

Focus Ireland

Insights into Family Homelessness

Number 1

What do we know about the children and families living in Dublin's emergency homeless accommodation?

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Introduction

Since early 2014, the Department of Environment, Community and Local Government (DOE) has published monthly data concerning the number of families that are living in emergency homeless accommodation¹. This publication includes the total number of adults and children in these homeless families. The publication also includes an analysis by age group of the adult homeless population. However, there is currently no information available about the demography of the children in the families who are homeless.

According to the most recent DOE figures (October 2015,) there are 1,638 children, belonging to 744 families, currently experiencing homelessness in the State. This is the highest level of family homelessness since records began. The problem is particularly acute in Dublin, with 677 families and 1,425 children experiencing homelessness. The majority of these families (63%) are residing in commercial hotels, with the balance in 'assessment centres', and B&Bs. A small number are in specially designed Supported Temporary Accommodation (STAs).

Recent data published by the DOE indicates that while the number of newly homeless families in Dublin fell in November 2015, the total number of families who are living in emergency homeless accommodation continued to rise.²

The current level of family homelessness is exacerbated by a significant constriction in the private rental market, which both causes homelessness in the majority of cases and limits the exit routes for homeless families. Qualitative research conducted by Focus Ireland³, the Housing Agency⁴ and the DRHE⁵ has demonstrated that the majority of newly presenting families and families currently residing in emergency accommodation have no previous experience of homelessness and do not have the range of psycho-social problems which are typically associated with homelessness.

Despite a number of positive recent policy initiatives, the continued shortage of affordable rental accommodation suggests that the length of time that some families will remain in emergency accommodation will increase over the next period. Given the international evidence that periods in emergency accommodation can have negative impacts on the education and development of children in homeless families⁶, there is a growing need to put in place policy responses which will minimise this impact for families in Ireland experiencing homelessness.

The DRHE, the Child and Family Agency (Tusla), the Department of Education and Skills, and Focus Ireland are all seeking to respond to these new challenges

This report seeks to make a contribution to filling the information gap about the demographic profile of the children in homeless families with a view to improving the services which Focus Ireland can provide to these families and assisting and informing the broader policy response.

¹ <http://www.environ.ie/en/DevelopmentHousing/Housing/SpecialNeeds/HomelessPeople/>

² <http://www.environ.ie/en/DevelopmentHousing/Housing/SpecialNeeds/HomelessPeople/#RecentPublications>

³ Focus Ireland, "Come back when you're homeless': Preventing family homelessness through assisting families to stay in their homes or find alternative affordable accommodation" (2015) available at: <https://www.focusireland.ie/files/come%20back%20when%20youre%20homeless%20new%20presenters%200april%202015%20final3.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.housing.ie/getattachment/Our-Publications/Latest-Publications/Family-Experiences-Report-PDF.pdf>

⁵ "Initial Analysis of 78 newly homeless families accommodated by Dublin's homeless services in August 2015, DRHE, October 2014

⁶ Marybeth Shinn, "Long Term Associations of Homelessness with Children's Well-being" (2008) 51(6) American Behavioural Scientist 789

Methodology

For a variety of reasons, demographic information on the children of families experiencing homelessness is not collated in a readily accessible manner. While all households that come into contact with homeless services funded through Section 10 of the Housing Act are recorded on PASS (providing consent is given), PASS only records the date of birth and name of children in families which are experiencing homelessness. Furthermore, this data is not recorded in fields which are readily searchable to obtain an overview.

This study uses the information recorded on the initial assessments carried out by the Focus Ireland Family Homeless Action Team (HAT) to obtain a picture of the age profile and other relevant features of the children in homeless families.

The families (and where appropriate the children in the families) gave informed consent for anonymised information to be used by Focus Ireland for the purpose of informing the development of services. This was explained to the families both verbally and in writing at the initial assessment with the HAT team, at which families were invited to sign a three-part consent 'pack' which included the following items:

- The 'customer consent to share information' form includes the statements that 'It (recorded information) may be used to continue to contribute to the development of Focus Ireland services or for research (using anonymous data)'
- The 'consent form for work with children/young people under 18' includes the statement 'I understand that this information will be used to benefit the development of Focus Ireland's services', and is co-signed by children where appropriate.
- The customers also sign a PASS consent form (which includes a reference to the Focus Ireland-only fields known as HSM or 'Focus Ireland PASS'.

