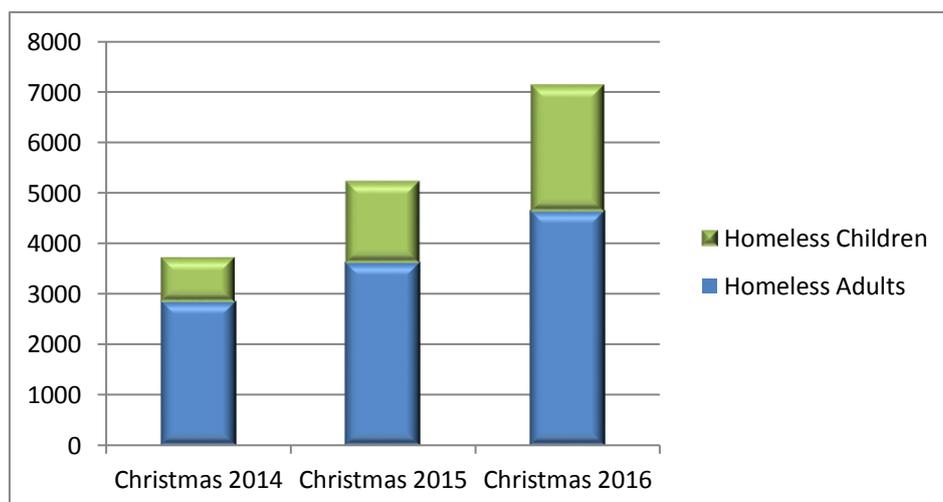
Barnardos is very concerned the housing crisis is not abating. Child and family homelessness is gathering pace and the responses and actions of Government, local authorities and agencies are unable to stem this flow. The impact of homelessness on children is far reaching, and affects every element of a child's development. These children are being robbed of their childhoods and this will have lifelong implications for them and for all of society. Children are the most vulnerable victims of the housing crisis, they are often invisible and the impact of the crisis on them is underestimated.

Child homelessness increased by 55% in 2016 - this is a national crisis

Child homelessness in Ireland is increasing at an unfathomable rate. It is scandalous that the rates of child homelessness have increased by 55% in the year from December 2015 to December 2016. This is a crisis of unprecedented scale for children in Ireland.

The figures: In December 2015, there were a total of 1,616 children registered as homeless across Ireland. In December 2016, this had risen to 2,505 children¹. This is an increase of 55%.

The figures also tell us that this same period saw a 28% rise in adult homelessness nationwide. This in itself signals a crisis. But that child homelessness is increasing at double this rate means it is an immediate and urgent crisis and action must be taken.



¹ <http://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/homelessness/other/homelessness-data>

Homelessness Fatigue – The faces behind the figures

‘Her entire world was the space between those two beds’ – Barnardos Project Worker describing the life of a two year old she visited at Christmas living in a hotel.

We see through our work across the country, issues around coping with homelessness, difficulties accessing private rented accommodation and inability to secure social housing are constant themes for so many families. We see parents struggling daily to cope with stress, uncertainty and feelings of inadequacy that is not of their own making or within their control to resolve. Their children are overwhelmed with how their lives have changed and they are fearful of what their future contains.

Despite the rising figures, and commentary from the media, activists and organisations, very little seems to be changing for the better. As one project worker frustratingly stated, ‘there seems to be homelessness fatigue – that’s just the way it is.’

Barnardos believes it is incumbent upon all of us to start focusing on the people behind these numbers – people who are living very real lives, in very difficult circumstances. They are in communities all over the country. We need to start understanding and imagining what they are experiencing. When we hear there are 2,505 children who are homeless, we need to start visualising what it is like for these individual children on a daily basis.

‘To be homeless you have to go and present as homeless that day with your children. Imagine if that was your child how you’d feel? They’d have to pack up their things and go and present as homeless with you. It’s traumatic for children. We’re inflicting trauma on them.’ – Barnardos Project Worker

For children, being homeless has profound affects. It affects their mental and physical health. It affects their social and their emotional development. It affects their education. It also affects their key relationships.

