



Simon Communities of Ireland Submission: Public Consultation on diversion paths for young adults aged 18-24

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Introduction

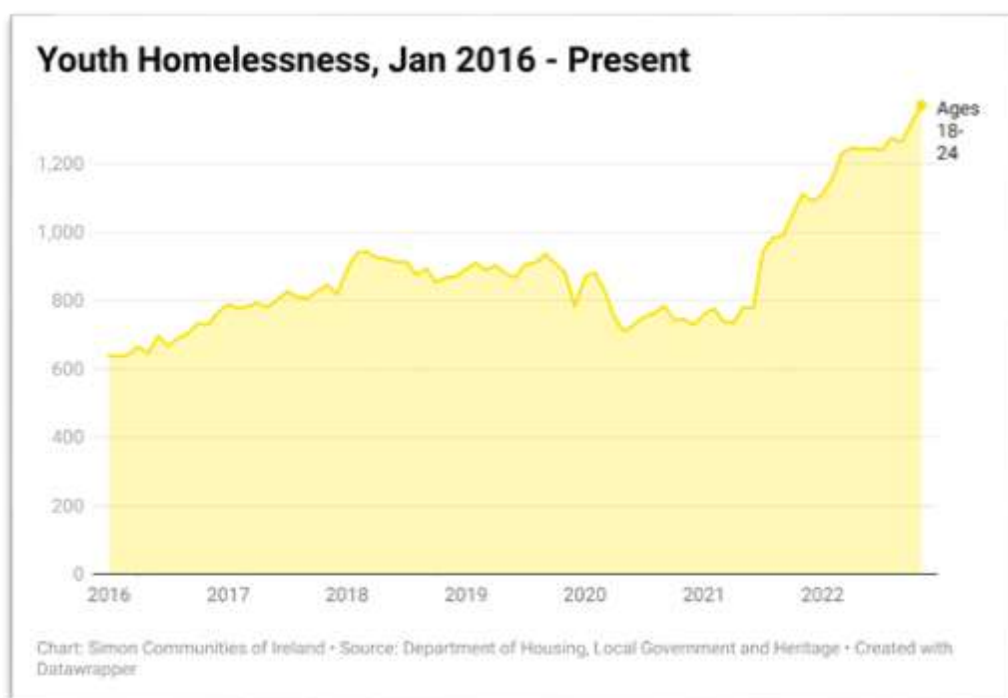
For decades Simon services have worked directly with young people experiencing – or at risk of – homelessness. This work happens through street outreach, emergency accommodation, homelessness prevention, tenancy sustainment, resettlement, as well as youth specific service provisions.

Expanding diversion access to the Garda Diversion Programme for over 18's in an important step and the Simon Communities of Ireland welcome this progress within the Department of Justice. Young people over the age of 18 will have similar but different needs than younger age groups. Accessing secure housing can be more difficult for vulnerable young people as they reach adulthood and independence. For that reason, housing and trauma-informed support are critical if plans to divert young adults (aged 18-24) away from the Criminal Justice System are to be successful. Youth is a time of self-discovery, growth, and development. Experiences of homelessness or living in insecure housing can have a damaging effect during this critical time in life. As vulnerable young people transition from adolescence into adulthood, we need to ensure that housing is a priority. Diversions from the criminal justice system can only be possible if there are adequate and accessible secure housing options for vulnerable young people.

This submission will provide an overview of youth homelessness and the effects of homelessness on young people. Following from this are policy recommendations aimed to support two cohorts of young people: (i) young people coming out of prison and (ii) young people in homelessness who may be at risk of offending and who can be diverted from the criminal justice system. As well as housing options, the Simon Community call for a trauma informed approach and coordination between governmental departments and agencies.

Overview of Youth Homelessness

Youth Homelessness is on the rise. In the last 12 months alone, the number of young people living in emergency homeless accommodation increased by 23.4% from 1,111 in November 2021 to 1,371 in November 2022.¹ This is a record high number of young people in homelessness recorded by the Department of Housing, Local Government, and Heritage.



However, this is not the full picture of homelessness among young people in Ireland. Young people are disproportionately affected by periods of hidden homelessness which masks the extent of youth homelessness as it is difficult to enumerate and not currently captured in official statistics. This includes people sleeping rough, those 'couch surfing' between friends and family, people staying in cars, and so on. A six-year Irish study showed that young people trying to exit homelessness 'demonstrated enormous determination in their attempts to sustain housing and took specific steps to avert a return to homelessness. It is significant that their strategies and actions included efforts to avoid homeless hostels, settings which most perceived as undesirable and stigmatising'.²

