

Homeless in Ireland in 1996

What are the facts?

Patricia McCarthy

1996

Homelessness is a major issues in most of Europe, the U.S.A, and a crisis issue in the developing world. Militant housing rights groups, who see squatting as a political act, have sprung up in France and Germany. In Ireland the issue is dealt with almost totally by the charity and service organisations. This is partly because because of Ireland's draconian legislation against squatting, the Forcible Entry Act, and because few people on the left have seen it as a political issue. So what are the facts about homelessness here?

There are approximately 28,000 households on the waiting lists of local authorities country-wide. The majority of these households are lone parents, reflecting the changing social reality of Irish society. Lone parents and the single homeless are especially likely to have housing problems because local authority housing stock still caters mostly for the standard nuclear families, three and four bedroom houses which they are very reluctant to give to lone parents and never give to single people.

The housing crisis is such now that particular groups have no chance of public housing. Single people will not even be considered for public housing and lone parents have a limited choice of a long stay in a homeless hostel or an inner city flat until something suitable comes along. These flats are often referred to as drugs supermarkets by applicants.

South Dublin County Council for example, have 1,000 households on their waiting list for housing. Three quarters of these are lone parents. They build 100 new houses a year at present and have a maximum of 100 casual vacancies to offer applicants. It is obvious in this situation, which is a typical one, that people will have a very long wait for council housing.

Many have to rely on the privately rented sector in order to survive. This means small, poor quality flats and bedsits at very high rents. The health boards pay rent allowance but not everyone gets it. Young people wanting to move out of home often have a lot of trouble getting rent allowance and some do not get it at all, depending on where they live.

A recent survey of youth homelessness in Tallaght found 79 young people had been homeless in the previous year. Some of this was due to the fact that they would not get rent allowance. Even for those who do qualify it is a ridiculous system where the state subsidises landlords who are overcharging for awful kips. The housing shortage means that these landlords can charge what they like and get away with it.

Travellers also have serious accommodation problems. The government's Task Force on the Travelling Community estimated that 3,100 extra units of accommodation are needed straight away to cater for the backlog of families living in primitive conditions without sanitation or electricity.

The housing crisis was brought about by the government's decision back in 1987 to stop building public housing. That policy lasted for five years and the number of houses being built now is still only a fraction of what it was in the seventies and early eighties. While Cork, Dublin and Galway are full of new apartment blocks for yuppies there are thousands of families, especially lone parents, living in squalor waiting for decent housing.

Homelessness is not just about people sleeping rough on the streets. It is also about people living in overcrowded flats and houses, living temporarily with friends and relatives but having no place of their own, people threatened with eviction and people living in hostels and institutions because they have nowhere else to live. Homelessness is an issue for gays and lesbians who can be thrown out of home when they declare their sexual orientation. It is also an issue for women and children who are being abused in their homes.

Homeless people are especially vulnerable to physical attacks, exploitation and abuse of all kinds. Their health suffers badly. Many of the long term homeless in this country are mentally ill and have been discharged from institutions to the non-existent 'community' of the streets.

There is no solution except a major increase in affordable, good quality public housing, accessible to everyone who needs it. The fact that it is not available results in the growing number of homeless people in this country, many of whom are young, some in their teens. It is an issue which should be taken up by the trade union movement. Next to struggles for wages and conditions, housing struggles are vital to the interests of the working class – the people who can end up homeless in this society.

The situation in Cork

CORK SAW over 1,300 families on the waiting list for Corporation housing at the beginning of the year. Only 150 new houses were completed last year, and this year's target is 200. Because of this thousands of men, women and children are condemned to live in overcrowded conditions with relatives or to pay through the nose for a private flat – if you can find a landlord prepared to rent to people with children.

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Retrieved on 7th December 2021 from struggle.ws
Published in *Workers Solidarity* No. 48 – Summer 1996.

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