

Home Works:

A Study on the Educational Needs of
Children Experiencing Homelessness and
Living in Emergency Accommodation

Dr Geraldine Scanlon
Grainne McKenna



Foreword

Home is the foundation for almost everything in a child's life. It is the place where they spend most of their time, where they play, relax, do their homework, eat their meals and sleep. Home should be warm, secure and safe. Home is where family is. A good home forms the essential basis that prepares a child to go to school, to learn and to thrive. Emergency accommodation over time does not provide this necessary foundation, despite the colossal efforts of schools and parents.



There are nearly 4,000 children who are homeless in Ireland right now in the midst of a national housing emergency. This report is the first time of its kind, looking at the educational impacts of homelessness on children. Important lessons were learnt after the devastating Hurricane Katrina in the US some years ago which left so many families homeless. There it was found that the school played a vital role in enabling children to access support, reducing distress and improving academic achievement. Many of these lessons could be applied here in Ireland.

Children who are homeless lose out on every level of their education because they have no home to provide them with the backdrop that they need to learn and grow. Let me paint the picture of what child homelessness looks like on a day-to-day level and the dreadful effect this has on their schooling. For a child, life in homeless accommodation can be tough. They wake up in the one room they share with their parents and siblings. Some must wake their children as early as 5:30am to make the long journey across the city to school. Many are exhausted and some fall asleep in class. School attendance is affected. The child is hungry because often there is nowhere to store food or prepare breakfast or their lunchbox. The child doesn't always have adequate washing facilities and sometimes goes to school with a dirty uniform.

Homeless accommodation makes it almost impossible for parents to establish regular routines. Parents say this can result in changes to their child's behaviour with many children 'acting out'. Others are sad or withdrawn from their peers as they struggle with the shame and secrecy they feel.

When the child returns to their accommodation after school, there is no place to do homework. There is nowhere to rest or play. They can't invite their friends back and it's tricky to go to birthday parties or sports clubs because they live so far from their communities. A child's sense of belonging and their friendships are negatively impacted. Children are denied the opportunity for academic achievement but also the important social experiences children need to develop their personality and abilities. A child living in homelessness is not able to enjoy their childhood.

All aspects of their educational experience are grossly impacted upon.

The backdrop for many families is poverty, social disadvantage and domestic violence. The stories are heart-breaking. One mother and her three children had to sleep in the family car for two weeks before moving to a hotel. Another family with five children became homeless when their home burnt down in a fire. Some children have disabilities or additional needs, adding to an already excruciating and difficult scenario for families.

In spite of the many intolerable demands, parents do an amazing job in raising their children and continuing to send them to school. Parents have high aspirations, desperately wanting their children to do well. Yet, they also know that their children's education is impeded by low energy, fatigue and illness due to a lack of rest, food and access to health services – all caused by homelessness.

Schools are a beacon of hope for families. They provide a stability and consistency that is otherwise absent in the child's life, and play a vital role in supporting families. Yet sometimes educational professionals say they feel helpless and badly need more resources to help them to cope.

Children need action now or we will lose a generation. We urgently need to address child homelessness and provide families with sustainable, affordable and social housing options. Specifically, we need a coordinated approach and dedicated actions to support children who are homeless in their everyday schooling or for younger children, early years supports. More information and service planning is needed to make sure that no child falls through the homeless gap.

Most of all, we need political will and concerted action from all in society to end the scourge of child homelessness so every child can learn, grow and flourish.



Tanya Ward
Chief Executive

The Children's Rights Alliance commissioned this research with the support of The Community Foundation for Ireland, on foot of concerns from our members about the detrimental impact of homelessness on children's education. We are extremely grateful to The Community Foundation for Ireland for their pledge to support this project from the outset.

 **The Community
Foundation for Ireland**

Executive Summary

Introduction

Children are the fastest-growing group in the homeless population of Ireland. Figures from the *Homelessness Report* from the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, February 2018 record a total of 3755 dependent children from 1739 families officially recorded as homeless. While the majority of homeless families (76 per cent) are located within the greater Dublin region, the crisis has extended beyond the capital. Rates of family homelessness outside the Dublin region have more than doubled in one year; increasing from 165 in January 2017 to 410 families in February 2018 (Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, 2018).

As a result of this unprecedented phenomena, early childhood settings and schools across Ireland are supporting children who are experiencing homelessness to engage in education and participate fully in school life. In October 2017, the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) reported that children who are experiencing homelessness struggle in school and their teachers struggle to help them cope. Despite the increasing numbers, the INTO states that there is ‘no support for hard-pressed teachers, no advice, no guidance and no additional resources’ (2017).

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 Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). While the State has put in place legislative and administrative systems to ensure access to a school place, children’s right to education in Ireland has yet to be fully realised. Family homelessness is having a detrimental impact on children’s participation and development, and presents significant challenges for parents, teachers, educators and those who seek to respect, protect and fulfil children’s rights.

