

All I Want For Christmas Is...
Somewhere to Call Home

*A report into the plight of the 82,000
homeless children in England*

Summary

- 82,780 children in England will wake up on Christmas Day in temporary accommodation
- 6,500 of the families lucky enough to exit temporary accommodation in the last year had been without a permanent home for more than 3 years
- Children in temporary housing are almost twice as likely to suffer from poor health as other children
- A third of children living in temporary accommodation have no school to go to
- One in four households are in temporary accommodation for over a year and 4 percent are in temporary accommodation for over 5 years before a permanent settlement can be found.
- By the time homeless children are eight years old, one in three has a major mental disorder
- Two thirds of homelessness staff felt under pressure to reduce homeless acceptances

Introduction

Christmas is a time when families traditionally come together to celebrate and enjoy each other's company in the warmth and comfort of the family home.

It's a celebration which conjures up a specific vision in each of our minds. It might be Christmas dinner with the family, a chance to do something special for loved ones or strangers, or the excitement on children's faces as they excitedly see what Santa has brought them.

The shocking reality is that for more than 80,000 homeless children in England this Christmas, Santa will be visiting them in temporary accommodation.¹

Homelessness trends are affected by housing supply and demand, affordability and unemployment; as well as the number of leaving institutions, such as prisons, children's homes and long stay psychiatric hospitals. As such the recent trend of demand outstripping supply and homes becoming less and less affordable is a great concern. More and more households will be unable to buy or rent their own home. Households are also hampered by a lack of supply of social rented homes and poor access to tenancies in some areas.

In the last decade the Social Housing Waiting List has ballooned; right now there are 1.8 million families languishing on the list for a new home – an 80 per cent increase on 1997 levels.

The limited supply of social housing is also an issue once households are registered as homeless. The limited supply means families are forced to stay in Hostels and B&Bs, rather than self contained units. A considerable amount of research has identified serious problems with living in both types of accommodation. In 2002 The Government made a commitment to end the use of bed and breakfast hotels as temporary accommodation for families and children, however this Christmas will see an estimated 915 children living in B&Bs.

While the impact of living in B&Bs is seen as a particularly bad for children, being made homeless and having to live in any form of temporary accommodation can have a very negative impact of a child and their development.

Overcrowding and poor living conditions has been shown to increase the chances of developing respiratory diseases and chest infections, while the stress of homelessness causes depression and other mental health problems in children.

¹ Current figures are taken from the most recent statutory homelessness statistics published by the Department for Communities and Local Government on 10 December 2009,
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/corporate/statistics/homelessnessq32009>

Children in temporary housing are almost twice as likely to suffer from poor health as other children².

The impact of homelessness is also not only confined to children's health. Research by the charity, Shelter, shows that homeless children miss an average of 55 school days a year due to the disruption of moving into or between temporary accommodation and which in turn damages their education and their prospects for later life³.

This report shows that, while the number of homeless children has declined since its peak in 2005, the number of homeless children is still nearly 20 percent higher than in 1998.

Furthermore the time that homeless families spend in temporary accommodation has also increased over the period. In 1998 only one in nine households were in temporary accommodation for a year or more before leaving and only one in a hundred more than two years. However now over one in four families are in temporary accommodation for over a year and 4 percent of households are in temporary accommodation for over 5 years before a permanent settlement can be found.

Part of the reason for the reduction in numbers of homeless households has been put down to homeless prevention and a more pro-active approach from local authorities helping people find homes before they become homeless. Such a development is welcome, however there are concerns that the 'prevention' is used as a form of gate-keeping to stop people declaring themselves homeless, under perceived pressure from central government. It must not be the case that vulnerable people are pressured into circumstances in which they do not wish to life for the sake of figures and targets.

² Shelter, Impact of Bad Housing: Against the odds, November 2006

³ Shelter, Homelessness Fact Sheet, October 2007

The Impact of Homelessness and Outcomes for Children

The impact on a child of becoming homeless can be massive. This is not only the initial shock of becoming homeless and having to move out of ones home but also the after effects. Living in temporary accommodation, which is often overcrowded and of a poorer quality, is also damaging to children. Nor is any damage limited to the time that a child is in temporary accommodation, sadly as Adam Sampson, former Chief Executive of Shelter said at the time "There is nothing temporary about the damage done to their education and mental and physical health"⁴.

