

How does Ireland's homeless problem compare with other countries

Recent claims by An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, [that homelessness in Ireland is low by international standards](#) have sparked a debate about how homelessness is measured and compared across countries.

Focus Ireland has been actively involved in international work for many years, participating in [FEANTSA](#) (the European umbrella organisations for homeless organisations) and its research arm, The European Observatory on Homelessness. This issue of cross country comparisons has been extensively discussed and researched for many years, and the difficulties are well understood.

It is important to stress that Focus Ireland has never claimed that Ireland has a particularly higher rate of homelessness than other countries (nor has any other homeless organisation to our knowledge). Our claim has always been that homelessness is too high, that it could be much lower and – in recent years – that it is growing appallingly and unnecessarily. Homelessness must be tackled, not because it is higher than some international averages, but because it is wrong and avoidable.

Nevertheless the Taoiseach has made the claim that it is 'lower' than other countries and this has been supported by the Minister for Housing, Eoghan Murphy and other Government spokespersons. Irrespective of whether we still think that Irish homelessness is still too high, even if it were lower than other countries, it is reasonable to ask whether the Taoiseach's assertion is true.

Three levels of problem emerge when you start to compare homeless figures between different countries:

- Different countries measure different things (some measure the number of people without shelter, others only measure those in specialised emergency accommodation, and others having a much broader view and including people who are living with friends and families because they have no alternative).
- Different countries measure homelessness using different systems – some using administrative data, some doing surveys and others using other systems to 'estimate' levels.
- Different countries have different understandings and cultural responses to homelessness. FEANTSA responded to this issue a number of years ago by producing a 'typology' which names the different ways in which homelessness can be experienced and allows a meaningful discussion to take place. This is called [ETHOS](#), and is the foundation stone and benchmark for any cross country comparison of homelessness.

Since mid-2014, Ireland has used robust administrative data (information entered on to the PASS database) to report a narrow definition of homelessness (the number of people staying overnight in emergency accommodation paid for by the Department of Housing any night in the reference week). [This data is published each month](#) and receives widespread coverage. Prior to 2014, homelessness in Ireland was tracked using a different set of administrative data and also survey data. The survey data was a tri-annual survey called '[Counted in](#)', carried out from 1999 to 2008 by the predecessor organisations of the Dublin Region Homeless Executive. The DRHE decided to discontinue this series in 2008. The administrative data previously used was the number of people who were registered as homeless by local authorities. This data is still [published by the Housing Agency](#) but is generally considered less reliable than the monthly data from PASS.

From subsequent statements it became clear that the Taoiseach's comments are based on the [OECD statistics published earlier this year](#). Ironically, this Report is extremely clear about the problems of comparison because different countries use different definitions and different collection systems,

stating: There is no internationally agreed definition of homelessness. Therefore, this indicator presents a collection of available statistics on homelessness in OECD and EU countries in line with definitions used in national surveys.

Unfortunately the Government sources seem to have skipped all the explanations and headed straight for the table. The table does appear to show Ireland with a lower level of homelessness – 8 people per 10,000 in the population compared with say the UK with 25 per 10,000 or Finland with 13.

However, not only are the Irish data clearly marked as not comparable with these other countries, the figure used for Ireland comes from 2015, when there were 3,625 adults homeless. The report, which was quoted by the Taoiseach, notes that homelessness rose steadily since then. The most recent comparable figure (number of adults homeless in September 2017) is 5,250 - an increase of a third.

Efforts were made by the European Union to create a common basis for comparison of homeless figures, particularly through the last EU-wide Census. This was not successful and it is generally agreed that only Poland made any real effort to follow the EU proposed approach. The European Observatory on Homelessness issued a report on 2012 looking at attempts to find comparable ways of measuring homelessness across the EU, primarily looking at the Census report. This can be seen [here](#).

