

Topic briefing:

Children experiencing homelessness

July 2018

*This is one of a series of topic briefings relating to housing and homelessness.
This is a statistical briefing looking at the number of children who are homeless.*

You may also be interested in our topic briefings on:

- [Time in temporary accommodation](#)
- [Health and homelessness](#)

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Key points

- In 2017/18, 14,075 children were in households assessed as homeless, this is equivalent to 38 children becoming homeless every day.
- On 31st March 2018, 6,615 children were living in temporary accommodation. This is the fourth consecutive year that this figure has increased.
- Households with children spend longer in temporary accommodation than households without children (201 days compared to 161 days).
- Homelessness can have drastic consequences for children and young people, across almost all areas of their lives; from health to education, homelessness leaves many children unable to realise their potential. These effects on a child's life have been shown to worsen the longer a child is homeless.

Background

Sadly, homelessness is shown to have drastic consequences for many areas of children and young people's lives; mental health, physical health, and educational attainment often suffer as a result. For example, homeless children are three to four times more likely to have mental health problems than other children, even one year after being rehoused.¹ Poor housing conditions also have a long-term impact on health, increasing the risk of severe ill-health or disability by up to 25 per cent during childhood and early adulthood.² Such effects have been shown to worsen the longer a child is homeless. Teachers report that children experiencing homelessness or bad housing were often late, physically and emotionally exhausted, and less able to maintain relationships with their peers.³

There is no regularly published official statistic showing the number of children who have been assessed as homeless in Scotland. The number of children who are living in temporary accommodation is sometimes used as an indicator of the number of children affected by the crisis of homelessness. But this does not tell the whole story. We know that only around half of people who are homeless used temporary accommodation,⁴ and therefore the number of children living in temporary accommodation is an underestimate of the total number of children who are homeless in Scotland.

We know that families who are homeless tend to exhaust all other accommodation options before having no choice but to access temporary

¹ Shelter (2006) Chance of a lifetime: The impact of bad housing on children's lives, http://england.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_and_research/policy_library/policy_library_folder/chance_of_a_lifetime_-_the_impact_of_bad_housing_on_childrens_lives

² Shelter (2006) Chance of a lifetime: The impact of bad housing on children's lives.

³ Digby A and Fu E for Shelter (2017) Impacts of homelessness on children – research with teachers. Kantar Public

⁴ Shelter Scotland (2017), The use of temporary accommodation in Scotland - 2016, https://scotland.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_library/policy_library_folder/the_use_of_temporary_accommodation_in_scotland_-_2016

accommodation: moving between family, friends and other accommodation. While it may be preferable that they stay with family and close family friends and benefit from existing support networks, this comes with the risk that there are unknown numbers of children experiencing unsettling and frequent moves, and often staying in overcrowded circumstances. Figures on the number of children staying in temporary accommodation are therefore not only an inaccurate representation of the true number of children who are homeless, but also underestimate the number of children likely to be experiencing disruption with all the negative effects on health and education as those already documented.

Case study 1: One lady, caring for her three young grandchildren, chose to move in with extended family whilst waiting for housing, rather than using temporary accommodation provided by the council. The family of four slept on two mattresses on the living room floor for three months over the Christmas period before a permanent home was found nearby. During this period, stress levels were high as a result of living on top of one another and having no private space or room to store belongings except in bags on the floor.

Case study 2: A young mum, also supported by our Foundations First service, made a homeless application after experiencing domestic abuse. She was offered temporary accommodation but it was far from her home, and would have been multiple bus trips from her son's nursery. Instead, she moved in with her two young children to her mum's house, sleeping on a sofa bed in overcrowded conditions, for three months until suitable permanent accommodation became available for her to move into.

