

Homeless in Europe

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Increases in homelessness



FEANTSA



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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We would like to give you the chance to comment on any of the articles which have appeared in this issue. If you would like to share your ideas, thoughts and feedback, please send an email to the editor, emma.nolan@feantsa.org

Increases in homelessness

By **Chloé Serme-Morin**, *FEANTSA Project Officer*

Homelessness is on the increase in Europe, reaching record numbers across almost all Member States.

But what evidence can we rely on to back up this alarming statement, and to substantiate this social emergency?

The only available data for analysing trends and the gravity of the situation are found within Member States, but statistical definitions, methodologies, timeframes and geographical scopes differ widely from one country to another. Although the ETHOS typology¹ is a widely used reference for understanding and measuring homelessness and housing exclusion, there is still no generally accepted definition in Europe. There remains fairly widespread confusion between the situation of roofless people living rough and the broader situation of those without a home, who may be, for example, living in temporary accommodation, or in insecure or inadequate housing.

The collection of reliable quantitative and qualitative data regarding homelessness-related issues is vital to know who the victims of housing exclusion are, and to understand the reasons behind their situations. Consequently, specific, adapted and targeted interventions can be implemented.

Nevertheless, the worsening trends throughout Europe demonstrate that there is a systemic problem in our societies: **homeless population profiles have been changing since the beginning of the recession**, and a substantial part of the explanation is now abundantly clear. **Housing markets are pricing out more and more people, and not only the most vulnerable.** Being above the poverty threshold does not necessarily spare people from housing exclusion. In fact, today in Europe, social factors such as being young, having dependent family members, or being a migrant make you more susceptible to difficulties in accessing housing. Housing affordability and liveability are emerging as the most challenging social policy issues all over Europe.

The following articles provide us with the opportunity to better understand some of the national realities and challenges faced by homelessness sector professionals in different European Member States.

In **Romania**, although there is no national homelessness data collection strategy, information is available from other sources regarding housing exclusion, temporary accommodation, and Bucharest's night shelters and day centre facilities. Studies carried out in certain European capitals show alarming increases in the phenomenon, as proven by the results of the two-yearly count of homeless and inadequately housed people carried out since 2008 in the **Brussels-Capital Region**. In **England**, if data collection methods are criticised for not reflecting the true scale of the problem, homelessness trends are closely and regularly monitored: there has been a steady rise since 2009/10 in both the number of households who have approached their local authority for homelessness assistance and those who were accepted as homeless. In **France**, the number of homeless people increased by 50% between 2001 and 2012, according to INSEE, the French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies. In **Ireland**, the total number of people who are homeless increased by 129% in 32 months between 2014 and 2017, family homelessness having particularly contributed to this rise. The devastating consequences of the economic crisis are highlighted with thought-provoking insights from the **Greek** experience of rising homelessness as a consequence of never-ending austerity measures.

Finally, with **Finland** being the only European country where official statistics show decreasing numbers of single homeless people, its experience allows us to claim that a reduction in homelessness is possible if we make a dedicated and persistent effort and allocate resources to and co-operate on integrated strategies. We need to initiate a new way of thinking: a functioning housing system must value housing as homes for people as opposed to an investment opportunity.

¹ ETHOS, the European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion, was launched in 2005 by FEANTSA and is used for different purposes – as a framework for debate, for data collection purposes, for policy purposes, monitoring purposes, and in the media. <http://www.feantsa.org/en/toolkit/2005/04/01/ethos-typology-on-homelessness-and-housing-exclusion?bcParent=27>



Romania – a country of sparse homelessness data

By Ian Tilling, *Casa Ioana*

There is no national homelessness data collection strategy in Romania and the only general social inclusion indicators are available at the national level. Therefore, very little data on homelessness exists, making it very difficult to estimate/quantify its extent. As a result, public policies are mainly based on the results of studies and research conducted by NGOs with homeless people as their target group – such as Samusocial Romania or Casa Ioana. Academia such as the Research Institute for Quality of Life in partnership with the National Institute of Statistics are also influential players and for example, in a study in 2004 estimated that the number of roofless people in Romania was around 14,000-15,000 persons, with 5,000 living in Romania's capital city, Bucharest.

Other official estimates, exclusively from administrative sources (Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration, 2008), suggest a lower figure of about 4,000 homeless people, whilst Save the Children research in 2009 (based on the capture-recapture method) in the cities of Bucharest, Braşov, and Constanţa identified around 1,400 children and young people (up to 35 years old) experiencing homelessness. Similar research undertaken by Save the Children in 2014, in Bucharest and based on the same method, estimated over 1,100 children and young people in Bucharest.

For the first time, homelessness was included in the 2011 national census which revealed that 165,000 people were registered as living in 'collective' housing spaces (shelters/temporary accommodation) or were homeless.

Between 1 January and 31 December 2011, 113,495 'marginalised persons' were registered with the authorities of which:

- 41,085 did not own or rent a place to live
- 161,806 lived in inadequate conditions
- 10,604 were older people without legal guardians or care givers

According to the Romanian comments paper for the European Commission's 2013 [Peer Review on Homelessness in Denmark](#) homelessness was recognised as a reality and it was observed that the number of homeless people was rising.

The Romanian Strategic Action Plan for 2015-2020 within the framework of the National Strategy for Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction for 2015-2020, contains a specific objective to estimate the number of homeless people and to monitor its dynamics. This includes:

- evaluating the number of homeless people at the national level and the main localities, based on a reliable set of data
- setting up a classification of homeless people according to the chronology of this state/status (the time frame on which the person was homeless), its causes and effects and specific intervention needs
- setting up a system for the continuous registering and monitoring of homeless people in partnership with public institutions, NGOs, statistics and research institutes etc.
- including dedicated indicators in social inclusion monitoring systems at national and local level

At present, the above objectives appear not to have yet been properly implemented. It is not known whether the specific objective to estimate the number of homeless people and monitoring its dynamics has been reached, or whether the objective is still being pursued. Certainly, the NGO sector, working in the field of homelessness, has not been consulted on the framework or its implementation.

What can European-level data tell us about Romania? The FEANTSA and the Fondation Abbé Pierre's latest annual [Overview of Housing Exclusion in Europe](#) ranks Romania 24th out of the 28 EU countries in terms of housing exclusion. Romania is ranked in last position in respect to 'overcrowding' (52.3% against the EU average of 16.9%) as well as 'severe housing deprivation' (21.5% against the EU average of 5.1%). The overview also shows that 29.3% of households with dependent children are 3 times more affected than households without children.

According to [Eurostat](#), Romania has the highest rate of poverty in Europe at 25.4%. although the rate of severe material deprivation decreased from 9.9% to 7.8% in the EU-28, the early data for 2016 shows an important increase in severe material deprivation in Romania (+1.1 percentage points). Whilst rates fell in Malta, Latvia, Hungary, Croatia and Portugal, limited or no change was registered in all the other countries that provided early data.

The 1990s saw the Romanian state insist on a massive sale of public housing stock for an almost symbolic price, resulting in 96.2% of the population becoming homeowners with only 4.5% of the total having an outstanding mortgage. The result is that less than 1.4% of the national housing stock (28,000) is registered as social housing.



“Until there is reliable data available, the estimations regarding those experiencing homelessness are, at best, simply a guess.”

Bucharest has the highest concentration of local authority emergency night shelters with 210 beds shared amongst four out of the six administrative districts. In order to qualify for a place, one has to prove a local connection. The municipality offers another two shelters offering 560 and 80 beds respectively, although the director of the largest facility stated that they did not reach full capacity this winter. People applying for a place in these centres do not necessarily have to prove a connection with Bucharest.

