



Society of St. Vincent de Paul

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SUBMISSION ON THE IMPACT OF  
HOMELESSNESS ON CHILDREN

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TO THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH  
AFFAIRS

May 2019  
Social Justice and Policy Team

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## 1. Introduction

The Society of Saint Vincent De Paul (SVP) welcomes the opportunity to engage with the Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs on the impact of homelessness on children. Established in 1844, we are the largest, voluntary, charitable organisation in Ireland with over 11,000 volunteers. The society's mission is to provide friendship and support to those experiencing poverty and social exclusion, to promote self-sufficiency and to work for social justice.

SVP has a unique insight into the current reality of children experiencing homelessness, as SVP members visit families in hotels, B&B's, family hubs and those that are experiencing 'hidden homelessness'. SVP staff and volunteers also work in resource centres operated by the society which provide vital supports to families experiencing homelessness. In addition, the society is a provider of social housing with almost 1,000 units across the country, manages ten homeless hostels, and engages in advocacy on the issue of housing and homelessness, drawing on the experience of members and policy analysis to seek to bring about the necessary policy change.

For Wang (2017)<sup>1</sup>, family homelessness is a 'severe form of poverty', leading to increased vulnerability to traumatic life experiences and systematic challenges, which rob children and families of their basic human rights and capabilities.

*'An SVP Conference, consisting of eight members visited over 100 families in two hotels in 2018'*  
*(SVP Social Justice Committee Member).*

*There was a common room/kitchen in the B&B which was handy but this was closed recently*  
*(SVP Member).*

## 2. Context

A housing and homeless crisis has developed since 2014 in Ireland, resulting in 10,305 people experiencing homelessness, including 3,821 children in the week of March 25<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup> 2019 across Ireland. More than one in three people in emergency accommodation is a child.<sup>2</sup> Approximately 12% of children

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<sup>1</sup> Wang J.J (2017) Reducing Family Homelessness and Improving Child Outcomes: A Housing First Approach Washington and Lee University

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/about-homelessness/>

in homeless accommodation have been there for two years or more.<sup>3</sup> This can only be described as the institutionalisation of children who are already vulnerable due to their young age.

Lone parents, predominately women account for approximately 60% of the client population SVP members support. They are also over-represented in the homeless population too, alarmingly, two-thirds of families with children suffering homelessness are headed by lone parents.<sup>4</sup>

Rebuilding Ireland acknowledged that any medium-to long-term period living in emergency accommodation such as a hotel seriously ‘impacts on normal family life and is particularly detrimental to children’, and committed to ensuring that by mid-2017 hotels are only used in limited circumstances for emergency accommodation for families.<sup>5</sup> The reality is that families continue to live in hotels and B&B’s while experiencing homelessness. In addition to hotels & B&B’s, families experiencing homelessness can be accommodated in ‘family hubs’. They are provided in refurbished buildings including former religious institutions, warehouses, retail units, and former hotels & B&B’s.<sup>6</sup>

SVP members have reported variances in the quality of homeless accommodation. Some of the families they visit are in accommodation that would be considered of good quality, children have adequate places to play for example, while other homeless services are lacking in the basics, such as adequate levels of cleanliness, space and proper facilities to prepare food.

The acute need for increased provision of homes which will provide safety and security is to the forefront of the minds of SVP members who visit and support some of these children in emergency homeless accommodation.

*‘SVP members see the experience of homelessness as one of survival both physically and mentally. Parents appreciate the time members spend with them listening to their concerns and frustrations’  
(SVP member).*

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.kildarestreet.com/committees/?id=2019-05-08a.262&s=%22direct+provision%22+2019-05-08..2019-05-17#g265>

<sup>4</sup> [http://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint\\_committee\\_on\\_social\\_protection/reports/2017/2017-06-15\\_report-on-the-position-of-lone-parents-in-ireland\\_en.pdf](http://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_social_protection/reports/2017/2017-06-15_report-on-the-position-of-lone-parents-in-ireland_en.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> [https://issuu.com/votemerrigan/docs/rebuilding\\_ireland\\_action\\_plan](https://issuu.com/votemerrigan/docs/rebuilding_ireland_action_plan)

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/sites/default/files/assets/document/Investing%20in%20the%20Right%20to%20a%20Home%20Full\\_1.pdf](https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/sites/default/files/assets/document/Investing%20in%20the%20Right%20to%20a%20Home%20Full_1.pdf)

### 3. Homelessness and its effects on school aged children

The Children's Rights Alliance commissioned a report titled 'Home Works: A study on the Educational Needs of Children Experiencing Homelessness and Living in Emergency Accommodation'.<sup>7</sup> Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with twenty parents, and interviews with educational professionals. It shines a light on the experiences of children and young people experiencing homelessness while attending early years education, primary and secondary school. This includes how living in emergency accommodation such as hotels and B&B's effects children's access to education, school attendance, academic achievement and social participation overall. It makes for very difficult reading. The research is also very reflective of the experiences of SVP members who visit families living in homeless accommodation. They see first-hand how all aspects of family life are negatively impacted.

