

# Homelessness and Poverty



Illustration by Brian Fitzgerald



## HOW MANY?

Every three years Irish local authorities assess the numbers of homeless people in their area, as part of a general assessment of housing need. The most recent national figures from the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government show that in March 2002, there were 5,581 homeless people in Ireland. The majority of these were in Dublin. The Homeless Agency co-ordinated a separate assessment for Dublin. This counted 2,920 homeless people in Dublin in 2002.

The size of the homeless population depends on how homelessness is defined (see [What is Homelessness?](#) below). Many organisations working with homeless people consider official statistics to be inaccurate because of the way homelessness statistics are collected. Official statistics do not count certain people e.g. people using emergency accommodation or other services. People who are homeless may move from place to place and this can also make it difficult to get an accurate count of the homeless population.

## WHAT IS HOMELESSNESS?

The Housing Act 1988 defines a homeless person as somebody who has no reasonable accommodation to live in or lives in a hospital, institution or night shelter because of a lack of home. Different types of homelessness include:

- visible homelessness - on the streets, sleeping rough, in shelters;
- hidden homelessness - in temporary and insecure, low quality or overcrowded housing with relatives or friends; bed and breakfast accommodation; squatting.

## HOMELESSNESS AND POVERTY

Poverty is an underlying cause of homelessness. Other factors, many of which are inter-related, also cause homelessness. These include:

- poor educational achievement
- poor quality jobs or unemployment
- high cost of buying or renting a home
- difficult relationships at home
- leaving institutional care
- inadequate community support services
- ill-health - including mental health
- physical, sexual and mental abuse
- disability
- drugs and alcohol use
- crime and leaving prison.

People sleeping rough, living on the streets or in shelters may experience absolute poverty. This means they are living without proper shelter, food, clothing or medical care. Often, people who are homeless have little or no support from family and friends.

There is an insufficient supply of appropriate and affordable homes for people in poverty and people who are homeless. People who experience poverty may live in poor quality private rented housing, have rent arrears, be under eviction proceedings or have no security of tenure. Housing costs such as high rents increase the poverty risk of people living in private rented houses or flats/apartments.

## WHO?

The majority of homeless people are single adults. The national data from 2002 on homelessness shows 1,405 children are homeless with their parents.

In 2002, in Dublin, there were 640 homeless families. The majority of these were lone parent families. There were 1,140 children in Dublin based homeless families. 56 per cent of these children were under 5

years of age. 89 per cent of homeless families with children in Dublin were in bed and breakfast emergency accommodation.

Men stay homeless for longer than women.

## GETTING OUT OF HOMELESSNESS

A reduction in poverty, more good quality and affordable homes for people on low incomes and better community based support services for children and families can all contribute to reducing homelessness.

Better supports to assist homeless people to move into good quality secure jobs is also important.

The supply of appropriate and affordable homes is a critical solution to homelessness. In particular, there needs to be a better mix of housing options for people who are homeless. There needs to be more housing options for single adults (who are the majority group amongst homeless people) and other groups who are homeless. Rent levels, in the private sector and in the social housing sector also need to be affordable.

A number of national strategies are in place to reduce and prevent homelessness. These include the *Integrated Strategy on Homelessness*, the *Youth Homelessness Strategy* and the *Homelessness Preventative Strategy*. Local authorities also have Homeless Action Plans.

### Further information

Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government [www.environ.ie](http://www.environ.ie)

The Homeless Agency [www.homelessagency.ie](http://www.homelessagency.ie)

National Children's Office [www.nco.ie](http://www.nco.ie) (co-ordinates Youth Homelessness Strategy)

Focus Ireland [www.focusireland.ie](http://www.focusireland.ie)

Simon Community [www.simoncommunity.ie](http://www.simoncommunity.ie)

Threshold [www.threshold.ie](http://www.threshold.ie)

Irish Council for Social Housing [www.icsh.ie](http://www.icsh.ie)

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