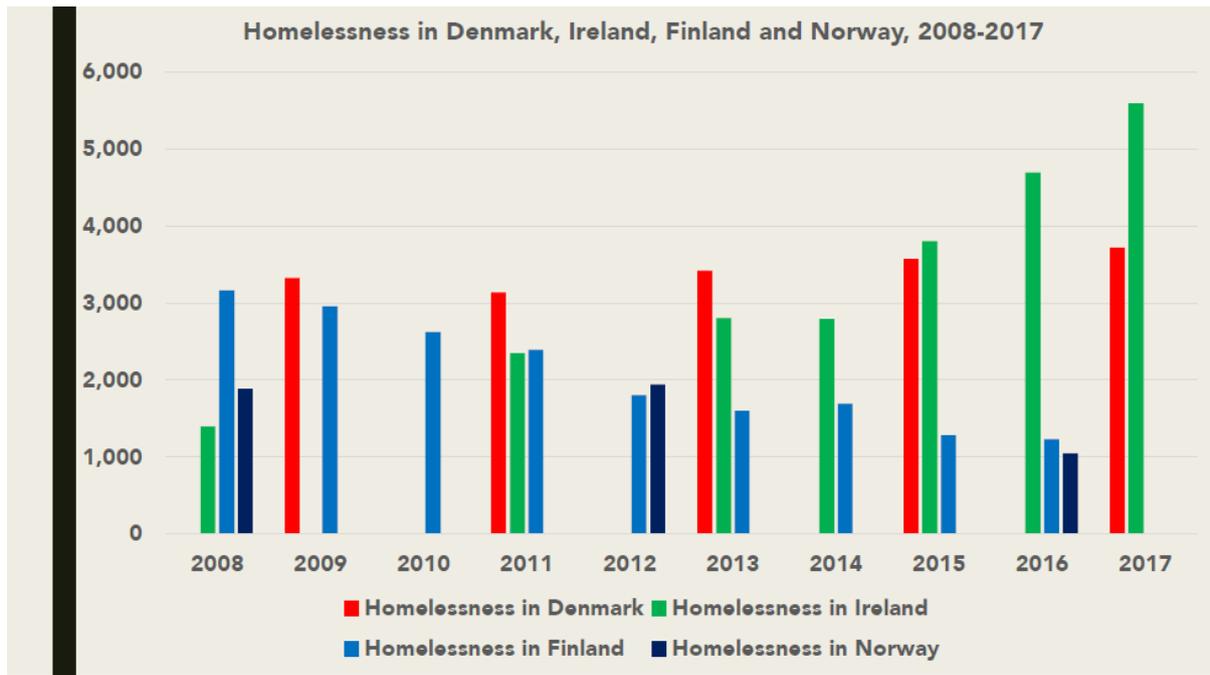
It is also widely noted that traditional estimates of homelessness frequently undercount particular groups of homeless people – particularly young people and women, and this problem carries on into family homelessness. There is a good discussion of the problems of counting women's homelessness by Prof Eoin O'Sullivan from Trinity College [here](#). The Canadian Homeless Hub has a detailed article about the challenges of counting the homeless [here](#).

However, a closer more detailed knowledge of the homeless system in different countries does allow us to carry out reliable comparisons with a small number of countries where the data is counting the same thing in more or less the same way. Professor Eoin O'Sullivan, who is a member of the European Observatory on Homelessness and Editor of its Journal, recently undertook such a study and presented it at a joint Focus Ireland/Trinity College School of Social Work and Social Policy seminar. The full presentation can be accessed [here](#).

The study looked at Ireland, Finland, Norway and Denmark, which are not only of similar size but also collect data in a way which allows comparisons. The Irish data uses the Local Authority data for dates prior to 2014. The Local Authority figures for 2013 is very similar to the number from the PASS data for 2014, indicating that they can reasonably be set out as a continuous series.

An initial comparison of the data (such as that reflected in the Taoiseach's statement) would see Ireland as having much the same problem as these other countries. However, the other countries also include a range of people who are living in overcrowded accommodation or who are at risk of homelessness (e.g. prisoners whose sentences end within 3 months and have nowhere to live on release). We do not even count these groups let alone include them in our homeless figures. The way the Finnish, Danish and Norwegian data is presented allows these groups to be deducted from their figures, allowing a genuine comparison.

This shows Ireland moving from a position where we genuinely have a lower level of homelessness than these countries, to a position where our problem is significantly higher.



Source: Homelessness in Ireland and Norway (and Finland and Denmark) - Eoin O'Sullivan

To allow for differences in population size these can also be set out as homelessness per 1,000 in the population – again showing that Ireland now has a much greater proportion of its population without a home than these other countries.



Source: Homelessness in Ireland and Norway (and Finland and Denmark) - Eoin O'Sullivan

It should also be noted that these comparisons are between homeless adults in these four countries, and do not take into account the scale of family homelessness in Ireland (with 1/3 of Ireland's homeless people now being children).

There are countries which have a significantly larger homeless population than Ireland, and others which have much lower numbers. People are free to choose which of these they wish to see as our 'peers', but it certainly not true to say that we have 'low' levels of homelessness, and each month that passes the numbers are getting higher.

Focus Ireland's international work has allowed us to make another general comparison – Irish people do appear to find the scale of the homelessness and housing crisis here much less acceptable than citizens in many other countries.

The Journal.ie also undertook an extensive fact check on the Taoiseach's claim which can be accessed [here](#).