

Hidden Homelessness- What's the Problem?

May 2018

Introduction

The housing crisis engulfing the country has been steadily expanding over a number of years. As time has gone on, Government initiatives aimed at tackling the crisis have failed to stem the tide of children into homelessness, curb rent increases or build enough social housing. Living in emergency accommodation is a situation no child should ever find themselves in. Barnardos campaigns nationally to ensure no child is lost to homelessness and works locally with families living in emergency accommodation. There has rightly been much media coverage of the worsening crisis and public outcry at the ever increasing child homelessness figures (3,646 at time of writing¹); yet there are thousands more children who are homeless but go largely unnoticed. These children are the hidden homeless. They have no home of their own but are not counted by Government and don't qualify for many support services.

The hidden homeless are temporarily accommodated (usually with friends or family) but their living situation is precarious and unsustainable.² Hidden homelessness is most frequently characterised by overcrowded accommodation which is unsuitable for children. Overcrowding has increased in recent years. Census 2016 showed a 28% rise in the number of households with more people than rooms as well as an increase in the number of persons per household, particularly in urban areas.³ Overcrowding is defined in legislation as when two people over ten years old who are opposite sex but not in a relationship must share a bedroom due to lack of space or less than four hundred cubic feet of air space per person per bedroom.⁴ However, the reality for children is that sharing a room with multiple siblings, parents, aunts, uncles or grandparents can hinder their emotional, social, mental and physical development.

¹ Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. (2018) *Homelessness Report March 2018*. Dublin: Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government.

² London Assembly Housing Committee. (2017) *Hidden homelessness in London*. London: London Assembly.

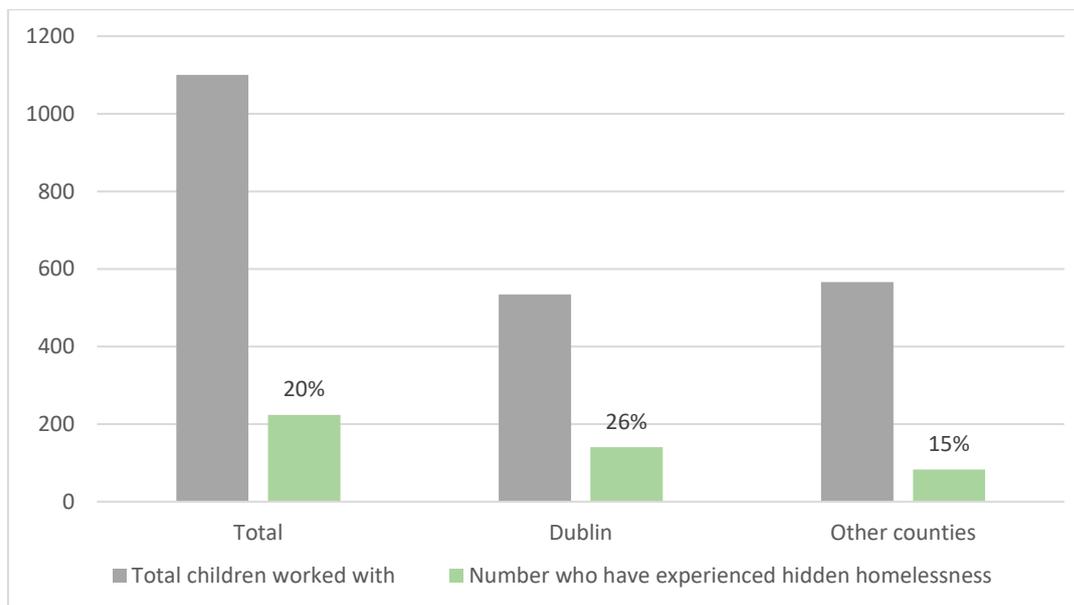
³ Central Statistics Office. (2017) *Census of Population 2016*. Dublin: Central Statistics Office.

⁴ Housing Act, (1966). Available at <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1966/act/21/section/1/enacted/en/html#sec1> [accessed 11 May 2018]

Barnardos' experience of hidden homelessness

Examination of data gathered from Barnardos' case work with families and children indicates 25 per cent of individuals whose needs were recorded had one or more housing need. Examples of the types of housing need recorded include living in overcrowded conditions, in temporary accommodation, facing the threat of homelessness and not having a suitable home.⁵ This data analysis along with anecdotal evidence raised by staff members prompted a survey of Barnardos staff in April 2018. Respondents to the survey work with families and children in ten counties (Cork, Dublin, Kilkenny, Limerick, Meath, Offaly, Tipperary, Waterford, Westmeath and Wexford). Respondents were asked to estimate the number of children they work with as well as the number of those children who have experienced hidden homelessness. In total respondents said 20 per cent of the children they work with have experienced hidden homelessness. Unsurprisingly, given the severity of the housing crisis in the capital, respondents working in Barnardos' services in Dublin worked with a higher number of children (26 per cent) experiencing hidden homelessness than those in the rest of the country.

