



Hidden Homelessness



Hidden Homelessness – what’s the problem?

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 homelessness, curb rent increases or build enough social and affordable housing. There has rightly been much media coverage of the worsening crisis and public outcry at the ever-increasing number of people living in emergency accommodation; yet there are thousands more individuals, families and children who are homeless but go largely unnoticed. These are the hidden homeless.

The hidden homeless do not have a secure place to call home. They are often staying with friends or relatives, doubling and tripling up, as they have nowhere else to go. These housing situations are often short-term and unsustainable, meaning people are forced to move around or enter emergency accommodation. Hidden homelessness is often characterised by overcrowded and unsuitable accommodation. Overcrowding has significantly increased in recent years. Despite the fact that they have no home, are residing in temporary accommodation and experience many of the same challenges faced by those living in emergency accommodation; the hidden homeless are not counted by Government and don’t qualify for many support services.

These are the real stories of people experiencing in hidden homelessness.*



Policy Recommendations

The following policy changes identified by Barnardos, Focus Ireland, Simon Communities in Ireland and Society of St Vincent de Paul, could provide real and lasting positive change for those experiencing hidden homelessness:

1. Help reduce the number 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.

* names and identifying details in stories have been changed to protect anonymity. **cover photo: DieselDemon, Flickr



Photo; Annie Spratt, Unsplash

John, Aoife & Cian

John and his two children Aoife (12) and Cian (7), became homeless after John's relationship with his partner broke down. John temporarily moved his family into his sister's house while he looked for alternative accommodation. They have been living there for nine months now.

At first it was a novelty, John found his sister to be a great support and his kids loved living with their cousins. But as the months went by, the novelty wore off. The family are all living in one bedroom and they are struggling with the lack of space. Aoife and Cian share a single bed and John sleeps on a camp bed next to them. Most of the family's possessions had to be left behind when they left their old home and the children are really missing their personal things.

John has found it very difficult to maintain normal routines. The house is busy and with both children in one room it's very hard to get Cian to bed at an early hour. As a result, Cian is often tired during the week and his school work is suffering. Aoife recently turned 12 - an age where she really needs an occasional bit of privacy, but this is impossible in the current set-up.

Although his sister would never leave John and his family without a place to stay, John feels that he's over-staying his welcome. His sister recently announced that she's pregnant and John knows that she will soon need the spare bedroom back for her own family.

With all the pressure and stress he's been experiencing, John has been finding it more and more difficult to keep his patience with his children. Aoife and Cian are stressed and tired themselves, as a result they act out a lot. John has been really struggling to manage their behaviour.

Barnardos has been working with John to support his parenting, giving him tools to deal with his own stress and also manage his children's behaviour. Cian also attends a Barnardos Friendship Group to help improve his social skills and emotional development.

John desperately continues to search for a suitable home for his family.

Niamh & her daughters

Niamh has two daughters aged 18 months and 3½ years. When her youngest daughter was three months old, Niamh had to leave the home she shared with her partner in the middle of the night as she was concerned for the welfare of herself and her daughters.

On first leaving her home, Niamh moved back in with her parents. She was reluctant to do so as her father recently had to leave work due to poor health and Niamh's mother was financially supporting the household with one low paid job. Although Niamh contributed to household costs where possible, it was a constant concern and cause of stress that she and her children were putting undue pressure on her parents. After almost a year, she decided to leave.

When Society of St Vincent de Paul (SVP) met her, Niamh and her children were staying in a friend's spare room. She knew this was only a temporary measure as her friend did not want to see them

stuck. But Niamh and her daughters were living out of bags. There was no room for clothes or toys. At night, she found it hard to settle her youngest daughter. At that time Niamh was actively applying for jobs to help get back on her feet and managed to secure a part-time job in a crèche.

Niamh applied for social housing, but her application was refused. The Council suggested that Niamh declare herself homeless and gave her contact details of homeless shelters, but she dreaded the thought of her children having to stay there.