As to why this shelter was not so attractive to people experiencing homelessness, a blog – [“Life on the streets at -21 degrees”](#) – interviewed a homeless man and asked why he was not staying in emergency shelter, particularly because of the severe cold weather. He replied that he had spent six nights there but would not return again because the centre’s guards demanded bribes or stole money and other personal items. The man went on to add that many people experiencing homelessness experienced similar incidents and also refused to attend the centre.

Samusocial (Romania) works with people experiencing homelessness in Bucharest through its day centre facility. They report that in 2016, they supported 1,293 individuals, a drop of just over 500 people compared with 2015 (1,800 people).

Moreover, Casa Ioana, a Bucharest based NGO providing temporary accommodation to women and children experiencing domestic abuse and family homelessness reports a small but significant decrease in the number of families seeking support.

Although the anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that the numbers of people experiencing homelessness in Bucharest is falling, there is no reliable data to confirm or refute this trend. There may well be factors that can explain this apparent decline in the city’s homeless population, such as a fall in the number of people migrating from rural areas to the city for work, or a decline in the number of homeless people seeking support from public and private service providers.

Certainly, there is evidence that points to a large migration of Romanian citizens exercising their right to live and work abroad and that a small number of these emigrants end up requiring social support. It is possible that some of these emigrants might have otherwise been tempted to migrate from rural to urban centres but decided to go abroad instead. Until there is reliable data available, the estimations regarding those experiencing homelessness are, at best, simply a guess.



The sticking points around homelessness in the Brussels-Capital Region

By **Nicole Mondelaers**, *Project Manager at La Strada*

THE METHOD

La Strada, the support hub for the Brussels homelessness sector, has been carrying out a two-yearly count of homeless and inadequately housed people in the Brussels-Capital Region since 2008. The organisation counts not only the number of people who spend the night on the street, in parks and in metro or train stations, but also tries to record the number of people accommodated in approved accommodation services for homeless people. In addition to these groups, the count attempts to cover those who find shelter through other means due to a lack of places in accommodation or because accessing these places is difficult.

A distinctive feature of the Brussels count is that it is a shared project, organised jointly by the homelessness sector and all of its partners from related sectors, such as local government, public services and public transport. Involving frontline workers in every stage of the process means that they can continuously monitor the situation and this improves the quality of the data collected.

THE NUMBERS

The count produces a snapshot at a specific moment and gives an adequate overall picture of the situation in the Brussels-Capital Region. By organising consecutive counts (2008, 2010, 2014, 2016) at the same time of year, using the same methodology and with the same partners means the results can be confirmed or contested. These four periods of counting, spaced over eight years, allow us to observe developments and trends, make comparisons and draw conclusions.

On the night of the 7 November 2016 count, which took place before the winter plan was launched, a total of 3386 people were counted, of whom 35% were roofless (in public spaces or in emergency or crisis shelters), 25% were homeless (in temporary accommodation) and 39% were living in inadequate housing (including squats). We notice that the number of people counted, whether they be roofless or homeless, or in unstable or inadequate housing, is increasing faster and faster and has almost doubled in 8 years (+96%). The increase between 2014 and 2016 was 30%, meaning a total of 873 more people living in precarious living conditions.

What is most striking is the 72% increase (from 412 in 2014 to 707 in 2016) in the number of unique individuals counted in public spaces. The number of people living on the street has progressively increased ever since the first count. At the time of the 2016 count, 1 in 5 homeless people (21%) were on the street, while 1 in 4 people (26%) found shelter in squats, with or without a temporary licence to occupy from the owner. This means that almost half the number of people counted (47%) are pushed to find their own survival strategies. One noticeable trend is the rising number of groups and families who set up camp in tents and huts on wasteland or in parks, and do not allow social workers to come near them.

When it comes to accommodation services, the ministers with responsibility mostly set store by emergency accommodation and night shelters, which are free and place no conditions on access. The increase in emergency and crisis-type accommodation, 29% between 2014 and 2016 and 103% since 2008, can be explained by the increase in the emergency shelter spaces of one accommodation service organisation - Samusocial. During this same period, the number of places in longer-term accommodation only increased by 9%. The result of this is that a smaller and smaller number of the people counted end up in one of the approved accommodation units that provide mental health and social support, budgeting assistance and administrative support aimed at improving their wellbeing, autonomy and reintegration into society. In 2016, just 1 in 4 people counted were staying in longer-term accommodation. In 2008, 45% of those counted were staying in longer-term accommodation.

As well as longer-term accommodation units, there are initiatives run by charitable organisations and NGOs, but also by commercial firms geared towards low-threshold accommodation for those who slip through the net of approved public services or who do not wish to receive help and support towards independence. The staff in these organisations are not adequately trained to support people who are often very vulnerable, so there are a lot of questions around their work. The number of initiatives by faith-based organisations is underestimated and this does not reflect the role they play in accommodating homeless people and those in inadequate housing. These alternative services accommodate 15% of the people counted.



“The results of the counts clearly show how blocking access to social rights and adding conditions to obtaining welfare payments and social assistance exclude more and more people.”

BRUSSELS POLICY ON HOMELESSNESS AND INADEQUATE HOUSING

The policy position on humanitarian action in emergency accommodation developed by successive delegated ministers is even clearer if we take into account their growing investment in winter shelters. In 2008, around 200 extra places were made available during the cold season, from November to March. The 2016-2017 edition of the regional winter plan covers the period from 14 November 2016 to 2 May 2017 and includes three elements: night shelters, day centres and outreach teams aiming to meet people living on the streets day and night and to signpost them towards the winter shelters. Voluntary organisations such as Doctors of the World provide medical checkups to those people using the service. An initiative running 8 day centres, the 86,400 project, was funded as a result of the winter plan.

Responsibility for running the winter shelters was given to Samusocial which, as well as organising the outreach teams, runs four large accommodation centres with a maximum capacity of 1,350 places (which doubles the number of places in Brussels during this time period). The Brussels government subsidises three of these establishments. The national authorities fund the fourth centre, which has a capacity of 330 places and accommodates undocumented male migrants or men with uncertain residence status.

If we compare the results of the counts *before* winter and *during* the 2016-2017 winter plan, we notice around 200 fewer people were counted in public spaces and about a hundred fewer people were counted in squats after the plan. A few of those using the winter shelters were probably living in other unstable living arrangements before the winter, such as with friends or family, or in other types of hidden homelessness. Others come from elsewhere, attracted by the available spaces in homeless accommodation, or signposted by local authorities that prefer not to invest in their own accommodation. It is also worth noting that a number of people find shelter thanks to their family connections. On the night of the 6 March count, 1013 people stayed in the winter shelter, of whom 67 were children.

Each year when winter shelters close, the difficult situation of families who suddenly find themselves on the street is brought into the public eye, with the result that the number of places in government emergency shelters is increased. On 4 May 2017, the authorities announced that one of the temporary shelters would stay open, with 200 permanent places provided, which would increase to 400 spaces following renovation.

UNDERMINING SOCIAL RIGHTS

The results of the counts clearly show how blocking access to social rights and adding conditions to obtaining welfare payments and social assistance excludes more and more people. The health and social care research centre *«has observed a switch from a social assistance approach that is inclusive, supportive and aims to ensure the right to basic access to care and wellbeing for everyone; to support that is only available to those who comply fully, allowing savings to be made on the back of services not used by the ‘deviants who have only themselves to blame’, who are often among the most vulnerable people in our society – and who end up being punished for their vulnerability.»*¹¹ One of the consequences of this is that a few groups amongst the most vulnerable people, such as those who do not have a valid residence permit, are not included in administrative data, in public service routes, or in access to welfare payments. Their only option is to rely on voluntary assistance. Other survival strategies, such as begging, undeclared work and squatting in empty buildings are seen as a nuisance and are criminalised.