While current figures and demographic data indicate the alarming extent of the crisis, there is a need to understand the effects and potential impact of homelessness on children. This includes how living in emergency accommodation affects children’s access to education, school attendance, academic achievement, social participation and overall participation in their school communities. The objectives of this study were to:

1. Review international and national research on the impact of homelessness on children’s education.
2. Gain insights into the lives and educational experiences of children that are living in homeless accommodation in the greater Dublin region.
3. Explore the types of educational provision that children are attending including; early childhood settings, primary schools, and secondary schools.
4. Gain insight into the experience of principals, teachers and educational professionals working with children who are experiencing homelessness.
5. Provide clear, achievable and tangible recommendations that will support and enhance access to education for children experiencing homelessness.

Methodology and Methods

This study employed a mixed methods approach and comprised a literature review, semi-structured interviews and online surveys across educational settings. This approach sought to provide a deeper understanding of the perceptions and knowledge of children’s educational experiences from the perspective of parents and educational professionals.

The search strategy conducted for the literature review involved a systematic search of electronic databases (PubMed, PsycINFO, ERIC, CINAHL, Scopus, and Google Scholar) and was limited to articles published in the last 28 years (1990 - January 2018).

The qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 parents from 19 families, and seven educational professionals from primary and secondary schools. Service profiles were completed for the six early childhood settings attended by pre-school children in the study and a semi-structured interview conducted with a community-based child-care provider making provision for four children from the study.

The quantitative method comprised of three online surveys for (1) principals and vice-principals of primary and post-primary schools, (2) educational professionals including teachers, home-school liaison coordinators and special needs assistants working in primary and post-primary schools and (3) early childhood professionals. The online survey for early childhood settings was circulated to settings offering the Community Childcare Subvention Resettlement (Transitional) Programme. Responses from the early childhood settings questionnaire are not reported in the quantitative analysis due to a relatively low response rate (5) and significant differences in the service type, provision, staffing and the levels of funding across the responses.

Key Findings

Parental Perspectives on Children's Educational Experiences

Characteristics of Study Participants

Experiences of homelessness are diverse, and the families who participated in the study varied significantly regarding their demographic profile, family composition, periods of homelessness and the type and stability of their homeless accommodation. Despite differences in family composition and demographic information, all families had experienced significant levels of housing insecurity and transition, this included highly unpredictable and transient provision in private emergency accommodation during periods when they were required to 'self-accommodate'. For a significant number of families, homelessness occurred alongside other forms of loss and disadvantage including unemployment, poverty, domestic violence, family bereavement and disability that presented additional challenges in finding and sustaining accommodation. For all but one of the parents, this was their first experience of homelessness. Feelings of loss, shame, sadness, and isolation were salient throughout all parent interviews.

Children's Educational Related Experiences and Needs

The semi-structured interviews explored parents' perspectives on the key education-related issues faced by their children. The interviews generated in-depth discussion and provided meaningful insights into children's school attendance, relationships with teacher and peers, engagement in learning and future educational aspirations. While parents experienced significant challenges in ensuring that their children had access to schools and early childhood settings, such educational provision was highly valued by parents.

Basic Physiological Needs

Parents reported that in order to fully access and participate in education, their children's fundamental requirements for food, adequate rest and physical health must be satisfied. While living in homeless accommodation this could not be achieved owing to scarce financial resources, long journeys to and from school, significant transport costs, lack of appropriate facilities for food preparation and storage and inadequate facilities for sleep and maintaining personal hygiene. This resulted in poor physical health and mental well-being, irritability, exhaustion, low self-esteem and feelings of social isolation which impacted on children's school attendance and resulted in reduced engagement and participation in school life and learning. Parents living in private emergency accommodation such as hotels and bed and breakfasts described how all family members shared sleep spaces and how noise from other families, nightclubs below the accommodation and cramped living conditions impacted on their children's sleep. Thirteen of the families indicated that their children had to get up each morning before seven, with three parents waking their children at 5:30am to ensure access to a communal bathroom and to allow enough travel time to get to their school.

Children were said to be fatigued before arriving in school, often sleeping on the bus and three parents of primary school children had been informed by teachers that their child had fallen asleep in school. Families spoke of their children appearing tired, run down and lethargic resulting from poor sleep and disrupted bedtime routines.

Access to a sufficient and nutritionally balanced diet was repeatedly identified as a factor impacting children's health, school attendance, and learning. Parents discussed their children's experience of hunger, ill-health and low moods. Parents described challenges in providing their children with school lunches, with some reporting that they often had to choose between paying for transport to school and feeding their children.

Children's physical health and well-being was reportedly poor. Parents described how bacterial, viral and parasitic infections including chicken-pox, ear infections and head lice were common, and difficult to treat and manage while living in overcrowded and confined accommodation. Parents described how their children experienced frequent school absence because of illness and infectious diseases that could be attributed to poor diet, inadequate rest and poor living conditions within the homeless accommodation. Two families had young children with significant physical disabilities requiring the use of a wheelchair and ongoing medical care. Four other children had additional needs for which they receive therapeutic intervention and parents explained that medical and therapeutic appointments for their children resulted in additional absence from school.