When Niamh contacted SVP she felt she had nowhere to turn. Determined to better their quality of life, Niamh applied for a course as a mature student. SVP was able to assist Niamh with her college costs and accompanied her to the Local Authority office to help her get on the housing list. SVP also linked Niamh in with domestic violence support services.

Niamh and her daughters are still without a suitable long term place to live.



Paul

Paul lived in foster care from the age of 14 as his family home was not a stable environment to grow up in. When he turned 18, Paul had to leave the care system. Due to the lack of a pathway into long term, sustainable housing, Paul reluctantly returned to his family of origin.

Paul's mother was initially happy to see her son arrive unannounced at her front door, but within a short space of time the instability of the family situation, one blighted by domestic violence, reignites and Paul is on the move again from his home village.

Paul travels to Dublin where he has a few friends. One of them agrees to let Paul sleep on the floor of his bedroom. However, after a few weeks, his friend's patience runs out and Paul is left without a place to stay.

As Paul continues to struggle financially due to a reduced rate of Jobseekers benefit, the prospect of renting becomes more unattainable. He's still waiting for an Aftercare worker to provide support and guidance, but he hasn't been called yet. Paul is really having a hard time. As finding a place to sleep each night and

making his earnings stretch to last the week become his main focus each day, education has slipped way down his priority list.

No one prepared Paul for the transition from a regulated care system to an unsupported adult life, particularly one without a home.

Paul's life is in serious danger of drifting further into chaos.

Jenny & her mam

Jenny is seven years old. She shares a single bed with her mam in a small room in a house-share. All of Jenny's clothes and toys fit into two drawers under the bed. There is a TV in their room and a fridge for some food and snacks.

Jenny is the only child that lives in the house. The other grown-ups that live there stay up late each night playing loud music and sometimes shouting. There are often visitors coming and going until after midnight. Jenny doesn't like spending time in the living room or the kitchen. When she's home she mainly stays in the bedroom. Every afternoon she does her homework on the bedroom floor while her mam cooks dinner in the kitchen. They usually eat dinner on their bed while they watch TV.

Despite not being very happy at home, Jenny is doing well in school and has lots of friends. She often goes to her friend's house after school to play. She has so much fun playing games in her friend's living room where there's loads of space to spread out their toys. Jenny makes up excuses whenever her friends ask can they visit her house. She hasn't told any of them that she

shares a bed with her mam or that she eats her dinner on the bed every night.

Jenny can still remember when she and her mam had a home of their own. It was a nice apartment with a bright kitchen where Jenny used to eat breakfast every day. They had to move out of the apartment as the building was being refurbished. Rents in their town had increased so much that all Jenny's mam could afford was a single room in a house-share. Her mam said it would only be for a little while, but Jenny has had two birthdays since they moved in.

For the last year Jenny has been going to the Barnardos Breakfast Club every day before school. She really likes eating a meal at a big table and talking with her friends every morning. The grown-ups who work there are really nice and are always willing to talk to Jenny about anything that's bothering her.

But more than anything Jenny just wants to live somewhere that she can eat meals at a table with her mam and have her friends over to play.

Ciara & her family

Ciara's marriage broke down in 2014 and by 2016 the family home was sold, leaving Ciara and her four children (aged 5 – 12) without a place to live. Ciara did not have enough money to buy again, or to even consider long term renting. Between all the children, they had a significant amount of belongings - toys, clothes etc. which all needed to be stored as the house was cleared. Ciara rang SVP for the first time to request help with the cost of storage. SVP agreed, recognising that Ciara and her children were struggling.

Ciara had only her wages and the children's allowance for her family to live on. The children's father failed to make any payments towards their maintenance. Ciara had to return to living with her parents. The chance of a roof over their heads was welcome, but moving back home meant that Ciara was now many miles from where she worked and where the children went to school. This meant more petrol for the extra travelling. Ciara's parents tried to help Ciara with bills and expenses as much as

they could. But Ciara's younger sister and her new baby were also living in the house, so space and resources were at a premium.