In the 2016 edition of the Brussels report on the state of poverty, the health and social care research centre studied the issue of non-take up of social rights and the underuse of social welfare payments in the Brussels-Capital Region. It would seem that the successive legislative changes and the transfer of responsibilities from national level to local authorities and regions does not only disadvantage claimants, but social workers too, who are also struggling with a role that is openly targeted at checking up on people and no longer at being a social care professional. They too get swamped in ever more complex administrative procedures and in added conditions on access that result in arbitrary judgments.

In the Brussels-Capital Region, the gap between incomes and the cost of rents is steadily increasing²² and 1/3 of the population are living on an income that is below the poverty line (not including homeless people and people without a valid residence permit). These trends make the consequences of this policy clearly visible. For more and more people and single-parent families, housing on the private rental market is no longer affordable. Social housing does not provide any solutions. There have been more people on the waiting list than there are housing units for some years now. The key challenge to take up must therefore be to tackle the housing crisis by ensuring access to social assistance, to health care, to employment or to unemployment benefits, and to education and training.

- 1 Observatoire de la santé et du social de Bruxelles-Capitale (2017). Aperçus du non-recours aux droits sociaux et de la sous-protection sociale en Région bruxelloise, Cahier thématique du Rapport sur l'état de la pauvreté en Région de Bruxelles-Capitale 2016, Commission communautaire commune, Bruxelles. [Brussels-Capital health and social care research centre (2017). Insights into non-take up of social rights and underuse of social protection in the Brussels region, Thematic guide to the report on the state of poverty in the Brussels-Capital Region, 2016, Joint Community Commission, Brussels.]
- 2 Observatoire des loyers, Société du logement de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale, Bruxelles. [Rents monitoring unit, Brussels-Capital Region housing authority, Brussels].



Why are homelessness levels in England continuing to rise?

By **Francesca Albanese**¹, *Research Manager, Crisis UK*

All forms of homelessness that are recorded in England have increased at varying rates since 2009/10. Whilst there are issues with under-recording levels of homelessness, especially amongst less visible forms such as people living in squats or in dangerous and vulnerable situations, official statistics are able to illustrate trends over time. The table below shows the sharpest increase has occurred with the most acute form of homelessness – rough sleeping – which has more than doubled in the past six years.² In England, levels of rough sleeping are measured through a one-night snapshot count or estimate, and whilst widely criticised for not reflecting the true scale of the problem, it is a useful indicator of trends over time. Examining the regional picture in England, London accounts for the largest number of rough sleepers – around a quarter of the total number over this period – with the south of England seeing one of the biggest increases between 2010 and 2016, with a rise of 166% in that period (Fitzpatrick et al 2017).

After a steep decline in the level of statutory homelessness³ recorded in England since 2003, there has been a steady rise since 2009/10 in both the number of households who have approached their local authority for homelessness assistance (29% increase) and those who were accepted as homeless (44% increase).⁴ The reduction in levels between 2003/04 and 2009/10 can be explained by government policy

which introduced a ‘Housing Options’ approach to addressing homelessness in England. Local authorities have since shifted their resources to focus on prevention activities and informal advice and assistance which are recorded as informal actions outside of the statutory framework (referred to as prevention and relief cases). Despite this change there has still been a noticeable rise in statutory homelessness post 2009 and reasons for this are set out in the next section. Again regional differences are borne out through the data. The north of England has seen a slight decrease since 2009/10 (6%) whilst in London the levels of statutory homelessness have more than doubled. A direct result of the heightened housing market pressures experienced in the south of England.

The homelessness prevention and relief activity demonstrates a slightly different pattern. Whilst there was a steady increase in prevention and relief cases between 2009/10 and 2013/14, this has since slightly dropped in the past two years (by 7%). Evidence suggests that this decline is unlikely to be a consequence of less demand for services. A survey of local authorities in England in 2016 found that two thirds said the overall flow of homeless people had increased (Fitzpatrick et al 2017), funding constraints and service capacity is most likely to explain why prevention and relief caseloads have decreased.

Table 1: Changes in levels of homelessness in England 2009/10 to 2015/16

SUMMARY OF HOMELESSNESS STATISTICS	2009/10	2014/15	2015/16	% CHANGE 2014/15-2015/16	% CHANGE 2009/10-2015/16
Rough sleeping in England – snapshot (1)	1,768	3,569	4,134	16	134
Rough sleeping in London – annual (2)	3,673	7,581	8,096	7	120
Local authority statutory homelessness cases – annual (3)	89,120	112,350	114,780	2	29
Local authority statutory homelessness acceptances – annual (4)	40,020	54,430	57,740	6	44
Local authority homelessness prevention and relief cases (5)	165,200	220,800	213,300	-3	29
Total local authority homelessness case actions (6)	205,220	275,230	271,050	-2	32

Taken from Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wilcox, S. and Watts, B. (2017) The homelessness monitor: England 2017, Crisis and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation https://www.crisis.org.uk/media/236823/homelessness_monitor_england_2017.pdf Sources: (1)-(6) Department for Communities and Local Government; (2) Greater London Authority.

¹ Francesca.Albanese@crisis.org.uk

² Department for Communities and Local Government, Table 1: Street counts and estimates of rough sleeping in England, Autumn1 2010 - 2016

³ Statutory homelessness refers to households who seek help with housing on the grounds of being currently or imminently without accommodation and are assessed by local authorities under provisions of the Housing Act 1996.

⁴ Department for Communities and Local Government, Table 770: Decisions taken by local authorities under the 1996 Housing Act on applications from eligible households England, 1998 Q1 to 2016 Q4



WHAT FACTORS ARE DRIVING THE INCREASE?

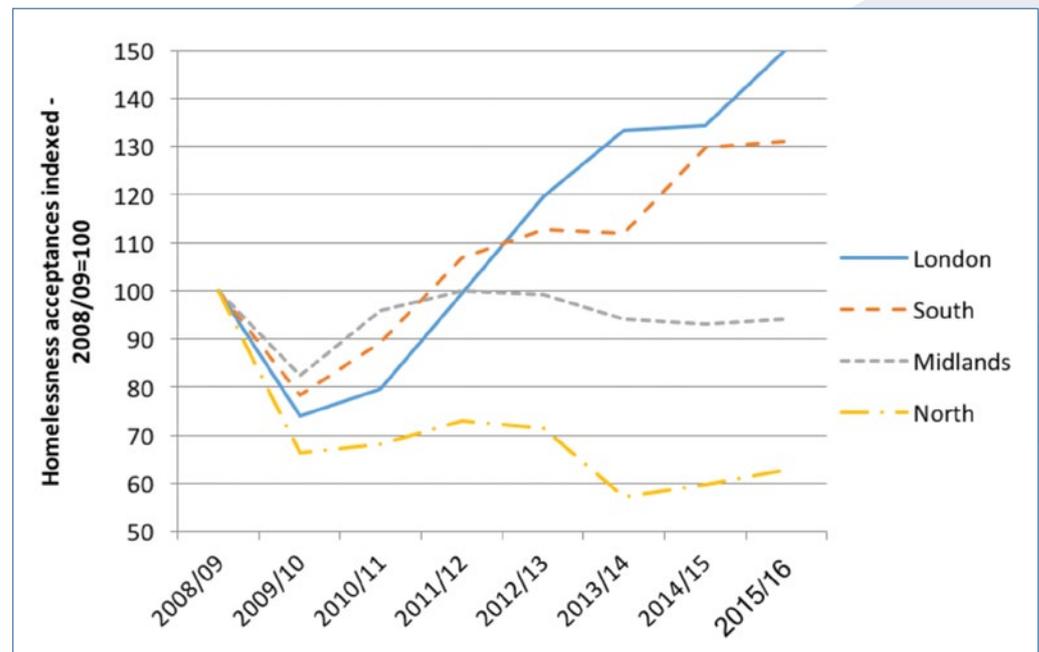
Statutory homelessness policy has diverged significantly across the UK since devolution in 1999 and is a contributing factor in explaining the variation in the levels and patterns of homelessness. Compared to the other UK nations, England has experienced a more pronounced increase in homelessness. The patterns seen in England in the past six years can be attributed more to policy factors, particularly in relation to welfare reform, than the economic context in itself. Two thirds of local authorities in England reported that the 2010 to 2015 welfare reforms had increased homelessness in their area. London local authorities were more likely to cite this than those in northern England (93% compared to 49%, respectively (Fitzpatrick et al 2016)) – again reflecting the regional disparities across England and the differing impact of policy.

