
There's No Place Like Home

How 130,000 children will be homeless this Christmas

Research and Report by Grant Shapps MP
16th December 2008

Key Findings

- There are over 130,000 homeless children living in England.
- The number of homeless children living in England has risen by 128% since 1997.
- Homeless children are twice as likely to undergo emergency hospitalisation and five times as likely to have asthma as children with a fixed address.
- Homeless children have four times the rate of delayed development and are suspended from school twice as often as non-homeless children
- The number of households living in temporary accommodation has doubled in the last ten years, from 41,000 in 1997 to nearly 85,000 in 2007.
- The number of homeless households with children has more than doubled in the last ten years, from 24,000 in 1997 to more than 64,000 in 2007.
- The number of homeless households with children as a proportion of homeless households has risen from 68% in 1997 to 75% in 2007.

Introduction

The notion of homelessness is often considered to mean rough sleeping and is frequently applied exclusively to those who sleep rough on Britain's streets night after night (See: Roughly Sleeping report¹).

However, homelessness is not that obvious. It is a social failure that extends to people, families and children whose homelessness is inconspicuous and concealed from the openness that comes with sleeping rough. These people are the hidden homeless, many forgotten and most of them out of sight in the temporary accommodation where they find themselves trapped.

This report reveals that this Christmas, over 130,000 children will wake up homeless, a staggering rise of 128% since 1997.

Shortages in affordable housing means that increasing numbers of children and their family's are being forced to live in crowded conditions in hostels and bed and breakfasts while they wait to be rehoused. Recent research done by Shelter found that there is a direct link between childhood tuberculosis (TB) and overcrowding. TB can lead to serious medical problems and is sometimes fatal.²

Having no fixed address is a devastating experience for children and their families and leads to social, physical and mental crises that can last well into a child's adulthood.

A safe and secure home is an essential element of a child's well being. It is a constant in a child's life that is essential for their progression into adulthood and one that should be far easier to provide. Homeless children in temporary accommodation are amongst the poorest and most deprived children in the country, regularly experiencing anxiety, insecurity and disruption and as Adam Sampson, Chief executive of Shelter recently commented, 'There is nothing temporary about the damage done to their education and mental and physical health'.³

This report reveals the true number of homeless children in England and the dramatic increase of homeless children since 1997. The graphs in this report show that there has been a slowdown in the number of homeless families in the last 3 years, after it peaked in 2004 at 101,300.

¹ Roughly Sleeping report: Nov 07 from <http://www.shapps.com/reports>

² <http://england.shelter.org.uk/home/home-6852.cfm?frmAlias=/chanceofalifetime/>

³ <http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/articlerender.fcgi?artid=421817>

Whilst this is obviously a welcome development, the number of homeless families has more than doubled in the last ten years, the number of homeless children has increased by 128% and there are now profound pressures on housing families in need of temporary accommodation, meaning that the trend could well be about to reverse.

Furthermore, the housing stock, on which people in temporary accommodation depend in order to move on, is not being replenished at an adequate rate. This Government has built fewer social housing units in each year of its administration than in any year under either the Thatcher or Major Governments.

Indeed in 2006, Shelter warned that the lack of social housing was fuelling the housing crisis and that 'There simply aren't enough social rented homes to provide a safety net for those in the greatest need'.⁴

Tim Nicholls, Director of the London homeless charity The Simon Community has serious concerns over the provision of social housing. He said, 'One concern is with the spectacular lack of affordable property in the UK. I fear that the govt plans for house building are woefully inadequate if one compares the projected number of new households created in comparison with numbers of houses being built. Furthermore the number of social housing being planned for is still far short of demand.'

On top of the housing crisis, we have a growing and aging population, increased immigration and a housing market that has become particularly unaffordable. The number of rough sleepers in London has increased by 9% in the last year, demonstrating the current pressures on housing the homeless and the fact that not only is the problem far from being tackled, but that the situation is at serious risk of deterioration.

The aim of this report is to alert the Government to a problem which has got dramatically worse over the past decade, to focus attention on the 130,000 children who will be homeless this Christmas and to raise a warning that current pressures mean that the recent slight downward trend is likely to be dramatically reversed in the coming years unless there is a proactive and sustained response.

⁴ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/5076512.stm>

Types of Temporary Accommodation

Bed and Breakfast

Bed and Breakfast accommodation that accept homeless families are most commonly run by local authorities or private landlords.

Bed and Breakfast accommodation is usually the first type of temporary accommodation a family will be placed in on becoming homeless. It is also generally considered to be the worst. (need footnote) Living conditions in B&Bs are invariably overcrowded, of poor quality⁵ and highly unsuitable for children.

It is not uncommon for parents and their children to have to share a bedroom with strangers and more often than not, families have to share a bathroom. There are usually no or limited cooking facilities and therefore families have to rely on takeaways.

Once families are accepted into B&B accommodation, it is very easy for them to be evicted if they fail to pay rent. Shelter has reported that evictions take place even if unpaid rent is the result of problems or delays with their housing benefit. If under these circumstances people are asked to leave, they don't have a legal right to stay.⁶

In March 2002, the Government announced a target to reduce the number of B&Bs being used as temporary accommodation. The Government advised that by 2004, local authorities were to ensure that no homeless family with children has to live in a B&B except in an emergency (and then only for no more than six weeks).⁷

There are currently nearly 1,000 families living in Bed and Breakfasts and almost 2,000 children.