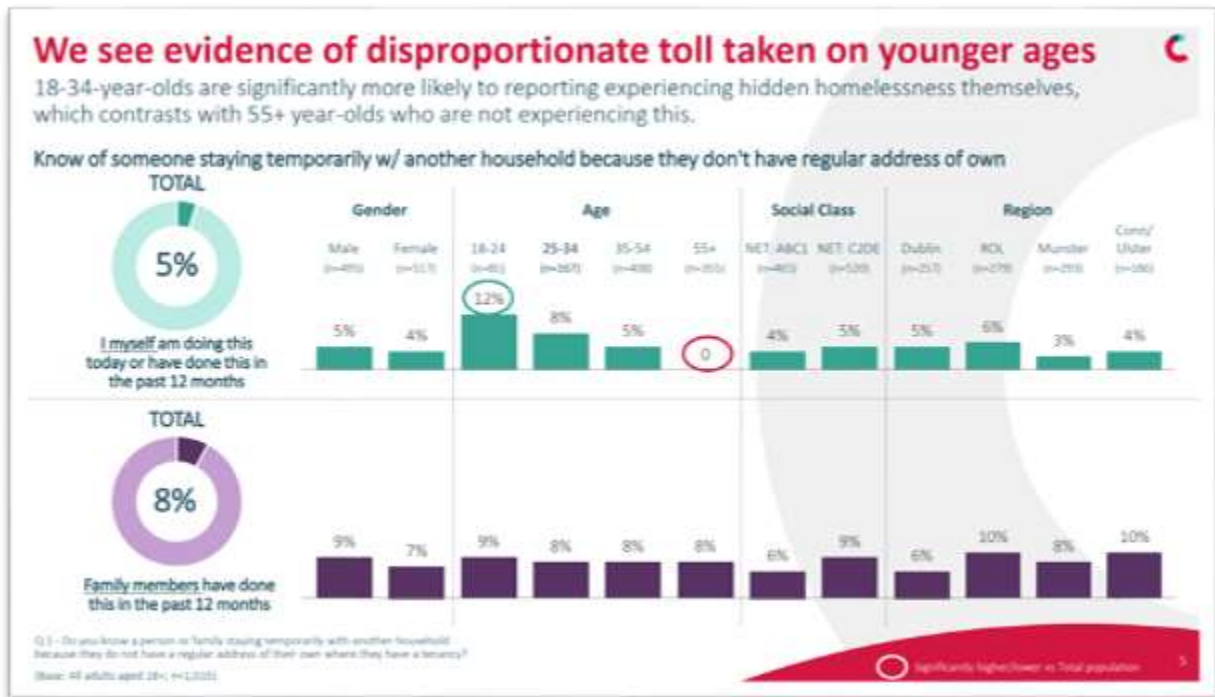
The Simon Communities of Ireland recently conducted a Red C research poll³ looking to better understand hidden homelessness in Ireland. The research showed that of all age groups, young people were most likely to report experiencing hidden homelessness themselves: 12% of young

¹ <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/80ea8-homelessness-data/>

² <https://www.homelessdublin.ie/content/files/Young-Peoples-Homeless-and-Housing-Pathways.pdf>

³ *Hidden Homelessness*, Available at: <https://www.simon.ie/e-publication/hidden-homelessness/>

people aged 18-24 who participated in the poll experienced a period of hidden homelessness 12 months prior. In total, the poll estimates that up to 290,000 people could be experiencing hidden homelessness in Ireland.



The Effect of Homelessness on Youth

As highlighted in the consultations’ discussion document⁴, there is a significant body of research that shows certain underlying factors increase the likelihood of young people engaging in offending behaviours and that that the prison system is not suitable for supporting young people. The document also highlights homelessness as an underlying thread among young people in prison in Ireland, along with unemployment and those who are early school leavers.

	Female (17)	Male (511)	Overall (528)
Early School Leavers	58.8%	79.9%	80.6%
Unemployed	88.2%	83.1%	83%
Homeless (self-reported data)	41%	8.4%	9.5%

This link is not surprising given the traumatic effect of homelessness on children and young people. Homelessness can have a major effect on a person on any stage of life, but children and young people are of particular risk of long-term consequences. Studies show that homelessness in all forms – transgenerational homelessness, new onset homelessness, and hidden homelessness – can have a negative effect on development, learning, behaviour, and can affect opportunities later in adult life including housing security.⁵

An Irish study examining the health of people in homelessness in Dublin and Limerick found that the majority of the 601 people in the study were experiencing mental or physical health problems,

⁴ <https://assets.gov.ie/237234/3455763d-f97a-4e83-b79d-6665cfa4ac17.pdf>

⁵ *No Place Like Home*, Available at: <https://www.oco.ie/app/uploads/2019/04/No-Place-Like-Home.pdf>

experienced increased rates of substance misuse, and tended to engage in risk-taking behaviours with younger people in homelessness most at risk.⁶

A Children's Rights Alliance⁷ study in 2018 examined the educational needs of children experiencing homelessness and living in emergency accommodation. The study showed movement between emergency accommodation and a lack of suitable transport affected school attendance and left children exhausted before arriving to school. A lack of sleep combined with poor nutrition and hunger reduces student's participation and learning potential in the classroom. Changes in behaviour including increased aggression, anxiety, and agitation linked to the stress of displacement also affected education. Homelessness affects children's involvement in activities, their connection with peers, and ability to socially engage with school.