Figure 1: Barnardos Staff Survey (2018) (Sample 1,100 children)

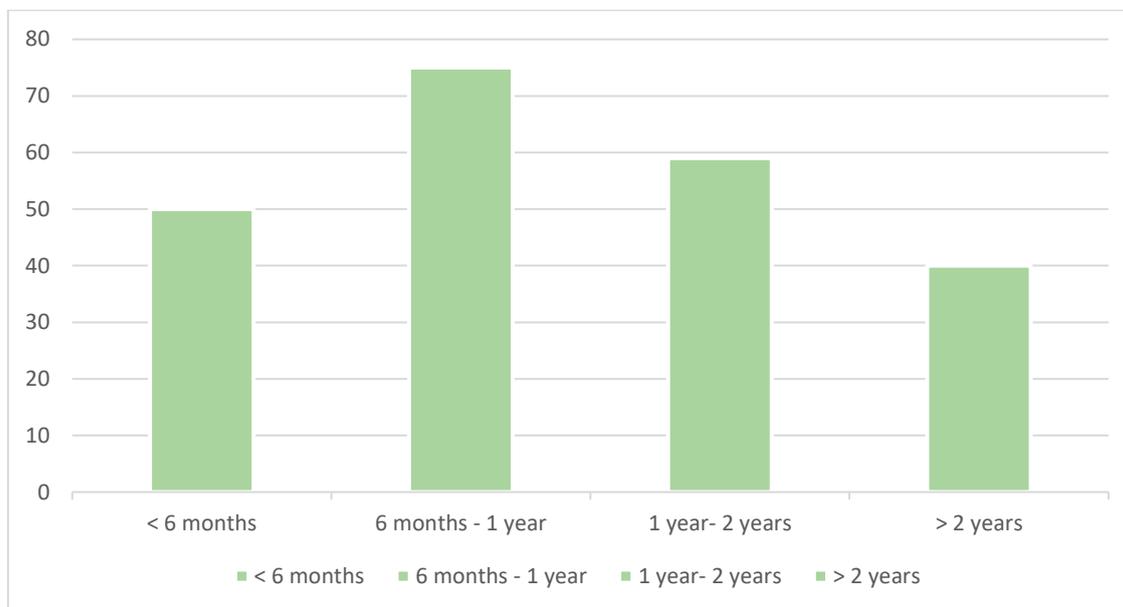


Of the children experiencing hidden homelessness respondents said the majority were living with family members (grandparents 45 per cent and other family 26 per cent). The rest were living with friends or had other arrangements. There was a fairly even split between the number of children staying in accommodation which is owner occupied (36 per cent), private rented

⁵Barnardos worked with more than 14,000 children and families last year. 1397 individuals had needs recorded in Barnardos Children's Services Database and Electronic Record Keeping systems.

(34 per cent) or social housing (30 per cent). As Figure 2 shows, of those experiencing hidden homelessness just over half (n=125) of children were living in someone else's home for less than a year but a sizeable proportion (n=40) have spent more than two years living in this situation.

Figure 2: How long have children been living in hidden homelessness. (Sample 224 children)



Respondents told us the vast majority of children are sharing a room with another family member. Of these children, 45 per cent are sharing a bed with a parent or sibling, 12 per cent sleep on the floor or a fold away bed in a bedroom. A small but sizeable number (n=19) sleep on a fold away bed or sofa in a communal room such as a sitting room.

“I work with a teenage boy who shares a room with his father, both say they have no private space. Another teenager, a girl who shares a room with her mother and younger brother, tells me she feels different from her friends and has no space to call her own impacting on her emotionally.”

-Barnardos Project Worker

The impact of hidden homelessness on children

Responses to the survey indicated hidden homelessness impacts every aspect of a child's daily life. The consequences for a child's social, emotional, behavioural and physical development can be profound.

At a basic level, children's hygiene and diet suffer as a result of living in overcrowded shared accommodation. Insufficient bathroom and cooking facilities for the number of people living in a home mean children's physical needs are often not being met. Worryingly for younger children this, coupled with lack of space and imperfect sleeping arrangements, can delay important developmental milestones and result in failure to learn practical skills (e.g. toilet training). Living

in cramped quarters with parents and even sharing a bed with them can also lead to separation anxiety and prevent children from becoming independent.