⁵ See NHC literature 11.1 <http://www.nch.org.uk/aboutus/index.php?i=466>

⁶ See 'What Rights Would I Have?' <http://england.shelter.org.uk/advice/advice-105.cfm>

⁷ http://www.gos.gov.uk/497417/docs/202207/LHStatement_2002.pdf

Hostels

Homeless hostels are usually run by charities, Local Authorities or Housing Associations. Only some hostels, direct access hostels, will accept people on the door; most hostels require homeless people to call beforehand to check availability.

Hostels vary in their standard, but usually are of a higher quality than nightshelters or B&Bs. Hostels also vary in their regulations, but generally will not accept couples and ask you to pay for the accommodation. However, regulations can vary with regards to who they will accommodate, for example only helping certain groups of homeless people such as single people or people with mental health problems.

The length of stay in a hostel also varies, from a few nights to a few months. Most hostels will help homeless people find accommodation before they leave, or attempt to move them to a longer term hostel or 'move-on' accommodation for those who aren't ready to live on their own yet.

Local Authority and Registered Social Landlord

When a person or a family make a homeless application, the Local Council must provide temporary accommodation for them if they have no where else to go. People who are homeless are threatened with homelessness can make an application to the local council, who will then look at their position and depending on whether they pass the four homelessness tests⁸, will assess what accommodation they are legally obliged to offer.

RSLs are usually housing associations that have registered with the appropriate government agency and aim to provide affordable housing to people on the housing waiting list.

Homeless people or those threatened with homelessness take priority on the housing waiting list, along with people living in unsuitable accommodation and those living in crowded conditions or people who have large families.

⁸ These tests involve questions surrounding the applicant's current state of homelessness ie, are they homeless or facing homelessness, their eligibility for assistance, whether they are in priority need and if they are intentionally homeless.

Homeless at Home

Homeless at home applies to people living temporarily with friends or family, while they wait for the provision of alternative accommodation.

This wait for temporary accommodation means that people are essentially 'sofa surfing' between family, friends and acquaintances, some of whom they might not be particularly familiar and for long periods of time, before accommodation becomes available. This exposes an already fragile group of people to a new level of dependence and vulnerability.

Methodology

The average number of children in a family declined from 2.0 in 1971 to 1.8 in 2004. Married couple families were generally larger than other family types, with an average 1.8 children in 2004, compared with 1.7 in cohabiting couple and lone-mother families.⁹

The 'Living in Britain 1998 General Household Survey' confirmed that there has been no decline in the average number of children from 1981 to 1997. The average number of dependent children per family was 1.8 from 1981 onwards.¹⁰

However, studies have shown that the profile of a family with children or a single parent living in temporary accommodation is higher than the 1.8 average.

The Family Housing Fund has profiled today's homeless parent to be 'a young woman in her twenties who gave birth to her first child in her teens...have had multiple pregnancies resulting in at least two children under the age of six'.¹¹

Similarly, the Better Homes Fund profiles the average homeless family to consist of a single mother with two young children.¹²

On that basis, we have applied a figure of 2 to each family with children, to calculate the number of homeless children in England.

However, using official figures, the number of homeless children could in fact be closer to 150,000.

The ODPM commissioned report, 'Estimating the short and longer term costs of statutory homelessness to households and services provider', compiled by the Institute of Public Finance in 2003, states that there are an estimated 1.68 dependent children per family household unit.

In 2003, there were 92,490 homeless families on average.¹³ If there were 1.6 children per homeless family in 2003, there were a total of 147,984 homeless children.

⁹ ONS, <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/CCI/nugget.asp?ID=1163&Pos=4&ColRank=1&Rank=160>

¹⁰ ONS, report at p. 23 http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_compendia/GHS98.pdf)

¹¹ <http://www.fhfund.org/dnld/reports/SupportiveChildren.pdf>

¹² The Better Homes Fund 1999; Page, Ainsworth and Pett 1993

¹³ This figure is an average of the four quarters in 2003.

If this number is then spread across the number of homeless families with children, instead of total homeless families, then the average number of children per homeless family with children is 2.3.

If this average is applied to the number of homeless families with children in England today, there are an estimated 147,000 homeless children in England this Christmas.

However, while this figure is perfectly possible and perhaps likely, in this report we have applied a figure of 2 children per homeless family with children in order to work with a figure that can be agreed on and accepted on all sides as accurate.

