



Rural Homelessness

Peter McVerry SJ, well-known campaigner for the homeless and a regular contributor to the *Messenger*, reports on the scale of homelessness in rural Ireland.



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Many people think that homelessness is an urban problem, particularly a Dublin problem. It might surprise many people to know that the increase in homelessness, and most worryingly the increase in family homelessness, is actually greater in rural Ireland than in the cities.

While the numbers are small by comparison with the cities, each homeless person and family experiences the same trauma of losing their home, having their life turned upside down and facing an uncertain future. Considerable evidence shows that the damage suffered by homeless children is profound. The physical, mental, educational and social development of children is damaged, sometimes irreversibly. The symptoms include anxiety, sleeplessness, aggression and withdrawal. It is hard to believe that in

Ireland today, a homeless child, living with their parents, has no legal right to shelter.

Official figures show that in the past two years:

In the Midlands (Laois, Longford, Offaly and Westmeath): adult homelessness increased by over 100% (from 49 to 104) and homeless children have increased by about 250% (from 33 to 83). Meanwhile, Census 2016 identified 11,811 empty homes in the Midlands.

In Co. Clare: adult homelessness increased by almost 400%, from 19 to 72, while homeless children in Co. Clare and Co. Limerick combined have increased from 34 to 176. Meanwhile, Census 2016 identified 6,104 empty homes in Co. Clare.

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In Co. Louth, Monaghan and Cavan: adult homelessness increased from 81 to 127 while homeless children have increased from 12 to 43. Meanwhile, Census 2016 identified 11,665 empty homes in these three counties.

In Co. Kerry: adult homelessness increased from 29 to 97, while homeless children in Co. Kerry and Co. Cork combined have increased from 64 to 255. Meanwhile, Census 2016 identified 9,691 empty homes in Co. Kerry.

In Co. Mayo: adult homelessness increased from 6 to 26 while homeless children in Co. Mayo, Galway and Roscommon have increased from 69 to 209. Meanwhile, Census 2016 identified 10,597 empty homes in Co. Mayo, and 5,323 in Co. Roscommon.

In Co. Wexford: adult homelessness increased from 42 to 78, while in the Southeast overall, homeless children have increased from 39 to 71. Meanwhile, Census 2016 identified 5,918 empty homes in Co. Wexford.

However, these figures are a minimum. Some homeless people and families in rural areas move to the nearest urban area, as the services there may be better. Nor do these figures include people sleeping rough, sleeping in cars, in tents, sheds or couch-surfing. Nor does it include 625 homeless adults and 981 homeless children whom the Department of Housing, inexplicably,

removed from the homeless figures nationwide. Most of these are in rural areas. For example, in the first six months of 2018, the Simon Community identified 54 homeless children in Leitrim, casting doubt on the official figures. However, even the minimum figures show that rural homelessness is at record levels.

The problem will get worse. There are, nationwide, about 43,000 mortgages in arrears of more than two years, most of which are in rural areas. Between 2015 and 2017, almost 2,000 repossession orders were obtained on properties in rural Ireland and the families had to leave their homes. In August 2018, 15,000 distressed mortgages were sold off, the largest ever. Many of these are likely to be repossessed and the families evicted.

While many of the 183,000 empty homes nationwide identified in the Census may not be available, or suitable for housing homeless families, some certainly are. It is absurd, even obscene, to have houses lying empty with no one living in them while families and individuals are desperately looking for a house to live in. It is important that local authorities identify empty homes in their areas and negotiate with the owners to bring them back into use, or if the owner is unwilling or unable to do so, then compulsory purchase orders should be considered.

Unlike the cities, homeless people in rural areas are not clearly visible, sleeping on the streets. Hence, awareness of the problem of rural homelessness is low, and the urgency for action may be absent. 