1. Are there official data collected on homelessness?

A statutory assessment of the number of homeless persons in the country is carried out every three years under the Housing Act, 1988. The assessment is carried out in conjunction with a national assessment of the need for social housing, also carried out every three years.

2. On which level? By who?

The assessment is carried out by Local Authorities in co-operation with housing associations and health boards.

The assessment of need for social housing takes place on a given day usually at the end of March. However, due to the complex nature, composition and lifestyle of homeless households the assessment takes place over the course of a week. It normally involves a survey of homeless households on local authority waiting lists, those using day centres for homeless people and those accessing emergency and homeless accommodation during that week. The week long assessment also includes a one night street count of rough sleepers, usually in the urban areas.

The most recent assessment was compiled nationally at the end of March 2005.

One month’s notice of the assessment from local authorities to voluntary bodies is required under legislation. This enables housing associations to be involved in the assessment and to bring forward households that they are aware of. Local authorities will work closely with housing associations in the identification and assessment of homeless people. There is also liaison through the Homeless Fora in each local authority area.

The situation is Dublin where there is the greatest incidence of homelessness in the country is different. The assessment of homeless is carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute. There is more detailed information collated in this survey and therefore there is greater knowledge on the problem of homelessness in Dublin. Also the rough sleeper count is carried out more frequently than every three years, usually on an ad hoc basis.
3. **Methodological questions?**

3.1. **Definition**

Under Section 2 of the Housing Act, 1988 a person shall be regarded as homeless by a housing authority if -

(a) there is no accommodation available which, in the opinion of the authority, he could reasonably occupy, or

(b) he is living in a hospital, county home, night shelter or other such institution because he has no accommodation as referred to in the previous point.

(c) and he is in the opinion of the authority, unable to provide accommodation from his own resources.

Therefore, the definition covers not only people without shelter but also people living in hospitals, county homes, night shelters who have no suitable alternative accommodation. A night shelter includes hostels, refuges, B&B accommodation as well as shelters. Long term residents of a hostel shall also be included as homeless in the assessment. Those who are no longer able to occupy what would be suitable accommodation due to domestic violence come within the scope of the definition.

With regard to people in Health Board accommodation, it is a matter for each local authority to determine whether they are homeless on the basis of information provided by the Health Board. People who are homeless and under the age of 18 will not be included except for certain circumstances (e.g. where they have children).

The inclusion of certain categories were expanded in 1999 Assessment to give a wider scope to the definition of homeless.

3.2. **Variables**

Different data is collected in the Homeless Assessment to the general housing needs assessment.

In the assessment of homeless information is collected on:

- Number of households
- Household type (e.g. single, family breakdown)
- Current accommodation circumstances (e.g. sleeping rough)
- Gender breakdown
- Accommodation needs

In Dublin the survey carried out is more thorough and seeks additional more information such as duration of homelessness, country or origin and accommodation types used that week.
3.3. **Frequency**

The assessment is triennial. The most recent assessment was March 2002.

3.4. **Methodology**

The Department of Environment and Local Government issue guidelines on the assessment. However, the methodology will vary according to each local authority’s interpretation and implementation usually depending on resources and perceived size of the problem. Rural local authorities would not carry out a rough sleeper count in rural towns for example.

The methodology can be briefly summarised as the use of a survey questionnaire and interviews carried out by local authorities in co-operation with housing associations. The methodology for Dublin is very well developed and is based on the use of a survey questionnaire.

4. **Comments**

While the assessment of homelessness is very welcome and useful there are major concerns over the timeliness of the data collected. The information is only updated every three years and it usually takes up to a year for it to become available nationally. The use of the data is therefore inherently limited by this.

There are similar concerns over the three year assessment of those in housing need. The availability of up to date data on homelessness and housing need would be far more advantageous for the planning of services for homeless persons.

The accuracy of the data across local authorities also comes in for criticism and there are many questions in relation to the implementation of the assessment. There has also been criticism of accuracy of the one night street count which is important in terms of knowing the number of rough sleepers.