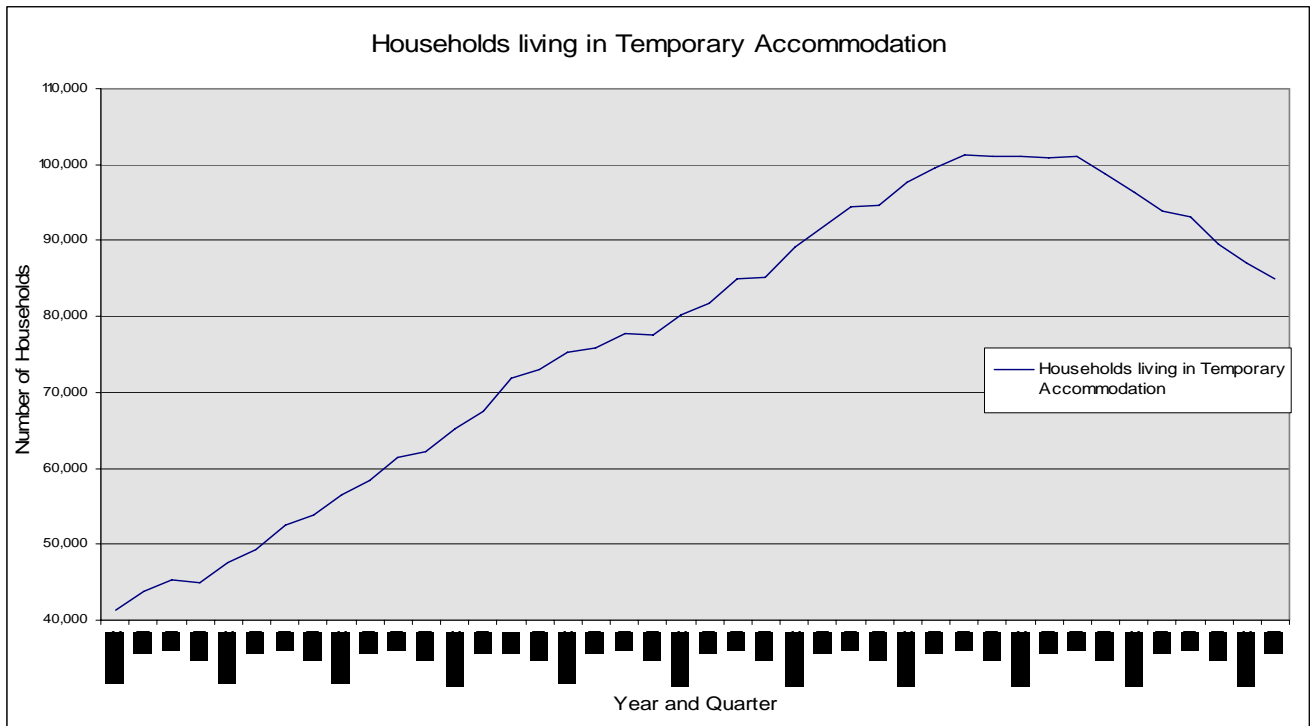
Figures used are official, taken from the Department for Communities and Local Government website. The number of households with children as a proportion of total households homeless was not recorded by the Government until 2002.

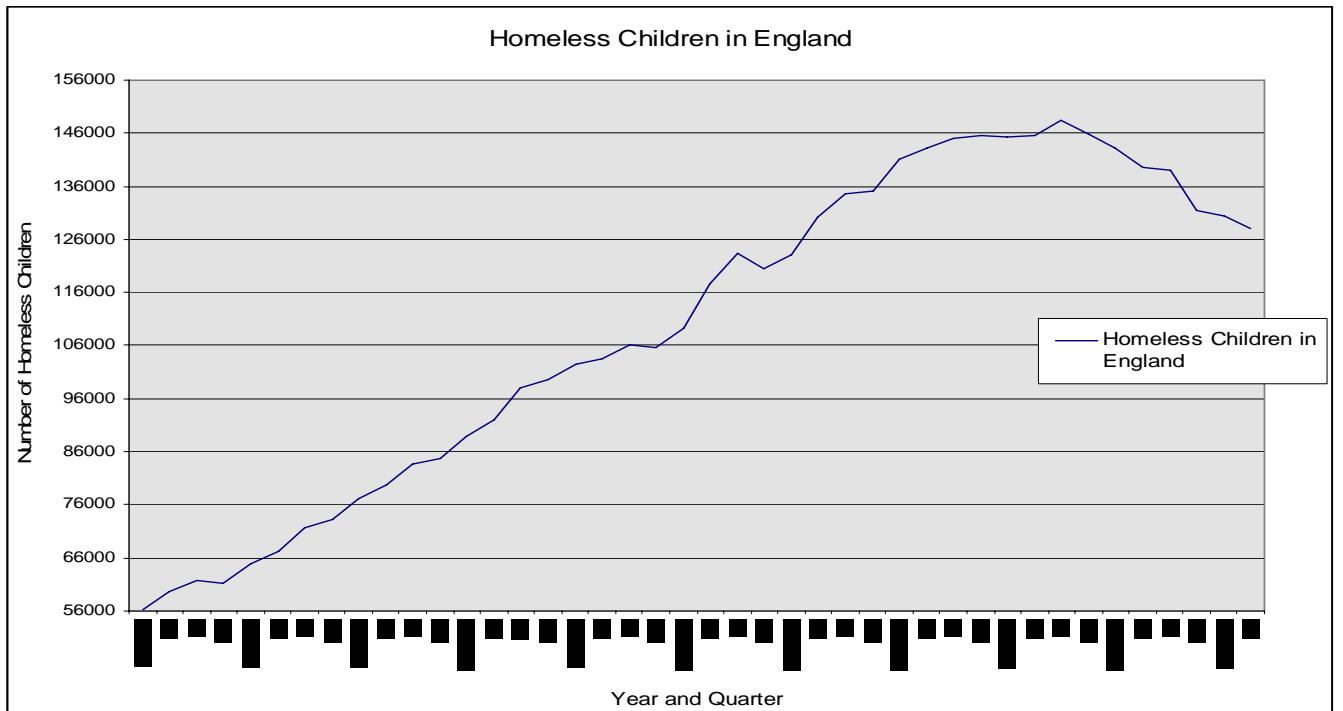
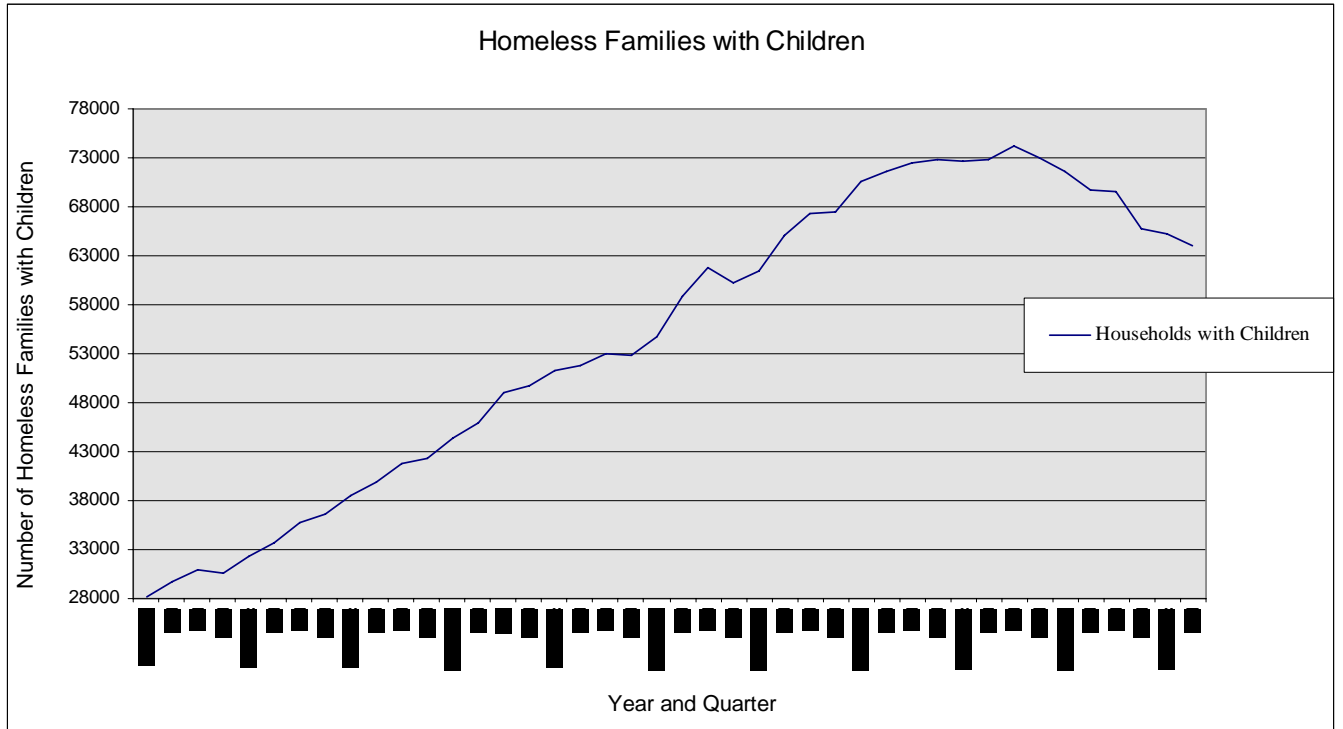
The number of homeless households with children prior to 2002 has been reached by applying the figure of 68.15%, which was the percentage of homeless families with children as a proportion of total homeless families when it was first recorded in 2002.