Home is and should be a haven for children. It is a place a child can feel protected and secure. The report highlights in stark reality what homelessness is doing to impede a child thriving and enjoying their educational experience. It depicts children living on the margins of society and not fully participating in education or life itself. Children and young people want to feel the same as their peers. However, it is impossible for children that are homeless to feel this way. This should not be a child's reality considering children have a right to an education. Access to a free primary education is enshrined in the Irish constitution (Article 42), and further protected by the State's ratification of the United National Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).<sup>8</sup>

Parents reported that in order to fully access and participate in education, their children's requirement for food, adequate rest and physical health needed to be satisfied. In all cases, this was not happening to the extent it needs to, due to their living conditions. Many of the parents interviewed had scarce financial resources and were living in poverty. Parents described their children as sad, depressed, angry, suffering ill-health and had low self-esteem. All parents said the onset of these difficult behaviours and emotions were due to the feelings of uncertainty and insecurity because of homelessness.

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<sup>7</sup>[https://www.childrensrights.ie/sites/default/files/submissions\\_reports/files/Home%20Works%20Study%20on%20the%20Educational%20Needs%20of%20Children%20Experiencing%20Homelessness%20-%20Full%20Report.pdf](https://www.childrensrights.ie/sites/default/files/submissions_reports/files/Home%20Works%20Study%20on%20the%20Educational%20Needs%20of%20Children%20Experiencing%20Homelessness%20-%20Full%20Report.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>

*'Our SVP Conference supported a family to buy new crested school uniforms as their three children had to move schools due to the landlord selling their home. It was not only an unexpected expense for the family, the emotional trauma cannot be measured' (SVP Member).*

*'Recently the Conference provided funding to a city centre school to purchase and maintain a stock of school ties, shirts etc., which can be provided to children where families have lost items of clothing while on the move during their homeless experience' (SVP Member).*

#### **4. Families who have to 'Self-Accommodate' while experiencing homelessness**

In the Children's Rights Alliance report and from listening to member's experience of visiting emergency accommodation, the practice of families self-accommodating further adds to the stressful experience of being homeless. Families that have to 'self-accommodate' have to find their own emergency accommodation and are not able to access vital supports such as a case worker who can assist them with the daily challenges of homelessness and importantly support families to get out of emergency homeless accommodation. SVP members have reported visiting a family for a couple of weeks, returning for a follow-up visit, to find they are no longer there, they would then be told by hotel staff the family have been moved to alternative homeless accommodation. One can only imagine how stressful these events are on young children.

*'A family we helped attend summer camp in our local resource centre did not participate in an end of week outing to a leisure centre. Members found out later that the parent had no way of drying towels in the hotel room and felt embarrassed by this fact and didn't send her children on the swimming trip as a result' (SVP Member).*

#### **5. Stories of Struggle**

The society in 2018, commissioned the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (VPSJ) to research the reality experienced by households with children, whose income falls below that required for a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL). It is titled 'Stories of Struggle'.<sup>9</sup> Housing is an

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.svp.ie/social-justice/publications-submissions/publications/stories-of-struggle-2018.aspx>

omnipresent theme throughout the interviews that intensifies family's struggles. Of the 30 interviews conducted, two families were experiencing homelessness. The following extracts from the report clearly highlight the stress, worry and uncertainty families are facing while experiencing homelessness:

*'We broke up after eighteen years in a permanent relationship. After the break up, the landlord told me that he wanted to sell the house we were living in. We had to move three weeks before Christmas. We had to move into [homeless accommodation] and now we are staying with my sister'*

*I'm homeless; I'm staying in a hotel. I was in a rented apartment and the rent was €750 per month, but it was increased by €200 to €950.... Rent Allowance was increased from €550 to €650 but I couldn't afford the extra €100 rent..... My son died in homeless accommodation from cot death syndrome..... this had a big impact on me and my daughter personally. When my baby died, I relapsed for a short period of time. I lost my self-confidence; I'm embarrassed about being homeless and it's stressful.*

*I have to get a house for my family; nothing can be done until we have our home. Then I will get a job and begin to save and plan. It's impossible to plan in homeless accommodation. I want my daughter to have a routine and stability'.*

## **6. Children who are experiencing 'Hidden Homelessness'**

SVP are deeply concerned about the thousands of children who are experiencing hidden homelessness. These children have no place to call home and are often doubling up, tripling up, staying with friends or relatives as they have nowhere else to go. Their living situation is precarious, unsuitable and unsustainable. Despite facing many of the same challenges faced by those living in emergency accommodation, those experiencing hidden homelessness don't qualify for many support services.

