

# HOMELESS

## YOUNG PEOPLE

The problem of homelessness amongst young people is one that has been growing not only in extent but also in the level of public awareness of the problem, in contrast to the denial - certainly inaction - of the statutory bodies and their political masters.

### WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'HOMELESS'?

Homelessness is not just 'rooflessness', although there is sometimes a tendency to try to reduce it to that. Most homeless young people sleep rough only occasionally; most nights they get a friend who will put them up on the sofa, or a relative who will put them up for a few nights or they find an empty building or shed where they will be dry, warm and above all, safe. The characteristic of homelessness amongst young people is that they are constantly on the move, with no stable place in which they can put down roots and grow and develop. Such an unstable situation is clearly destructive to the healthy development of a young person and in particular places the young person in a situation in which it is difficult to form and maintain close personal relationships with others, a limitation which may affect the rest of their lives.

### HOW MANY HOMELESS YOUNG PEOPLE ARE THERE?

In short we do not know. In 1987, in two surveys that were undertaken, almost 400 young people under 18 were homeless in Dublin and almost 300 in other cities and towns in Ireland. All the voluntary bodies would say that the numbers have increased since then. In the first three months of 1993, 191 new homeless young people came to the attention of the statutory or voluntary bodies, which if continued throughout the year would suggest about 800 young people becoming homeless in Dublin in one year.

However, homelessness is not just a Dublin issue - every single town in Ireland has this problem, although many do not want to acknowledge it. Few towns have any services available for young homeless people and many, after a short time, will drift off to Dublin or London where their plight only gets worse.

### WHY DO YOUNG PEOPLE BECOME HOMELESS?

Almost always, homelessness is caused by a breakdown in relationship between one or both parents and the child. This may result from parental violence, sexual abuse or alcoholism; it may be that the parents have separated and the parent with whom the child is living has taken in a new partner and either the new partner rejects the child or the child rejects the new partner or both. However, frequently it can be difficult to identify why the young person has left home; it often results from a breakdown in communication between the parent and the child which leads to both parent and child reacting in a destructive way to each other. If they are not helped to overcome this barrier, the relationship between them can become so tense that the atmosphere in the house becomes unbearable, particularly if there are younger children also living there.

In many cases, the breakdown in relationship is nobody's fault, neither the parents' nor the child's. The parents and child can be upset, worried and confused and may be desperately seeking help - help which may not be available. Social workers may be so overstretched, particularly in more deprived areas, that one has the time to give to families in trouble until the crisis finally arrives - and then it may be too late. Services for children or families in difficulty may simply not exist in the area. In many cases the stigma which is attached to being a homeless child, ("they are robbers, or take drugs or are out of control") or the parent of a homeless child, ("What was going on in that house?") is totally undeserved and only adds to the problems of the family.

## RESPONSES TO HOMELESSNESS

The primary response must be preventative - providing the social workers and family support services which can intervene and support families in difficulty before the crisis erupts. As most homeless children come from well-defined deprived areas, these services must be located in those areas. In time, such support services would ensure that the numbers of young people leaving home would be reduced to a minimum.

However, preventative services are too late for those children who are now on the streets. A priority for them must be the provision of emergency accommodation so as to ensure that no child is left on the streets or unsupported. Even a few weeks or days on the streets may introduce a child to crime, drugs, prostitution and make their problem immensely more difficult to solve. Above all, the illusion of freedom which life on the street provides may make it difficult to reintroduce a young person to the dependency on others which is appropriate to their age.

There also exist a small number of young people who are well-known to all the voluntary agencies and who are too damaged to fit into the highly structured life of most hostels. They may have been in many of the hostels and been expelled because they were too difficult to manage or may not have been admitted to many hostels for the same reason. They require a special regime, characterised by flexibility, small numbers and high staff-child ratio. Such a service is expensive, but less expensive than prison, which is where most of these young people will otherwise end up.

### CHILD CARE ACT 1991

The most important step in dealing with the problems of children and their families was the introduction of the Child-Care Act 1991. The history of this Act, both before it was introduced and afterwards, is highly significant in highlighting the political indifference to the whole problem of youth homelessness. For the previous twenty years numerous reports highlighted the

inadequacy of the 1908 Children's Act as the major legislative provision for children and recommended that it be replaced. Eventually in 1985, a new Children's Bill was introduced into the Dail but had still not passed two years later when the Dail was dissolved. In 1988, the new government introduced another Children's Bill which took a further three years to pass into law. Even today, two years after the Act was passed by the Dail, only one significant section of the Act has been signed into law by the Minister. This is the section which obliges the Health Boards to provide "suitable" accommodation for homeless children up to 18 years of age. However, no resources have been made available to implement this section. An increasing number of homeless children are being placed in Bed and Breakfast accommodation or in adult homeless hostels because no "suitable" accommodation exists. Indeed, social workers in the Dublin area are now refusing to deal with homeless children over the age of 16 in protest at the lack of accommodation available to them. The reality is that today the main legislative provision for children is still the Children's Act 1908 because the Minister has not signed into law the new Act of 1991 and the services for homeless children are just as inadequate as ever.

### CONCLUSION

The provision of accommodation, food and care for children is an issue of fundamental rights. In a civilised society, fundamental rights should be guaranteed by law and provided by the structures of society. Hence the provision of services for homeless children must remain the responsibility of the Government, although they can legitimately fulfil this responsibility by delegating services to voluntary bodies. However, even then, ultimate responsibility for the funding, continuity of service, and standard of service must remain with the Government through the Health Boards. At present, services to homeless children are dependent on the goodwill of individuals who compensate for inadequate funding and support with their time, energy and compassion.

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