The assessment records were accessed by an authorised member of Focus Ireland staff and the demographic information extracted on site and recorded in an anonymised form. The recorded data was stored on the Focus Ireland shared drive in the staff member's private folder which was password-encrypted. The PASS ID for the parent(s) was linked to each piece of information to allow verification and cross referencing, but this could only identify the family to a person who already has access to the PASS records.

Focus Ireland has been appointed as the Homeless Action Team (HAT) for families by the four local authorities in Dublin, through the Dublin Regional Homeless Executive (DRHE). Once a family is accessed as homeless by the relevant local authority, they are generally provided with emergency accommodation by the DRHE. They are then referred to Focus Ireland HAT who make contact with the family within 24 hours to set up an initial assessment. This assessment is recorded on a standardised form, based on the Holistic Needs Assessment (HNA) developed by the DRHE, and provides a basis for understanding the supports the family will require to exit from homelessness. The information collected at this point includes the names and ages of children who are with the family along with the school being attended.

After the initial assessment, where particular support needs are identified the family may be allocated a child support worker if deemed appropriate. The family are assigned a caseworker, who works with the family to support them to exit from homelessness, as well as to overcome any problems related to their experience of homelessness which present a barrier to that exit (access to welfare payments, eligibility for housing supports, behavioural issues, etc). With the number of families becoming homeless doubling over the last 12 months, a delay of up to 6 months between the initial assessment and the allocation of a case worker had built up at the time of this research.⁷ When the family is allocated a case worker, the initial assessment becomes part of the case management file and the relevant data is entered into PASS.

⁷ This backlog is being addressed by the allocation of additional resources to the HAT by DRHE (with an additional commitment from Focus Ireland itself) to increase the number of case workers in the HAT to eliminate the gap between assessment and allocation of a case worker.

Until a case worker is allocated, the initial assessments are held in locked cabinets in a secure unit. These assessments provide the most readily accessible source of information about a substantial cohort of families which are experiencing homelessness. The total cohort analysed in the study includes all those families which at the start of November 2015 had been allocated to the Focus Ireland HAT, where an initial assessment had been completed but had not yet been allocated to a case worker. The total number of families in this category was 307 who were accompanied by 636 children.

A verification process using PASS showed that some of the 307 families had left emergency accommodation between the time of assessment and the date of the study (1st November 2015). Of 636 children, 39 were no longer residing in emergency accommodation. This corresponds to 19 families. An analysis of their pathways out of homelessness is beyond the scope of this study. 593 children remained in emergency accommodation, while details were unclear for 4 of the children.

The full cohort of 307 families and 636 children was included in the analysis, as such the study covers all families which were referred to emergency homeless accommodation during the relevant period not those where are currently resident in such accommodation. Because assessing how long families remained in emergency accommodation is beyond the scope of this study, it includes all families who presented as homeless, were placed in emergency accommodation and were initially assessed.

In the third week of October 2015, 677 families with 1,425 dependents were residing in emergency accommodation in Dublin.⁸ This figure increased from 331 families reported ten months previously. Over that period an additional 643 new families presented to homeless services while 297 families departed from homeless services. Below is a breakdown of the families from within that cohort who were referred to the Focus Ireland Family HAT. As noted on page 3, some of the families included in these figures may have already departed emergency accommodation.

Figure 1: Status of homeless families October/November 2015

	No of families	No. of children
Actively case managed by Focus Ireland HAT	159	n/a
Initial assessment by Focus Ireland HAT, awaiting case manager	307	636
Awaiting initial assessment by Focus Ireland HAT	187	n/a
Total families allocated to Focus Ireland HAT	653	n/a

The data concerning age, gender, school, etc used in this study was mined from the hard-copy assessment forms, and descriptive analysis was carried out using the statistical software package SPSS.

Within each variable there were differing amounts of missing values. This is due to gaps in the data collection process at initial assessment. Furthermore, the standardised forms are not designed to provide advanced analysis but rather offer a basic demographic profile of all those who come into contact with the HAT team. As such, many of the forms were written in short form and did not include full details of, for example, the school the child was attending. For clarity, in the analysis of each variable, the level of 'missing data' is recorded.