Imagine packing your bag and going with your family to present to the authorities as homeless. Imagine the worries you would have about when you would see your friends, or where you would sleep, or how you would get to school. Imagine how worried you would be for your parents. Imagine not telling your friends where you live because you’re embarrassed and think you might be bullied. Imagine how much stress you would have to cope with. Imagine not being able to play. Imagine not having a place to do your homework. And imagine not knowing how to change it or when it will end. These are the real fears of children living in hotels, emergency accommodation units and in overcrowded situations.

‘All of these stresses are undermining the relationship children have with their parents. We know this relationship is a protective factor for children and its being eroded as parents struggle to cope and reassure their children.’ – Barnardos Project Worker

One project worker visited a family with a two year old in a hotel just before Christmas, and she was struck that the child’s ‘whole world was the space between the beds’. A child cannot develop properly in a situation like this, and the pressures this puts on parents is unfathomable.

Another project worker said ‘parents are trying to do really well in hotels, but they can’t cook, and they’re walking up and down the corridor to get ice to cool milk for breakfast, but for dinner the children are eating out of tins. Feeding your child is so basic, and parents are being robbed of this. There’s a whole generation growing up that have been robbed of this.’

**‘If we’re not dealing with these things quickly, there are going to be knock on effects. We need to put forward a child centred approach to housing.’ -
Barnardos Project Worker**

We know from research if a child experiences homelessness when they are an infant or a toddler, they are at a 60% risk of not reaching their full potential in their later life². We also know that they are likely to suffer developmental delays. This will have consequences for that child’s entire life, and the tragedy is that it is avoidable.

What does homelessness look like?

Snapshots: These snapshots reflect living realities of children and their families across Ireland. They are based on the real lives of some of the families Barnardos are currently working with.

Snapshot One: Child’s 1st day of being homeless

I love mammy’s reaction to me reaching my ‘first’ something: my first words, my first steps, and my first day at school. I loved her smile when I cycled for the first time. I was nervous at the start, but she ran alongside me and I was going really fast, and suddenly I realised that I was doing it on my own. My heart started pounding but I felt really brave. Everyone was cheering. That felt great.

But I didn’t like my first night at being homeless. I had to pack up some of my toys and put some clothes in a suitcase. I had to leave my bike with my cousin and go with my little sister and mammy to an office to say we needed somewhere to stay. The grown-ups there made us wait in a room for ages. I missed school that day. I kept crying because I didn’t know where I was going to sleep or if I’d go back home. Mammy was upset too and she wasn’t able to answer my questions. My little sister was just bored in her buggy. I just wanted to go back to my home and see my friends.

Then Mammy told us we would be staying in a hotel, I was excited because we had a holiday once before and we played on the beach and we all had fun. I couldn’t wait to watch TV and explore. We’ve been at the hotel for a long time now and have even had to move to different hotels. It doesn’t feel like we’re on holiday but Mammy says we can’t go home.

I don’t like living out of bags and I’d like to eat normal food again not take-aways but we’ve no kitchen so mammy can’t cook. My little sister is only small, she’s only 2 and she always wants to play with me but we can only play on the floor between the beds. I feel sad and she cries a lot.

I’m sick of sharing a bed with her. We can’t even play out in the hall. I haven’t told any of my school friends that I’m living in a hotel because they might tease me so I don’t bring any of them here.

² Taylor, J., Gibson, B., & Hurd, K (2015). Parental preschool choices and challenges when young children and their families experience homelessness. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 5668-75.
Doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2015.06.010

Barnardos helps my mammy, and my little sister has joined their playschool. But I just want my Mammy to be happy, and to ride my bike again. And I want to find a home.