Findings

The following graphs illustrate the number of households living temporarily in various types of accommodation and the number of families that are homeless with children.

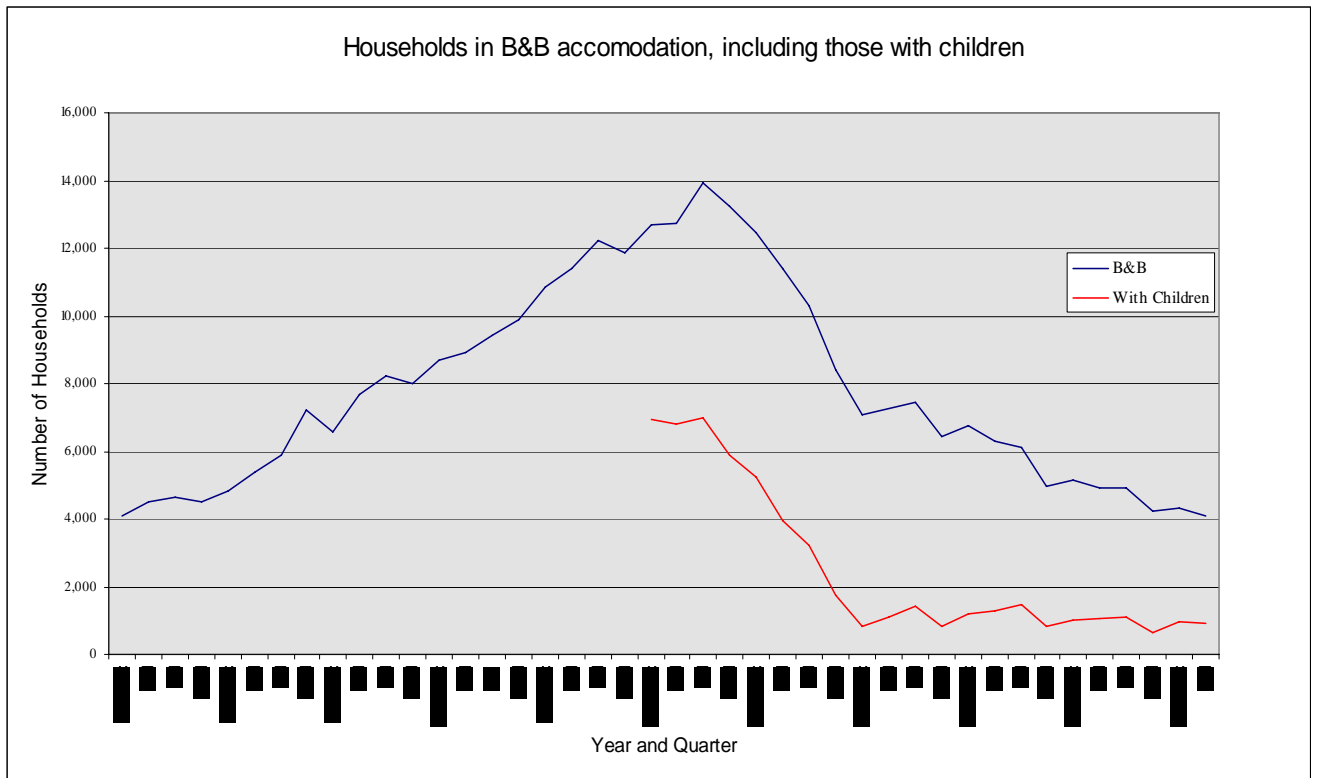
The figures reveal a massive hike in the number of homeless household, families with children and children living in temporary accommodation over the past decade. Whilst the graphs suggest an easing off in the last three years, this report provides compelling evidence that new and additional pressures mean that the figures are about to start climbing again, unless urgent action is taken.



