



# **THE IMPACT OF HOMELESSNESS ON WOMEN'S HEALTH**

**APRIL 2018**

## Executive Summary

There has been a feminisation of homelessness in Ireland during the current housing crisis. Women now account for 42% of the adult homeless population, and this rises to 44% in the Dublin area<sup>1</sup>. The increase in female homelessness has been attributed to the rising numbers in family homelessness, the majority of which are lone parent, female-headed households<sup>2</sup>.

Homeless policy and service delivery could be described as 'gender-blind'. This is despite the increasing acknowledgment that women's routes into, through, and out of homelessness can differ from their male counterparts. Women often enter homelessness with a history of domestic violence, trauma, and/or time spent in hospital, prison or other institutional settings. A large proportion of homeless women spend significant periods of time in 'hidden' homeless situations, that is, living in accommodation that is provided informally rather than by housing authorities or other service providers.<sup>3</sup>

These experiences have a detrimental impact on women's physical and mental health. A 2015 study, 'Homelessness, An Unhealthy State', reported that almost 90% of women participants had a diagnosed mental or physical health problem<sup>4</sup>. The negative impact of persistent homelessness on physical and mental health is well documented and, for those who remain in situations of homelessness for extensive periods, health issues can become increasingly difficult to overcome. Women experiencing homelessness need equitable access to health services that are sensitive to their complex health and social needs. Better collaboration between the housing and homelessness sector, health services and women's organisations is needed, combined with greater levels of training and awareness for staff. Training should focus on domestic violence, sexual violence and psychologically informed approaches including trauma-informed care.

## Recommendations

1. Invest in the Prevention of Homelessness
2. Increase the Provision of Social Housing
3. Create Gender Sensitive Responses to Women's Homelessness
4. Develop a National Health Care Strategy for Homeless People
5. Improve Links between Health and Homeless Services
6. Address the Issues of Stigma and Discrimination
7. Tackle the Increasing Numbers of Families living in Emergency Accommodation
8. Establish Combined Support Services for Women with Dual Diagnosis of Mental Health and Addiction Issues
9. Address the Links between Domestic Violence and Homelessness

<sup>1</sup> 2,570 homeless women, out of 6,052 homeless adults. The Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Feb 2018) Homelessness Report [http://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homelessness\\_report\\_-\\_february\\_2018.pdf](http://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homelessness_report_-_february_2018.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Mayock, P & Bretherton, J (2017) *Women's Homelessness in Europe*. Palgrave: MacMillan

<sup>3</sup> Mayock, Sheridan, Parker (2015) The Dynamics of Long Term Homelessness Among Women in Ireland.

<http://www.drugs.ie/resourcesfiles/ResearchDocs/Ireland/2015/TheDynamicsOfLongTermHomelessnessAmongWomenInIreland.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> O'Reilly et al, (2015) 'Homelessness: An Unhealthy State'.

[http://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/b6d55d\\_ace6c285c5c5414e94eeb1bf11ca82f9.pdf](http://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/b6d55d_ace6c285c5c5414e94eeb1bf11ca82f9.pdf)

## 1. Women and Homelessness in Ireland

The most recent homeless figures from the Department of Housing, Planning & Local Government (February 2018) record total of 9,807 people experiencing homelessness in Ireland. Nationally, there are now 2,570 homeless women in Ireland, making up 42% of the 6,052 homeless adult population. There are 1,739 families living in emergency accommodation, 60% of which are lone parent-headed households. There are 3,755 homeless children; meaning more than 1 in 3 people experiencing homelessness in Ireland is a child.<sup>5</sup>

Women make up a far higher percentage of the homeless population in Ireland compared to other European countries, where the figures are much lower, at typically 20-33%<sup>6</sup>. Our official figures also may not represent the full extent of the problem, as women tend to engage more in invisible forms of homelessness. This means that women are more likely to stay with friends and family, or enter relationships in exchange for accommodation. Our current figures also do not include the many women and children living in domestic violence refuges or residing in direct provision centres.<sup>7</sup>

When women eventually present to homeless services they are often at crisis point with a range of complex needs, often coinciding with deteriorating physical and mental health. Common experiences for homeless women include a history of trauma and abuse, separation from children/family, feelings of stigma and shame<sup>8</sup>.