Security, Routine and Predictability

Uncertainty in accommodation, displacement from their local communities and loss of space, privacy and personal belongings had resulted in distress and discomfort for children in the study. Parents described how the family's experience of homelessness had resulted in changes in their child's behaviour both within school and out of school hours. This included children refusing to eat, increased levels of agitation, crying and comfort-seeking behaviours. Two parents reported that their children who were previously toilet-trained experienced bed-wetting when placed in emergency accommodation. Some children were described as sad, depressed, withdrawn and lonely while others were said to be angry, upset, easily frustrated and increasingly sensitive to perceived admonishment. Parents believed that changes in children's well-being and behaviour resulted from uncertainty and housing insecurity. This was said to negatively affect children's relationships with teachers and peers and reduce their ability to fully participate in school life. However, all parents in the study described their children's educational setting as a source of predictability and comfort, where consistent routines and responsive teachers could offer children a sense of stability and continuity amid the uncertainty of family homelessness. All parents expressed their commitment to maintaining the continuity of school provision even when the accommodation was a significant distance from their child's school.

Friendship, Trust and Belonging

Parents recognised the importance of their children's friendships within school as well as the challenges in supporting and maintaining these relationships while living in emergency accommodation. Parents described how children's friendship groups had reduced to a small number of close, trusted friends in the period of homelessness. This reduction in peer group size was attributed to limited opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities and limited availability to meet with their friends after school or on weekends because of placement in accommodation some distance from their local community. Positive teacher-child relationships were highlighted by parents as a source of support and comfort for children within the wider school community. The majority of parents spoke positively about their children's relationship with teachers and school staff and described how praise, authentic encouragement and access to in-school supports had assisted their children during the family's period of homelessness. In particular, parents of children attending pre-school and primary school spoke of the warmth and affection that their children experienced in their relationships with teachers and school staff and how this promoted positive attitudes to school and school work.

Attitudes to School and Educational Aspirations

All parents stated that their children enjoyed attending school and participating in school life despite the challenges of access and meaningful educational participation while experiencing homelessness. While the majority of parents of school-age children (14) indicated that they did not have significant concerns regarding their child's learning abilities or progress with their school work, seven of the parents interviewed spoke of how their child's attainments in class and school tests had deteriorated during the period of homelessness. They described how this resulted in disappointment for the children and sometimes additional stress within the family. Parental aspirations for children's academic success were high and consistently evident throughout the interviews. Parents of children expressed strong commitments to their children attending and succeeding within school despite multiple transitions and the harmful impact of family homelessness on children's educational experience.

Educational Professionals' Perspectives

Primary Indicators of Pupils Experiencing Homelessness

Based on findings from relevant literature on child poverty, homelessness and educational inequality, as well as the lived experiences of parents and educational professionals, a set of key indicators of education-related needs for children experiencing homelessness was developed. The indicators are contextualised within a hierarchy of need (Maslow, 1948) whereby deprivation across the domains of (1) Basic Physiological Needs (2) Security, Routine and Predictability (3) Friendship Trust and Belonging and (4) Pupils Academic Self-Worth and Educational Aspirations negatively impacts on children's educational experiences and outcomes.

This research found that homelessness impacts on each of the four domains but the most significant area of deprivation relates to children's **Basic Physiological Needs** for sufficient nutrition, adequate rest and good physical health and well-being. It is also worth noting that in addition to hunger and exhaustion, educational professionals indicated that 'sometimes' pupils experiencing homelessness may not be dressed in full uniform and experience difficulty maintaining personal hygiene and cleanliness.

The key indicators in the domain of **Security, Routine and Predictability** demonstrate that pupils experiencing homelessness 'often' arrive late to school, become distressed by a sudden change in the school environment, do not make friends easily or respond to unfamiliar adults and will not ask for additional support from teachers. Educational professionals also indicated that 'sometimes' pupils attend school on a regular basis, become easily upset by correction or perceived criticism from the class teacher, complete homework and become easily frustrated in the school environment.

Significant negative impact was also observed in the domain of **Friendship, Trust and Belonging**. It was found that 'often' pupils experiencing homelessness do not participate in extracurricular activities and demonstrate limited awareness and intolerance of other children's needs. Respondents indicated that pupils 'sometimes' have a sense of identity and belonging within their class group, ask questions and can appear socially isolated from their peer group. However, respondents indicated that pupils 'often' respond positively to praise and encouragement from their class teacher.

Finally, children's **Academic Self-Worth and Educational Aspirations** were seen to be characterised by fear of failure and finding aspects of academic work challenging. However, educational professionals positively indicated that pupils are somewhat aware of their strengths and difficulties and 'sometimes' show interest and motivation in school work and pleasure in academic progress.

Sharing Information

All of the parents stated that they had informed their child's school that they were experiencing homelessness. Three parents had not intended to notify their child's school but felt they had to because of poor attendance, children arriving late, or to update their address for correspondence. In all cases, the first communication was with the school principal, but only ten parents spoke directly to their child's teachers. While parents found school staff to be supportive and understanding, four parents were uncertain as to whether the school principal had informed the teacher/s of their child's circumstances. For parents, this meant that they were unsure if the child's teacher would make allowances or accommodations for poor attendance, incomplete homework or signs of fatigue and frustration.

