



VINCENTIAN  
PARTNERSHIP  
for SOCIAL  
JUSTICE

# JUST.NOW

APRIL – MAY 2018 JUSTICE BRIEFING

## HOMELESSNESS

### The Impact on Families



The focus of this edition of Just.Now is on homelessness and the lack of housing. The centre pages present facts and figures which help to understand the extent of the problem. However other aspects of the recent work of the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice have made us very aware of what it is like to become homeless. In December 2017 the Simon Communities in Ireland said “it was deeply worrying to see the year close with a record number of people in emergency accommodation”. In February of this year almost 10,000 people were homeless. This is a deeply worrying situation for all of them and for all who have a social conscience. The people with whom the VPSJ were engaged were homeless for a variety of reasons – a sudden and dramatic increase in rent, unemployment, landlords deciding not to renew leases, mental illness of one of the parents, the prolonged illness of a child, family breakdown due to violence, abuse or addiction. Because of the failure to build local authority houses the majority of these families were added to the housing waiting lists and if ‘fortunate’ some were found emergency accommodation while others sought a refuge in already crowded homes of family members.

The following statement of one mother replicates the experience of many other homeless parents “ Life has completely changed for us. We have no home. The children don’t know what is going to happen next. Each of them is worrying in their own way. They should be out playing – having fun instead they ask “Mum is it going to be like this forever?” I know their health and education is suffering. When I get up each day I try not to let them see how worried I am. I feel depressed, helpless and hopeless but I try to keep the best side out. But for how long – months – years?”

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The Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice consists of

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul, The Vincentian Congregation, The Daughters of Charity and The Sisters of the Holy Faith.

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# HOMELESS CRISIS

The VPSJ first focused an edition of Just.Now on homelessness at the end of 2015. At that time the emerging homeless crisis, and the growing number of families and children experiencing homelessness, had been in the news for a year.

Now we are in the fourth year of the ongoing crisis, and the number of people experiencing homelessness has tripled.

By February of this year 9,807 people were homeless. This included 6,052 adults and 3,755 children. This is a shocking increase of 201%, with a fivefold increase in the numbers of children homeless since mid-2014.

In 2017 comments from senior politicians, including An Taoiseach, suggested that these levels of homelessness were actually comparatively low, by international standards. That we were not out of step with other developed countries, and that we should not use phrases such as ‘crisis’.

This article aims to shine the light of fact on such attempts to cast doubt on the severity of the homelessness crisis that persists in Ireland.

To do this we must take a step back and look at the definitions behind the numbers, because as always ‘the devil is in the detail’.

**Homelessness is more than just sleeping rough, it is staying in emergency hostels, in temporary B&B accommodation, staying with friends & relatives when there is nowhere else to go.**

## WHAT IS MEANT BY ‘HOMELESS’?

Much homelessness is ‘hidden’. For instance, cases where people are taken in by relatives, to live with them temporarily, often resulting in an overcrowded situation. Similarly, cases where people remain in institutions due to the lack of a home to move on to, for example women and children in domestic violence shelters.

Homelessness is more than just sleeping rough; it also means staying in emergency hostels or shelters, staying in temporary bed and breakfast accommodation or staying with friends and relatives when there is nowhere else to go.

## HOW IS HOMELESSNESS COUNTED?

When politicians refer to our ‘relatively low’ homeless number, they neglect to mention that the Irish numbers may seem lower because in Ireland we use more limited criteria for counting, than we use for our wider understanding.

Crucially the Irish numbers do not count the hidden homeless. This is not the case in many other countries.

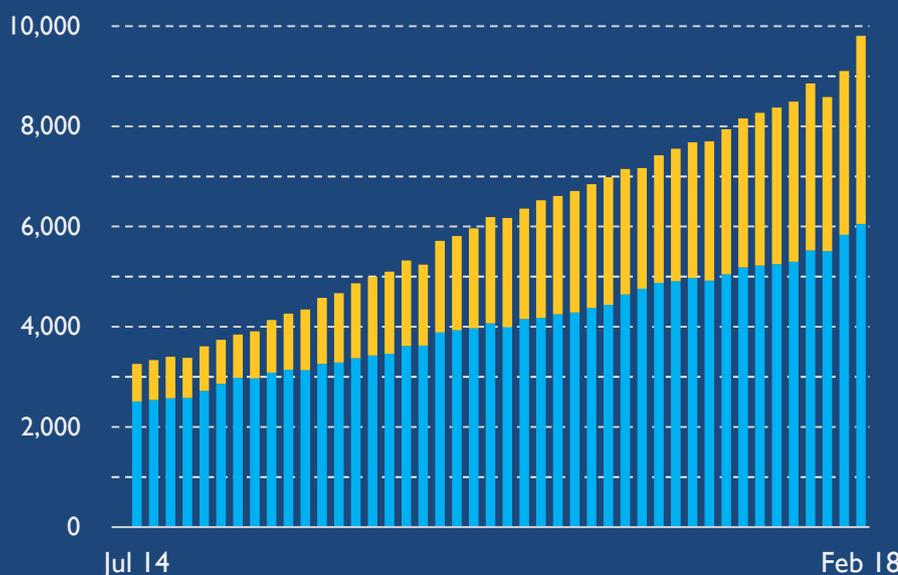
In Ireland the official homeless numbers, as quoted in this article, are compiled by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. They count the numbers of people making use of emergency accommodation services.<sup>1</sup>

Denmark, Germany, the UK, and Sweden, are amongst the many countries which count the ‘hidden homeless’ in their homeless statistics.