There have been a series of welfare changes across Great Britain since 2010 with some of the most severe reforms focused on restrictions on housing benefit in the private rented sector (PRS) – referred to as ‘Local Housing Allowance’ (LHA). The initial

changes introduced in 2011 set the LHA rates at the 30th percentile of market levels rather than the median which had previously been the case. Maximum caps were also applied, which further reduced the rates in inner London, and from 2016/17 LHA rates have been frozen for four years. The accumulation of these changes have made it more difficult for low income households to access the private rented sector and impacted on affordability.

These restrictions in the housing market and welfare benefit changes coincided with increased use of the PRS to resolve homelessness by statutory and voluntary agencies as social housing supply has declined and housing associations have become more restricted in their policies to let to homeless people. At the same time, the statutory homelessness statistics have recorded a significant increase in the ending of an assured shorthold tenancy (the main type used in the PRS) being the main cause of homelessness amongst households who were accepted as homeless. Since 2009/10 the number of cases has quadrupled, indicating that the PRS is both a cause and solution of homelessness exacerbated by welfare reform changes (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Change in the number of households made homeless due to immediate causes, 2008-09



Source: Fitzpatrick, S., Pawson, H., Bramley, G., Wilcox, S. and Watts, B. (2017) The homelessness monitor: England 2017, Crisis and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation



Other policy decisions which have impacted on homelessness levels include significantly reduced local authority budgets. Whilst there has been an increase of 13% in local authority spending on homelessness since 2010, local authorities have reduced their Supporting People programmes by 67% in real terms which provided large resources for support services for single homeless people.

More widely, access to housing for homeless people has become very problematic across the social and private rented sector. This coupled with a reduction in hostel accommodation has put further pressure on people accessing and sustaining housing. The 52% increase in temporary accommodation placements since 2010/11 is a further indication of stresses in the housing market and the impact they have on homeless households.

WILL THE TREND CONTINUE?

Without substantial investment in genuinely affordable housing supply there will continue to be difficulties for households experiencing homelessness to access suitable and sustainable housing options. The impact of welfare reform changes are also set to continue, and accumulation of the benefit changes in place and those introduced in the near future will reduce the incomes of poor households in and out of work by £25 billion by 2020/21 (Fitzpatrick et al 2017, Beatty and Fothergill 2016). However new homelessness legislation will come into force in England over

the next 12 months. The Homelessness Reduction Act, whilst not designed to address the structural drivers of homelessness outlined in this article, will place a legal duty on local authorities to prevent homelessness in their area, diverting more resources to early intervention. This opens up opportunities for local authorities to work more closely with local partners including private and social landlords to address challenges in the housing market and look at the way they design and commission services to address the problem upstream.

This article draws on data from the Crisis and Joseph Rowntree Foundation Homelessness Monitor series available at: <https://www.crisis.org.uk/ending-homelessness/homelessness-knowledge-hub/homelessness-monitor/>

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“Without substantial investment in genuinely affordable housing supply there will continue to be difficulties for households experiencing homelessness to access suitable and sustainable housing options.”



Investing in solidarity as a way to combat homelessness!

By **Laura Slimani & François Bregou**, *Fédération des Acteurs de la Solidarité*

A 2012 study by the French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies (INSEE) found that there are 140,000 homeless people in France.¹ That is 50% more than 10 years ago, and this number is probably an underestimation, with the effect of the 2008 economic crisis on the exacerbation of situations of exclusion likely not having reached its climax. It is estimated that 800,000 people have sunk into poverty over the past 9 years. This does not include the effects of the migrant crisis which has been affecting European countries since 2014.

The latest report by the national 115 monitor, supported by the French Federation of Stakeholders in Solidarity,² brings to light a 7% rise in the number of unique homeless individuals who have called the 115 hotline³ between Winter 2015-2016 and Winter 2016-2017. Young people aged 18-24 (+ 12 %), families (+ 12 %) and single men (+ 6%) are the most affected.

These figures articulate a change in our society, our economy and our labour market and the difficulty public policy – be it employment, housing, asylum or health – has in responding adequately to this new set of circumstances. They show how our model of social protection is unable to stop significant numbers of people facing economic instability from falling into exclusion, especially when they come up against difficult life events (loss of a job, illness, relationship breakdown).

To deal with the chronic rise in the number of homeless people, the French government has increased the number of places in accommodation units to 120,000 – an increase of 40,000 places in 5 years. This supply is still below required levels, though, and is not adapted to people's needs. Each year, the accommodation made available is of poorer and poorer quality and more often than not on a temporary basis and without social or health care support. This mechanism consequently traps many people into rough sleeping. The phenomenon of homelessness particularly affects young people aged 18-24, who occupy 25% of places in accommodation for homeless people, according to a study carried out by the Federation of Stakeholders in Solidarity.⁴ Young people are over-represented in these accommodation units, while this age group makes up 15% of the general population. Who are these young people and what are the reasons that push them into life on the street and into homeless accommodation? Most of them left the school system at 16 with no qualifications and have not acquired

basic skills (reading, writing and arithmetic). They are thought of as 'drop-outs'. Under these circumstances, it is difficult for them to access the labour market, as nowadays it is almost impossible to find a job which does not require qualifications. Getting back into education or taking on an apprenticeship also proves difficult for these young people. The French system is not designed to allow people to take up this kind of education again at their own pace, with general social support provided to tackle any possible problems related to housing or health. Access to training pre-supposes that the person has the means to pay for daily needs: paying rent, paying for transport, etc. And yet welfare benefits are only available to those over 25 (most notably the guaranteed minimum income (RSA) which enables people without means to have a minimum level of income that varies according to household composition). To compensate for these difficulties, in 2015 France put in place a system called the "youth guarantee". This grants 16 to 25 year-olds who are very vulnerable in the labour market with funding and support to access employment. This is progress but it is still inaccessible to the most vulnerable young people, including homeless people, not least because of the temporary nature of this system which does not give the necessary guarantees to help them access housing. But of course having a place to live is often a first step to finding long-term employment.

A number of young people were "put into care" when they were children (taken away from their family following a court order because they were in danger) and/or have experienced family problems. The practice of placing children in foster families or children's homes stops at the age of 18, the age at which the young person is supposed to be independent. This is clearly not the case for the majority of these young people who consequently end up on the street.