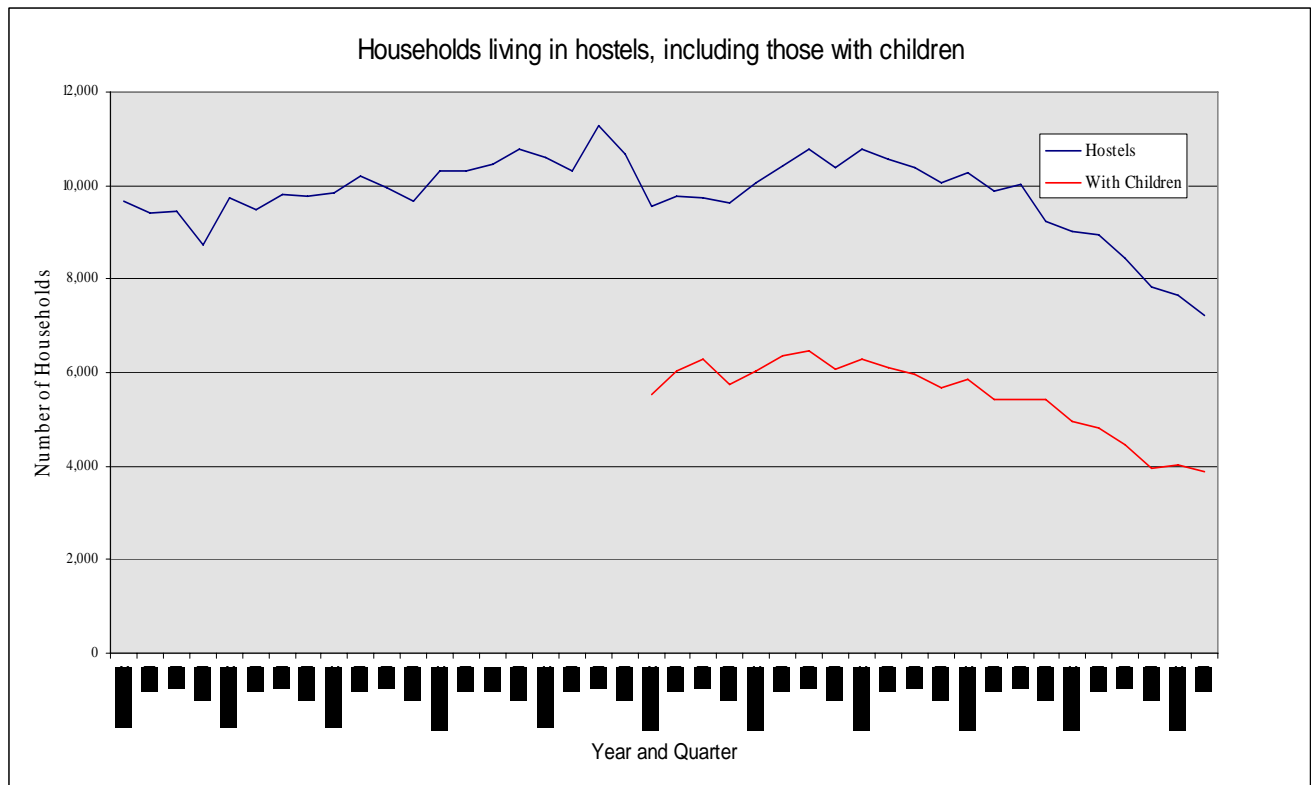


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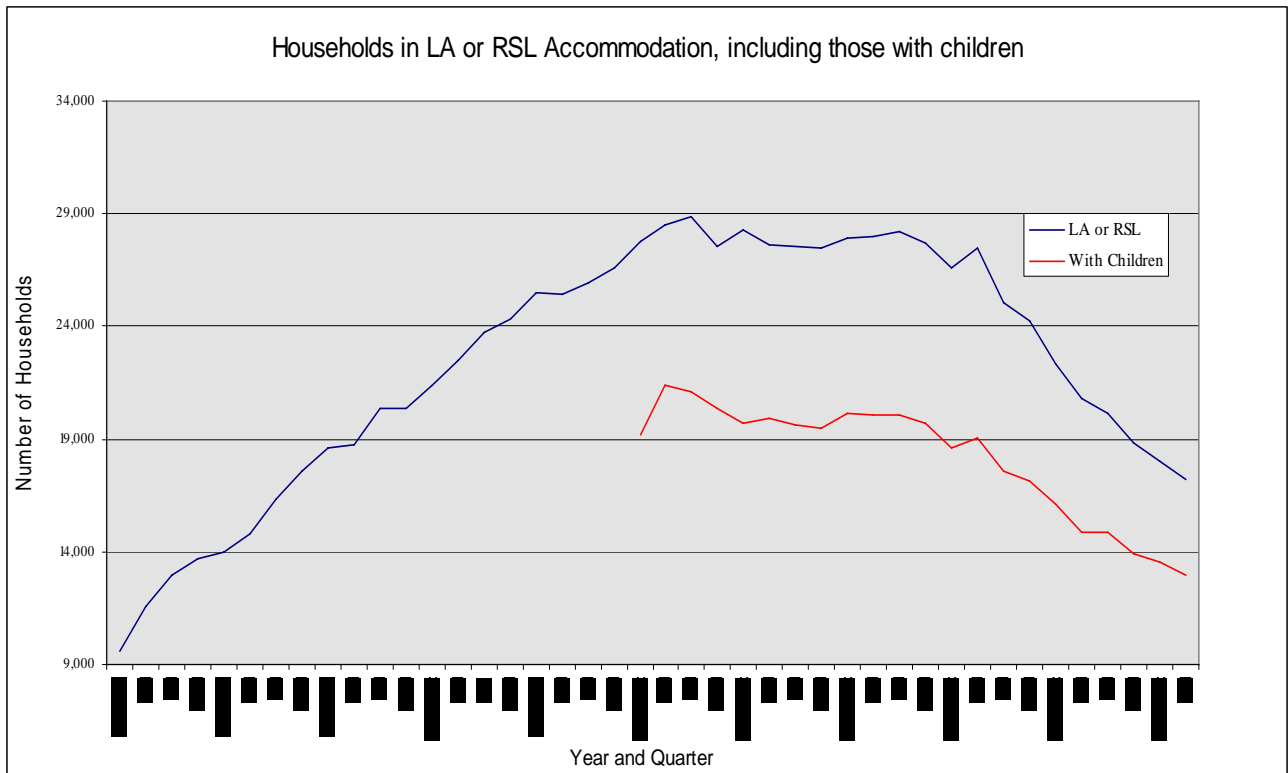
The Graph below shows that the number of people living homeless in Bed and Breakfast accommodation has fallen, although when it peaked at nearly 14,000 in 2002, this was a increase of 240% since 1997. Whilst the figures are coming down slowly, the increase since 1997 means that more and more people are bearing the permanent scars of homelessness.



