



Homelessness – a major challenge for Ireland

Homelessness is one of the most extreme and devastating examples of poverty and social exclusion. Despite Europe being a wealthy society, the issue remains difficult to solve and, as a result of the current economic recession, may even be getting worse.

Homelessness is often associated with people sleeping rough. While this is certainly its most visible manifestation, people who are classed as homeless – or at risk of housing exclusion – may struggle in other ways.

They may be living in temporary accommodation such as shelters or institutions. Their housing arrangements may be insecure due to unfavourable tenancy agreements or because they are threatened with eviction.

In Ireland, it is estimated that in 2008, 2,399 households were categorised as homeless, with 1,725 households living in unfit accommodation, 4,112 households were in overcrowded accommodation and 3,375 were involuntarily sharing. This only reflects a snapshot of the situation on one night and does not reflect the experiences of many more families that are impacted by homelessness throughout the year.

Measuring the true extent of homelessness is difficult, partly because people who are homeless move frequently and partly because many of them, by definition are hidden.

Personal crisis

The reason why some people become homeless is due to a mix of inter-related human, structural and institutional factors.

Dramatic changes in circumstance due to financial and personal problems brought on by divorce, bereavement, mental illness or substance abuse can leave people of all ages at risk of becoming homeless. Individuals leaving care or prison are also vulnerable.

Limited access to affordable housing and unemployment can also lead people into homelessness. And poorer people can find themselves in difficulties due to the ever-rising cost of housing.

According to an [EU report](#), 38% of people at risk of poverty spend more than 40% of their disposable income on housing – more than twice the average for the overall population.



The report also notes that data from Member States indicates that the numbers sleeping rough or without accommodation have increased in some countries. In part this may be due to the recent recession.

Inadequate support services can compound problems. For example, supply of social housing is patchy across the EU. And because they lack a permanent address, homeless people can find it hard to access social support and health care systems.

What can be done?

Member States have the prime responsibility for developing policies to help the homeless, with the EU offering a coordinating role. The issue is currently at the top of the EU's anti-poverty agenda.

In 2008 the European Parliament adopted a written declaration calling for the end of street homelessness in Europe by 2015. The Parliament asked the Commission to develop a European framework to define homelessness and provide annual updates on actions by Member States.

In 2009 homelessness was chosen as a thematic focus for coordination between the EU and Member States in the field of social inclusion.

The EU report calls on Member States to develop integrated strategies to combat homelessness which combine financial support for individuals with effective regulation and good-quality social services – especially in areas such as housing, employment, health and welfare.

Developing more effective policies to tackle homelessness will be the subject of a major conference in December 2010. The European Consensus Conference on Homelessness brings together key stakeholders including public authorities, EU institutions, the social housing sector and people who have experienced homelessness.

Meanwhile, the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion (EY2010) will continue to raise awareness about the issue and the suffering it causes thousands of people across the EU.

Within the framework of EY2010, FEANTSA – the European Federation of national organisations working with the homeless – has launched a Europe-wide campaign called Ending Homelessness.

The campaign message is that homelessness is a problem that can only be



solved through a concerted effort to develop integrated strategies rather than by investing in reactive, short-term measures.

For further information

[Social protection and social inclusion homepage](#)

[Joint reports on social protection and social inclusion](#)

[FEANTSA website](#)