Responses from educational professionals suggest that school staff were aware of parents' reluctance to disclose personal and sensitive information concerning the family's experience of homelessness. School staff found that parents often felt embarrassed about their situation and were concerned their child would be treated differently. The study found that on occasion, the family's circumstances were only shared by parents and/or children when difficulties were noted by the class teacher or school principal and discussed with the child's parents. For example, school staff approaching parents regarding the child's poor attendance, disrupted work patterns and incomplete homework.

In some cases, educational professionals reported that when they were made aware of the family's circumstances, they developed initiatives to provide support to pupils. These included coordination of services, educational resources and peer mentoring. They also reported that the identification of a trusted contact person for parents and pupils was seen to be helpful in enabling and facilitating discussion as well as providing access to additional in-school support.

The Importance of School

Across all types of educational provision, parents reported that school was important to their children, not only because of their friendships and learning experiences but also due to the stability and predictability it offered amid the uncertainty and stressors that accompanied their experience of homelessness. In short, the function of school changed for this group of children.

Peer-to-Peer Friendships

Over half of the parents (n=14) reported that their children had a best friend or a small group of close friends. In general, the children were said to enjoy warm, reciprocal relationships with their peers in school. In three cases (n=3), children attended the same school as their cousins, and parents valued these extended family networks in securing friendships and supporting the child.

However, almost half of the families (n=9), particularly children attending secondary school, explained the challenges in maintaining friendships while the family was living in emergency accommodation. Four of the parents described how friendships had been impacted due to withdrawal from extracurricular activities and limited opportunities to meet and play with their school friends due to placement in homeless accommodation some distance from their school and local community. Educational professionals shared similar views with regard to the impact of homelessness on children's friendships and social participation.

Relationships with Teachers and School Staff

The majority of parents (n=17) spoke positively about their children's relationship with teachers and school staff. They described how praise, authentic encouragement, and access to in-school supports had supported their children during periods of housing insecurity and transition. In particular, parents of children attending pre-school and primary school spoke of the warmth and affection that their children experienced in their relationships with teachers, and how this promoted children's positive attitudes to education and school work. In contrast, all schools noted accumulative factors could impact on children's behaviour resulting in some cases in a breakdown in relationships with school staff.

Attitudes to School and Educational Aspirations

Parents were asked to describe their child's attitude to school including their child's capabilities, self-confidence, motivation and future academic aspirations. All parents stated that their children enjoyed attending school and participating in school life. Parents of school-aged children (n=16) indicated that they had participated in parent-teacher meetings with no significant learning or behavioural concerns identified by class teachers. While parents reported that their children showed interest and enjoyed school, seven parents of school-aged children described how their child's attainments in class and school tests had decreased during the period of homelessness. They described how this resulted in disappointment for the children and sometimes additional stress within the family. These results are consistent with the responses of educational professionals who indicated that pupils are aware of their strengths and difficulties, show interest and motivation in school work and take pleasure in academic progress. Despite the negative effect of homelessness on children's educational experience, high parental aspirations for children's success in school was consistent throughout the study.

Continuity of Learning

Educational professionals reported that obtaining previous school records was the most crucial piece of information supporting the child's continuity of learning and transition between schools. They considered additional support for learning and allowances for incomplete homework to be of less importance, while activities to facilitate integration, monitoring of school attendance and assessment of current needs were considered to be least important when providing continuity for learning.

Educational professionals indicated that in general, school enrolment policies facilitated mid-year transfer and did not present challenges for pupils who may have to transfer to a new school as a result of becoming homeless and having to move out of their community. Opinions were equally divided on how useful the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Education Passport was in helping schools to provide for pupil needs, but it was noted that it contributed to schools knowing what type of support might be required for individual pupils.

What Schools Need

Schools indicated that support and funding for Special Educational Needs (SEN) were the most important requirements to effectively respond to the educational needs of children who are experiencing homelessness. Responses from educational professionals suggest that access to support agencies was the third most important resource, followed by the provision of additional classes. Access to information to assist families was ranked as the fifth most important resource while funding for school lunches and assistance with uniforms was seen to be of less importance.

The findings from the qualitative interviews with educational professionals highlight the impact that homelessness is having on children, as well as teachers and school staff. Schools, while advocating on behalf of families, are experiencing high levels of difficulty and frustration in trying to access information and advice including supports to develop inclusive practice. Many important areas of need have been identified by schools making provision for children who are experiencing homelessness. In particular, schools require access to information from agencies supporting homeless families, specific funding to support pupils as needs arise, in-service training and coordination of services that support children and their families.

