

Poverty, Housing and Homelessness

Poverty, lack of access to adequate housing and homelessness are inextricably linked. Over the past two decades the most noticeable feature of Irish housing policy has been the remorseless expansion of the owner-occupier sector and the gradual erosion of other forms of housing tenure. This trend has substantial implications for those who are currently homeless and for those entering the housing market, in that the housing options available to them are increasingly limited and not geared to those on low incomes, the unemployed, the population with no fixed home, and particularly for young people forming new households. The drive towards home ownership has curtailed housing choice in Ireland and has resulted in housing deprivation for substantial numbers of households.

KEY FACTS

- Of all EU countries, Ireland has the highest rate of owner-occupation.¹
- Between 1971 and 1991 the number of private households in Ireland rose by just over 40 per cent, from 726,363 in 1971 to 1,019,791 in 1991.
- The number of permanent housing units has risen by a similar proportion over the same time span, from 705,180 units in 1971 to approximately 1,019,723 in 1991.
- The quality of housing over this period has also improved for the majority of citizens, with most households enjoying indoor piped water and sanitary facilities.
- The owner-occupier sector now accounts for approximately 80 per cent of permanent private households in Ireland – compared to 69 per cent in 1971.
- By contrast, the local authority sector has declined by 12 per cent. It now represents only 9.7 per cent of permanent private households, compared to 15.5 per cent in 1971.
- Recent research has highlighted that the risk of poverty is highest for households in the local authority rented sector.²
- In October 1999, the results from the 1999 assessments of local authority housing needs including homeless persons, were published. These showed a total of over 50,000 persons on local authority waiting lists, marking a substantial increase of 13,000 persons since 1996.
- While the furnished private rented sector has increased its share of the housing market, its starting base was so minimal that it currently accounts for only 6 per cent of permanent private households.
- Housing units provided by voluntary agencies occupies a marginal, but growing, role in Irish housing, providing an average of 900 new units per annum over the past five years.
- In March 1999, 5,234 persons were recorded as homeless by the local authorities, an increase of over 100 per cent on 1996.
- Surveys of the homeless populations in Ireland and internationally show homeless people to be a particularly marginalised sub-set of those experiencing poverty and social exclusion.³
- In August 1999, a pilot assessment of homelessness in the Eastern Health Board region was published.⁴ The results showed a total of 2,900 homeless persons in the region alone.

CURRENT IRISH HOUSING POLICY

The objective of Irish housing policy as defined by the Department of the Environment is: 'To enable every household to have available an affordable dwelling of good quality, suited to its needs, in a good environment, and, as far as possible, at the tenure of its choice.'⁵ This core statement has been expanded in recent years, and future housing strategies aim to 'develop and implement responses appropriate to changing social housing needs and mitigate the extent and effects of social segregation in housing.'

The Housing Acts 1966 to 1992 place responsibility on the individual local authorities for the delivery of housing services on the ground, while the Department of the Environment provides the legislative framework

1 Nolan, B., Whelan, C.T. and Williams, J. (1998) *Where are Poor Households?: The Spatial Distribution of Poverty and Deprivation in Ireland*. Dublin: Oaktree Press/ Combat Poverty Agency.
 2 Doling, J. (1997) *Comparative Housing Policy: Government and Housing in Advanced Industrialized Countries*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
 3 Collins, B. and McKeown, K. (1992) *Referral and Resettlement in the Simon Community*. Dublin: Simon Community (National Office); Tosi, A. (1999) 'Homelessness and the Housing Factor: Learning from the Debate on Homelessness and Poverty', in Avramov, D. (Ed) *Coping with Homelessness: Issues to be Tackled and Best Practices in Europe*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
 4 Williams, J. and O'Connor M. (1999) *Counted In. The Report of the 1999 Assessment of Homelessness in Dublin, Kildare and Wicklow*. Dublin: Homeless Initiative.
 5 Department of the Environment and Local Government (1995), *Social Housing - The Way Ahead*, Dublin, Department of the Environment and Local Government.



for housing provision, the required funding, monitoring of the national housing situation and the development of appropriate policy responses. Housing is provided for households in need⁶ either by constructing new buildings, purchasing existing houses or improving private houses, in lieu of re-housing. The consequence of promoting and subsidising home-ownership can be seen in Table 1.