Tackling homelessness for young people allows is not just about providing a roof over their head; it is about ensuring a compassionate transition from teenage years to adulthood which requires support to ensure healthy cognitive, social, and economic development.

Policy Recommendations

Housing needs to be a central support for vulnerable young people at risk of or with a history of offending behaviour. Swiftly removing a child or young person from homelessness will minimise the damaging effects of homelessness on that person. However, to do this, there needs to be a whole-of-government approach, collaboration, and coordination.

Prevent homelessness for young people leaving prison: We need a commitment to reduce reliance on emergency homeless accommodation as an exit pathway from prison and increase emphasis on supported housing type accommodation so young people can be supported to develop the skills they need to desist from criminality. In June 2021, Ireland signed the Lisbon Declaration on the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness and committed to end homelessness by 2030⁸. Part of that commitment is to ensure no one is discharged from any institution (e.g. prison, hospital, care facility) without an offer of appropriate housing. A clear housing route needs to be provided for young people leaving prison to fulfil this commitment and reduce homelessness figures (specific housing policy options laid out below).

Divert young people in homelessness from prison: Research shows a close link between housing insecurity, homelessness, offending, and re-offending^{9,10}. Offending youth and individuals leaving prison are identified as a risk factor for youth homelessness in the newly published Youth Homelessness Strategy. A 2014 report by Focus Ireland examined experiences of criminal activity among young people in homelessness.¹¹ All 25 of the young men interviewed reported contact with the Gardaí at some point in their lives and 10 had spent time in prison. Ten of the 15 young women reported contact with the Gardaí, although none had received a custodial sentence. First contact with the Gardaí was often linked to substance use and typically occurred in the young people's home

⁶ O'Reilly et. al (2015) Homelessness: An Unhealthy State. Health Status, Risk Behaviours and Service Utilisation among Homeless People in Two Irish Cities. P.10. Available at:

<https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/24541/1/Homelessness.pdf>

⁷ Children's Right's Alliance, *Home Works*, Available at: https://www.right-to-education.org/sites/right-to-education.org/files/resource-attachments/Childrens_Rights_Alliance_Home_Works%20_2018_ENG.pdf

⁸ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=24120&langId=en>

⁹ <https://www.bristol.ac.uk/poverty/downloads/keyofficialdocuments/Reducing%20Reoffending.pdf>

¹⁰

<https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/17578041311293125/full/html#idm46228987265472>

¹¹ Available at: <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Mayock-Parker-and-Murphy-2014-Young-People-Homelessness-and-Housing-Exclusion-FULL-BOOK.pdf>

neighbourhoods during their early to mid-teenage years. Implementing sustainable housing policies targeted at vulnerable youth will help to reduce offending behaviour and needs to be central in any diversion programme for young people.

Housing Policy Recommendations:

There needs to be a clear pathway to secure and safe housing for young people with a housing need who access support from the Garda Diversion Programme. Housing is not the direct responsibility of the Department of Justice, but housing and homelessness is very closely interlinked with successful diversion of young people. As outlined below, a collaborative process and actions can enable people to avoid prosecution, a criminal record, to integrate into their local community, and to get a second chance.

Expand and reform CAS to include other vulnerable young people including those targeted by diversion paths: Existing housing and homeless prevention options such as CAS (Capital Assistance Scheme) for care leavers needs to expand and adapt to be more inclusive of all young people at risk of homelessness, especially those who endured welfare issues as a child. This is a housing-led response that has the potential to eradicate the threat of homelessness for many vulnerable young people. SCI believe that there is potential for CAS to be expanded both in terms of eligibility and ambition.

Housing First: Housing First is an excellent housing initiative that provides a person centred, trauma informed housing supports. The publication of the 2022-2026 Housing First National Implementation Plan¹² was a positive step towards expanding Housing First tenancies and supports in Ireland. We need to see the Department of Justice work with the Department of Housing to ensure Housing First targets are increased and that vulnerable young people – including those at risk of offending or who have a history of offending – are prioritised in Housing First tenancies.

Greater Supports and Protections in the Private Rental Market: The housing system can be difficult to navigate for young people who are more likely to have a lower income. Young people who do enter the housing market are most likely to do so through the private rental market.¹³ Rising rents, a low housing stock and few long-term renting options makes affordable, secure housing difficult to find.