Conclusions

Children in Ireland have the right to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development (UNCRC, Article 27) and every child in Ireland has the right to access education and to be educated (UNCRC, Article, 28). Research from the last twenty years has consistently illustrated how residential and educational mobility resulting from homelessness places children at risk of academic problems, poor school attendance, acute medical conditions, negative social stigma and isolation as well as physical, social and cognitive setbacks (Julianelle and Foscarinis, 2003; Masten, 2012; Miller, 2011; Rafferty, 1998; Wright, Rubin and Devine, 1998). When children are not afforded their right to education, they are denied the opportunity for academic achievement and positive experiences that develop their personality, talents and abilities to their fullest potential (Children's Rights Alliance, 2015). This loss extends across the lifespan, impacting on health, well-being, social relationships and occupational success. Failure to respect, protect and fulfil the development and participation rights of homeless children contravenes the State's commitments and obligations under the UNCRC, and impedes efforts to create a fair and equitable society for all.

This study indicates that children who are homeless in Ireland are experiencing a unique set of challenges and difficulties that impact on their health, well-being and social development. These challenges create barriers to their school access and limit educational participation. For children experiencing homelessness, the function of school was seen to change from becoming a place of learning to a place of safety, routine and predictability. However poor attendance and placement in accommodation some distance from the school was found to impact on children's academic achievement and social relationships. In some cases, this was found to result in the breakdown of important, protective relationships for pupils leading to social isolation and behavioural problems.

The research found that there was a consistency between the educational professionals and the parent's perceptions of education-related needs. This converged into a set of key indicators developed for this research to describe the educational needs of children experiencing homelessness in the Irish context. The indicators consider needs in the domains of (1) Basic Physiological Needs (2) Security, Routine and Predictability (3) Friendship Trust and Belonging and (4) Pupils Academic Self-Worth and Educational Aspirations which inform the recommendations for this report.

Recommendations

The following recommendations emerged from the findings of the study. They provide a policy context for the improvement of systems, structures and services to ensure educational access and participation for children who are experiencing homelessness.

Families with children experiencing homelessness should be provided with the material assistance and support programmes to uphold a child's right to education. In particular, appropriate and dedicated measures should ensure that children can access and participate in education irrespective of their family circumstances. The response to children experiencing homelessness must be separate and distinct with input from all relevant government ministries, agencies, organisations and services working with and for children and families.

In 2016, the newly formed Government published *Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness* to address the housing crisis with a focus on increasing housing supply. It is welcome that *Rebuilding Ireland* recognises that issues may arise in relation to school attendance for children experiencing homelessness. This research could inform and update Pillar One of *Rebuilding Ireland* which commits to putting in place supports for families with children. The Inter-Agency Group established by Minister Eoghan Murphy TD following a review of Rebuilding Ireland in September

2017,¹ and chaired by a former Secretary General coordinates with the Department of Health, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the Health Service Executive and Tusla, the Child and Family Agency is a welcome development as it presents an opportunity for coordinated actions to address issues facing families experiencing homelessness.

The annual *Education Action Plan* for 2019 and the developments envisaged in the School Completion, Educational Welfare Service could potentially be critically important for addressing the educational needs of children experiencing homelessness.

1. Update and Enhance Strategic Supports for Children Experiencing Homelessness

- i. The Government should build on its existing commitments in *Rebuilding Ireland* and update Pillar One to reflect the additional identified needs of children experiencing homelessness with particular regard to education.
- ii. The Government should consider expanding the Inter-Agency Group to include representatives from the Department of Education and Skills. Greater connectivity between the Inter-Agency Group and the Steering Group of the Children and Young People's Services Committees and national youth services could be important to responding to the needs of children experiencing homelessness.
- iii. The objectives, actions and activity status of any updated or additional commitments in Pillar One should be submitted and reviewed as part of the *Rebuilding Ireland* Status Reports.
- iv. The next annual Action Plan for Education 2019 presents an important opportunity to address the issues identified in this report. The Department of Education and Skills should liaise with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Tusla Educational Welfare Service and consult directly with the Irish Primary Principals' Network, the Joint Managerial Body for School Management in Voluntary Secondary Schools (JMB), the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), the Association of Secondary Teachers of Ireland (ASTI), Teacher's Union of Ireland (TUI), Educate Together Principals' Network, the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals (NAPD), youth organisations, voluntary childcare organisations and City and County Childcare Committees.
- v. Targeted initiatives (such as DEIS, the School Completion Programme, Education Welfare Services, ABC programme) which focus on hard to reach children, run by the relevant Departments and constituent Agencies, could consider developing additional supports and local community response plans to address the educational needs of children experiencing homelessness. The School Completion Programme plays an important role in supporting this group of children. Tusla, the Child and Family Agency should consider increasing its supports to children experiencing homelessness and the Department of Education and Skills could give consideration to increasing HCSL provision where there is increased demand and extending the service to non-DEIS schools who are supporting children experiencing homelessness.
- vi. Due to the housing crisis, thousands of children have had their education interrupted and negatively impacted by the challenges presented through their experience of homelessness. The Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Tusla, the Child and Family Agency must plan ahead for the longer-term impact of homelessness on the educational experience of this cohort of children and the disruption that it may have caused. This cohort of children will need to be tracked by the Department of Education and Skills and the School Completion Programme and their needs planned for to ensure that they do not fall behind.

