

Editorial

During one visit, a teacher once made an observation that is difficult to forget: children experiencing homelessness are often the “best students”. This was, of course, not praise, but a shocking observation about what children experiencing homelessness have learnt to do: they have learnt to be quiet, take up as little space as possible and go unnoticed.

Children are supposed to be loud. They should be able to ask questions, express their feelings, make mistakes, and ask for attention. The fact that some children learn instead to make themselves invisible highlights the “double silencing” they experience. Their voices are too often disregarded simply because they are children, and even more so when they experience homelessness and social exclusion.

All contributions in this issue point to the same reality: homelessness has profound and far-reaching consequences for children and their families. The figures and trends presented across France, Ireland and Belgium are alarming, and the wider European picture is deeply concerning. According to the 9th Overview of Housing Exclusion report by Fondation pour le Logement and FEANTSA, around 400,000 children in Europe are experiencing homelessness, living on the streets or in emergency and temporary accommodation. In many EU Member States, children account for one third of people living in homeless accommodation. Even very young children, pregnant women and women leaving maternity wards are increasingly left without a safe place to stay.

Homelessness threatens children’s development, physical and mental wellbeing, security and future opportunities. Its effects can accumulate across a lifetime, reinforcing intergenerational disadvantage. Yet this cycle is not inevitable: public authorities have a duty to act. Despite repeated warnings, the situation continues to deteriorate, as Dr Niall Muldoon, Ireland’s Ombudsman for Children, also highlights.

Addressing homelessness requires a human rights approach. As Maria José Aldanas, coordinator of Housing Rights Watch, reminds us, child homelessness represents a profound social injustice and can entail violations of a range of human rights. Children are rights-holders and States and public authorities are duty-bearers, with obligations to respect, protect and fulfil those rights. The best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in every decision affecting them.

Recognising children as rights-holders also means recognising their right to be heard. Their experiences should inform the policies and services intended to support them. Julie Lignon and Paul De Ryck, from UNICEF, illustrate the importance of this approach in their contribution on innovative ways of involving children with lived experience of homelessness.

These principles must translate into action. Advocacy must focus on ensuring that existing rights and protections are implemented in practice. When children are left without a home, the failure is not that of individual families who cannot secure ade-

quate housing. It is the failure of public authorities to ensure that children’s rights are protected.

Responding to homelessness therefore requires more than managing an emergency. As Sarah de Liamchine’s contribution on Samusocial illustrates, emergency accommodation can protect families in immediate danger, but cannot fulfil a child’s right to a home.

Boróka Fehér and Lea Lengyel draw attention to the specific needs of women facing homelessness during pregnancy, highlighting the need for services that respond to pregnancy-related needs. However, support services cannot compensate for the absence of stable housing. Families should not have to fear that seeking help will put them at greater risk. A safe, stable home is essential to family life and the realisation of other human rights.

Child and family homelessness is also a gendered issue. Behind the term “lone parents”, explored in the project coordinated by Daniel Hoey from Focus Ireland, are often women navigating housing insecurity alongside gender-based violence, discrimination and structural inequalities. Effective responses must recognise these realities and address the conditions that make women and their children particularly vulnerable to homelessness.

The contributions also point towards the changes needed. Ireland’s dedicated, cross-departmental and agency-led Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan offers an example of a coordinated, child-centred approach. A similar commitment is needed across Europe through an ambitious, multi-year policy framework that supports people in moving from the streets and emergency accommodation into permanent housing, and that provides organisations with the resources and funding they need to deliver these housing and support solutions. The European Child Guarantee can provide a useful framework for Member States to coordinate these efforts across government and ensure that children experiencing homelessness are not left behind.

The message of this magazine issue is clear, and the teacher’s observation should serve as a warning. No child should adapt to homelessness by becoming quiet and invisible. No child’s development should be shaped by public authorities’ failure to provide the safety and dignity that a home offers. Ending child homelessness requires political commitment, coordinated policies, adequate resources, and accountability for the rights of every child.



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