Ciara talked to SVP members about her situation wondering how long she could remain living back with her parents. She considered herself homeless and often thought about declaring herself officially homeless, thinking she might be better in emergency accommodation. She felt guilty loading the pressure on her parents and sister, though she felt that she would feel worse if the children could not cope in emergency accommodation. Furthermore, she felt that she did not want to be a burden to the council.

SVP is assisting Ciara's parents with the cost of their utility bills, and is also providing Ciara with assistance through vouchers for clothes for the children as well as zoo passes and cinema vouchers to give them a break away from the crowded conditions. While these supports will help the family cope with the issues arising from their homelessness, their housing situation remains uncertain and precarious.





Sarah

When she was growing up, Sarah experienced significant conflict in her family home which was profoundly impacted by addiction. Sarah's resilience was evident as she committed to secondary school despite her challenging home environment. However, during her Leaving Certificate year, things came to a head at home and Sarah was forced to leave after family conflicts escalated.

Sarah stayed with friends, moving around when she felt she'd overstayed her welcome. She also dropped out of school. Because Sarah left home just a couple of months after her 17th birthday she did not qualify for any Aftercare support. Young people must be in the care system for 12 months to qualify for Aftercare. Sarah faced significant discrimination as she sought to access the private rented sector, unable to find a landlord to accept her as a tenant. Her options were grim as the adult emergency housing system comprised of men and women of all ages beckoned.

Luckily, Sarah called into the Focus Ireland Coffee Shop in Dublin City Centre, it was a visit which changed her life. She was quickly linked in with Focus Ireland services, and when a vacancy arose at Caretakers (a Hostel for young people aged 16-21 years with a history of care) she was able to access stable accommodation. The Focus Ireland service Employment Focus for Youth was able to link Sarah in with a retailer seeking staff, helping her to secure employment. Having regained some stability in her life, Sarah then completed her Leaving Certificate, and in time further education on a part-time basis.

While Sarah was able to access the supports she needed to move on with her life, many young people like Sarah leave the care system and are left trying to survive without these kind of supports – often slipping through the cracks.

Laura, Noel, Barry & Sam

Laura, Noel and their two sons Barry (8) and Sam (5) became homeless when their landlord decided to sell the property they had been renting for the previous eight years. They frantically looked for alternative accommodation, but for the few places that were available to rent there were hundreds of people eager to take them. The family have been on the housing list for nine years but they have had no offers of a house in that time.

Once their eviction date came, faced with moving the family into emergency accommodation, Laura and her husband Noel decided instead to split the family up. Laura and the boys moved in with Laura's parents and Noel moved in with a friend. Their dog Blondy was sent to live with a relative in another county. Over a year later, the family still do not have a home of their own and continue to live separately.

Before Laura moved into her parents' home there were already three adults and one child living in the three-bedroom house. Laura said living in an overcrowded house, away from her

husband has greatly affected her emotionally and mentally. She described the experience as very stressful for everyone living in the home and as a result relationships are very tense.

Laura has watched her children grieve for the life they once had and the family unit they used to be. Their dog Blondy brought great comfort to the boys, particularly when they were stressed or anxious – losing Blondy has been devastating for them. Noel has found it hard to maintain the closeness he once had with his children now that they don't live together. The family try to spend as much time together as possible out of their homes, but there are only so many activities they can do.

Barnardos have been working with the family to help them cope with the challenges of being apart. The two boys attend a Barnardos after school group which gives them some space to play and share their feelings.

Laura has tried to explain to the boys it is not their fault they are homeless, that there are not enough homes at the moment for everyone in the city, but they often ask her why they are not "good enough" to have a home.



Photo: Panagiotis Karagiannis, Unsplash



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