¹ Rebuilding Ireland, 'Minister Murphy announces outcomes from review of Rebuilding Ireland' accessed 19 September 2017.

2. Support Schools to Cater for the Educational needs of Children Experiencing Homelessness

- i. The Government should establish a ring-fenced fund for schools to provide for the needs of children experiencing homelessness attending the school throughout the academic year. Funds may be used to provide supports for children living in emergency and temporary accommodation, including but not limited to psychological assessment and support, extracurricular activities, home-work clubs, additional tuition or wrap-around services delivered within the school premises.
- ii. All schools and educational settings making provision for children experiencing homelessness should have access to resources and/or facilities to provide children with regular, nutritious food. Consideration should be given to mechanisms to support children's access to nutritionally adequate food out of school hours through the development of community-based meal provision for children and families within school settings.
- iii. The Department of Education and Skills should issue a circular to provide advice and guidance regarding educational provision for children experiencing homelessness including recommendations to Boards of Management to address additional school costs, including the practice of 'voluntary donations' in primary and secondary schools.
- iv. The Teacher Education Section (TES) of the Department of Education and Skills should develop appropriate professional development training for teachers and schools making provision for children experiencing homelessness. This would include support for educators in identifying and addressing educational needs arising in children from deficiency in basic physiological and security needs.
- v. The July Education Programme of the Department of Education and Skills provides funding to extend the school year by a month for children with severe or profound general learning disabilities or children with autism. This Programme should be extended for children experiencing homelessness to ensure that children living in emergency or temporary accommodation have opportunities for enrichment, learning and leisure during the summer months.

3. Ensure that Families with Children Experiencing Homelessness are Supported to Access Appropriate Accommodation

- i. End the practice of 'self-accommodation' for families with children with immediate effect. Ensure that families with children who become homeless are provided with the necessary supports to access appropriate accommodation.
- ii. The Government should provide a specific time-line in which it will end the use of emergency hotel and B&B type accommodation for families with children. Families with children should not be required to live in emergency or temporary accommodation for more than six months and figures relating to the type of provision and period of homelessness for families with dependent children should be maintained and published on a monthly basis.
- iii. All emergency and temporary accommodation sites for families should be centrally mapped alongside the current mapping of all Family Resource Centres.
- iv. In placing families in emergency and temporary accommodation, every possible attempt should be made to maintain children's educational stability and continuity of school placement.

Families with children should be placed in accommodation that is within reasonable proximity to their child's existing school or child-care service. Access to public transport networks and the associated costs of travel should also be considered when determining a placement. Families should be provided with immediate access to the LEAP travel card scheme.

- v. Quality standards must be adhered to in temporary and emergency accommodation to consider and respond to the needs of children. These standards should include specifications that uphold a child's right to a standard of living adequate for physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development in such a way that also considers and accounts for how these needs change according to the specific needs of different age groups. Centres should have appropriately trained staff, safe and secure spaces for rest and sleep, age-appropriate homework and study spaces, adequate facilities for food preparation and storage and appropriate standards of sanitary accommodation including private bathrooms and access to washing machines. Children should have access to safe play environments.

4. Ensure Families with Children Experiencing Homelessness are Granted Access to Adequate Financial Support and Welfare Assistance

- i. Given the financial hardship faced by families with children experiencing homelessness, the significant costs associated with school can place additional pressure on these families. In addition to the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection should review the circumstances of these families to determine whether an Exceptional Needs Payment would assist with additional costs, particularly at the start of the school year. These costs include once-off costs associated with the purchase of appropriate outerwear, equipment, books and materials requested by schools. The Department should take into account the variation in costs between children attending primary and secondary school. The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection should update its operational guidelines to highlight the specific issues related to families experiencing homelessness and to provide guidance on rates and eligibility criteria to all community welfare services, officers and representatives administering Exceptional Needs Payments.
- ii. The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection should also review the possibility of making available an additional payment to families experiencing homelessness to account for increased daily living expenses resulting from the period of homelessness with particular reference to adequate nutrition and transport to and from school, including a car fuel grant for parents who have access to private transport.
- iii. Figures on accessing these supports should be collated to assess and determine the need for additional payments for this cohort.

5. Information and Service Planning

- i. The Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government should ensure that there are adequate systems in place that provide clear information regarding children's experience of emergency and temporary accommodation. This should include anonymised demographic details showing the age range of children as well as the type of accommodation, transition between types of homeless accommodation and the total duration of homelessness.

- ii. The Inter-agency Group should work with and fully utilise the infrastructure of Children and Young People’s Services Committees and all relevant government, statutory and voluntary agencies to provide clear, accessible information regarding the supports and services available to families who are at risk of, or are experiencing homelessness.

Information should be made available to schools and provide information on educational and family supports available nationally and locally.

- iii. Children experiencing homelessness should be identified as a potentially vulnerable population and their needs should be considered when reviewing local and national policy documents relating to social inclusion, housing, education, social protection and healthcare.