⁸ As reported by the DOE:
<http://www.environ.ie/en/DevelopmentHousing/Housing/SpecialNeeds/HomelessPeople/#RecentPublications>

Data Overview

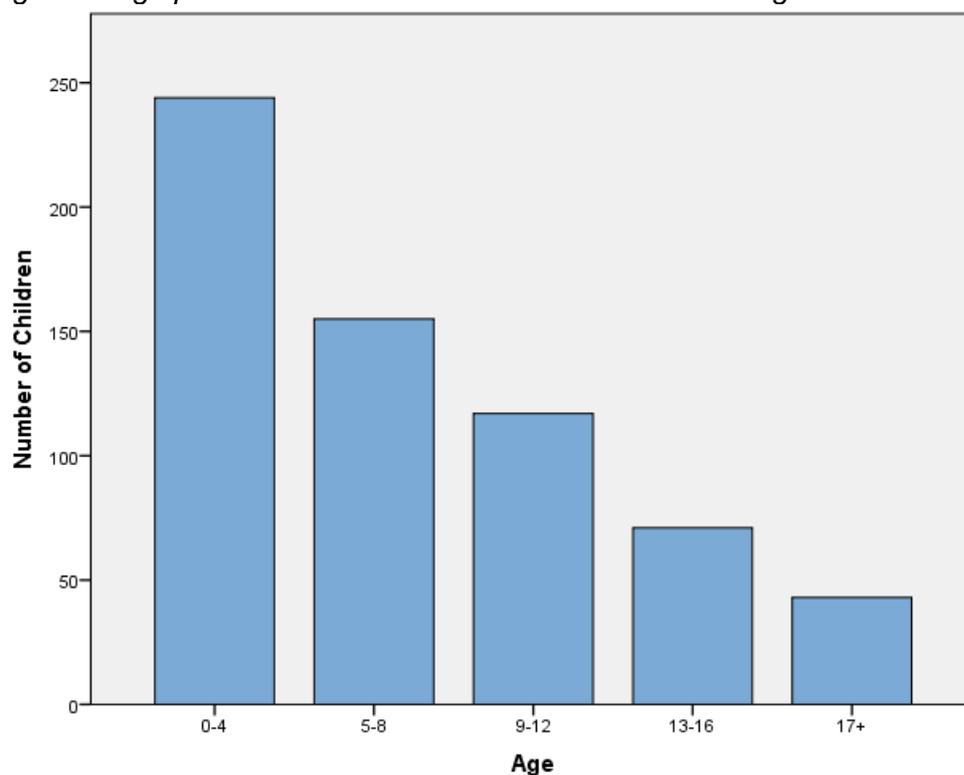
Age and Gender

Of the 636 children awaiting the allocation of a caseworker, 290 were female and 346 were male.

The children were divided into five age cohorts: from birth to four years old, from five to eight, from nine to twelve, from thirteen to sixteen and those who were seventeen and over.

Six of the 636 children did not have their date of birth or age noted. Of the remaining 630 children, 244 were between the ages of zero and four. 155 children were between the ages of five and eight. 117 children were between the ages of nine and twelve. Therefore 81.9% of the cohort were aged twelve or under.

Figure 2: Age profile of children in homeless families awaiting case workers (n=630)



Family structure

Of the 307 families 199 (65%) were single parent families and 108 (35%) families were headed by a couple. Of the 199 families headed by a single parent, the vast majority of these parents were women, with only 4 (2%) of the families being headed by a man.

Education

Preliminary education details for the children are recorded on the initial assessment forms. These include the name of the school the child is attending. Many of the assessment forms also included the year which the child was in, though others did not. Therefore education is separated into pre-school, primary school, and post-primary school. With regards the former, we only counted a child as attending pre-school if this was specifically stated on their initial assessment; we made no assumptions based on the age of the child.

A frequency distribution of education as produced on SPSS is displayed at Figure 3. The educational levels of 244 of the children were not listed on the initial assessments. 41.7% of the children are listed as attending primary school, with only 12.1% attending post-primary school. These figures are broadly in line with what would be expected from the data on the children's ages.

Figure 3. Frequency table of education levels of children studied Education Level (n=636)

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Blank	244	38.4	38.4	38.4
Pre-School	48	7.5	7.5	45.9
Primary	265	41.7	41.7	87.6
Post-Primary	77	12.1	12.1	99.7
Over	2	.3	.3	100.0
Total	636	100.0	100.0	

The data above shows that of the sample used in this study, the majority of children were either attending primary school or pre-school, or younger.