Unlike Ireland, they ensure the fuller meaning of homelessness is reflected in the official figures.

Consequently, when Ireland’s figure is compared favourably to other European countries, we must challenge the comparison as being misleading. The two numbers represent entirely different approaches to counting the numbers of people experiencing homelessness.

# HOMELESSNESS INCREASED BY 201% SINCE 2014



**9,104 PEOPLE HOMELESS**

**6,052  
ADULTS**

**3,755  
CHILDREN**

Feb 2018

Child homelessness has increased by 401% since mid-2014

## SCALE OF THE CRISIS

The lack of affordable social housing and high rents in the private sector are crucial factors underlying the ongoing homelessness crisis.

Rents have been rising since 2013. By the end of 2017 the national average rent was over a third higher than it was at the end of 2013.

By the end of 2017 the average rent in Dublin was over €1,500 per month, and over €1,000 in the counties around Dublin and the cities of Cork and Galway.<sup>2</sup>

In 2017 there were 85,799 households in need of social housing. Over half of these households are in Dublin and neighbouring counties.<sup>3</sup>

70,000 plus of these households have been on the waiting list for at least a year, but a quarter are waiting for seven or more years.

Almost 5,000 households waiting for social housing are living in homeless emergency accommodation. These are counted in the official homeless figures.

But over 20,000 of the households are living with parents / relatives / friends. It is likely that many households in this situation constitute a cohort of 'hidden homeless' and give an indication of what the true scale of homelessness in Ireland may be.

## FACTORS BEHIND THE CRISIS

Housing and childcare costs impose a significant burden to those on low incomes. Further factors contribute to incomes being inadequate, these include low pay and the need for a Living Wage, the structure of in-work social welfare supports, precarious work and a lack of adequate hours.

The VPSJ examines the minimum income households need to afford an acceptable minimum essential standard of living, when paying private rents compared to differential rents in social housing.

In 2017, we found that secure full-time minimum wage employment may be adequate for households with one or two children and both adults working, if in social housing. However, households would need to earn at least 1 ½ times the minimum wage to afford private rents.

Larger families, and one parent households with older children would need to earn significantly more to enable an acceptable standard of living and adequate housing.

– **Robert Thornton**, VPSJ

## References

<sup>1</sup> Dept of HP&LG (2018) Homelessness Statistics

<sup>2</sup> RTB (2018) Rent Index Quarter 4 2017

<sup>3</sup> Housing Agency (2018) Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2017

# Reflection and Prayer

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98. If I encounter a person sleeping outdoors on a cold night, I can view him or her as an annoyance, an idler, an obstacle in my path, a troubling sight, a problem for politicians to sort out, or even a piece of refuse cluttering public space. Or I can respond with faith and charity, and see this person a human being with a dignity identical to my own, a creature infinitely loved by the Father, an image of God, a brother or sister redeemed by Jesus Christ. This is what it is to be a Christian! Can holiness somehow be understood apart from this lively recognition of the dignity of each human being?

99. For Christians, this involves a constant and healthy unease. Even if helping one person alone could justify all our efforts, it would not be enough. The Bishops of Canada made this clear when they noted, for example, that the biblical understanding of the jubilee year was about more than simply performing certain good works. It also meant seeking social change: 'For later generations to also be released, clearly the goal had to be the restoration of just social and economic systems, so there could no longer be exclusion'.

*Pope Francis April 2018 – Rejoice and be Glad*



## Prayer for Those Who are Homeless

They are on our streets,  
On buses and subways,  
In classrooms, in shelters,  
In doorways and back ways,  
Lost, invisible, hungry, and hurting.

Lord God, give us the eyes to see  
"The least of these,"  
Your children without the security  
Of calling any place "home."  
That single word would  
Be a gift of the greatest worth,  
A gift they can only imagine.

Lord God, help us remember  
"Home" is more than four walls and a  
roof;  
It is warmth in a cold time,  
It is comfort in a difficult world,  
It is safety for their children.

Lord God, help us know  
To be homeless is a hurt to the heart;  
It constricts the soul, both theirs and  
ours.

As we open ourselves  
To your weary children,  
We open ourselves to you.

Call us all to that place of solidarity,  
Call us all home, Lord God,  
Call us all home. Amen

*Education for Justice, 2014*

Editor: *Bernadette Mac Mahon DC*