Snapshot Two: Emergency Unit

I had to move out of my house when Daisy was only 6 months old and Daniel was 7. The landlord's house was being repossessed and we had no option but to leave. I was really surprised I couldn't find anywhere else to rent. We'd been so happy there too and I had the new baby already settled. We had our routine during the day so it was a huge upheaval when we had to leave. I stayed with my boyfriend and his parents for a while but his sister already lives in that house with her two kids and we were sleeping in the sitting room so I couldn't stay there for long. We couldn't go to sleep until everyone else had gone to bed. That was really hard on Daniel who was always tired going to school the next day.

The first day I went down to register as homeless I was in a bit of shock. You think it couldn't happen to you, but I just couldn't find anywhere to rent and I was finding it very stressful living with my boyfriend's family. There were just too many of us living in that house. Barnardos helped me register as being at risk of homeless, and I got HAP approval, but I still couldn't get anywhere to rent. You still never think you'll be down there saying that you're homeless and looking for help. I felt scared and angry at what was happening. I had been a good tenant, why was this happening to me. My son was being very quiet and I knew he was sad, he had even helped me pack everything we needed.

We were lucky because we got housed in an emergency unit. But I spend every day very anxious. Daisy no longer has her routines and now she has to sleep in with me. But she wakes during the night and is crying, and I can't seem to calm her. Some of the other residents have complained and I'm terrified they'll tell us to leave, so I just keep rocking her. Last week Daniel got in trouble for kicking his ball against the wall outside during the day. I'm so terrified we'll get in trouble here, but he was only playing. He needs to be able to play, he's only a child and he's just trying to make things as normal as possible here. The stress is making it very hard for me to cope. And my boyfriend's not allowed to be here with us as he's not a resident so I feel like I don't even have that support. I dread the weekends as there is nowhere to go but I always leave here and end up walking the roads or going to a nearby park. At least during the week, Daniel is in school but poor Daisy has nothing. I can't find a childcare place for her that's close to Daniel's school. I know I am letting her down as she is bored. Barnardos has helped me to play more with her and try to resume some kind of routine.

In my old flat, Daniel had his friends, and he was on a local football team. Daisy was doing so well. Now I'm constantly terrified. Life is so unstable and they're both just caught in the middle of it. I don't live any kind of life, I just exist. I'm worried about how this is affecting them. I think people forget when they hear the figures that there are tiny children living in the middle of all this anxiety and instability. I only want the best for them.

(Update: this particular person has now secured long term social housing, and is looking forward to the stability and security of her new home).

Hidden homeless – The people not counted in the official figures

'We are dealing with people who are in supported accommodation, but it is substandard, and we see that it's horrific even when people are housed.'

Barnardos Project Worker

This issue of hidden homeless is even more prevalent, in our experience, than when we raised it in 2016. These are the thousands of families in Ireland who are living in substandard, overcrowded or unsafe accommodation, unable to move or demand better accommodation because they have no other options. These people do not even show up in the homeless figures as they have not presented as homeless. They are the hidden homeless but their experiences can be just as traumatic.

Parents with their children forced to cram in with extended family is a very common issue, with the strain of limited personal space eroding key support relationships and frequently causing mental health issues both for parents and children. We have worked with a family of five adults, two teenagers and three small children living in a two bedroomed house and this has not been an isolated incident. Children have nowhere to do their homework or play and often cannot go to sleep until the adults have gone to bed. These families are often not given support or alternatives because on paper they are classified as housed.

One project worker in particular told us that they are constantly seeing damp and often the children are getting sick because of the damp conditions. He also told us they have seen children living in homes where smoke inhalation is an issue, where fire safety regulations are not adhered to, and in overcrowded complexes where parents fear for their children's safety.

Snapshot Three: Overcrowded private accommodation

I had to move in here after my relationship broke down. It was advertised as a flat, but it's a bedsit with only a single bed, a hotplate for cooking and a small ensuite. There is dampness on the walls so it's impossible to keep the place warm. I feel so down most of the time, and spend most of my time in this small room. There's five other tenants here but I don't know them. I'm starting to feel like I'll never get out. I feel so lonely and helpless. I feel like a prisoner and I haven't committed a crime.