We need greater supports for renters, including prevention measures against eviction that will result in homelessness. The Simon Communities were pleased to see the Simon Bill (Residential tenancies (Amendment) (Extension of Notice Periods) Bill 2021) pass second stage in Dáil Éireann¹⁴ and we urge the Government to safeguard its legal enactment in 2022. The Simon Bill, if enacted, will provide increased protection for those facing eviction and deemed to be at risk of homelessness. Homeless services and local authorities are regularly contacted by people who are coming to the end of a tenancy notice period, and are imminently at risk of homelessness, having been unable to source alternative accommodation. In such a case, if a local authority determine a person or family are 'at risk of homelessness', the amendment will trigger an extension in the notice period for that household to allow time to prevent homelessness. This determination and extension should be accompanied by a commitment to ensure that the individual or family affected will be given all available supports to take advantage of the extension and secure alternative accommodation as soon as possible.

¹² <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c49d0-housing-first-national-implementation-plan-2022-2026/>

¹³ <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp1hii/cp1hii/tr/>

¹⁴ <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/bills/bill/2021/159/>

Additional Policy Recommendations:

Adopt a trauma informed approach: Trauma informed care and endeavour to incorporate understanding and awareness of trauma into the ethos, practice and service delivery. This approach is critical when working with young people at risk of or with a history of offending behaviours. Recent research from Dr. Sharon Lambert¹⁵ shows that care and awareness around trauma is critical when working with vulnerable young people, as often experiences of trauma is closely interlinked with substance dependence, mental health, physical health, and serious/violent offending.

Ensure a Youth Work Approach: along with housing and in tandem with trauma informed care, wrap around supports need to be provided to vulnerable young people. Key workers with specialist youth training can provide support into early adulthood including homeless prevention, information and support the development of skills needed to live independently. Given the known connection between adverse childhood experiences and issues later in life (such as educational disadvantage, homelessness, and social exclusion), additional care and life supports need to be available to vulnerable young people who come into contact with the criminal justice system.

Collaboration with other Departments and agencies: A whole-of-government and multi-agency approach is required to underpin the success of the policies that are necessary to tackle both Youth Homelessness, and see strategies to divert young adults away from the Criminal Justice System succeed.

A partnership approach is critically important. A multi-agency partnership that exists between Galway Simon, Galway City Council and Túsla – to ensure youth services are well-informed and young people are well supported – is proving effective in the outcomes that it is having for young people. In particular, we are seeing increased rates of employment in the group. There is further potential in this model if appropriate housing can be sourced. The core principle of a dedicated partnership service has proven very effective.

We strongly recommend that the Department of Justice work collaboratively with the Department of Housing to support the delivery of the newly published Youth Homeless Strategy. Housing initiatives within the strategy are currently in planning stages and young people supported by the Garda Diversion Programme would benefit greatly from targeted measures. Upcoming housing led actions within the three strategic aims offer the opportunity for collaboration to ensure all vulnerable young people have access to sustainable, supported, and affordable housing options.

Conclusion

Housing needs to be a central part of appropriate diversion processes for young adults who encounter the criminal justice system. Youth homelessness is continually increasing, and additional supports and policies need to be put in place to stop more young people falling into housing insecurity. Given the vulnerability of young people in homelessness to offending behaviour, tackling homelessness has the potential to be a powerful preventative action in this area serving to protect vulnerable young persons. Underlying to the success of housing policies outlined above is the need for a trauma informed, collaborative approach. The Simon Communities of Ireland are happy to

¹⁵ Ensuring the Collaborative Reform of Youth Justice in Ireland in Line with International Research and Evidence-based Approaches, Available at: <https://www.ucc.ie/en/media/academic/law/researchwebpages/KilkellyetalEnsuringtheCollaborativeReformofYouthJustice.pdf>

support the Department of Justice in further developing and implementing a system that would support vulnerable young people.

About Simon Communities

The Simon Communities support over 22,000 men, women, and children. We have 50 years of experience providing homeless, housing and treatment services to people facing the trauma and stress of homelessness. We are a network of independent Communities based in Cork, Dublin, Dundalk, Galway, the Midlands, the Mid West, the Northwest and the Southeast, responding to local needs and supported by a National Office in the areas of policy, research, communications and best practice. We share common values and ethos in tackling homelessness and, informed by our grassroots services, we campaign for more effective policies and legislation regionally, nationally and at European level.

Whatever the issue, Simon's door is always open for as long as we are needed. For more information, please visit www.simon.ie

Services include:

- Early Intervention, Homelessness prevention, tenancy sustainment and resettlement.
- Street outreach, emergency accommodation and harm reduction
- Housing with support and Housing First services
- Homeless specific health and wellbeing services (counselling; addiction treatment and recovery; and mental health supports)
- Personal development, education, training, and employment services
- Food banks, drop-in centres and soup runs.

Supported by:



Rialtas na hÉireann
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