Someone can also end up on the street when they lose their job. This risk is all the greater when the period of unemployment is prolonged. It of course means that their money gets used up and, as a consequence, they become less and less able to meet the expenses of day-to-day life: paying rent and various bills, etc. Furthermore, the loss of confidence in their abilities, the loss of self-esteem and repercussions on their health are all factors that make returning to work even harder.

1 Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques, *Logement des sans domicile en 2012*, INSEE Première, July 2013

2 Fédération des Acteurs de la Solidarité, *Baromètre du 115 et enquête flash maraudes/Samu sociaux – Synthèse hivernale 2016-2017*, May 2017 - www.federationsolidarite.org

3 A telephone service for homeless people called "115" that offers immediate telephone access, at any time, to a listening ear as a first port of call for people without a home to talk about their situation and to be offered a place in homeless accommodation, based on available spaces and their needs.

4 Fédération des Acteurs de la Solidarité, *Les jeunes en errance sociale*, June 2006



As the number of long-term workless people continues to increase, employment policy is not able to adapt and respond to these challenges. Employment training is still not accessible enough to people who are out of work, especially those who are long-term unemployed (out of work for more than a year), to allow them to gain new skills and make returning to work easier. Employment policy cannot adequately remove barriers to accessing work either. For example, people who are out of work are faced with the problem of finding childcare for their children. Accessing training or work can mean they need to find childcare solutions very quickly, which the childcare system does not always allow for, in a context where there are not enough childcare places for young children to meet families' needs.

Clearly, the increase in homelessness is strongly correlated with the housing situation. France has had a housing crisis for several decades, characterised by insufficient supply but also by the persistent disparity between the level of rents and the levels of household resources.

There are now 1.8 million people on the waiting list for social housing in the country. Three-quarters of them have financial resources that make them eligible for the lowest-rent social housing.

This is compounded by the increase in evictions for rent arrears. This affects 130,000 households per year because of high rent costs, the unsuitable housing supply and the inadequacy of preventive policy and mechanisms to protect against risks on the rental market (allowing arrears to be managed). These place high demands on people and squeeze those with low or irregular incomes out of access to housing.

Against this backdrop, even households where all members are employed may be unable to find housing or find themselves unable to pay the rent and service charges when they are faced with an unexpected expense. It is also estimated that a third of those staying in homeless accommodation are in regular employment. Work is no longer enough to guarantee access to decent housing.

Lastly, the increase in the number of homeless people also has its origins in the growth in the number of migrants fleeing their countries of origin where they are faced with war, persecution and poverty. Like most

European countries, France has been unable to implement an asylum policy that meets migrants' needs. The asylum-seeker reception system has shown itself not to be up to the challenge of responding to this growth, despite an increase in the number of places in dedicated accommodation centres over the past few years. This system has turned out to be out of kilter with the need for these asylum seekers' future integration, as they are more often seen as future failed asylum seekers than as people who are destined to integrate into French society and be part of its richness. Consequently, even when people are granted leave to remain, when they leave the centres they may not be adequately equipped to integrate into French society and so end up homeless. The latest legislative reforms and certain French court rulings doom failed asylum seekers with or without children to life on the streets or confines them to special centres and refuses them access to accommodation, believing that they should be deported. This rarely happens, however. This situation is particularly disgraceful when it affects families with young children, who suffer serious consequences for their development.

This situation is not inevitable. The Federation of Stakeholders in Solidarity published a catalogue of proposals⁵ for the Presidential candidates. Putting these in place would, among other things, enable a sustainable reduction in homelessness. The Federation therefore calls on the government to put in place a national policy of direct access to housing for every group without a home based on Housing First principles that have demonstrated their added value in numerous European countries.

To do that, we must actively leave behind this short-term approach that focuses more on giving people shelter than on supporting them to make a sustainable exit from this situation. But we also have to work to stop people in fragile economic and social situations from falling into exclusion – starting in childhood through policies that focus on prevention and reducing economic, educational and social inequality.

Housing is an essential resource that conditions access to fundamental rights like health, employment and citizenship.

Combating homelessness needs real political will and the belief that solidarity is an investment for the whole of society and not an unnecessary expense.

“Housing is an essential resource that conditions access to fundamental rights like health, employment and citizenship.”



The Growth of Family Homelessness in Ireland

By **Wayne Stanley**

The total number of people who are homeless has increased by 136% in Ireland in 33 months¹. This deepening homeless crisis has been noted as a concern in the European Commission country report on Ireland in 2016² & 2017³. Much of this increase has been a staggering rise of 278%⁴ in family homelessness in this same period. One in every three people homeless in Ireland is a child in a family.

The scale of the increase is unprecedented in modern Ireland and seen as one of the most devastating, enduring and unacceptable consequences of the economic crisis that began in 2008. The economic crash had a terrible impact on society in Ireland and homelessness was a consequence of the crash but it was not inevitable.

IRELAND'S COMMITMENT TO ADDRESSING HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness is the lack of a home and the absence of the resources, either social or financial to secure a home. Therefore, the answer to homelessness is a home. The 2008 national homelessness strategy 'The Way Home'⁵ recognised this fact. The document clearly set out 'a strategic reorientation... away from emergency responses, towards long-term and mainstream housing (p5)⁶ and a target for ending long-term homelessness and the need to sleep rough by 2010.

This strategy was a culmination of social and political commitment stretching back to the late 1980's⁷ which saw Ireland come very close to ending long-term homelessness in 2010.⁸ While this target was not met significant progress has been made. A new government was elected in 2011 and in 2013 it launched a plan which set a new target⁹ to end long-term homelessness¹⁰ suggesting that Ireland retains a political commitment to address homelessness.

HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

If we have political commitment then what is missing is a housing system that provides secure homes for all those that need one. There is a notion in Irish public

discourse that 'the Irish' are obsessed with property and home ownership^{11,12}. Michelle Norris in her recent publication on the history of housing in Ireland¹³ demonstrates the link between Ireland's 'obsession' with home ownership and the clear policy direction of governments from the 19th century.

From the beginning of the period covered by Norris until the late 1970's through state subsidies, debt write-offs, and direct transfer there was a significant transfer of housing to citizens. As a result of these policies home ownership in Ireland reached 80% by 1991. Norris sets out that at this point the Irish housing policy shifts to facilitate the private market to provide housing.

During the 2000's the predominant discourse around housing in Ireland retained the belief in the 'Irish obsession' and added the monetary discourse of supply and demand¹⁴. This ignored or wrote out of the history the significant state intervention in support of citizens. However, state intervention was provided to the private market in the form of tax incentives to encourage investment or speculation in property¹⁵. Over the 2000's house prices increased enormously culminating in the bubble and crash in 07-08. Critically, levels of social housing in Ireland remain below 10%.

SOCIAL HOUSING

Significant levels of and investment in public housing can provide a safety valve for housing systems taking the air out of bubbles and inflating deflating markets¹⁶. In Ireland since the 1930's social housing tenants have been supported to purchase their homes. This was unpinned by a significant level of state building of social housing¹⁷ until the 1980's when state building of social housing fell dramatically. The effect of these decisions are illustrated by the levels of local authority housing in the state. In 1961 this was 18.4% by 2002 this had fallen to 6.9%.¹⁸

While there was some growth in the number of social housing units built in the 2000's the levels of social housing stock in the state is very low with the recent

1 3258 people in July 2014 to 7680 in April 2017 <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/latest-figures-homelessness-ireland/>

2 http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/csr2016/cr2016_ireland_en.pdf

3 <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/2017-european-semester-country-report-ireland-en.pdf>

4 from 344 families with 749 children to 1302 families with 2708 children <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/latest-figures-homelessness-ireland/>

5 <http://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/migrated-files/en/Publications/DevelopmentandHousing/Housing/FileDownload%2C18192%2Cen.pdf>

6 ibid

7 O'Sullivan E (2008) Sustainable Solutions to Homelessness: The Irish Case. *The European Journal of Homelessness*, Vol 2. p 205-233.

