

In Ireland, it has been possible to observe the direct impact of measures introduced during the pandemic on the number of homeless people, which decreased substantially during the initial phases of the pandemic. These measures, introduced quickly and effectively, are demonstrably feasible and should shape future policy, argue Focus Ireland.

LEARNING FROM THE PANDEMIC: BUSINESS AS USUAL WON'T SOLVE THE HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS CRISIS IN IRELAND



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WHO IS 'HOMELESS' IN IRELAND?

The pandemic has shown that a home of one's own is necessary not only for shelter, but also physical and mental wellbeing. As of September 2021, there are 8,475 people classified as officially homeless in Ireland, however, within Ireland there is a narrow concept of what is meant by homelessness. A person must declare that they are homeless and if it is considered by their local authority that they fulfil the criteria of the legal definition of homelessness, only then will they be counted as such. The official figures only record those in state emergency homeless accommodation, but discounts those that are in 'own-door' temporary accommodation, domestic violence refuges, asylum seekers, and the very many who are 'hidden homeless' and living with family or friends in insecure housing, sleeping rough or living in mobile homes or caravans. The broader ETHOS definition of homelessness and housing exclusion is therefore not used, meaning the true extent and experiences of homelessness in Ireland are not fully captured.

While Ireland has no constitutional or legally established right to housing, it is unique in that official homeless figures are published monthly which allows people working in the sector to track this issue. The numbers do point to certain trends and patterns and have been useful in understanding some of the scale of homelessness in Ireland since a housing 'crisis' was first declared in 2014.

Since 2014, the number of people experiencing homelessness in Ireland has increased by 150% and we have seen a surge in the number of families and children presenting as homeless during this period. Research

on homeless families carried out by Focus Ireland in 2019¹ found that 68% of families reported that their last stable home had been in the private rented sector, with most of these tenancies ending due to rent affordability issues, landlords selling up, landlords renting property to a family member, and renovation. These reasons are often referred to as 'no fault' evictions and are responsible for most families becoming homeless in Dublin, where 70% of people experiencing homelessness in Ireland are located.

IMPACT OF TEMPORARY PANDEMIC MEASURES ON HOMELESSNESS

At the outbreak of the pandemic, concerted efforts were made to rehouse those individuals and families who were already homeless and living in temporary emergency accommodation, into more suitable accommodation. New 'shielding' accommodation was established between homeless and health services in Dublin for the most vulnerable people and rough sleepers. These quick and innovative actions meant that Dublin homeless services had some of the lowest rates of cases and deaths from COVID-19 compared to other European capitals.

1 Long, A.E., Sheridan, S., Gambi, L., and Hoey, D. (2019) Family Homelessness in Dublin: Causes, Housing Histories, and Finding a Home. Available at: <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Research-Briefing-No-1-Interactive.pdf> (Accessed: 3rd November 2021)



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To prevent people becoming homeless during the pandemic, a range of temporary policies and measures were introduced by Government in March 2020 to protect those living in the private rented sector. The two major measures that were introduced were the moratorium on evictions and a rent freeze for the private rented sector. The moratorium, or ban on evictions, came into effect every time Ireland went into a strict lockdown and a 5-kilometre limit was set for all citizens. The ban on evictions prohibited the ending of rental tenancies on all grounds between March and August 1st, 2020. Evictions were permitted under limited circumstances during the 2nd and 3rd lockdowns, from October 2020 to November 2020 and from January 2021 to April 2021 respectively.

The official monthly figures make it straightforward to track the impact of these measures and policies on the number of people entering homelessness. During these months, numbers for homeless families either went down or stayed the same, the only months in which the numbers went up slightly were those where the eviction ban had been lifted. April to June 2020 saw the biggest drop in numbers, 324 for families and 506 for single adults. While the numbers of homeless families had been on the decline since September 2019, numbers fell further between March 2020 and March 2021, reducing dramatically by 39%. The same applied to the numbers for single adults, and this number dropped by 10% during the same period, with the only exception being January 2021 when there was a slight increase for this group.