### Family Homelessness

According to Focus Ireland<sup>9</sup>, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of families experiencing homelessness in Ireland, primarily due to the loss of private rented accommodation. The number of homeless families increased by 27% between June 2016 to June 2017. 62% of homeless families are lone parent families and women are consistently over-represented in this subgroup<sup>10</sup>. One homeless service has also reported an increase in the number of pregnant women accessing emergency accommodation. In 2017, 27 pregnant women stayed in DePaul's homeless accommodation.<sup>11</sup>

There is growing evidence on the detrimental impacts that homelessness has on the daily lives of families who are residing in commercial hotels, emergency hostel accommodation, or B&Bs – especially for prolonged periods of time. In December 2017, Focus Ireland reported that 331 families were living in emergency accommodation for more than one year, with 82 families remaining homeless for over two years<sup>12</sup>. There is significant strain and difficulties related to families living in emergency accommodation, such as; sharing a single room, residing considerable distances from

---

<sup>5</sup> The Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Feb 2018) Homelessness Report

[http://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homelessness\\_report\\_-\\_february\\_2018.pdf](http://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/homelessness_report_-_february_2018.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Mayock, P & Bretherton, J (2017) *Women's Homelessness in Europe*. Palgrave: MacMillan

<sup>7</sup> SAFE Ireland (2016) 'The State We Are In' <http://www.safeireland.ie/safeireland-docs/STATE-WE-ARE-IN-SAFE-IRELAND.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Simon Community. Women and Homelessness. Resource Guide. <https://www.galwaysimon.ie/download/simon-community-women-homelessness-resource-guide/>

<sup>9</sup> Focus Ireland (2017) Insights into Family Homelessness. <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Insights-into-Family-Homelessness-No-11-Families-who-presented-as-Homeless-during-June-2017-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Focus Ireland (2017) Insights into Family Homelessness. <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Insights-into-Family-Homelessness-No-11-Families-who-presented-as-Homeless-during-June-2017-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.rte.ie/news/ireland/2018/0308/945868-homeless/>

<sup>12</sup> Focus Ireland (2018) Latest Figures. [https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/latest-figures-homelessness-ireland/?t=\\$2#Family](https://www.focusireland.ie/resource-hub/latest-figures-homelessness-ireland/?t=$2#Family)

their centres of interest, difficulty transporting children to school, lack of safe spaces for children to play, lack of privacy for older children and parents, and financial problems.<sup>13</sup>

The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) has recommended<sup>14</sup> that responses to homelessness must focus on the long-term housing needs of families, as emergency accommodation cannot become normalised and families institutionalised. They also recommend that a National Quality Standards Framework be developed and emergency accommodation regularly inspected by an independent inspections body.

## 2. The Impact of Homelessness on Women's Health

There is a complex relationship between homelessness and health; incorporating physical health issues, mental health issues, problematic drug and alcohol use and complex needs. Health issues can be the cause of homelessness occurring in the first place but they can also be a consequence of the experience of being homeless<sup>15</sup>. A 2015 study of health and homelessness in Ireland<sup>16</sup> found that almost 50% women experiencing homelessness classified their health as 'poor' or 'fair' and 89% had at least one diagnosed mental or physical health problem. It also noted a dramatic increase in dangerous drinking among women experiencing homelessness.

Women experience better outcomes when health and homeless services take an inter-sectoral approach to their work. Barriers need to be removed for homeless women accessing health services. Current policy responses to homelessness lack gender sensitivity and models of service provision are primarily orientated towards the needs of men. The intersection between gender, health, and homelessness needs attention in social policy and service provision. To recognise both the gendered nature of health and that of homelessness would arguably result in a more integrated response to women who are utilising both services. For example, the Simon Community's 'Resource Guide to Women and Homelessness' recommends that facilities needs to be safe and secure spaces for women and children, or women only<sup>17</sup>.