8 In 2010 less than 200 families were homeless in the Dublin region, rough sleeping was at the lowest ever recorded in the Dublin region and was all but eradicated in other urban areas.

9 2016

10 http://www.homelessdublin.ie/sites/default/files/publications//Homeless_Policy_Statement_2013.pdf

11 <http://bit.ly/2qSrzPM>

12 <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/irish-have-home-owning-obsession-1.846400>

13 Norris M. (2016) *Property, Family and the Irish Welfare State*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan.

14 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUrk5qPqt94>

15 E.G. So called 'Section 23 Tax Relief' provided tax relief on all rental income to offset the cost of purchase of properties in designated areas. <http://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/homes-and-property/section-23-tax-relief-developments-a-roaring-success-story-for-investors-1.1130195>

16 Norris M and Byrne M (2016) Social Renting and Housing Market (in)stability: comparing Austria and Ireland during the Global Financial Crisis *European Network for Housing Research Comparative Housing Policy Working Group* Delft University of Technology, the Netherlands, , 10-NOV-16 - 11-NOV-16

17 Fahey T, Duffy D, (2007) The Housing Boom (In) Fahey T, Russell H, Whelan C, (Eds) *Best of Time? The Social Impact of the Celtic Tiger*, (pp123-138), Dublin, IPA.

18 <http://www.cso.ie/en/csolatestnews/pressreleases/2004pressreleases/2002censusofpopulation-volume13-housing/>



Census figures showing 8.4% of households living in social housing. This is of critical importance in understanding homelessness in Ireland as the underdeveloped public housing pillar of our housing system does not provide a safety-net.

PRIVATE RENTAL MARKET

In concert with the policies outlined above Ireland has had very limited regulation of the private rental market. While regulation was brought in in 2004 through the private residential tenancy act it was still noted in a report on rental market regulation for the European Commission in 2014 that Ireland's rental market regulation appeared 'to be more favourable to landlords.'¹⁹ This of course complimented the Irish state's policy encouraging property ownership and ultimately speculation.

Following the crash the related increases in unemployment²⁰ and emigration²¹ saw a significant decline in the cost of renting in urban areas but this was relatively quickly reversed. As rents began to rise and social protections such as 'rent supplement'²² were cut or remained stagnant Focus Ireland began to see more and more families becoming homeless from the private rented sector.

RESPONDING TO THE FINANCIAL CRISIS

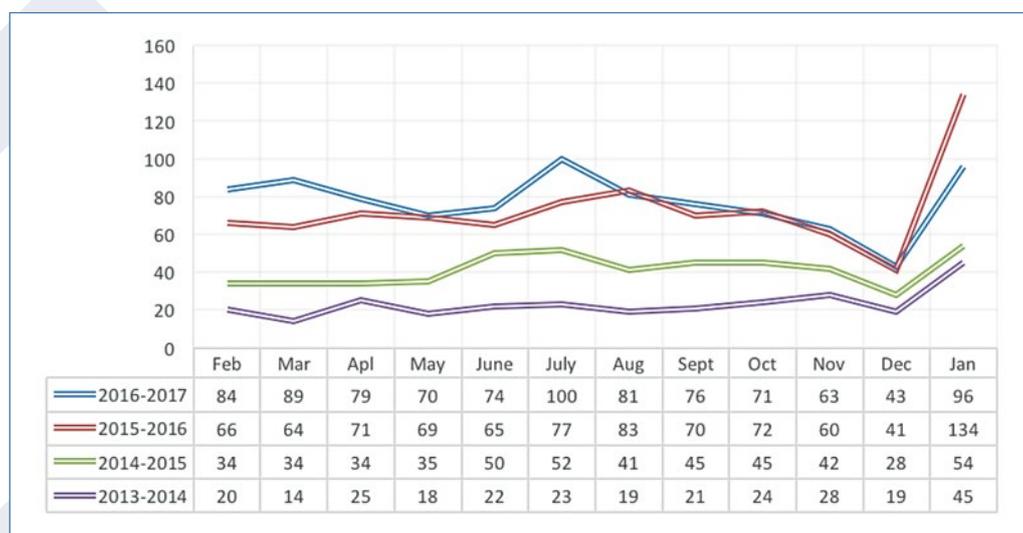
When the last government took office in March 2011 nationally house prices had fallen 56% from their peak in April 2007. When the government was delivering its first budget in December house prices had fallen another 10.7%²³. There was huge number of home owners in negative equity. Many of these - having lost their employment - were in arrears on unsustainable mortgages²⁴. This threatened the homes and well-being of citizens but also further impacted on what at this point was a failed banking system.

There were a number of responses by the government to these issues and part of this response sought to encourage investors to come into the market and buy up Irish property.²⁵ The hope was that this would return the Irish housing market to 'normal' increasing prices to reduce negative equity, thereby supporting the banking system and citizen with unsustainable mortgages. Further repeating the mistakes of the past there was a false faith in supply and demand stimulating a return to house building offering employment. This philosophy continues with the latest government plan on housing providing cash to first time buyers to support them to meet the cost of a deposit and encourage developers to develop schemes for first time buyers²⁶.

UNDERSTANDING FAMILY HOMELESSNESS

The graph below shows the number of families becoming newly homeless in the Dublin region each month from February 2013 to January 2017.

Table 1 No Families Presenting Newly Homeless Dublin Region



19 http://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/publications/economic_paper/2014/pdf/ecp515_en.pdf

20 to 15% in 2011 and 2012 www.cso.ie

21 34,400 people net migrate out of Ireland in 2012 <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/pme/populationandmigrationestimatesapril2016/> (Table 2)

22 Rent Supplement is a means tested social welfare payment provided to those without fulltime employment to help them meet the cost of renting.

23 <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-rppi/rppifeb2017/>

24 https://www.centralbank.ie/docs/default-source/statistics/credit-and-banking-statistics/mortgage-arrears/gns-6-2-2-4-2012q1_ie_mortgage_arrears_statistics.pdf?sfvrsn=4

25 One of the first and most significant interventions was the introduction of a capital gains tax exemption on properties that were bought between 7th December 2011 and 31st December 2014. It is only possible to benefit from the exemption if the property is held for 7years or more.

26 <http://rebuildingireland.ie/news/first-time-buyers-scheme/>



“Ireland’s political commitment to addressing homelessness, while real in terms of policy, clearly did not transfer into action across all government departments.”

The two striking aspects of the table above are the significant jump each year in the number of families presenting and the consistency of the pattern of the lines over the years. Such a consistent pattern strongly suggests that the driving forces behind the homelessness crisis are structural.

Seeing the growing trend in family homelessness Focus Ireland undertook analysis and surveys of families entering homelessness and found that the majority of these families were coming from the private rental sector and becoming homeless due to an inability to afford rent²⁷. In particular issues with the ‘rent supplement’ were identified as early as 2012²⁸. A reduction in the rate of rent supplement by an average of 13% in January 2012 was seen to be particularly harmful as it came at a time when rents in urban areas began to rise²⁹. This was exacerbated by the continued unwillingness of the Minister for Social Protection to address the gaps between rent supplement and market rents. Significant increases were agreed by the new government in July of 2017 and the rate of inflow of families becoming homeless has steadied following this as seen in the table above.