ASSESSMENT OF HOUSING NEED

The concept of housing need in Ireland has tended to be defined in a narrow manner, relating primarily to local authority accommodation. Data on the extent of housing need and homelessness in Ireland on a national basis is limited, the only consistent source being the originally bi-annual and now tri-annual assessment carried out by the local authorities since 1998.

Early assessments focused exclusively on the need for local authority housing, while the 1996 and 1999 assessments broadened their scope to include those on the housing waiting list whose housing needs could be better met by other housing options. Chart 1 highlights the number of households on the local authority housing waiting lists (although for

waiting lists has grown to over 50,000. Although a range of factors, such as the persistence of long-term unemployment, an increasing rate of household formation, immigration and deinstitutionalisation, have contributed to increasing the demand for social housing, the low levels of social housing output have resulted in households remaining on the housing waiting list for increasingly longer periods of time.

The primary reason for the growth in the numbers of households on the housing waiting list is not so much the increase in new households requiring social housing but the increasing length of time households are on the housing waiting list. For households accepted on the housing waiting list, the time between acceptance and eventual housing has increased between 1991 and 1996.

SOCIAL HOUSING IN IRELAND – A CHANGING DEFINITION

The term 'social housing' has come to embrace a range of housing policy responses to low-income households, which includes local authority housing and housing provided by voluntary agencies.⁷ Since independence,

professional housing managers and estate-based management, and the incorporation of voluntary agencies as significant players in the social housing system.

The sale of local authority housing in order to promote owner-occupation has helped to create a residual sector of local authority housing dominated by a narrow social mix of marginalised households, predominantly unemployed and unskilled, and a lack of social amenities.⁸

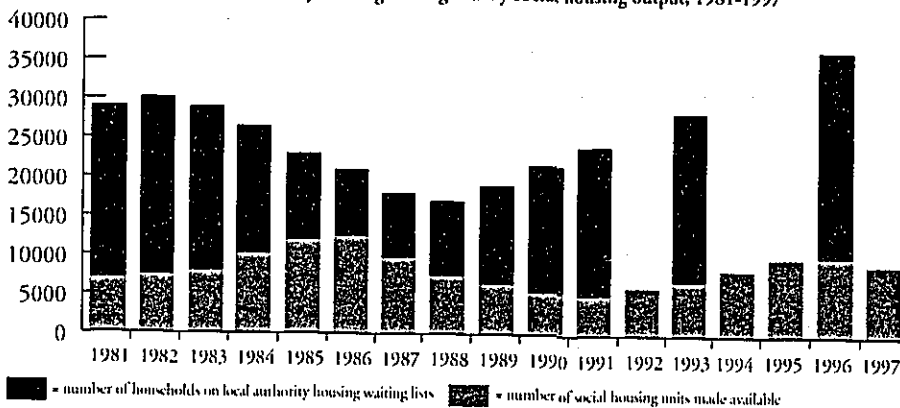
The most significant changes over the period in question is the increasing range of social housing options as shown in Table 2. Until the early 1980s, social housing was made available primarily through additions to the local authority stock and casual vacancies in their stock. Although local authority additions and casual vacancies still form a large component of total social housing output, the various schemes provided for in the two plans for social housing,⁹ in particular, shared ownership and voluntary housing, provided nearly 1,800 units of accommodation in 1997 and have increased their contribution to total social housing output since the early 1990s.¹⁰

THE PRIVATE RENTED SECTOR

Alongside social rental housing, private rented housing also plays a role in providing accommodation for households on low incomes, subsidised through the rent allowance operated through the Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA). In the past few years, there has been an increase in the flat / apartment market – underpinned by generous grants – in city centre areas, which has attracted young professionals who want the convenience of living adjacent to their workplaces. It is primarily to make this form of accommodation more attractive that limited tax relief on income (£500) was introduced in the 1996 budget. The lower end of the private rented sector is increasingly filled with unemployed households and this is reflected in the increase of payments to landlords under the supplementary welfare scheme, whereby a rent allowance is given to those who are unemployed to assist them with meeting their rent obligations. This substantial increase in the number of rent supplements paid to those in the private rented sector – from just over £5m in 1989 to an estimated £98m in 1998 – highlights the numbers of unemployed people who are dependent on this form of housing.¹¹

Only certain categories of private rented tenants enjoy security of tenure. Apart from controlled and fixed-term tenancies, a tenant will generally have to be in possession of a premises for a period of at least 20 years before acquiring a right to security of tenure.¹²

Chart One: number on local authority housing waiting lists by social housing output, 1981-1997



the 1996 figure, not all those included are deemed to require local authority accommodation) and social housing output from 1981-1997.