The precarious and chaotic nature of living in overcrowded accommodation that's not their own can deeply affect a child's emotional wellbeing. Anxiety was a common issue raised by Barnardos staff members. Children living in hidden homeless scenarios don't feel secure. Instability in their living arrangement can be mirrored in their emotions, which they may find difficult to manage. Living in close quarters means children are often exposed to adult conversations and themes which are inappropriate and confusing for them.

“Children need emotional connection with adults where they feel safe and cared. Moving to temporary or unsuitable accommodation traumatises these children. What they need is a home with their mother where they feel secure in the knowledge that they will grow up in this home with adequate space to flourish.”

-Barnardos Project Worker

The survey also highlighted behavioural problems increasing as children can act out due to lack of boundaries at home or become withdrawn because of anxiety or shame. Relationships with siblings and crucially parents can suffer. For some parents the stress of trying to raise children in overcrowded, temporary accommodation under someone else's roof is frequently too much to bear and leads to mental health or substance abuse problems. As a result parents can find it hard to manage their emotions (losing their temper easily for example) or become emotionally unavailable to their children.

“There are emotional effects, not having their own space, falling asleep with parents and in front of the TV, there is an impact on development, many children with inadequate space to play and explore and to do homework. Social development is impacted as these children cannot have friends over to the house and afterschool activities are limited. Parents are stressed trying to manage and parental mental health is impacted which in turn impacts their ability to parent.”

-Barnardos Project Worker

The reality of having too many adults in the home with input into how a child is parented or disciplined causes tensions. This can undermine the parent-child relationship and make it even more difficult for parents to establish consistency and routines for their child.

Socially, respondents told us, children feel isolated and different to their peers. They have trouble socialising and often cut themselves off from friends due to shame and embarrassment about not having their own space or owning many belongings. They may also be physically cut off if they have to move far from their social circle to share someone else's home. Lack of privacy and personal space is a common problem for children and young people experiencing hidden homelessness. The children and young people often have no space to play, hang out or

relax. Lack of stimulation can lead to boredom and frustration. For older children lack of space can result in being forced out during the day as there simply isn't room for them.

“Socially - they do not feel comfortable bringing friends to their home. It is very stressful for parents who in turn may struggle to meet the needs of their children. For teen parents it can affect their baby meeting the developmental milestones due to lack of appropriate and safe floor space or space for a cot etc.”

-Barnardos Project Worker

A child's education also suffers, respondents told us children experiencing hidden homelessness sometimes have difficulty attending school on time. This may be because their school is far away from their new accommodation, due to tiredness, or simply because of logistical issues relating to multiple people in the household accessing hygiene and cooking facilities in the morning. Tiredness due to unsuitable sleeping arrangements negatively impacts a child's ability to concentrate in school. Furthermore, lack of space to study or do homework was a common issue raised by respondents.

“As these children are not sleeping, they are tired all the time which has a knock-on effect on school work, social interaction and eating habits. The parent is also exhausted and cannot cope with their children's emotions. This leads to a pattern of angry outbursts, frustrated children and overwrought parents and grandparents.”

-Barnardos Project Worker

Policy responses

The most important policy change needed to alleviate the problem of hidden homelessness is to build more social housing. The target, as set out in the Government's Rebuilding Ireland Strategy, to build 50,000 new social homes by 2021 is creditable; however, we are nearly half way through the lifetime of the plan and yet to see any meaningful change to the number of social houses coming on stream.⁶ Most recent data from the Housing Agency states that in 2017 there were 85,799 people on the social housing waiting list. While hidden homelessness is not a specific criteria for social housing allocations, for around 30 per cent of these requests overcrowded or unsuitable accommodation are listed as the main reason for seeking social housing supports.⁷ It remains to be seen if the Rebuilding Ireland target will be met but it is clear much greater output is required.

The Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) provides the most likely route out of hidden homelessness in the short term; however there are some barriers to people experiencing hidden homelessness accessing this support. The government views those in receipt of HAP as being

⁶ Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. (2016) *Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness*. Dublin: Government Publications.

⁷ The Housing Agency. (2018) *Social Housing Need Report*. Dublin: The Housing Agency.

in receipt of a social housing support. Therefore in many instances families can be removed from the original Social Housing List and are placed on the local authority housing transfer list. This can mean families receiving HAP have a longer wait to access social housing. It is imperative all HAP recipients should retain access to the primary social housing list and choice based letting system. Furthermore, families living in hidden homelessness are largely ineligible for homeless supports as they are classed as having alternative accommodation. These families may have a roof over their head but they have no home and homeless supports designed to facilitate families securing appropriate accommodation, such as the Homeless HAP Scheme should be available to them.