### Mental Health Supports

There needs to be more visible, community-based supports, particularly in relation to mental health services, and an expansion of community mental health teams that work specifically with people

---

<sup>13</sup> Focus Ireland (2016) Submission to the National Women's Strategy. <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Focus-Ireland-National-Womens-Strategy-Submission.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> IHREC (2017) The Provision of Emergency Accommodation to Families Experiencing Homelessness.

<https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/2017/07/The-provision-of-emergency-accommodation-to-families-experiencing-homelessness.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> Simon Community (July 2017) Homelessness and Health. Opening Statement to the Oireachtas Committee on Health from the Simon Communities in Ireland <https://www.oireachtas.ie/parliament/media/committees/health/presentations/Simon-Communities-of-Ireland-Opening-Statement.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> O'Reilly et al, (2015) 'Homelessness: An Unhealthy State'.

[http://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/b6d55d\\_ace6c285c5c5414e94eeb1bf11ca82f9.pdf](http://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/b6d55d_ace6c285c5c5414e94eeb1bf11ca82f9.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Simon Community. Women and Homelessness. Resource Guide. <https://www.galwaysimon.ie/download/simon-community-women-homelessness-resource-guide/>

experiencing homelessness.<sup>18</sup> In their report, 'Homelessness and Mental Health: Voices of Experience'<sup>19</sup> Mental Health Reform and Simon Communities Ireland highlight difficulties faced by homeless people seeking mental health supports:

- Difficulties in accessing crisis support through Emergency Departments
- A lack of follow up for homeless people following discharge from an inpatient health setting
- Barriers to getting support when presenting with a dual diagnosis of both mental health and addiction issues

They recommend the development of in-reach mental health service within homeless services, so that when a homeless service staff member is concerned about the mental health of a client, they can request a visit from mental health services.

## Mothers experiencing homelessness

The impact of homeless women's mothering roles can also have an impact on their mental health. In one study on women's homelessness in Ireland, 73% of the 60 participants were mothers. Some of the women were separated from their children, with 35% having one or more of their children in the care of relatives or social services. This was linked to feelings of great loss, anxiety, and trauma<sup>20</sup>.

Women feel the stigma that is attached to being an "unaccommodated woman". This label conflicts with the traditional gender role of mother and home-maker.<sup>21</sup> Where homeless mothers 'fail' in this 'duty' towards their children, they are stigmatised as 'bad mothers', without regard to how the conditions of homelessness can diminish the resources available to provide love and care for their children<sup>22</sup>. Focus Ireland has documented how homeless women experience multiple levels of discrimination based on public and political conceptions of those who are 'deserving' and 'undeserving' of supports and services. Women who are struggling with substance misuse, mental health issues, or have engaged with the criminal justice system are particularly stigmatised.<sup>23</sup>

## Homelessness and Domestic Violence

National and European studies have established the link between violence against women and homelessness. 92% of homeless women in a FEANTSA European study had experienced some form of violence or abuse throughout their lives. Safe Ireland recorded 4,000 women and children being

---

<sup>18</sup> Government of Ireland (2006) A Vision For Change. Report of the Expert Group on Mental Health Policy. Dublin: Stationery Office. Accessed at [https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/publications/Mentalhealth/Mental\\_Health\\_-\\_A\\_Vision\\_for\\_Change.pdf](https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/publications/Mentalhealth/Mental_Health_-_A_Vision_for_Change.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> MHR & Simon Community (2017) Homelessness and Mental Health. Voices of Experience.

<http://www.dubsimon.ie/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=89CBnHoR2rc%3d&tabid=136>

<sup>20</sup> Mayock, Sheridan, Parker (2015) The Dynamics of Long Term Homelessness Among Women in Ireland.

<http://www.drugs.ie/resourcesfiles/ResearchDocs/Ireland/2015/TheDynamicsOfLongTermHomelessnessAmongWomenInIreland.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Mayock, Sheridan, Parker (2015) The Dynamics of Long Term Homelessness Among Women in Ireland.

<sup>22</sup> Savage, Méabh (2016) "Gendering Women's Homelessness," *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies*: Vol. 16: Iss. 2, Article 4.

