

THE NUMBER OF HOMELESS PEOPLE IN IRELAND - A REASSESSMENT OF AN ASSESSMENT

Under the powers vested in Section 10 of the Housing Act 1988, the Department of the Environment can ask local authorities to assess the scale of homelessness in their area. In 1991, such an assessment was conducted, resulting in the first official national enquiry into the extent of homelessness since 1925. According to the official Assessment of Homelessness, conducted by local authorities on 31st March 1991, there was a total of 2,751 homeless persons in Ireland over the age of 18. According to the Assessment conducted on 31st March 1993, this figure had declined by 3% to 2,667.

At the press conference where the Minister for Housing and Urban renewal presented the results of the 1993 assessment, Minister Stagg commented that 'considering the accommodation being provided and the emergency freephone after-hours service for the homeless... nobody need go without shelter or spend a night on the streets'.

However, the assessment of housing needs conducted by Local Authorities on behalf of the Department of the Environment shows a 44% increase in the number of households in need of accommodation over the period March 1989 - March 1993, with currently 28,620 households in urgent need of housing. All available evidence from organisations working with the homeless would suggest the opposite to what Minister Stagg asserted.

The problem seems to lie with the methodology used by local authorities in counting the homeless. For example, research conducted by the National Campaign for the Homeless in late 1992 showed that six local authorities did not include those sleeping rough as homeless under the definition of homelessness as laid down by the Housing Act 1988! The assessment of homelessness simply lists the numbers of homeless people by category of homelessness by local authority area. No information is available on basic variables such as age, gender, duration of homelessness etc. It is simply a very crude headcount of the number of some homeless people over the age of 18.

Homelessness is a growing and increasingly visible phenomenon in Ireland, particularly in our urban areas. The recent Eastern Health Board Survey showed that in the first six months of last year, a total of 280 homeless children were encountered in that Health Board alone. If Minister Stagg were to attempt to obtain a bed in any one of the emergency hostels for the homeless in Dublin after 7.00 p.m., or attempt to find adequate emergency accommodation for a homeless family any night this week, a different picture might emerge.

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