In general, the rate paid for HAP is not keeping pace with the rise in rent prices. Research from the Simon Communities in Ireland in March 2018 showed nationally just 7 per cent of properties available to rent were within Rent Supplement or HAP limits.⁸ There has been no recent increase in HAP limits yet rents have risen by approximately 10 per cent.⁹ While landlords are prohibited from discriminating against tenants on the basis of being in receipt of Housing Assistance Payment, this is difficult to regulate in a market with such high demand for rental properties.¹⁰ There is a clear need to reassess Rent Supplement and HAP rates to bring them in line with market rents. There is also a need to address rents in general. The Government's Rent Predictability Measures implemented in 2016 and designed to slow rent increases in a number of 'Rent Pressure Zones' has failed to have any real impact. These rules can be circumnavigated by landlords exploiting loopholes which allow evictions for major refurbishment, sale or needing the property for a family member. Once vacant, landlords can raise the rent as much as they want or let the property for high yield short term tenancies. Indeed, recent reports suggest half of all available rental properties in Dublin are short term lets to tourists.¹¹ Only a move towards rent certainty (for example linking rent increase to the Consumer Price Index) and security of tenure can alleviate the pressure on tenants and people trying to access the private rental market.

Responses to hidden homelessness do not lie solely with those charged with delivering social housing output or implementing housing policy. A multi- departmental approach is required with roles for the Department Children and Youth Affairs, Department of Education and Skills, and the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection coordinated by the Department of

⁸ Simon Communities in Ireland. (2018) *Locked Out of the Market X*. Dublin: Simon Communities in Ireland.

⁹ Lyons R. (2018) *The Daft.ie Rental Price Report 2018 Q1*. Dublin: Daft.ie

¹⁰ Press Release by Workplace Relations Commission. (2017) http://www.workplacerelations.ie/en/news-media/Workplace_Relations_Notices/Press_Release_re_Housing_Assistance_Grant_Decisions.html [accessed 16 May 2018]

¹¹ Clancy, M. (2018) *One out of every two rentals in Dublin are now only available to tourists*. <https://www.daft.ie/blog/one-every-two-rentals-dublin-now-available-tourists/> [accessed 16 May 2018]

Housing, Planning and Local Government. Services are key to helping children in hidden homelessness cope, help parents meet their child's needs and help families find a path towards a home of their own. Families experiencing hidden homelessness should have access to free family support services. 'Family support' is a wide range of services to children and families which evaluate what a child and family's needs are and carefully tailor a personal package of services to respond to those needs. These supports may include but are not limited to parenting programmes, therapeutic supports and practical advice and help. As highlighted earlier, hidden homelessness is detrimental to a happy school and social life for children and young people.

Services aimed at ensuring children can fully participate socially and in school should be provided by the State. Access to free quality afterschool services are key to giving children space to do homework, play, socialise and relax. Other initiatives such as free breakfast and lunch clubs and subsidised transport can help ease the burden that hidden homelessness leaves in children's lives. For parents trying to find services for them and their children and a route out of hidden homelessness there is no clear place to access information or advice. Development and promotion of services specifically targeting people experiencing hidden homelessness should be actioned as a priority, utilising existing expertise and support structures available through the not for profit homeless and housing sector.

Conclusion

Children living in hidden homelessness have been forgotten for too long. Nationally the exact scale of the problem remains unclear; however a significant proportion of the children Barnardos works with are living in unsuitable, unsustainable accommodation that is not their own. They live a life of uncertainty, reliant on the charity of their host. Fundamental changes to the way homes are build and rented in Ireland are needed. But the responsibility for supporting children in these circumstances needs a coordinated response. Some of these changes take time; in the meantime there are a number of key policy changes which, if implemented, would mean real change in these children's lives.

Recommendations

1. Help reduce the numbers of households turning to emergency accommodation by fast-tracking an enhanced prevention system in Local Authorities nationwide, to ensure that people experiencing hidden homelessness can access supports such as enhanced Housing Assistance Payments (HAP) that are in line with market rates, without first having to become officially homeless.
2. Issue Departmental guidelines to all Local Authorities to direct that all households in receipt of HAP remain on the primary social housing waiting list.
3. Review and support all state funded information and advice services to ensure that they are reaching those experiencing hidden homelessness and providing tailored information and advice on accessing supports and securing a home.
4. Improve security of tenure in the private rented sector by closing existing loopholes under Section 34 of the Residential Tenancies Act, requiring more stringent eviction criteria from landlords who own more than three properties, and progress the introduction of full rent certainty. This will reduce the number of people losing their rented accommodation.
5. Enhance mainstream social services to ensure that households experiencing hidden homelessness can receive supports including: family support services, leap cards to facilitate attendance at school, medical and therapeutic appointments, free quality afterschool services and access to breakfast and lunch clubs.