Family Composition

We were interested in assessing how large the families in emergency accommodation were, and whether this had any impact on which families were able to move-on quickest. It was not possible to access the relevant data for families being actively case managed, so the analysis was run only in relation to the families in the cohort awaiting a caseworker.

We found that the vast majority (88.6%) of families had between one and three children. This data can be found in the frequency table below.

We were interested to see whether larger families were less likely to be moved-on from emergency accommodation quickly, the reasoning being that it was more difficult to find suitable accommodation for families with 5 or 6 children. Of the 19 families that moved on from emergency accommodation while awaiting a caseworker, 6 were families with one child, 7 were families with 2 children, 5 were families with 3 children, and 1 was a family of 4 children. However, the small number of families who moved on means that we cannot confidently draw any conclusions from the data. This hypothesis may merit further research in the future.

Figure 4. Frequency table of the family size in emergency accommodation No. of Children in EA

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1	128	41.7	41.7	41.7
2	88	28.7	28.7	70.4
3	56	18.2	18.2	88.6
4	21	6.8	6.8	95.4
5	8	2.6	2.6	98.0
6	5	1.6	1.6	99.7
7	1	.3	.3	100.0
Total	307	100.0	100.0	

Area of residence prior to homelessness

The initial assessment forms also include data on where a family were living prior to becoming homeless. The families in the cohort came from all over Dublin and further afield. Given the spread, we will not reproduce the full figures. Below are the five areas where the largest numbers of families previously lived.

Dublin 15 ie Blanchardstown, Mulhuddart	118
Dublin 11 ie Ballymun, Finglas	89
Co Dublin ie Lucan	40
Dublin 9 ie Drumcondra, Donnycarney	34
Dublin 12 ie Crumlin, Drimnagh	33

Figure 5. Areas where number of children previously residing

Distance to school

Stemming from the information provided by our child support and family workers, we were also interested in gaining some insight in how far children were travelling to attend school. The majority of children stay enrolled in the school they were attending when they became homeless.

The initial assessments detail the emergency accommodation the children are now living in, as well as the schools they are attending. We used Google Maps to analyse the distance in km which the children are travelling to school. While we are cognisant of the fact that many of the families we work with do not have access to a car and rely on public transport, determining the length of time it might take children to travel to school was beyond the scope of this report.

We analysed the distance travelled for 63 children, representing 10% of the total cohort. These 63 children were randomly selected (among families who had stated the school of their children) using an online number generator. On average, we found that children travelled 8.75km to school. One child was residing in emergency accommodation which was 34.1km from their school. However, even lesser distances may prove more difficult if suitable public transport links do not exist. For example, one child was residing 14.1km from their school. However, because of a lack of direct public transport links, if that child needed to reach their school using buses, they would be travelling for over two and a half hours.

While this exercise provided some interesting preliminary insights into the issue of homelessness and children's schooling, it was felt that the outcomes are not sufficiently robust to draw any conclusion beyond those which are already known from service interactions with the families and previous research (Walsh and Harvey, 2015)

Discussion: Broader implications of the study

The DRHE recorded 1,425 children and 677 families as having spent at least one night in homeless accommodation in Dublin during the third week of October 2015.⁹ The cohort who were studied include 307 of such homeless families and 636 of the children in those families.

The families assessed represent the total population of a chronological segment.

The families are assessed and, except in cases of exceptional need, allocated a case worker on a first-come-first-served basis, so that the families in the sample cohort include all those who had an initial assessment completed between January and the first two weeks of November 2015. Those whose initial assessments were completed before January 2015 were excluded as they had been allocated a case worker, while those who became homeless after the second week in November 2015 were excluded because no assessment was yet available. All families who were initially assessed within these months were included.

⁹ <http://www.environ.ie/en/DevelopmentHousing/Housing/SpecialNeeds/HomelessPeople/#RecentPublications>

While Focus Ireland provides the family HAT in Dublin, a small number of families are case managed by other homeless organisations, in particular De Paul and Peter McVerry Trust. However, during the time covered by the research all initial assessments were carried out by the Focus Ireland HAT. As the analysis is based on the assessments no sample bias arises due to subsequent allocation to other agencies.

Given that the rate of homelessness in Dublin is significantly higher than the rate in the rest of the country, there may be different factors driving homelessness, or the processes leading to homelessness may be at a different stage of development outside of Dublin. For these reasons, too much uncertainty may be involved in projecting the demographics of the families analysed onto the total population of families experiencing homelessness.

