

Focus Ireland

Insights into Family Homelessness

Number 3

Are the children of families that are homeless attending schools with resources to tackle educational disadvantage (DEIS schools)?

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Key Findings

- This study looked at whether the children in families that are homeless are attending DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) schools which have access to additional educational supports to tackle disadvantage.
- The study looked at all 307 families which were allocated to the Focus Ireland Family Homeless Action Team (HAT) between January and November 2015.
- 55% of the children who were attending school were attending DEIS schools (either DEIS band 1, DEIS band 2, DEIS post-primary, or Youth Encounter Project (YEP) schools.
- 45% were attending schools that were not DEIS designated.

Introduction

As of February 2015, there were 790 families and 1,616 children residing in emergency accommodation in the Dublin region. This represents the highest number of children experiencing homelessness since records began. The majority of these families (63%) are residing in commercial hotels. A small number are in specially designated Supported Temporary Accommodation (STAs). While there have been some recent positive policy initiatives, the lack of affordable rental accommodation in the city means that families are spending longer periods of time in emergency accommodation.

Focus Ireland is the lead voluntary organisation working with families that become homeless and, with the support of the four Dublin local authorities and the Dublin Region Homeless Executive (DRHE), operates the Homeless Action Team (HAT) in the Dublin Region. Following discussions with our family caseworkers and child support staff, who witness first-hand the impact that homelessness has on young people, we are undertaking a number of pieces of research to provide information which will be of use to all agencies working in this area. Front-line staff have indicated that one of the greatest areas of concern relates to education. Some children are travelling long distances to get to school, rising early and missing breakfast. There are consistent reports of children who are tired in school as a consequence of entire families sharing a single hotel room. They rarely have somewhere quiet and private to complete schoolwork or to study. In addition to impacting on the children themselves, these factors raise significant additional challenges for teachers and schools. In this 'Insight' we explore the extent to which children in homeless families are attending the schools which have been provided with additional resources to respond to such challenges.

DEIS is 'the Department of Education and Skills policy instrument to address educational disadvantage'¹ Schools which are participating in DEIS can receive a number of additional supports, including: additional staff, access to home school community liaison services, access to the school meals programme, access to the school completion programme, access to literacy and numeracy supports, additional funding under the school books grant scheme, and further grant opportunities. These supports are targeted at improving educational outcomes for those at risk, and are not designed to tackle poverty. There are a number of DEIS designations which could apply to schools in the Dublin region: DEIS Band 1, DEIS Band 2, and DEIS Post Primary. Youth Encounter Project (YEP) schools also provide students with additional support services.

¹ <https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/DEIS-Delivering-Equality-of-Opportunity-in-Schools-/DEIS.html>

Methodology

In 'Insights into Family Homelessness No.1' we analysed the demographics of children in the 307 homeless families who were allocated to the Focus Ireland team between January 2014 and the beginning of November 2014. In this study we map the school attendance of the children in these families: of the 636 children in the cohort, we were able to determine the exact school attended by 307. Most of the remaining 329 children were too young to attend school while in some cases the school was referred to in too vague a manner (i.e. "Girls' school, Ballymun"). We then determined which of the schools attended were DEIS schools. Full details of the methodology can be found in the first publication of our 'Insight' series.²

Findings

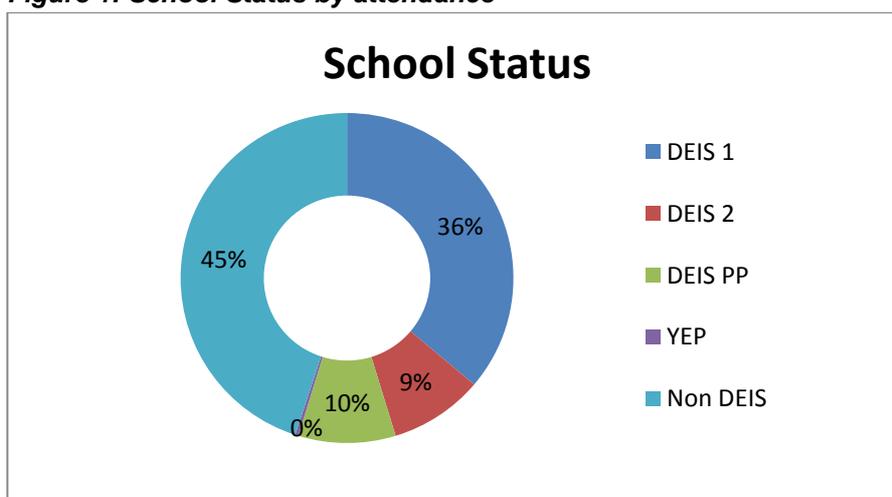
Of the 307 children who were attending either primary or secondary school, and whose school could be determined, 169 (55%) were attending a school with DEIS or similar supports. 45% of the children residing in emergency accommodation were not attending a DEIS supported school. The percentage breakdown is displayed in the chart below.

The table below shows the number of children from the cohort attending each type of educational institution.

Table 1: School attendance by DEIS/non-DEIS

School Status	Number of Children (n = 307)
DEIS Band 1	111
DEIS Band 2	28
DEIS Post Primary	29
YEP	1
No DEIS Designation	138

Figure 1: School Status by attendance



² Available here: <http://www.focusireland.ie/about-homelessness/resource-centre/tackling-homelessness/previous-campaigns>

Conclusion

The above findings, while preliminary, indicate that almost half the children residing in emergency accommodation are attending schools which are not in receipt of additional support services from the Department of Education to assist them in tackling economic and social disadvantage.

This finding has policy implications particularly in relation to how the non-DEIS schools with a significant number of children from homeless families can be supported to respond to this challenge. While Tusla's broader Educational Welfare Service provides integrated services to all schools, the DEIS programme does offer more targeted educational supports. The key measures implemented under the DEIS Action Plan include measures to increase student attendance, educational progression, attainment and retention³ – exactly the sort of supports required by the 45% of pupils that are homeless and attending non-DEIS schools.

To extend this form of support to the 45% of children who are currently outside the DEIS system will either require that criteria for DEIS designation be broadened to include the prevalence of homelessness, or the establishment of an additional policy instrument specifically targeted at the needs of children in families that are homeless.

Given that the current high rate of family homelessness is a relatively recent and hopefully temporary phenomenon, the more appropriate response might be a new dedicated policy instrument, rather than incorporating consideration of homelessness into the DEIS programme. Equally, it is important to recognise that the needs of the children currently residing in emergency accommodation are immediate and that policy responses to their needs must reflect this urgency.

Further Research

The 'Insight' series aims to fill research gaps in the current system and will see Focus Ireland producing a number of reports into family homelessness in Ireland. These reports can be read independently, as well as in conjunction with one another. In addition to this series, we believe that there are other research avenues which should be explored in order to deepen our understanding of family homelessness and its impacts. These include:

Preschool

There is anecdotal evidence of low take up of pre-school options for children who are homeless. Given the known benefits of pre-school education in reducing educational disadvantage it would be useful to explore whether this perception is valid, and if so, the factors causing it and how they can be overcome.

Travel to school distance

Previous research in the 'Insight' series attempted to ascertain travel to school times and distances, although the methodology used was not robust enough to indicate the real issues involved. Travelling long distances to school is likely to have a significant impact on school attendance and attainment, as well as placing further financial burdens on families. However, policy responses should not be developed based on anecdotal evidence. Research involving interviews with a representative sample of families would provide a much needed understanding of the scale of this problem and the issues that arise.

³ DEIS Action Plan available here: https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/deis_action_plan_on_educational_inclusion.pdf

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