Approximately, 40% of Traveller children are living in overcrowded accommodation.<sup>10</sup> Also, children living in direct provision are sharing living spaces with other individuals and families resulting in overcrowded, unsuitable and stressful living environments. SVP members have raised the issue of what many families take for granted, somewhere quiet and safe for children to do their homework.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.kildarestreet.com/committees/?id=2019-05-08a.262&s=%22direct+provision%22+2019-05-08..2019-05-17#g265>

In some direct provision centres, there is nowhere suitable for children to study or complete homework. SVP members have supported families to access libraries and resource centres in these instances.

SVP members have also reported the practical challenges in finding somewhere to live and continue caring for children. Some of the families SVP support have no support networks to help with childcare for example, while a parent views a property or they may have to travel long distances with small children to view a property.

*One of the problems with visiting this establishment is that we are not able to have proper discussions with our clients. We are not allowed visit them in their room and as the reception area is quite small, we are discouraged from having anything but the briefest of conversations with them (SVP Member).*

## 7.Homelessness and its effects on children's health

Almost 850 children treated in a Dublin hospital emergency department in 2018 were discharged to homelessness.<sup>11</sup> This amounted to a 29% increase from 2017. Emergency department staff looked after children with cystic fibrosis, neurological disorders, severe autism and significant developmental delays, as well as accidental injuries during 2018. SVP members are currently visiting families in hotels and B&B's that do not have access to a fridge or a personal washing machine. They report this is extremely challenging for families, particularly if a child becomes sick. They are in a confined space with no proper facilities to wash clothes in order to limit the spread of infection to other family members.

Dr. Niall Muldoon, the Ombudsman for Children warned that there will be a significant, long term impact on both the physical and mental health of children. In 2019 the Ombudsman for Children carried out a research report 'No Place Like Home'.<sup>12</sup> It outlines children's views and experiences of living in Family Hubs. While the report highlights the views of children and young people in their own words which is positive, it unveils the need for urgent action to be taken to ensure children and young people do not become institutionalised in homeless accommodation. For example, it outlined the requirement for children to sign in and out of the family hub every day. Also, they are told what

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/oireachtas/children-discharged-from-temple-street-into-homelessness-number-842-1.3767012>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.oco.ie/app/uploads/2019/04/No-Place-Like-Home.pdf>

to do by other people that are not their parents or guardians. Living in this type of environment for a prolonged period will impact negatively on children's mental health.

'We help families to get out of the hotel. We give them zoo passes; cinema passes etc. They really appreciate this as they can enjoy themselves for a short while'. (SVP Member).

### 8.SVP Recommendations

One of the fundamental causes of homelessness is the widening housing affordability gap while government have cut back on their responsibility to build homes. To address this, SVP recommends that the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government significantly increase the direct building of social housing. In addition, rent regulation that protects tenants needs to be implemented and enforced so that families can stay in their homes.

There are a number of practical measures that could be implemented by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, which would ensure that children are not further marginalised by the experience of homelessness. They would also alleviate some of the stress and worry families face on a daily basis while living in emergency homeless accommodation.

The following recommendations are grounded in the experience of SVP members working with families affected by homelessness.

- SVP member often report that children do not want to attend school and are at risk of falling behind in their school work. They feel embarrassed and feel a sense of shame because they are living in homeless accommodation. Increased supports in school need to be implemented to support children in these circumstances. SVP recommends increasing funding to the School Completion Programme (SCP) to 2008 levels.
- Resource centres should have adequate funding to ensure they can provide vital services to children and their parents/guardians. For example, after-school homework clubs, after-school activities, women's groups, men's groups, information points, counselling service. All activities should be free for low-income families.
- Leap cards should be provided out of school term time to ensure families can spend time together away from the hotel/B&B or family hub.

- Continue to ensure that the voice of children who are experiencing homelessness is heard.

## **9. Concluding Remarks**

As adults we have a duty to children to ensure they are protected and enjoy their brief childhood. It should not be blighted by the experience of homelessness. Homelessness stands in stark contrast to the image of home as refuge and safety. At any stage or age in life, homelessness brings a host of risks and vulnerabilities to affected individuals, but children are a particular concern.

SVP members, through our engagement with people affected by homelessness contend that a significantly enhanced role for local authorities is required. In addition, there are many practical challenges that can be overcome which would minimise some of the trauma experienced from homelessness. That involves the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), state agencies and Non-Government Organisation's (NGO's) working together on behalf of children.