In the intervening period Focus Ireland and others continued to monitor and lobby government to take more action on homelessness and this was instrumental in the 2013 strategy with the commitment to end long-term homelessness noted above. Housing and homelessness were one of the dominant issues in the 2014 local and European elections which saw significant electoral losses for the government parties and the then Minister for Housing noting that the situation of family homelessness in Ireland had to be described as a crisis³⁰.

At this point the political system began to address the broader housing issues that had emerged in particular despite the economy beginning to improve there was a realisation that house building had not begun again in line with the growth in the economy. However, the strategy that was developed to address this again was reliant the provision of supports to developers to encourage ‘the market’ to meet housing needs.

To date this plan, and its successor, have not seen a normal level of construction return and very low levels of public housing being built. What has occurred following the last general election is that cash supports, in the form of a Housing Assistance Payment (HAP)³¹ have been put in place to secure properties from the private rental market and there is a commitment to increase the public housing stock

by 47,000 but 24,000 of these are to be purchased from the private market with the other 23,000 built directly by local authorities. As with the financial crash the political response to homelessness has been to attempt to leverage the private market to meet the housing needs of citizens.

CONCLUSION

Ireland’s experience offers a number of important insights in particular that:

- Homelessness is not an intractable problem and can be addressed.
- Providing homes is the way to address homelessness.
- And that for success to be sustained there must be a functioning housing system that values housing as part of the infrastructure of a society as opposed to proving an investment opportunity.

While it’s important not to underestimate the impact of the financial crash on homelessness the State’s response to the increasing costs in the rental market and increasing number of families becoming homeless from 2012 was wholly inadequate. In particular the Government’s refusal to increase rent supplement to keep families in their homes. Ireland’s political commitment to addressing homelessness, while real in terms of policy, clearly did not transfer into action across all government departments.

Equally as devastating in the medium to long-term has been the underlying fault lines in the housing system which were created prior to the crash and were exacerbated by the response to it.

Those responses were driven by a belief that the market system will meet the housing needs of the vast majority of citizens and that home ownership and the rules of ‘supply and demand’ are key. These tenets of Irish housing policy have led to a continued reliance on tax breaks and financial incentives. This ignores the critical importance and inter-relatedness of public housing, private housing and a well regulated rental system.

This kind of silo thinking generates policies that pull the same policy levers that were the root of the dysfunction in our housing system in the first place. The consequence of this dysfunction is housing exclusion³² - and for too many people this exclusion means homelessness.

27 <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/publications-and-partnerships/research/>

28 TSA Consulting (2012) *Out of Reach: The impact of changes in Rent Supplement*, Dublin, Focus Ireland

29 *ibid*

30 It is sobering to note that at that point there were less than 350 families documented by the relevant ministry as homeless in Ireland compared to 1256 in March 2017.

31 <http://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/social-housing/housing-assistance-payment/housing-assistance-payment>

32 Census 2016 showed there were 95,013 permanent households with more persons than rooms, according to Census 2016, accommodating close to 10% of the population, at an average of 4.7 persons per household. This is a 28% rise on the equivalent number in 2011 (73,997). <http://www.cso.ie/en/csolatestnews/pressreleases/2017pressreleases/pressstatementcensus2016resultsprofile1-housinginireland/>



Living with the Consequences of the Austerity Measures in Greece: Homelessness on the Rise

By Ioanna Pertsinidou, *Social Worker, PRAKSIS*¹

Since the onset of the crisis back in 2008, Greece has signed three Memoranda of Understanding with European Institutions and the IMF (the first one being in 2010 and the last one in August 2015 without the IMF) that all take the same or similar directions: budget cuts in essential sectors like health and welfare and an increase in taxation. Austerity measures that both governments have followed since then have resulted in an increased number of people living at risk of poverty or social exclusion (from 27.7% in 2010 to 35.7% in 2015,) and a deterioration of the quality of people's living conditions, as measured by the indicator of material deprivation in the EU SILC survey, which is repeated on an annual basis (from 24.1% in 2010 to 39.9% in 2015). At the same time, the austerity measures have resulted in an increasing gap between the richest and the poorest in society (the Gini Coefficient increased from 5.6 in 2010 to 6.5 in 2015) without effectively reducing the deficit that led the country to its current situation.

It was the health sector which first suffered severe budget cuts, particularly in mental health, which saw 80% cuts in 2010. In 2012, an effort was made to 'rationalise' expenditure on the welfare system. All benefits provided at that time were abruptly cut without any warning to the beneficiaries or any type of transition period. The idea was to register all types of benefits and beneficiaries and to restructure the welfare sector. Despite the welfare system in Greece being fragmented and inadequate, the chosen strategy for change has resulted in thousands of people being cut off from their only day-to-day income. In the last MoU, signed in 2015, the Institutions suggested mapping social welfare weaknesses, as they had never been identified. This review of the social welfare system can be translated, from all MoUs signed so far with various institutional stakeholders, as budget cuts to a sector experiencing increased demands that it systematically fails to meet. Through the agreement with ESM, the social welfare sector is expected to "save" over 900 million euros through various benefits cuts and there is no suggestion to reinvest this money to benefit the most vulnerable people.

The groups that have experienced the consequences of these measures are the ones that were already living at the margins of society or that were socially excluded. The national rate of homelessness has been officially calculated using only secondary sources, thus we are not able to precisely identify to what degree homelessness has increased. Observations made by service providers suggest a significant increase in homelessness and that housing exclusion and homelessness is hidden, due to its presence in the private sphere. All the same, their observations suggest that there are many people living in cold housing without electricity or in abandoned buildings. Evictions have risen by almost 70% since the start of the crisis, due to court decisions or voluntary abandonment of housing due to debts, according to the Pan-Hellenic Association of Renters. The number of people living without electricity or proper heating in winter is also increasing. In 2013 the Electricity Board

reported 330,000 households cut off, where 40,000 had reconnected irregularly. Only 140,000 had made an attempt to regulate their debts. In 2015 the debts of the Electricity Board increased to 1,000,000 euros, meaning that a lot more people could not afford to sufficiently cover their basic needs at home.

Homelessness is mostly measured in urban areas and the most recent research reflects the situation in Athens only. In 2015 research by the Municipality of Athens counted 415 people sleeping rough in the summer, while another count by the Technical School of Athens included, along with rough sleepers, those living in inadequate or precarious conditions. The total of this count was almost 120,000.

During this deep recession, the most vulnerable people have been severely affected, while the welfare system has been unable to respond to the increased demand. In 2015 a Social Strategy was written, in which the direction of social welfare policy was set. The Social Strategy, almost two years later, is experiencing difficulties with implementation. The administrative mechanism described in the bill that passed in 2016 to support and monitor the implementation of the strategy is still under construction.

In 2016 the Social Solidarity Income (SSI), the minimum income scheme in Greece, began to be implemented at national level. Its rate is too low to allow people to live with dignity, following the fiscal adjustments on the minimum wage. It is set at €200 for an adult who has been unemployed for the past six months. Unless someone is already receiving assistance with housing, this amount of money cannot support independent life in Greece, although it is a first step in the right direction with regards to social support.

The discussion over the formulation of housing programmes is yet to commence. Since the dissolution of the only social housing organisation for employed people in Greece, not much progress has been made on this subject. Night shelters were established in 2012 to provide relief, and transitional support for rough sleepers was put in place, but only for those who are legally resident. Following the definition of homelessness in Greece, drug addicts and people with mental health disorders should not be excluded from services. The current environment and the lack of adequate personnel in these structures, however, make it impossible to host the people who may require more intensive care. There remains, therefore, a significant proportion of rough sleepers (according to the latest research, one third of them) who remain helpless.