The number of households living in hostels is shown in the graph below and after alternate and steady increases and plateaus between 1997 and 2005, has finally started to reduce in the last year and a half.



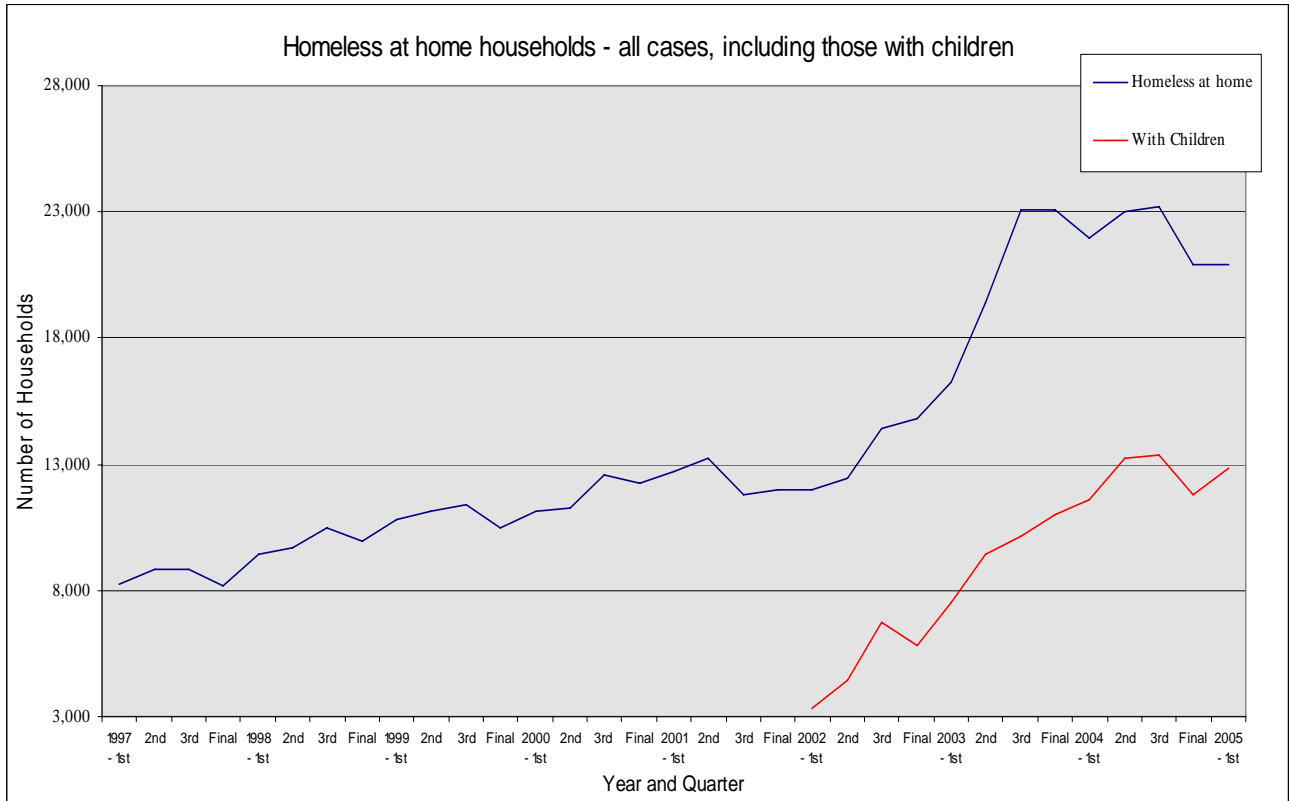
The graph below is similar to that of families in Bed and Breakfast accommodation. The number of families homeless in LA or RSL accommodation has been double what it was in 1997 in every quarter since 1999 to the present day and was triple what it was in 1997 in every quarter between 2002 and 2004.