Children in households assessed as homeless

Shelter Scotland requested a statistic from the Scottish Government on the number of children in households assessed as homeless or threatened with homelessness in 2017-18⁵ to give a more accurate picture of the number of children affected by the issue of homelessness:

- 14,075 children were in households assessed as homeless or threatened with homelessness in 2017-18.
- 13,981 children were in households assessed as homeless or threatened with homelessness in 2016-17. Therefore, **the number of children has increased by 94 since last year.**

⁵ In fact, there will be additional children in households that have been assessed as homeless or threatened with homelessness in 2016-17 or earlier, and whose case has yet to be resolved.

It is important to remember that this figure relates to children up to the age of 18 listed as dependents as part of a homeless application, and excludes young people aged 16-24 who are making a homeless application independently of their parents or guardians. Anyone over the age of 16 who is no longer in the care of their parents or guardians can make a homeless application themselves, and these figures are collected alongside other homelessness demographics.

Children in temporary accommodation

We have also seen an increase in the use of temporary accommodation in the past year, particularly among families.⁶

- On 31st March 2018, there were 6,615 children in temporary accommodation.
- This was a 9% increase from the year before, when 6,058 children were in temporary accommodation on 31st March 2017.
- The number of children in temporary accommodation has increased for the past four consecutive years: on 31st March 2014 the figure stood at 4,153, showing an increase of 59% over four years.

We know that **households with children tend to spend longer in temporary accommodation than households without.**

- Households with children who left temporary accommodation in 2017-18 spent an average of 204 days across all types of temporary accommodation over the past year, compared to 161 days for households without children.

Being in temporary accommodation can be disruptive, especially for children, and research has shown that long periods in temporary accommodation can impact on a child's physical and mental health and their educational attainment.⁷ New legally enforceable standards are necessary to ensure that temporary accommodation, where its use is necessary, is of a good quality and provides that positive stepping stone into permanent accommodation.⁸

Conclusion

New Scottish Government data has shown that the number of children in Scotland found themselves without a place to call home has risen to 14,075.

⁶ Scottish Government, Homelessness in Scotland: 2017-18, <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2018/06/9554/downloads>

⁷ Shelter Scotland, Temporary accommodation standards: campaign briefing, November 2013 http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_library/policy_library_folder/temporary_accommodation_standards_campaign_briefing

⁸ More information on policies and recommendations about the importance of standards in temporary accommodation is available in Shelter Scotland (2018), Time in temporary accommodation, https://scotland.shelter.org.uk/professional_resources/policy_library/policy_library_folder/time_in_temporary_accommodation_2018

This data gives us a clearer picture of the scale of the problem we face, and re-establishes the need for urgent action.

For those who need it, temporary accommodation is a vital step in the homelessness process and an important stepping stone on the way to permanent secure housing. **We fundamentally believe that while the situation remains that people have to use temporary accommodation as a stopgap while they wait for a home, they should not have to spend any length of time in poor quality accommodation.** It's crucial that this time, described as being 'stuck in limbo', is kept to a minimum and that new legally enforceable standards are introduced as soon as possible to ensure that temporary accommodation, where its use is necessary, is of a good quality and provides that positive stepping stone into permanent accommodation.

However, we know that not all families use temporary accommodation; many try to make alternative arrangements, such as staying with friends and family. Figures on the number of children staying in temporary accommodation are therefore not only an inaccurate representation of the true number of children who are homeless, but also underestimate the number of children likely to be experiencing disruption with all the negative effects on health and education as those already documented.

The impacts of homelessness are wide reaching and well documented, but sadly the short and long-term impacts on children can be especially damaging. It is therefore vital that central and local government, statutory bodies and third sector partners work together to prevent homelessness wherever possible; and that we ensure that the 14,075 children who do experience it are supported into permanent accommodation – a place they can call home – as soon as possible.

Shelter Scotland helps over half a million people every year struggling with bad housing or homelessness through our advice, support and legal services. And we campaign to make sure that, one day, no one will have to turn to us for help.

We're here so no one has to fight bad housing or homelessness on their own.

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