Although the chart does not identify all households who could be considered in need of local authority accommodation due to the reasons outlined above, it does give us an indication of the extent of housing need in Ireland.

The chart highlights a decrease in the number of households on the waiting lists during the 1980s, and in social housing output from the mid-1980s. In March 1996 there were over 37,000 households on the housing waiting list, with only just over 10,000 social housing units made available in that year. The 1999 assessment of housing needs shows that the number of households on local authority

local authorities in Ireland have built approximately 300,000 dwellings for public rental at a discounted rent. However, due to the policy of selling local authority houses to sitting tenants at discounted rates (under the provisions of the Housing Act, 1966) in order to support the overriding objectives of home-ownership, by 1995 there were only 97,219 houses managed by local authorities.

Furthermore, despite the large-scale provision of local authority housing, no coherent system of estate management was established at its inception, tenant participation was non-existent, the social problems associated with large-scale newly-built sites were not anticipated, and the organisation and maintenance of local authority housing remained highly centralised. Many changes have occurred in the past number of years in terms of the development of

⁶ The concept of housing need in Ireland, although defined in general terms in the Housing Act 1988, was described in a recent review as 'based on something other than a single, clearly understood and universally applied definition of housing need'. Fahey, T. and Watson, D. (1995) *An Analysis of Social Housing Need*, General Research Series, Paper no. 168, Dublin, ESRI, p. 29.

⁷ For further detail on the concept of social housing in Ireland, see Fahey, T. (1998) 'Housing and Social Exclusion' in Healy, S. and Reynolds, B. (Eds) *Social Policy in Ireland: Principles, Practice and Problems*. Dublin: Oaktree Press.

⁸ O'Connell, C. (1998) 'Tenant Involvement in Local Authority Estate Management: A New Panacea for Policy Failure?', *Administration*, Vol 46, no 2, pp. 25-46 and Nolan, B., Whelan, C.T. and Williams, J. (1998), *op cit*.

⁹ Department of the Environment and Local Government (1991) *A Plan for Social Housing*, Dublin: Department of the Environment and Local Government; Department of the Environment and Local Government (1995), *op cit*.

¹⁰ For further details on the role of the SWA scheme in relation to housing, see Department of Social Welfare (1995) *Review Group on the Role of Supplementary Welfare Allowance in Relation to Housing*, Dublin: Stationery Office.

¹¹ The vast majority of tenants in the private rented sector are 'periodic tenants'. Periodic tenants rent their dwellings from week to week or from month to month.

The private rented sector caters primarily for four categories of households:

- a declining number of largely elderly persons who have lived in the sector for a long period of time (mainly controlled dwellings);
- a young and mobile population for whom the sector provides flexibility and relative ease of access;
- employment-linked accommodation;
- low-income households (such as single persons, lone parents, young people leaving home etc.) who have difficulty obtaining access to social rented housing or owner-occupation.

However, it cannot be assumed that there is equal access to the entire sector for all four categories. Households in the fourth category are dependent on rent supplementation from the health boards and many landlords are unwilling to accept them because they see them as being less reliable. Of 173 landlords interviewed in a study in Cork city, almost three-quarters said they would not accept rent supplement tenants.¹² In addition, with the passing of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 1992, tenants in the private rented sector are entitled to rent books and that basic physical and hygiene standards are maintained in such dwellings. At the end of December 1998, 23,926 private rented houses were registered. Based on the 1991 Census data, that represents approximately one-quarter of the total stock of private rented housing.

Of greater concern are the high numbers of private rented dwellings inspected which do not meet the requirements of the Housing (Standards for Rented Houses) Regulations, 1993.¹³ The figures fluctuate considerably from, from 2 per cent in Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown to 64 per cent in Dublin County Borough.¹⁴ Overall, the figures highlight the differences in quality within the private rented sector, with a high concentration rent-supplement tenants in poor-quality accommodation.

Changes in the population size and household structure, with smaller households becoming more numerous, sluggish social housing output, increases in the cost of purchasing homes and stubbornly high levels of long-term unemployment are creating an increased demand for the private rented sector, yet the sector has not expanded to meet the demand.