The graph below shows the number of homeless families dependent and relying on family and friends for shelter while they wait for temporary or permanent accommodation to be provided.

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These figures ceased to be recorded in 2005, at which point the number of families homeless at home was nearly three times the number it was in 1997.



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Effects of Homelessness

Early Childhood Development

Studies have shown that homelessness affects a child well before the child is born and every facet of a child's life thereafter. Whilst homeless mothers are pregnant, they face many obstacles to having and completing a healthy pregnancy. These include chronic and acute health problems that affect the prenatal development of the child¹⁴ alcohol and chemical abuse and a tendency for homeless women not to seek prenatal care.

Children born into homelessness are more likely to have a low birth weight and be exposed to various environmental hazards that will adversely affect their health. If these hazards do lead to physical health problems, homeless children then have little access to the health care they need to overcome these problems. For example, many homeless children don't get the basic and vital immunization given at birth.

Further to this, research has shown that homeless parents have often had a very difficult start in life, creating obstacles to the better start they want to give their own children. A report prepared for the Family Housing Fund revealed that childhood homelessness resulted in 'a profound and accumulative negative effect on the development of children, leading many to repeat the cycle of homelessness as adults'.¹⁵ In fact, many of the female, single parents who dominate the homeless parent category, were homeless themselves as children.¹⁶

Behavioural Problems

Stressful and traumatic events are common in the life of a homeless child. Many homeless children are too young to understand the event when it occurs, but it is severe enough to cause instability and fragility in the child's life.

¹⁴ Bassuk, Ellen L. and Linda Weinreb. "Homeless Pregnant Women." *Amer. J. Orthopsychiat.* 63(3): 348-356, July 1993.

¹⁵ <http://www.fhfund.org/dnld/reports/SupportiveChildren.pdf>

¹⁶ Hausman, Bonnie and Constance Hammen. "Parenting in Homeless Families." *Amer. J. Orthopsychiat* 63(3): 358-369, July 1993;
"Tale of Two Nations" Homes for the Homeless. www.opendoor.com/hfh/ Sep. 2, 1998.

Anxiety is also a prominent feature of a homeless child's upbringing, caused by the worry about where they are going to sleep or, once the child finally has somewhere temporary, anxiety that once again, they will be moved.

There is also concern over being uprooted from school and their school friends, being seen as being different amongst their peers and also concern for their parents and family, who are undoubtedly stressed and tense in light of their current situation. As a result of constant mobilisation, a lack of stability and a sense of tension in the family, this stress and anxiety eventually filters down to the child. According to the Family Housing Fund, the average homeless child moves as many as three times in a year.¹⁷

This stress can then lead to a significant level of detachment between the child and their family and in turn, low self-esteem and dysfunctional personality development. These conditions then become manifest in the child's behaviour, which come most commonly in the form of aggression, lethargy, depression and overt anger with their parents.¹⁸

Education

Homeless children are often separated from their parents and when this happens in the critical first five formative years, they suffer a number of emotional and behavioural setbacks that hinder their schooling.

The academic performance of homeless children is hampered by their slow cognitive development, which is often due to higher rates of perinatal complications and reduced access to resources and services. A child's intelligence growth is less likely to be as advanced if they have little security and social structures. Homeless children have four times the rate of delayed development and are suspended from school twice as often as non homeless children.¹⁹

The poor physical health of a child also affects their ability to perform. Academia has to be juggled with the child not feeling well, a lack of vigilance and low energy levels as a direct result of poor health.

The environment and the circumstances surrounding a homeless child also prohibit a child's development at school. Living in temporary accommodation can mean constant mobility for some children, which harms the academic

¹⁷ <http://www.fhfund.org/dnld/reports/SupportiveChildren.pdf>

¹⁸ <http://www.fhfund.org/dnld/reports/SupportiveChildren.pdf>

¹⁹ Study by the Better Homes Fund

progress of a homeless child. Forty One per cent of homeless children attend two different schools in one year and twenty eight per cent of homeless children attend three or more schools.²⁰ This frequent mobility leads to poor academic performance and compounds the already weak social structures surrounding the child.

Abuse and Neglect

The children's charity NCH describes domestic violence as 'an enduring feature of homelessness'.²¹ According to their research, domestic violence accounts for 16% of homelessness acceptances in England and Wales, 7% in Northern Ireland and they estimate these figures are an under representation of how many cases of homelessness are a direct result of domestic violence.²²

Drake and Pandey have exposed a direct link between poverty and neglect. They stress that a combination of violence and homelessness can be even more detrimental to children, as homeless children don't have the tools and support network to recover as easily or at all from the trauma caused by abuse and neglect.²³

Domestic violence is also heavily prevalent among homeless families, affecting 63% of homeless parents.²⁴

Health problems

Homeless children are twice as likely to undergo emergency hospitalisation and five times as likely to have asthma as children in a fixed address. Moreover, homeless children have four times as many respiratory infections than non-homeless children and six times as many speech and stammering problems.²⁵

Temporary accommodation can lead to health problems for two main reasons. Firstly, overcrowding and poor living conditions has been proven to increase respiratory diseases and chest infections which can lead to further physical

²⁰ http://www.fhfund.org/_dnld/reports/SupportiveChildren.pdf

²¹ <http://www.nch.org.uk/aboutus/index.php?i=466>

²² <http://www.nch.org.uk/aboutus/index.php?i=466>

²³ Drake, D. & Pandey, S. (1996). Understanding the relationship between neighborhood poverty and specific types of child maltreatment. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 20 (11), 1003-1018.