All the above-mentioned points explain the increase in homelessness in Athens, and potentially in other cities in Greece also. Establishing a national strategy to prevent and combat homelessness is a necessity. There is no excuse for people to be socially excluded or left sleeping rough, and complex needs should be addressed accordingly and taken into consideration when providing services to homeless people.

¹ ipertsinidou@praksis.gr



Finland: Towards ending homelessness instead of managing it

By **Taina Hytönen**, *Programme Coordinator, Y-Foundation*, **Juha Kaakinen**, *CEO, Y-Foundation* and **Saija Turunen**, *Researcher, Y-Foundation*

Increasing homelessness in Europe appears to be an overwhelming challenge and it is a fact that there is no quick fix in the quest to end homelessness in a sustainable way. The Finnish example, however, shows that dedicated and persistent effort produces results, and a reduction in homelessness is possible even amongst the most vulnerable of homeless people. This has required resources and co-operation, but most of all, a new way of thinking.

Finland has for decades actively tried to solve homelessness. The state has supported affordable housing construction, and measures to eliminate homelessness have been a part of government programs almost without interruption since the mid-1980s. The development of homelessness has also been monitored by annual statistics since 1987.

There has been a great deal of progress in this area since the construction of the welfare state created the basic preconditions that enabled people with low incomes to raise their living standards. Municipalities and non-profit organisations have built social rental housing, and special measures have been allocated to offer homes to many groups, such as students, young people, the Finnish Roma and homeless people.

Thirty years ago, there were over 18,000 homeless people in Finland, of which a significant proportion lived in temporary accommodation, in dormitories or in institutions. By the 2000s, the total number had halved, and an increasing proportion of homeless people were those who lived on a temporary basis with relatives or friends. However, the statistics uncovered a "hard core" of homelessness: long-term homeless people, who spent long periods in temporary accommodation and did not receive the help that they needed from the existing service system. When new measures to tackle homelessness were planned, there was an urgent need to find innovative solutions for this vulnerable group. The traditional way of emphasising housing-readiness had to be turned upside-down and the home was emphasised as the basis for solving other life problems. The Finnish Housing First model was developed for this, and since 2008 it has been the cornerstone of Finland's homelessness work.

SUSTAINABLE SOLUTIONS

The goals and preconditions for a new operating model were stated in The National Programme to Reduce Long-Term Homelessness¹, confirmed by the Finnish Government. The basic idea was to offer homeless people permanent rental homes and needs-based support, instead of temporary housing in hostels or in overnight shelters. A permanent home with a rental contract meant a major improvement in the security of tenure and privacy.

In Housing First, people do not have to earn their right to housing by proving their ability to manage their lives. Tenants pay rent and they are entitled to housing benefits. Stable living conditions and support allow for the use of mainstream facilities instead of expensive emergency services. In addition to new housing, the Finnish Programme also provided state funding for services and new means of support were developed to match the multiple needs of individual tenants.

Implementing Housing First is not feasible without proper housing options. In Finland, this includes the use of social housing, buying apartments from the private sector to be rented out and building new supported housing facilities. An important part of the Programme was the extensive conversion of shelters and dormitory-type hostels into supported housing units. The last big hostel in Helsinki, with 250 beds, was run by the Salvation Army. This hostel was renovated in 2012 and now consists of 80 independent apartments with on-site personnel. The disappearance of temporary solutions, like hostels, has completely changed the landscape of Finnish homelessness policy in a very positive way, and in terms of public safety, the improvement has been clear and visible.

Prevention has been an essential part of the National Policy on homelessness. Developing housing advice services has been promoted to prevent evictions, and multi-professional low threshold services make help and guidance easily accessible. As recommended by an international evaluation of the Finnish Policy Programme² in 2014, focus on prevention has been further strengthened. The current National Programme on homelessness³, confirmed by the Government in 2016, focuses entirely on the prevention of homelessness.

1 http://www.housingfirst.fi/en/housing_first/homelessness_in_finland/national_programme_2008-2011

2 https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstream/handle/10138/153258/YMra_3en_2015.pdf

3 http://asuntoensin.fi/assets/files/2016/11/ACTIONPLAN_FOR_PREVENTING_HOMELESSNESS_IN_FINLAND_2016_-_2019_EN.pdf



WIDE PARTNERSHIP, EXTENSIVE RESULTS

Since the beginning of the Programme's implementation, over 3,500 new apartments have been built or purchased for homeless people and there are now around 300 new professional support workers in housing-related social work. In addition, housing advice services have prevented some 200 evictions every year.

Finland has all but eradicated rough sleeping. At the end of 2015 the number of single homeless people was for the first time under 7000. This also includes people living temporarily with friends and relatives (80 % of all homeless people). Compared to 2008, the main reductions have taken place in the following categories: long-term homeless people, homeless people living in shelters and hostels and homeless people living in institutions.

Cooperation and measures targeted at the implementation of the Programme have led to clear results. The main explanation for the success is quite simple: Housing First was, from the very beginning, adopted as a mainstream approach in National Homelessness Policy. There was strong political will to find new solutions to homelessness, and therefore the focus of the national strategy was clear from the start. This common framework made it possible to establish a broad partnership between the state, local authorities and NGOs. The Ministry of Environment co-ordinated the National Programme and city authorities provided housing and were responsible for implementation at local level. The necessary shift in mindset in adopting a new work orientation has been promoted by a national development network, which has brought together practitioners from NGOs, cities and parishes, as well as people with lived experience of homelessness.

WORK IN PROGRESS

During the past ten years work on homelessness has improved in terms of its content. Homeless people have gained permanent homes and finally have received help tailored to their needs. The power of communities has been utilised in support work: after a long period of homelessness a supported housing unit may offer a safe place to practice daily skills and pathways to participation. Low-threshold activities and neighbourhood work are also means of promoting integration.

The heart of Housing First is the tenants and their individual needs. However, it is evident that in scaling up Housing First major structural reforms are also needed. Crossing bureaucratic boundaries is a challenge, but at the same time an absolute necessity, in order to achieve multi-professional cooperation. A new kind of leadership is thus required.

Despite the great improvements achieved in housing long-term homeless people, the situation needs to be constantly monitored and we must be aware of new challenges. In 2016, for example, the statistics showed that one in four homeless people in Finland had an immigrant background. It is also crucial to guarantee the financial prerequisites for providing affordable rental housing.

The cornerstone of any decent housing policy is a sufficient supply of affordable social housing. Especially in these times of austerity, building new housing appears to be an economically wise and value-creating investment with positive side effects, ranging from reduced youth unemployment to boosting the local economy.

All this costs money, but as ample evidence from many countries shows, it is always more cost-effective to end homelessness instead of managing it⁴. Investment in ending homelessness always pays back, not just in financial terms; it is the right thing to do in human and ethical grounds. The statement that a lack of funding in most European countries is the reason for not providing affordable social housing is either an understatement or a conscious misunderstanding. The real reason is a simple lack of political will.

“Finland has all but eradicated rough sleeping.”

⁴ For example, http://asuntoensin.fi/assets/files/2016/10/YMra7_2011_Asunottomuuden_vahentamisen_taloudelliset_vaiikutukset.pdf; http://homelesshub.ca/sites/default/files/costofhomelessness_paper21092012.pdf

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**European Federation of
National Organisations working
with the Homeless, AISBL**

194, Chaussée de Louvain
1210 Brussels

Belgium

Tel: +32 (0)2 538 66 69

Email: information@feantsa.org



FEANTSA