Available at: <http://arrow.dit.ie/ijass/vol16/iss2/4> <http://arrow.dit.ie/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1263&context=ijass>

<sup>23</sup> Focus Ireland (2016) Submission to the National Women's Strategy. <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Focus-Ireland-National-Womens-Strategy-Submission.pdf>

accommodated on a yearly basis in emergency refuge accommodation, however, this form of homelessness is not included in national statistics<sup>24</sup>.

As highlighted by Focus Ireland, domestic violence refuges do not accept women who are actively using substances and this can result in women remaining in unsafe environments<sup>25</sup>. Migrant women who are undocumented, or those who lose a valid immigration permit upon separating from their partner, can often face additional barriers to accessing emergency accommodation or social welfare payments. This puts them at risk of returning to a violent partner.<sup>26</sup>

### 3. Recommendations to end the housing crisis and support women experiencing homelessness

Our response to homelessness must tackle the economic and social policies that have a direct impact on women's lives, on their access to housing and on their health. In this section NWCI outlines key recommendations both to address the housing crisis and to support women who are currently homeless.

#### Recommendation 1: Invest in the Prevention of Homelessness

In 2016, almost a third of calls to the housing charity, Threshold, were in relation to situations where clients were at risk of losing their homes.<sup>27</sup> Preventing homelessness before it happens is one of the most effective ways we can tackle the housing crisis. More investment is needed in tenancy sustainment and settlement services, housing advice and information services that work with people who are facing homelessness to ensure they keep their homes.

#### Recommendation 2: Increase the Provision of Social Housing

The end of homelessness has moved out of sight. This has been the result of a long-term decline in state investment in social housing. Ireland has no constitutional or legally established right to housing. Ireland ratified the European Social Charter in 2000, excluding article 31 on the right to housing. A right to housing recognises that a home is central to the dignity of a person. Improvements in health cannot be achieved until women experiencing homelessness have access to secure housing.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> SAFE Ireland (2016) 'The State We Are In' <http://www.safeireland.ie/safeireland-docs/STATE-WE-ARE-IN-SAFE-IRELAND.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> Focus Ireland (2016) Submission to the National Women's Strategy.

<sup>26</sup> Focus Ireland (2016) Submission to the National Women's Strategy. <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Focus-Ireland-National-Womens-Strategy-Submission.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> Threshold Press Release, 27<sup>th</sup> Nov. 2017. <https://www.threshold.ie/news/2017/11/27/threshold-urges-government-to-strengthen-investmen/>

<sup>28</sup> Randall, N & Kelleher, C (2017) 'Simon Communities in Ireland, Senator Colette Kelleher and Mercy Law Resource Centre jointly hosted 'A Right to Housing' seminar in Trinity College Dublin on 13 July 2017' in Human Rights Watch. Accessed at <http://www.housingrightswatch.org/news/call-righthousing-be-enshrined-irish-constitution>.

### **Recommendation 3: Create Gender Sensitive Responses to Women's Homelessness**

There needs to be a discussion in Ireland about whether governmental policies and strategies adequately address the distinct housing and support needs of women who are at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness or housing instability.<sup>29</sup> With a dramatic increase in the number women experiencing homelessness in Ireland, policies and services must address this growing problem.

### **Recommendation 4: Develop a National Health Care Strategy for Homeless People**

There is a need to develop a national health strategy that looks at the differential impacts of homelessness on women and men. One comprehensive strategy would allow for effective care planning for this vulnerable group.<sup>30</sup>

### **Recommendation 5: Improve Links between Health and Homeless Services**

Women experience better outcomes when health and homeless services take an inter-sectoral approach to their work. Better collaboration between the housing and homelessness sector, health care professionals, and women's organisations is needed, along with greater levels of training and awareness for staff. Training should focus on domestic violence, sexual violence and psychologically informed approaches including trauma informed care, stigma and shame<sup>31</sup>.

### **Recommendation 6: Address the Issues of Stigma and Discrimination**

Stigma and discrimination affect homeless women's access to health services. This can have a significant impact on particular groups of women, for example, women from the travelling community and migrant women. Many people experiencing homelessness report feeling stigmatised by hospital staff when attempting to access services and often feel uncomfortable and under surveillance when attending appointments<sup>32</sup>. This suggests that there is a need to address issues of stigma in the community through culturally sensitive initiatives, as well as additional training for professionals.