I have to share the bed with Molly. She's nine now and I know this is all very hard on her. Imagine having to share a single bed with your mother when you're nine, and having nowhere to play or do your homework except on the floor. She's such a good child and she's sensitive, so this is all very hard. I think she's holding in just how hard she's finding it. Like, I noticed she's started avoiding her friends at school and when I asked her she says it's because she doesn't want to invite them round and see our room. She's starting to fall behind at school now too and struggles getting her work in. I know she is worried about me and where we'll end up. I feel like I'm letting her down but I just can't afford to move to a bigger place that we could call home. I'm trying everything I can to get help for us but I know she's losing out. She needs friends around her that's why I contacted Barnardos. It's been a lifeline as they've really helped her understand the situation and build up her self-confidence. They've helped link her in with a local afterschool club. It's early days yet but I hope she returns to being a happy sociable child.

She's only 9. She didn't ask for this.

Rebuilding Ireland – What is being done?

In July 2016, Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government, Simon Coveney, launched 'Rebuilding Ireland – An Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness'³. This whole of government plan aims to tackle the housing crisis by focusing on 'five pillars': Address Homelessness; Accelerate Social Housing; Build More Homes; Improve the Rental sector; and Utilise Existing Housing. Each of these pillars has specific targets, which are to be monitored in quarterly published progress reports.

The Second Quarterly Progress Report published in February 2017 showed some welcome progress in a number of areas. However, in many ways the Government's successes are being overshadowed by the continued escalation of the crisis. For instance, there were approximately 2,700 sustainable exits from homelessness in 2016, which is an increase of 16% on 2015. However, the rate of homelessness accelerated rapidly during the same period and rose by 28% for adults.

The Dublin Region Homeless Housing Assistance Payment (HHAP) pilot also showed successes and created tenancies for 810 people, in excess of the Government's own targets. This programme offers registered homeless households in the Dublin region access to the private rental market, by providing assistance and the discretion to increase the regular HAP payment by up to 50%. Front line services view it as a notable success in helping homeless households to access accommodation. However, this programme is not currently available outside of Dublin, despite its efficacy and increased need countrywide.

It also appears the Government's own commitment that by mid-2017 hotels would only be used for emergency accommodation for families in very limited circumstances is also not going to be met. In 2016, despite extra social housing allocation, the provision of 12,000 HAP tenancies, and the accommodation of 1,000 families under RAS, it still falls short as the crisis continues relentlessly. The number of families housed in hotels during Christmas week of 2016 in Dublin, for instance, was 6% higher than in July of that same year when Rebuilding Ireland was launched. Recent figures from Daft.ie show that rent increased nationally by 13.5% in 2016, the highest annual increase since the Daft Report began monitoring rents in 2002.⁴

Barnardos is also particularly concerned the majority of current social housing needs are being met through the private rented sector, rather than through the construction of social housing. In 2016, 12,000 HAP tenancies were created to address people's social housing needs, and only 5,280 social houses were built, refurbished or acquired⁵. This over reliance on the private rented market is unsustainable and an insufficient approach to increase supply of housing stock.

For 2017, it is welcome there is increased funding for housing and homelessness and a clear Government priority to address the issue. However, the slowness of systems to respond, escalating rent prices and the continued lack of supply across all housing sectors, all combine to hamper Government efforts. Rebuilding Ireland must be adaptive if it is going to succeed, and must respond quickly to escalating figures. Otherwise more lives will be affected with every month that passes and it will get harder and harder to address this crisis.

³ www.rebuildingireland.ie

⁴ The Daft.ie Rental Price Report: An analysis of recent trends in the Irish Rental Market – 2016 in review (February 2017).

⁵ Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness – Second Quarterly Progress Report (February 2017), page 5.

Conclusion

We cannot accept the current rates of child homelessness as either acceptable or inevitable. It is a crisis of unprecedented scale for children in Ireland - a 55% increase in child homelessness in a single year. That is 2,505 individual children, and we cannot lose sight of them. We need to start seeing the children behind these figures.