²⁴ Stern, L. & Nunez, R. (1999). *Homeless in America: A children's story, part one*. New York: The Institute for Children and Poverty.

²⁵ Study by the Better Homes Fund

problems. The second cause is that those living in temporary accommodation often lose the support network and social framework that is needed to maintain a good quality of life and provide access to services.

Scars of Homelessness

The stress of long term homelessness on children often results in prolonged social and health problems which end up as permanent aspect of adulthood.

The other long term effect of growing up with no fixed address is problems with mental health. Studies show that more than one fifth of homeless children have severe emotional problems requiring professional care, homeless children between the age of 6 and 17 have high rates of mental health problems and less than one third of homeless children are receiving the mental health treatment they require.²⁶

Health problems and lower academic success associated with homelessness impact on the child's opportunities during adulthood. A study carried out by Shelter in 2006 found that 'Long-term health problems and low educational attainment increase the likelihood of unemployment or working in low-paid jobs' and that 'The behavioural problems associated with bad housing in childhood can manifest themselves in later offending behaviour. In one study, nearly half of young people who had offended had experienced homelessness'.²⁷

Parents and Homelessness

Parents within homeless families also experience an enormous amount of stress and loneliness, which ultimately impacts on the quality of life of the child. The University of York has reported among homeless children 'a high level of accidents and physical damage resulting from the use of force by parents'.²⁸

²⁶ http://www.cotsonline.org/homeless_kids.html

²⁷ <http://england.shelter.org.uk/home/home-6852.cfm?frmAlias=/chanceofalifetime/>

²⁸ <http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/chp/kfsum.htm>

Conclusion

This report has revealed the true number of children that will be homeless this Christmas and the degree to which this figure has risen over the last ten years.

This is the first time that figures have been calculated on a constant basis in order to accurately determine the increase over the decade.

The report outlines the devastating impact that homelessness has, in particular, on young people and how being without a permanent address hampers and disrupts development and enjoyment in every facet of a child's life.

In preparing this report the authors were struck by cases where people had become homeless after problems of benefit claims and debt management had simply spiralled out of control. Relatively small problems became big, ultimately making the individuals or families homeless.

Many of the solutions revolve around better and more coordinated attempts to provide information, communication and support to people who might be on the verge of homelessness.

The interpretation of what "duty of care" means is exercised by Local Authorities in widely varying ways around the country.

The speed and abruptness at which people can be evicted from social housing may need to be reviewed, along with the adequacy of support networks that are provided to specific groups like single people and non-parents, who are rarely considered to be in priority need.

The degree and accessibility of information and advice available to homeless people and the obligations of Local Authorities to provide this service should be reassessed. Improvements in the provision of information and channels of communication are key to preventing cases of homelessness and providing the safety net that is so vital to those either facing eviction or those vulnerable groups who are likely to become homeless.

Throughout the year, but especially at Christmas, the indignity of homelessness brings misery and uncertainty to hundreds of thousands of people. Rough sleepers have to deal with longer, colder and more daunting nights, but those facing eviction, or in or waiting for temporary accommodation, are anxious about a sudden or imminent move.

For homeless families with children the problem is even more complex.

It is imperative for a child's health, education, freedom and their start in life that homelessness is considered an unacceptable social status, a feature of social breakdown that as a society we do not tolerate and a crisis that should be at the top of any Government's priorities.

This report does not believe that there are any quick fixes to resolving the complex problems associated with homelessness, but has tried to outline some of the changes in both attitude and practice required to get back on top of the problem.

In particular the report's authors believe that official recognition of the dramatic scale of the problem must be a first step to finding better solutions for the 130,000 homeless children this Christmas.

Quotes

“For 130,000 homeless children in England this Christmas is unlikely to be much fun. Lack of permanent accommodation can have an absolutely devastating impact on a child’s health and development with long-lasting consequences.

“The fact that the number of homeless children has doubled over the past ten years highlights the Government’s dismal record in creating more social housing and it’s hard to escape the conclusion that their policies have been a dramatic failure in this area.

“This report calls on the Government to get a grip of the situation by applying greater focus to the complex reasons that lead to homelessness and to recognise that homeless children will face special challenges which will outstretch their time in temporary and unsuitable accommodation.”

Report author and Grant Shapps MP

“The impact of temporary accommodation (TA) on children is a subject that Shelter has long campaigned on, so we're very pleased that you will also be raising it in the public arena.

“Like you, we recognise that living for prolonged periods in temporary accommodation can have very negative effects on all aspects of children's lives - particularly on their health, education and future life chances - and it is this evidence in particular which has underpinned our calls for an increase in the provision of social rented housing, to ensure that families are able to move on to permanent accommodation swiftly once they have been accepted as homeless.”

Caroline Davey, Deputy Director of Communications, Policy and Campaigns Shelter

“What children need is a loving home to grow up in. A stable, healthy, secure environment with people who love them and care for them. But also an environment where they aren't constantly moving from one piece of low quality housing to another or have the threat of that hanging over them, because the housing stock in the UK is so desperately limited.

“I would concur with your report regarding local authority housing advice improvements. It seems to me that the separation of housing advice from the homeless persons unit in each local authority has led to some of the problems people in vulnerable situations encounter. Once again a good report.”

Tim Nicholls, Director, The Simon Community.