Increases in rents in the private sector are pushing more people into homelessness.¹⁵

Table 1: Housing Tenure in Ireland by Permanent Private Households, 1971-1991

	1971		1991	
	00s	%	00s	%
Local Authority Rented	1127	15.5	989.14	9.8
Occupied Rent Free And Other	172	2.4	216.22	2.1
Unfurnished Private Rented	650	8.9	180.96	1.8
Furnished Private Rented	318	4.4	637.11	6.3
Being Acquired From LA	712	9.8	652.52	6.5
Owner Occupied	4284	59.0	7430.64	73.5
Totals	7263	100.0	10106.59	100.0

Source: Central Statistics Office. Census 1961, 1971, 1981 and 1991.

Table 2: Total 'Social Housing' Output - Various years

	1981	1991	1996	1998
Additions to LA Housing Stock	5,681	1,180	3,573	3,290
Improvements in lieu of LA Housing/ extensions to LA Housing	-	7	232	429
Shared Ownership	-	23	1,166	805
LAs Letting from Vacancies	2,056	3,500	3,930	3,378
Voluntary Housing	14	581	917	485
Total	7,751	5,291	10,086	8,387

Source: Department of the Environment. Annual Housing Statistics Bulletin. Various Years.

Table 3: Numbers of Homeless, 1991-1996

	1991	1993	1996	% change, 1991-96
Numbers of Homeless Nationally	2751	2667	2501	-9.1
Numbers of Homeless in EHB	1614	1617	1767	9.5
Dublin as a % of Total	58.6	60.6	70.6	

Source: Assessment of Homelessness 1991, 1993 and 1996. Dept of Environment

THE EXTENT OF HOMELESSNESS IN IRELAND

It is only since 1989 that attempts have been made made by a government department to compile data on the extent of homelessness in Ireland, albeit in a very rudimentary form (see earlier Assessment of Housing Need). Based on the data in Table 3 there has been a reduction of just over 9 per cent in the numbers of homeless between 1991 and 1996. The data also suggests that the majority of homeless people are to be found in the Eastern Health Board region (70 per cent in 1996), which has experienced a growth of over 12 per cent in homelessness since 1991. However, the validity of these data have been questioned – because of the inadequate method of gathering the information – and it has been argued by many voluntary agencies that the figure produced in the assessments seriously underestimates the real extent of homelessness.

The 1999 local authority assessment used a broader definition of homeless persons, which included those who have no accommodation, those in hostels and in

Health Board accommodation. The results showed a much higher level of homelessness in Ireland of over 5,000 persons (almost twice that in 1996), over 3,600 of whom were in Dublin county borough. A total of 2,764 of these were adults. These results were reflected in another recent pilot assessment of homelessness in the Eastern Health Board region, by the ESRI, which also identified a total of 2,764 homeless adults in Dublin county and city, and 2,900 homeless adults in Kildare, Dublin and Wicklow. Methodology in this study involved identifying the population through both voluntary and statutory service providers, with data being recorded through face to face interviews with each respondent. In this sense, this study represents a departure from previous methods of assessing the numbers of homeless persons in Ireland. In particular the data does not give any indication of the extent of youth homelessness in Ireland, i.e. children under the age of 18. Since the implementation of the Child Care Act, 1991, health boards have responsibility for promoting the welfare of children and in providing reasonable, suitable and appropriate accommodation for homeless

¹² See Guerin, D (1994) *Claiming Rent Supplement*. Cork: Threshold, and Guerin, D. (1997) 'Supplementary Social Assistance and the Private Rented Sector: Some Recent Research Findings'. Paper presented at the INOU/Threshold Conference, SWA Housing Assistance: Problems, Prospects and Opportunities. 11 March 1997.

¹³ The regulations require a landlord to ensure that the house is in a proper state of structural repair; provide a sink with hot and cold water; provide a toilet and bath or shower; provide adequate means for heating; for installing cooking equipment and for storing food; maintain installations for the supply of electricity or gas in good repair and safe working order; provide proper ventilation and lighting to each room; maintain common facilities for cooking, food storage, lighting and heating in good repair and safe working order; maintain common sinks, toilets, baths/showers and other common areas in good repair and clean condition and provide a secure handrail for any common stairway.