### **Recommendation 7: Tackle the Increasing Numbers of Families living in Emergency Accommodation**

There are a disproportionate number of families experiencing homelessness in Ireland. 60% of these families are lone parent families and the majority are female-headed. Living in emergency accommodation has a detrimental effect on the health and well-being of all family members. Individual housing plans need to be developed in consultation with each family which sets out a maximum period that a family will remain in emergency accommodation before being offered

---

<sup>29</sup> Focus Ireland (2016) Submission to the National Women's Strategy. <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Focus-Ireland-National-Womens-Strategy-Submission.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> O'Reilly et al, (2015) 'Homelessness: An Unhealthy State'. [http://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/b6d55d\\_ace6c285c5c5414e94eeb1bf11ca82f9.pdf](http://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/b6d55d_ace6c285c5c5414e94eeb1bf11ca82f9.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> National Housing Federation (2017) Homelessness and Health for Disadvantaged Groups. <http://www.housing.org.uk/resource-library/browse/homeless-and-health-for-disadvantaged-groups/>

<sup>32</sup> MHR & Simon Community (2017) Homelessness and Mental Health. Voices of Experience. <http://www.dubsimon.ie/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=89CBnHoR2rc%3d&tabid=136>

secure housing.<sup>33</sup> We must also end ‘self-accommodation’ for homeless families. This involves local authorities merely providing the financial support to a family in order to source accommodation for themselves. IHREC<sup>34</sup> has highlighted significant concerns about the barriers faced by families when attempting to source their own emergency accommodation.

#### **Recommendation 8: Establish Combined Support Services for Women Experiencing Homelessness with Dual Diagnosis of Mental Health and Addiction Issues**

Currently, substance abuse services and mental health programmes are disconnected. Individuals must go to one service for mental health support and another for substance misuse treatment. The operation of parallel services for mental health and substance-use not only acts as an additional barrier to accessing appropriate supports, it also fails to take into account the interactive and cyclical nature of dual diagnosis. Prior research also suggests that service user outcomes in parallel treatment systems are generally poor.<sup>35</sup>

#### **Recommendation 9: Address the Links between Domestic Violence and Homelessness**

Domestic violence is often a direct or indirect cause of women’s homelessness. In Ireland, there are 4,000 women and children being accommodated yearly in emergency refuge accommodation, these women need to be represented in homeless statistics.<sup>36</sup> Additional funding is needed to ensure that women living in violent situations can access secure and affordable long-term housing options.

---

## **Contact**

**Jenny Liston, Health Policy Assistant**

**Dr Cliona Loughnane, Women’s Health Co-ordinator**

National Women’s Council of Ireland, 100 North King Street, Smithfield, Dublin 7

Tel: 01 67 90 100 E: [jennyl@nwci.ie](mailto:jennyl@nwci.ie)/[clional@nwci.ie](mailto:clional@nwci.ie)

Founded in 1973, the **National Women’s Council of Ireland (NWCI)** is the leading national women’s membership organisation. We represent and derive our mandate from our membership, which includes over 180 groups and organisations from a diversity of backgrounds, sectors and locations across Ireland. We also have a growing number of individual members who support the campaign for women’s equality in Ireland. Our mission is to lead and to be a catalyst for change in the achievement of equality for women. Our vision is of an Ireland and of a world where women can achieve their full potential and there is full equality for women.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Share, M & Hennessey, M (2017) Food Access and Nutritional Health Among Families in Emergency Accommodation. Focus Ireland.

<sup>34</sup> IHREC (2017) The Provision of Emergency Accommodation to Families Experiencing Homelessness.

<https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/2017/07/The-provision-of-emergency-accommodation-to-families-experiencing-homelessness.pdf>

<sup>35</sup> MHR & Simon Community (2017) Homelessness and Mental Health. Voices of Experience.

<sup>36</sup> SAFE Ireland (2016) No Place to Call Home. Domestic Violence and Homelessness. The State We Are In. Accessed at

<http://www.safeireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/Final-Homeless-Report-.pdf>.

<sup>37</sup> More information is available at [www.nwci.ie](http://www.nwci.ie)