Personal Testimonies

The following stories from parents detail their personal experience of parenting amid the stress, sadness and isolation resulting from homelessness. They highlight the harmful impact child homelessness has on their children and their education. Veronica, Deirdre, Maria and Jessica have used pseudonyms to protect their privacy and that of their children.

Personal Testimony One

Veronica, aged 26

“It was costing me €6 every morning on a lunch for Alice going to school and I’d have to buy that in the garage. So I was driving to the garage, getting the breakfast because I had no fridge I couldn’t store anything. Then coming up to the Christmas I was trying to save a few quid for Santa so I went and bought some yoghurts and butter and cheese and I left it in my car because it was freezing, so that was my fridge. There was a communal kitchen but there were no locks on anything, so if you went and done your shopping and there was another family there that didn’t, they would help themselves to your food. When you came back later in the afternoon everything was gone. Eventually I bought a kettle, I boiled eggs in it and steamed the baby’s bottles with it, and we used it for soup, we had soup and rolls.”

Veronica is a 26-year-old mother, with two girls: Alice (6) and Annie (18 months). She had been living in supported temporary accommodation for nine months. Before that, the family had spent three months in different types of emergency accommodation; this included two months living in a women’s refuge and one month of ‘self-accommodating’ for one to three nights in various hotels in Dublin.

In September 2016, Veronica’s daughter Alice started primary school in the community where Veronica had grown up and is on the waiting list for social housing. The family was placed in emergency accommodation 36 km from Alice’s primary school. Their daily routine was to wake the two girls at 6am each day and leave the refuge by 6.45am to ensure that Alice arrived at school on time. The journey took two hours by car, with the baby Anna sleeping in the car and Alice eating her breakfast on the way to school.

Alice enjoyed school; she was fond of her class teacher and the school principal. Veronica believed that she had established good relationships with other children in her class. While the school found her to be a happy and hardworking little girl, Veronica reported that Alice would often be very tired and upset at collection time, sometimes tearful on the way back to the family’s accommodation.

Alice would often be reluctant to go to bed and had trouble sleeping through the night in the shared room with her mam and baby sister Annie. Veronica also found it difficult to provide meals and packed lunches for Alice because of a lack of facilities for food preparation and storage.

Veronica has moved with her girls to a self-contained housing unit within supported temporary accommodation 15 km from Alice’s school. The family has a kitchen with cooking and storage facilities, which means that Veronica can plan and budget for meals and packed lunches on a weekly basis. While the journey to school still takes 45 minutes, Veronica said that Alice has an established routine, with time and space for play, homework and bedtime stories. She goes to bed at 8pm in her own room, and sleeps through the night, waking for school at 7am.

Personal Testimony Two

Deirdre, aged 47

“On a typical school day, the alarm goes off at six and we get up and get the kids washed and dressed and breakfasts, and then we do the lunches, by the time we have all that done, it’s seven o’clock and we have to leave. Most mornings on the way to school on the bus, the two of them fall asleep. Now Ronan fell asleep this morning and he toppled sideways in his wheelchair and whacked his head off the pole on the bus. And Sarah, there was no seats on the bus for her so she sat down and fell asleep on the floor.”

Deirdre, a 47-year-old mother, was living with her three children in an apartment provided as Temporary Emergency Accommodation (TEA). The family had previously been living in a three-bedroom family home for six years. In 2016, Deirdre was issued with a Notice of Termination stating that her landlord required the house for family use.

Despite efforts to find a home within their community, there was a lack of affordable housing to suit the needs of the family. Deirdre’s son, Ronan, has a physical disability and uses a wheelchair. Ronan also has ongoing health problems and has had two significant surgeries in the last four years. Their family home provided adequate space, accessibility, heating and ventilation for her son’s medical needs but Deirdre could not access equivalent affordable housing in Dublin.

In 2016, Deirdre and her children presented to the local authority and were directed to ‘self-accommodate’ in private emergency accommodation. Deirdre spent two days making phone calls to various hotels until she found availability for two nights in a hotel 20 km away. Deirdre then presented to the local authority, detailing her son’s medical needs and one month later, the family were placed in an apartment on a temporary basis. They have now been living there for over 12 months. While the apartment has ground-floor disability access for Ronan, there have been ongoing maintenance problems with plumbing and ventilation. According to Deirdre, there are significant amounts of black mould in the bathroom and bedrooms and this has exacerbated Ronan’s underlying medical condition which has meant a return to hospital and absence from school.

Two months after leaving her previous family home, Deirdre returned to the house to collect post, and was surprised to find that the house was being rented by multiple tenants for significantly more rent than her family had been paying. With support from a housing charity, she took a case to the Private Residential Tenancies Board who found that the Notice of Termination had been invalid. The Board made a modest award for damages to the family but one year after the invalid eviction from their previous home, the family remains homeless.