¹⁴ Department of Environment and Local Government (1998) *Annual Housing Statistics Bulletin 1997*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

¹⁵ Rents in the private rented sector in the 12 months to 1 November 1998, rose by 24 per cent in Dublin, 17 per cent in Leinster and Munster and 12.5 per cent in Connaught. Bacon, P. et al (1999) *The Housing Market: An Economic Review and Assessment*. Dublin, Stationery Office.

children. However, in practice, many health boards have experienced considerable difficulty in providing adequate accommodation for homeless children. This is particularly the case for children aged between 15 and 18.¹⁶

REDEFINING HOMELESSNESS

There is a difficulty in arriving at an accurate and reliable assessment of the numbers and characteristics of the homeless in Ireland. This has to do with the diverse methods of thinking about or defining homelessness. There is not and never has been a clear and universally accepted definition of homelessness. Taking homelessness as an absolute concept, it can be defined as simply being without a roof over one's head, but this definition is narrow. It says nothing about standards of accommodation; it does not take into account those living in sub-standard, overcrowded conditions; it ignores those who are forced to live with relatives, those who squat in disused houses and those who live in institutions like night shelters, prisons or psychiatric hospitals. Considerations of security of occupancy, of personal safety, of physical adequacy, must also be taken into account.

Overall, homelessness should be thought about in terms of a continuum, with sleeping rough at one end and occupation of secure and satisfactory housing at the other. Homelessness, therefore, is not an all or nothing concept. This issue is important because the size of the homeless population will depend on how we define homelessness, and this in turn will determine the policy responses to the situation. The perception of the middle-aged, single male transient, shabbily dressed and begging on the streets as 'homeless' has, at least in the research literature, been contradicted. We now know that the homeless population is heterogeneous in terms of age and gender. It is primarily those from backgrounds characterised by low incomes, unemployment and poverty who become homeless – increasingly younger people, women and children, often referred to as the hidden homeless, fill the ranks of this growing population in Ireland.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- Despite some changes in Irish housing policy in recent years, the years of stagnation in the area from the mid-1980s until 1991 have resulted in an accumulation of households in urgent need of accommodation in Ireland.
- Although the Irish housing system has been remarkably successful in creating home-owners, the supply of rental housing (public and private) has not expanded in recent years to meet the needs an increase of those who cannot afford to own their own homes. An increase in the supply of rental housing in the foreseeable future is unlikely unless radical changes are brought about in government policy.
- It is now eleven years since the last comprehensive overview of housing policies in Ireland was conducted. Since then, a number of reports commissioned by statutory bodies have examined aspects of housing policy in Ireland, but rarely in the holistic manner advocated by NES. In addition there have been a number of research reports and commentaries by a range of voluntary bodies. There is an urgent need for an assessment of the operation of the Irish housing system in its totality, with a particular emphasis on how to meet the housing needs of low-income households.
- The absence of detailed data on the nature and extent of homelessness and of housing need must be addressed as a matter of urgency. In the absence of such detailed data, coherent policy in this area will be difficult to achieve. The methodology adopted by the recent pilot assessment of homelessness in the Eastern Health Board should be utilised on a nationwide basis.
- The Department of Environment and Local Government needs to initiate a housing research programme in order both to monitor and evaluate housing expenditure and emerging trends in the area of housing provision. A key current issue is the degree to which SWA payments represents an adequate and cost effective response to the housing needs of low-income households.
- The issues of poor housing conditions and of homelessness need to be more fully incorporated into the agendas of the multi-agency forums that have evolved in recent years to tackle social exclusion, both at a local and national level e.g National Economic and Social Forum, Partnership Companies etc. Innovative projects such as the Homeless Initiative in the Eastern Health Board region should be replicated in other regions.
- Homelessness represents an extreme form of social exclusion and as such, the issue requires more meaningful inclusion in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy than has been the case to date.

¹⁶ For further information, see O'Sullivan, E. (1998) 'Aspects of Youth Homelessness in the Republic of Ireland', in Avramov, D. (Ed) *Youth Homelessness in the European Union*. Brussels: FEANSTA.

¹⁷ National Economic and Social Council, (1988). *A Review of Housing Policy*, Dublin: National Economic and Social Council Report No. 87.

¹⁸ See, Department of Environment and Local Government (1991) *op cit*; Department of Environment and Local Government (1995) *op cit*; Filhey, T. And Watson, D. (1995) *op cit*; O'Sullivan E (1997) *Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Access to Housing*, Dublin, Homeless Initiative; Bacon et al (1998), *op cit*.

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