Education

Studies find that homelessness and poor quality temporary housing has a large negative impact on a child's achievements at schools and hence their chances later in life. Shelter found that children living in bad housing are nearly twice as likely as other children to leave school without any GCSEs⁵.

A large part of the problem is school attendance. Barnados estimate that a third of children living in temporary accommodation have no school to go to⁶. For those that do have a school, it is often the case that the temporary accommodation provided by the local authority will be a long way from the child's current school. Parents and children have to decide whether to try to move schools or undertake long journeys. Limited public transport in many areas and high cost may the second option unattractive, however there is no guarantee that a school place would be available in the new area. As a homeless family can be moved many times, even getting to school can be a major issue. A survey by Shelter found that homeless children miss an average of 55 school days a year due to the disruption of moving into or between temporary accommodation⁷.

In interviews with homeless children and families Shelter found that homeless children can end up having to change schools several times in a year and that children saw these moves as a stressful experience and cause of anxiety⁸.

Poor, and temporary, housing also impacts in there day to day education. Shelter found that children living in bad housing are five times as likely to lack a quiet place to do their homework⁹. This greatly limits their ability to learn.

⁴ 'There's No Place Like Home', December 2007

⁵ Shelter, *Impact of Bad Housing: Against the odds*, November 2006

⁶ Barnados, *Homelessness*, Dec 2009

⁷ Shelter, *Homelessness Fact Sheet*, October 2007

⁸ Shelter, *Impact of Bad Housing: Against the odds*, November 2006

⁹ *Ibid*

Health

Children in temporary housing are almost twice as likely to suffer from poor health as other children¹⁰.

Overcrowding and poor living conditions has been proven to increase respiratory diseases and chest infections. Homeless children have four times as many respiratory infections than non-homeless children and five times more likely to have asthma¹¹.

Homeless children are also much more likely to suffer other injuries. One in four children living in bad housing attends Accident and Emergency in a given year¹².

As well as the impact on a child's physical health, homelessness and temporary accommodation affects a child's emotional wellbeing. The Chance of a Lifetime report revealed that homeless children living in temporary accommodation are three to four times as likely to have mental health problems than other children. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network found that more than one-fifth of homeless preschoolers have emotional problems serious enough to require professional care, but less than one-third receive any treatment. By the time homeless children are eight years old, one in three has a major mental disorder.¹³

Mental health problems such as anxiety and depression have been strongly linked to overcrowded and unfit accommodation. In a survey of overcrowded families, 94 percent of parents thought that overcrowding causes anxiety, depression and stress¹⁴.

Friendship and Family

Being made homeless and living in temporary and poor quality housing can seriously compromise family relationships. Children living in bad housing are three times as likely to feel unhappy about their family than other children¹⁵.

A major issue for homeless children especially teenagers is privacy. Children tend to have to share a bedroom with either their mother or other children. The lack of personal space is a problem and helps damage family relationships.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Better Homes Fund

¹² Shelter, Impact of Bad Housing: Against the odds, November 2006

¹³ National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Facts on Trauma and Homeless Children, 2005

¹⁴ Shelter, Impact of Bad Housing: Against the odds, November 2006

¹⁵ Ibid

The stresses that homelessness and its aftermath have on children and families means that such children are 50 percent more likely to run away from home¹⁶.

Outside the family homelessness and temporary accommodation has an impact on other important relationships. The lack of space and privacy together with having to move away from their area and school are all factors which children identify as having a negative impact on their friendships. Children cannot see their old friends and find it harder to make new friends¹⁷.

Children in bad housing are also nearly twice as likely to suffer from persistent bullying as other children¹⁸.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Shelter, Homelessness Fact Sheet, October 2007

¹⁸ Shelter, Impact of Bad Housing: Against the odds, November 2006

Methodology

Figures used are taken from the Department for Communities and Local Government website.

For the years prior to 2002 the estimates for the total number of children was made by finding the average number of children per homeless family post 2002, and then using this to estimate past numbers. The average number of children for all households was found to be 1.438 in the years 2002 - 2009. This average was used to give figures for 1998 -2002.

In order to estimate the total number of children for the years 2002 -2007, the average number of children per homeless household with children was taken from the seven quarters where data was available. In these seven quarters the average number of children per household was found to be 1.89. A number very close to the estimate of two which was used in "There's no place like home". This figure of 1.89 was used to give the estimated number of total children for 2002 - 2007.