By the time the last lockdown in Ireland ended in April 2021, numbers for single adult homelessness (n=5899) were at their lowest since August 2018. The reduction for homeless families for this same month (n= 925) was more impressive with the figures being their lowest since June 2016.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Research from Focus Ireland² shows that the protections for renters introduced in Ireland during the pandemic are both feasible, and effective at preventing and reducing homelessness.

² Focus on Homelessness- Adult-Only Households (2021) O’Sullivan, E., Reidy, A. & Allen, M. https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Focus_On_Homelessness-Single-0221.pdf

However, the Government has decided to not continue many of the policies that were so effective in helping to cut the number of people homeless by nearly 2000 people. The idea of a rent freeze has been controversial in Ireland for some time, with successive Governments hesitant to introduce protective measures for renters beyond rent caps due to fears of legal challenges from commercial landlords and landlords leaving the market.

The pandemic challenged our thinking of what was possible and what can be done to prevent the trauma of homelessness from occurring. Incredible work was achieved during the pandemic to keep the most vulnerable protected, but we are now starting to see a steady increase in the number of adults and children becoming homeless in Ireland again. The progress made during the pandemic is now being lost because we have stopped the measures and policies that were working - protecting renters from eviction and freezing rents.

To prevent homelessness in the first place, we need to protect tenants from “no fault” evictions in ‘buy to rent’ properties where the landlord is selling the property. It is common for commercial properties to be sold with tenants not affected and the same protections now needs to be given to tenants in their rented home. More effective measures aimed at curbing rising rents also need to be urgently considered as supply of rental homes is now at an all-time low³ which is driving up cost.

3 Daft.ie (2021) The Daft.ie Rental Price Report. An analysis of recent trends in the Irish rental market 2021 Q3. https://mcusercontent.com/7dc574a8b74605f879edb49d5/files/e06cf4fc-e85f-9aed-21d2-7b0e4da0ab9b/Daft_Rental_Price_Report_Q3_2021.pdf

We need to make sure that the people who do experience homelessness have the trauma of that experience minimised, including reducing reliance on unsuitable emergency accommodation. In Dublin, the drop in family homelessness coupled with an increase in more short-term lets, like AirBnB rentals, coming to the market at the start of the pandemic has led to a significant reduction in the number of families relying on commercial hotels for emergency homeless accommodation. There were only 67 families in commercial hotels in August 2021, down from a high of 871 in March 2017.⁴ However, the increasing homeless numbers and returning demand from the tourist market could reverse this very positive development.

Finally, we need to recognise that there is no ‘one-size fits all’ approach to ending homelessness. The measures introduced by Government during certain periods of the pandemic show us that family and child homelessness can be tackled very effectively by increasing protections for households in the private rented sector. However, it also shows us that there is no ‘silver bullet’ for preventing homelessness. The rate of single adult men experiencing homelessness remained steady during the pandemic as their needs and pathways into homelessness can be different to those of families. Alongside increased protections for renters, we need to ensure that tools like Housing First, a proven approach for supporting individuals with complex needs out of homelessness, are better utilised to address single adult homelessness in Ireland. While there are currently approximately 500 Housing First tenancies in Ireland, and the promise of an increase of 1,200 Housing First tenancies over the next five years, this does not stack up against the current numbers of single homeless adults which stood at 4,447 individuals

4 Dublin City Council (2021) Housing Delivery Report – October 2021 <https://councilmeetings.dublincity.ie/mgConvert2PDF.aspx?ID=34194>

in December 2020.⁵ These targets need to be more ambitious, and a supply of affordable accommodation made available to single people. Greater consideration also needs to be placed on what happens to single adults who don't qualify for Housing First programmes.

While the COVID-19 pandemic brought enormous stress, it also provided opportunities to shake up the status quo. Government and

society came together in a shared vision of protecting and providing for everyone, including those that were homeless, or at-risk. Business as usual won't solve the housing and homelessness crisis in Ireland and the lessons learned from this pandemic should be kept. Ironically, it took a massive upheaval to provide some form of stability and security to the most vulnerable in Irish society and there is no valid reason why these measures should not be retained into the future.

5 Focus on Homelessness- Adult-Only Households (2021) O'Sullivan, E., Reidy, A. & Allen, M. https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Focus_On_Homelessness-Single-0221.pdf

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