

Homelessness: Its Causes & Effects

Introduction

Did you know that there is currently no right to housing in Ireland? We believe that access to housing or accommodation that is adequate, secure, affordable and accessible is a fundamental human right. The Simon Communities of Ireland lobbies for the right to housing to be included in Irish legislation.

The Right to Housing

Current legislation does not impose a duty on local authorities to provide housing to people who are homeless. It does however, give responsibility to each local authority to consider the needs of people who are homeless and expand their powers to respond to those needs. But this can mean different things to different people, resulting in various interpretations and responses from each local authority. It also means that there are inequalities both in the housing system itself and in the ways that the housing needs of people who are homeless are met.

The Irish constitution sets out various rights, for example the right to private property, the right to life, and the right to education. There is no specific right to housing. When we in Simon talk about a 'right to housing' we mean the right to have your housing needs met by the State if you cannot meet them from your own resources. This would require an amendment to the Constitution.

What Do We Mean By Homelessness?

What is homelessness? It can mean sleeping rough, 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. Homelessness is all of these things. For people experiencing homelessness it is about a lack of security, a lack of belonging and often about being cold, sick and isolated.

Why People Become Homeless

There are a range of factors which can lead to a person becoming homeless which can be divided into the following -

Structural Causes can include poverty, unemployment and a lack of quality, affordable and appropriate housing.

Institutional Causes can include people who have been living in foster care and young people in state care, those who have been in prison or in mental health institutions, people who have been in hospital on a long-term basis or those who have been in the armed forces.

Relationship Causes can include people involved in abusive relationships or family breakdown. It can also be due to a death in the family.

Personal Causes can include people with mental health issues, learning difficulties and problems with drug and alcohol use.

Generally it is a combination of these factors that result in a person becoming homeless. For example, if someone lost their job and their relationship broke down, they may have to leave the family home but not be able to afford to rent alternative accommodation.

As you can see there is no one cause of homelessness and as a result there is no one solution.



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Effects of Homelessness

For many people being homeless can mean time spent sleeping rough, living in hostels and/or moving between different types of accommodation. It can mean not having a normal family life or social contacts and a lack of belonging.

Long-term homelessness can impact on a person's self-esteem – how they feel about themselves, and it can mean that that person does not get the opportunity to do well in education or employment. Imagine trying to start a new job or to go to school if you are living in emergency accommodation, not knowing where you will sleep that night. Imagine not being allowed into a café for a cup of tea and a sandwich as you had spent a few nights sleeping rough. Imagine having nowhere private to wash and shave each day. These are only some of the difficult experiences described by the people you saw on the DVD.

Urban and Rural Homelessness

As you have seen on the DVD, there are some differences between rural and urban homelessness. Homelessness, particularly rough sleeping, is often more visible in our towns and cities. However, this is not because homelessness does not occur in rural areas. A lack of emergency shelters and hostels in rural areas means people tend to travel towards the nearest town or city in the hope of getting the support they need. Sometimes these services do not have enough room, leaving people with little choice but to sleep wherever they can. It also means that vulnerable people move away from their friends and family – critical social networks and support structures that most of us take for granted, at a time when they need them most. There are particular problems in rural areas in relation to isolation where there is often limited access to support services, to information and to public transport.

Conclusion

Whether in urban or rural areas, many of the causes of homelessness remain the same. Simon wants to see services and responses in place locally in all parts of the country so people are not forced to leave their area and can remain connected to their support, family and friends.

Sources
www.feantsa.org



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