The same method was used to estimate the number of children staying in different types of accommodation, for the period post 2002.

The reason for this the use of two different methods is that the second method is expected to be more accurate as it relies on less assumptions, however due to the very limited data available for the years prior to 2002 it cannot be used in that time period. The first method could have been used for both periods, prior to and after 2002, however this would have been likely to lead to less accurate estimates in the post 2002 period than could be made.

Findings

Households living in temporary accommodation

There are currently 56,920 households in temporary accommodation in England.

The number of households living in temporary accommodation sharply increased in the period 1998 – 2005 peaking at over 100,000 in 2005. Since 2005 there has been a gradual decrease but the number of families living in temporary accommodation remains higher today than in 1998.

The number of Children living in temporary accommodation

Out of the nearly 57,000 families in England living in temporary accommodation, a staggering 43,400 include at least one child.

In the last quarter alone there were 82,780 children in temporary accommodation.

The number of Households and children in Bed and Breakfast accommodation

The five years from 1997 to 2002 saw the number of Households living in B&Bs increase over 240% up to 14,000. While this was followed by a decrease in these numbers, in the last five years the number of Households with Children has seen a great deal of fluctuation but very little of a downward trend rather the numbers seem to have stabilised.

There are still an estimated 915 children spending their Christmas in B&B accommodation this year.¹⁹

Hostels

The number of households living in Hostels has slowly been decreasing over the past three years, from a peak of over 10,000 of which over 6,000 were households with children. The problem has not gone away though as this year an estimated 4,170 children will be going to sleep in hostels or women's refuges on Christmas Eve.

Households in homes leased from the private rented sector by Housing Associations or Local Authorities

¹⁹ Because the Government do not publish figures on the actual numbers of children, but merely the number of *families* with children. As a result we have used the formula used in the report, *No Place Like Home*

The number of Homeless Households being housed in this manner has increased nearly three fold from just over 12,000 in 1998 to nearly 36,000 today. This trend is part of the wider problem of a lack of social housing, which is in part of cause of high Homeless rates.

In 2002, 35 percent of Homeless applicants could be housed in local authority or registered social landlord stock. However currently only 16 percent of Households live temporarily in such accommodation today. At the same time the number of those living in homes leased from the private sector has sharply increased, making up over 60 percent of all those temporarily houses, and increasing.

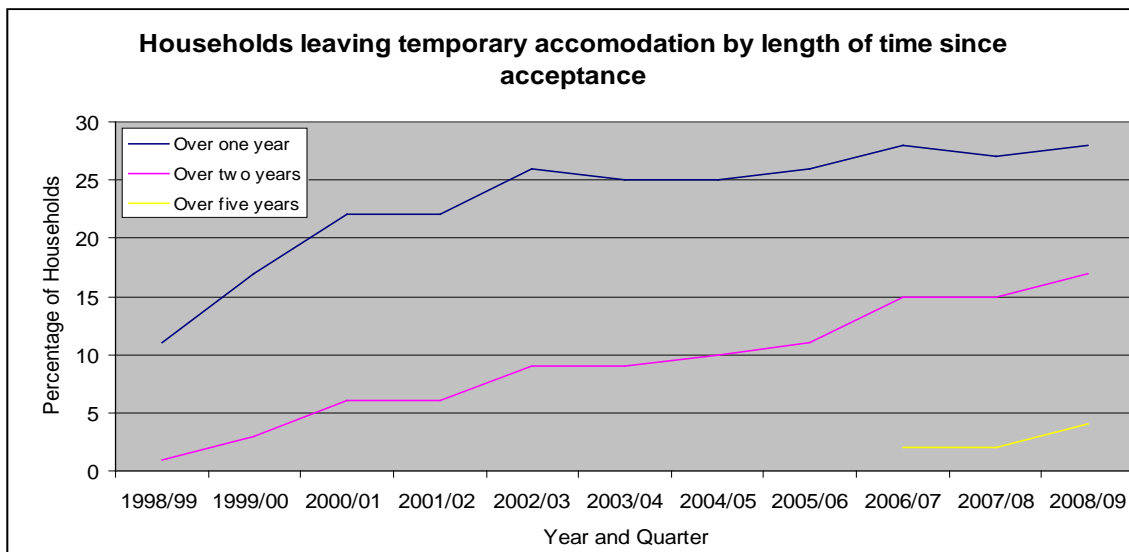
Length of time spent in temporary accommodation

While the Government does not report the length of time spent by all households in temporary accommodation the trend can be established from the data on the households leaving temporary accommodation.