If we do not act immediately and this continues at the current rate, within three years we could have almost 10,000 homeless children in Ireland. Imagine what that would look like. That is equivalent to 400 classrooms full of children. The bitter truth is that child homelessness is avoidable. These children are suffering because of choices that adults are making and the slowness with which systems respond when they are in need.

We also need to see all those children who are currently not visible in the official figures; those children living in overcrowded and substandard homes, the hidden homeless. They too need us to intervene.

All children need a safe, secure and appropriate home so that they can grow and thrive. Without this basic necessity we are setting them up to fail.

Barnardos recommendations:

Barnardos believes the following measures must be undertaken immediately to address the current housing issues and prevent the housing crisis from escalating:

- The Government made a commitment that by mid-2017 hotels will only be used in limited circumstances to house families. Hotels are not places where children can thrive or develop. Strategies to move families from hotels have been so far insufficient. For example, the construction of rapid build housing has been extremely slow, with only 22 houses of a target of 1,500 fully completed to date. Efforts should now be redoubled to ensure the Government keeps their commitment, and these families should be moved as soon as is possible out of hotel accommodation and into more stable and appropriate accommodation.
- The transfer of families out of emergency accommodation should be done in a more coordinated way that ensures children and their families are placed somewhere stable, secure and close to their networks of family and friends where possible. At a minimum, the new accommodation should be integrated purposefully into the community by having appropriate transport links and appropriate access to school and services. Coordination across agencies is needed to ease the transition and help mitigate the disruption already experienced by these children and families.
- The Government should prioritise the construction of social housing. Department figures show that currently people in need of social housing are predominantly being housed in the private rented market, through Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) or Rent Supplement (RS)⁶. There seems to be an overall move away from the provision of social housing by the State, to the provision instead of payments for private rental accommodation. The State would be much better served by building up its stock of social housing across the country.

⁶ Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness – Second Quarterly Progress Report (February 2017), page 5.

- Often HAP and RS payments fall well short of the price of rent in certain areas. A 2017 study by the Simon Communities in Ireland found 83% of rental properties are priced beyond the upper limit of these payments⁷. This increases the likelihood of people becoming homeless as they are unable to afford to pay the full rent being sought. RS and HAP payments should be reviewed and adjusted on an ongoing basis to ensure they are in line with market rents. There should also be more discretion for those in receipt of payments to have their payments increased should circumstances require it.
- The Homeless HAP pilot should be rolled out across the country. There is a clear need for its extension and it has proved effective in the Dublin region.

ENDS

Context

The following statistics outline the figures behind the housing crisis in Ireland:

- In December 2015 there were a total of 1,616 children registered as homeless across Ireland. In December 2016, this had risen to 2,505 children. This is an increase of 55%.⁸
- The same period saw a 28% rise in adult homelessness nationwide. This means that child homelessness increased at double the rate of adult homelessness between December 2015 and December 2016.
- In Christmas of 2016, the overall homeless figure recorded by the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government surpassed 7,000 for the first time. There were 4,643 adults and 2,505 children recorded as homeless, giving a combined total of 7,148.
- Property rents are rising at a record rate of 13.5% annually according to the latest figures from Daft.ie for 2016. This is the largest annual increase since they began monitoring rents in 2002 (Daft.ie).
- On the 1st of February, there were fewer than 4,000 properties available to rent nationwide (Daft.ie).
- During Christmas week 2016, there were 1028 families in homeless accommodation in the Dublin region, as well as 2096 children (Dublin Region Homeless Executive).

About Barnardos

Barnardos supports children whose well-being is under threat, by working with them, their families and communities. Barnardos provides services and support in more than 40 centres around the country. We also campaign for the rights of all children in Ireland, and provide training and knowledge resources to childcare professionals. Barnardos was established in Ireland in 1962 and is Ireland's leading independent children's charity. www.barnardos.ie

⁷ Locked Out Of The Market VI: The Gap between Rent Supplement/HAP Limits and Market Rents, Simon Communities in Ireland (January 2017).

⁸ <http://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/homelessness/other/homelessness-data>