In relation to Dublin, there may be factors beyond the scope of this exercise which would result in the family composition of families who became homeless in Dublin either before or after this period to be different than those that became homeless during the period studied.

Future areas of work

The study gives some initial insights in to the demographics of the children in families that are experiencing homelessness. Given the nature of the sample, the age profile is fairly robust for all homeless families, and is in line with expectation arising from family homelessness in other countries.¹⁰ This has implications for prevention of homelessness (how can we target prevention measures at families with younger children?? Does the fact that the children are young mean the parents are also, and what policy targeting implications might that have?) and for the interventions needed to reduce the damage which homelessness can do (what supports do parents need to ensure continued attendance at school? What supports to schools need to respond to the challenges of children living in homeless accommodation?).

The report also raises a number of questions with significant policy implications which would warrant further study.¹¹ These include:

School and disadvantage

The assessment forms include the name of the schools attended by the children (at the time of assessment). It would be informative to cross reference this list with the list of DEIS schools to identify the extent to which there is overlap between the two. This would have important implications both in exploring the extent to which homelessness is linked to likelihood of pre-existing disadvantage and illuminating whether the DEIS system is appropriately configured as a policy response to family homelessness. This is a particularly pertinent time for such analysis, given that DEIS is due to be shortly reviewed.

Preschool

The assessment forms gave no indication of school attended for 244 children, with a high proportion of these being in the younger age bracket. It is not possible to be certain whether this reflects that they are too young for any school or whether they are old enough to attend school but not doing so. There is anecdotal evidence of low take up of pre-school options for children of homeless families. Given the known benefits of pre-school education in reducing educational disadvantage it would be useful to explore whether this perception of low pre-education participation is valid and, if so, the factors causing it and how they can be overcome.

¹⁰ For example, in Denmark, 60% of children in shelters were aged 6 or under. In France, 50% of children using homeless services were under the age of 6. Via Feantsa, "Child Homelessness in Europe – an overview of emerging trends" (2007) available at: http://www.feantsa.org/spip.php?action=acceder_document&arg=2024&cle=c71d995931b306211a2eadfd392e5bf1adb56cd&file=pdf%2Fen_childrenhomeless.pdf

¹¹ These are areas which we believe merit further research. We plan to coordinate with the DRHE and other agencies to determine whether any of these areas are already on research agendas in the sector.

Travel to school distance

The methodology used in this report to ascertain travel to school times and distances, while providing some interesting results, is not a robust indication of the real issues involved. Long travel to school times are likely to have significant impacts on attendance and performance for children as well as placing substantial financial burdens and stress on parents. However, there is a real risk of policy responses being driven by anecdotes based on worst cases which may not be representative. A research project 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.

Ethnicity and Nationality

PASS contains information in relation to the nationality and identified ethnicity of the families experiencing homelessness. In the case of couples who were residing with their children in emergency accommodation, the family details are recorded on one of the PASS records, either the mother or father. Analysis of the nationality and ethnicity of the families involved would help illuminate whether these represent particular risk factors in relation to homelessness and may have policy implications for homelessness prevention policy.

To undertake this analysis would involve drawing from information on PASS not recorded by the Focus Ireland family HAT. It is proposed to seek guidance from the Focus Ireland Research Advisory Group, the DRHE and Data Protection Commission before undertaking that analysis.

Family size and homelessness

It was not possible, due to sample size, to draw any conclusions about whether family size has any impact on the risk of homelessness or the likelihood of exiting homelessness. However, further exploration of this issue may have implications for housing policy.

Conclusion

This report provides an initial and exploratory analysis of a cohort of children experiencing homelessness in Ireland today. While our findings do not differ dramatically from similar studies in other jurisdictions, we believe they provide a useful overview of the current situation in Ireland. Our initial findings also provide a platform to develop further research into the experience of children in emergency accommodation and the effects of homelessness on educational outcomes and child development. While the primary goal of policy must be to move these families out of homelessness as quickly as possible (and to reduce the numbers becoming homeless in the first place), we cannot ignore the problems faced by the families while they remain in emergency homeless accommodation. Understanding the dimensions of the problem, and the individuals most affected, will help to formulate more effective policy responses. As such, we hope that this research will provide policy-makers with a more informed understanding of the current situation, and will prompt more detailed and targeted research and policy interventions. We look forward to working with other actors to further this aim.

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Átha Cliath Theas
South Dublin County Council



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Bhaile Átha Cliath
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