Since 1998 there has been a sharp and continuing increase in the length of time households are in temporary accommodation before a permanent situation is reached. In 1998 only one in nine households where is temporary accommodation for a year or more before leaving and only one in a hundred more than two years. However now over one in four families are in temporary accommodation for over a year and 4 percent of households are in temporary accommodation for over 5 years before a permanent settlement can be found.

Of the families lucky enough to exit temporary accommodation in the last year, 6,581 had been without a home for a period of more than three years.

Given the hugely negative impact that temporary living has on children and families this trend is an extremely concerning trend.



Conclusion

More than 82,000 children will be homeless this Christmas and they are now twice as likely to have also spent their previous Christmas in temporary accommodation, than they were ten years ago.

Homelessness and temporary accommodation has a massive impact on a child's life: damaging their health, their relationships and their future. Each case on homelessness is a personal tragedy and the scale of this tragedy should not be allowed to continue.

Homelessness organisations report great frustration that they are unable to resolve even simple issues because no one within a relevant Government department believes that it is within their remit. A dialogue and solutions are therefore difficult to initiate. The Government needs to work across Whitehall to ensure that policy is designed to help rather than hinder homeless people. Homelessness must be put firmly onto the agenda, not only for the Housing Minister, but also for the other relevant Whitehall departments. This was a major tenet in the *Conservative Blueprint to Tackle Homelessness*, published in December 2008.²⁰

The blueprint outlined the Government departments with most responsibility for tackling homelessness. It described the type of cross-government approach to dealing with homelessness, its causes and its side-effects because this is not a problem that one department or minister can be asked to deal with alone.

For instance, the inflexibility of the Housing Benefit which means that private tenants receive their benefit directly has led to landlords refusing to let their properties to households in receipt of Local Housing Allowance who were subsequently being left homeless.

Conservative spokesmen from the Shadow Work and Pensions and Shadow Housing teams recently announced that should tenants wish to, they will be able to have their benefit paid directly to their landlord under a Conservative government.²¹ This should increase the number of homes available to some of the most vulnerable households and allow homeless families to move into more permanent accommodation.

As is so often the case, transparency is key to understanding the true extent of the problem and the Government has been slow to learn that facing up to the

²⁰ http://www.shapps.com/reports/Conservative_Blueprint_For_Tackling_Homelessness.pdf

²¹ http://www.conservatives.com/News/News_stories/2009/10/Increasing_the_housing_supply_and_helping_vulnerable_tenants.aspx

magnitude of the challenge is more important than minor political embarrassment. On the related issue of rough sleeping, for instance, the DCLG's counting method has been overhauled so that most local authorities are not even required to supply an estimate of the number of people in their areas sleeping on the streets. As a result the Government estimates that just 464 people are without a roof over their head and see it as a less pressing issue than it ought to be considered.

At the heart of this terrible human tragedy is the crisis in affordable housing which has developed in the past decade. As demand for housing has outstripped supply and buying or renting a home is now way out of reach for many families. At the heart of this crisis is the failure to build enough new housing of all types during the boom years in the UK economy.

There is also a need to move away from a top down target driven approach and enable local people to have more say in the development of their own areas to meet the needs of the population.

While house prices have been rocketing, the stock of Social Housing has all but silted up, with few people moving in and out, and as a result there are now over 1.8 million families languishing on the housing waiting list. In some cases these households are forced into homelessness. This is of particular importance for homeless families as three and four bedroom social homes are even more difficult to come by.

The emphasis on targets has perverted the housebuilding market with incentives for the number of 'units' built so family homes are invariably sacrificed. Since 1997 the percentage of Registered Social Landlord homes built with more than two bedrooms has fallen from 37 per cent to 21 per cent in 2008/9.²² This has meant that families will either be offered a cramped social home or temporary accommodation. But as the Waiting List shows little sign of shortening, the chances for a better outcome diminish and more and more children will spend more and more time in B&Bs, hostels and the like.

This report is intended to refocus the government on the issue of homelessness and especially the fact that 82,000 children will spent Christmas in temporary accommodation; the impact that this has on the children's lives; and some possible solutions to help stop this tragedy from continuing.

²² DCLG Live Table 254, <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/housing/xls/table254.xls>