Personal Testimony Three

Maria, aged 31

“They’ve missed so many days because they are sick all the time. They were getting chest infections and I had no doctor. So it was a nightmare, I had no doctor because I’d no permanent address. Then I couldn’t get a doctor because they wouldn’t take me on and the kids with medical cards. Obviously, they’d sent the renewal form to my old address, so I never renewed them in time and I couldn’t reapply for medical cards without a doctor.”

Maria is a 31-year-old mother of five children who had spent 20 months living in private emergency accommodation. Maria, her partner and children had lived for eight years in private rented accommodation which they were required to vacate in 2016. On presenting to their local authority as homeless, the family was placed in a hotel 30 km from their previous home and the children's school. They were living in a room with three single beds and one double bed between two adults and four children.

During the period of homelessness, Maria became pregnant, and this placed additional strain on the family; her relationship with her partner broke down. At the time, Maria’s children attended four different schools owing to the distance between the children's school and the family’s emergency accommodation.

Last year, the family were notified that long-term accommodation had been identified and that they would be housed within four weeks. The children's new school supported the family during the period of transition, providing advice and information on the school and the local area. The school principal made time for Maria and her children to meet with class teachers prior to starting classes and the school provided a ‘financial waiver’ from the costs of the school book scheme and voluntary donation.

Maria’s children settled well into their new school, making new friends and forming relationships with teachers and school staff. Her eldest son, Padraig (9) had been encouraged by his class teacher to join the school’s football team and was delighted when he made the team.

Despite the challenges faced by the family in the period of homelessness and transitions in schooling, Maria remained optimistic about her children's experience of education and the experiences and opportunities education can provide for her children in the future.

Personal Testimony Four

Jessica, aged 24

“When we were in the hotel and moving around, Clare’s behaviour got very, very bad you know. She was very, I don’t like to say bold but she was very bold, you know she was just acting up all the time like, attention-seeking and screaming, all this stuff. She lashed out all the time, you know we’d come back to the hotel, and then, if we were after booking out and booking back in, we’d change room, like they’d give us a different room. Clare wouldn’t understand. She’d be on the floor in the hallway shouting, ‘This is our house!’ You know so I had to kind of explain to her somehow like, ‘No we’re in this one today’, it wasn’t nice to try to explain that to her.”

Jessica is a 24-year-old mother of two children, Clare (3) and Peter (2). Jessica presented as homeless to her local authority in 2017 following six months living with friends and family members while trying to find affordable rental accommodation. Jessica had been living in supported temporary accommodation in North County Dublin for four months. Before this, the family had spent three months moving between various hotels and bed and breakfasts in Dublin.

Jessica’s son Peter was born with a complex medical condition that resulted in physical disability and severely reduced mobility. He has required ongoing medical intervention and therapeutic support since birth and requires use of a wheelchair. Jessica described how the multiple changes in accommodation impacted on her children, particularly her young daughter Clare.

Childcare had helped Clare and Peter in re-establishing routines and predictability. Despite travelling for an hour each morning, maintaining the provision was a priority for the family as the children formed relationships with staff and children in the creche. The preschool teachers were aware of Peter’s physical needs and have made adaptations to the physical environment, as well as working with his physiotherapist to support his movement and independent within the creche. Clare formed relationships with her teachers and classmates and Jessica has been provided with advice and information on parenting programmes and financial supports for parents caring for a child with a disability.

Jessica believes that accessibility to affordable, high quality childcare has provided her children with secure routines to support development and learning as well as providing her with time to seek long-term accommodation and a return to employment. Jessica is a university graduate and at the time of interview was preparing to commence employment.

Founded in 1995, the Children’s Rights Alliance unites over 100 members working together to make Ireland one of the best places in the world to be a child. We change the lives of all children in Ireland by making sure that their rights are respected and protected in our laws, policies and services.

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 National Organisation for the Treatment of Abusers (NOTA)
 National Parents Council Post Primary
 National Parents Council Primary
 National Youth Council of Ireland
 One Family
 One in Four
 Parentstop
 Pavee Point
 Peter McVerry Trust
 Rape Crisis Network Ireland (RCNI)
 Realt Beag
 SAFE Ireland
 Saoirse Housing Association
 SAOL Beag Children’s Centre
 Scouting Ireland
 School of Education UCD
 Sexual Violence Centre Cork
 Simon Communities of Ireland
 Social Care Ireland
 Society of St. Vincent de Paul
 Sonas Domestic Violence Charity
 Special Needs Parents Association
 SPHE Network
 SpunOut.ie
 St. Nicholas Montessori College
 St. Nicholas Montessori Teachers’ Association
 St. Patrick’s Mental Health Services
 Step by Step Child & Family Project
 Suas Educational Development
 Teachers’ Union of Ireland
 Terenure Rugby Football Club
 The Ark, A Cultural Centre for Children
 The Prevention and Early Intervention Network
 The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, NUI Galway
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 Youth Work Ireland

Children’s Rights Alliance
 7 Red Cow Lane, Smithfield, Dublin 7, Ireland
 Ph: +353 1 662 9400
 Email: info@childrensrights.ie
www.childrensrights.ie

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