



Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

A Class Education: How does Trinity engage with class and socioeconomic status in 2026?

How does Trinity support students experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity?

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1. Abstract

This report examines student homelessness and housing insecurity at Trinity College Dublin as a form of socioeconomic disadvantage that can affect students' participation and success in higher education. The project used a qualitative scoping approach, drawing on academic literature, national policy, information gathered about Trinity through consultations with staff and student representatives, and comparisons with Irish universities.

The findings indicate that Trinity has a range of existing supports for students experiencing housing difficulties, but these are spread across different student support services. There is currently no consistent institutional definition of housing insecurity, centralised monitoring system or single coordinated pathway for students seeking support. Hidden forms of homelessness, including couch surfing, temporary accommodation and overcrowding, were also identified as significant concerns.

The report recommends that Trinity explore a more coordinated and preventative approach, including improved monitoring, clearer referral pathways, rapid crisis support, stronger external partnerships and more flexible accommodation options.

2. Introduction and Context

Access to higher education does not always result in equal participation once students enter university. Financial resources, housing stability and access to family support can influence a student's ability to attend classes, complete academic work and participate fully in university life. The National Access Plan 2022–2028 reflects this broader understanding of equality by focusing on participation and success in addition to access to higher education. It identifies students who have experienced homelessness among groups experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and Higher Education Authority, 2022).

This issue is relevant within the current Irish housing context. In June 2026, 17,482 people were recorded as living in State-funded local-authority emergency accommodation, including 2,073 adults aged between 18 and 24 (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2026). These figures do not represent student homelessness specifically and exclude many forms of hidden homelessness, such as couch surfing, temporary stays with family or friends and other unstable accommodation. As a result, the extent of housing insecurity among university students can be difficult to establish.

Recent Irish evidence indicates that student homelessness is occurring across higher education. A 2026 Freedom of Information investigation identified at least 346 students who had disclosed homelessness across Irish higher education institutions during the 2024/25 academic year. Trinity was among the institutions unable to provide a figure as it did not have a centralised mechanism for recording these cases (Mahon, 2026).

This report examines student homelessness and housing insecurity at Trinity College Dublin as a manifestation of socioeconomic disadvantage. It explores how housing insecurity is identified and supported within Trinity, how current institutional structures respond to students experiencing housing difficulties, and how these approaches compare with other Irish universities. The report then considers measures that could strengthen Trinity's response to housing insecurity as an issue of educational participation and socioeconomic equality.

3. Methodology

This project used a qualitative scoping approach to explore how Trinity College identifies and supports students who are experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity. The research was completed over a six-week period.

Background information was gathered through a combination of academic literature, national policies and institutional sources. Relevant research on student homelessness, housing insecurity, socioeconomic disadvantage and participation in higher education was reviewed alongside Irish policy documents and reports. Trinity-specific information was gathered through discussions with staff and student representatives, including the Trinity Access Programme, a Mental Health Social Work employed by Trinity and Trinity College Dublin Students' Union. These discussions focused on Trinity's current support pathways, the types of housing difficulties encountered, existing resources and perceived gaps in provision.

For comparative purposes, other Irish universities and their Students' Unions were contacted regarding their approaches to student homelessness and housing insecurity. Where direct responses were not available, publicly available institutional webpages and accommodation information were reviewed instead.

The project focused on institutional systems and professional or representative perspectives rather than individual student experiences. No identifying information about students was sought or collected. Consequently, the project does not attempt to estimate the prevalence of homelessness within Trinity, but instead examines how housing insecurity is currently recognised and responded to institutionally.

4. Literature and Policy Context

The literature suggests that student homelessness and housing insecurity extends beyond students who are visibly sleeping rough. Hidden homelessness can include people who are living in temporary accommodation, couch surfing, "doubled up" with others, or facing eviction from their current accommodation. Crawley et al. (2013) describe how hidden homelessness can be difficult to identify as individuals may have temporary accommodation, but not a stable and permanent home. Hidden homelessness can be difficult to identify, meaning it may not appear in official data and those experiencing it may be less likely to receive the support they need.

In higher education institutions, homelessness and housing insecurity are closely connected with wider socioeconomic disadvantage and can affect many areas of a student's life. Haskett, Kotter-Gröhn and Majumder (2020) found that financial insecurity is a common feature of homelessness among university students, while Haskett et al. (2021) associated homelessness with poorer wellbeing, disrupted sleep and reduced academic success. Mulrenan, Atkins and Cox (2018) similarly found that homelessness placed pressure on students' time and financial resources and reduced their capacity to concentrate on their studies and participate fully in university life. Housing insecurity can therefore be understood as a consequence of socioeconomic disadvantage within higher education.

Irish higher-education policy supports this interpretation. The *National Access Plan 2022–2028* frames equity as extending beyond admission to include students' participation and success once enrolled in university. It identifies students who have experienced homelessness among groups experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, alongside students from low-

income households, lone parents, care-experienced students and those with experience of international protection (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and Higher Education Authority, 2022). The Student Assistance Fund similarly recognises the relationship between financial hardship and participation in higher education, with eligible expenditure including rent, utilities, food, childcare and essential travel (Higher Education Authority, 2026).

Current policy also places greater responsibility on higher education institutions. The *National Student Accommodation Strategy 2026–2035* links accommodation with affordability, equity, wellbeing and academic success and requires HEIs to develop institution-specific accommodation strategies (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2026). Research on institutional responses supports a coordinated approach to student homelessness: Haskett, Buccelli and Renbarger (2022) highlight liaison models where designated professionals help students to navigate university and community services. Overall, the research and policy show that student housing insecurity is not just an accommodation problem, but also an issue of socioeconomic equality, participation in education and university responsibility.

5. Findings

5.1 Student homelessness is present within Trinity, but its scale is unknown

The consultations carried out for this project indicated that homelessness and serious housing insecurity are encountered regularly across a number of Trinity's support services. Sarah Grimson, associate director for admissions and post-entry for the Trinity Access Programme (TAP), reported that housing difficulties are raised regularly by TAP students and were perceived to be increasing. It was reported that students disclose these difficulties directly, in addition to housing problems emerging when a student is discussing financial difficulties, attendance or other support needs (S. Grimson, personal communication, August 10, 2026). Lorenzo Cheasty, Welfare and Equality Officer at Trinity College Dublin Students' Union (TCDSU), similarly described housing as a frequent issue. Serious housing problems or requests for support were estimated to arise approximately every two to three days, with an increase in demand emerging during August and September and around Christmas (L. Cheasty, personal communication, August 4, 2026).

Despite services regularly encountering housing problems, Trinity does not currently have a central system for recording student homelessness or housing insecurity. Kirsten Cronan, Mental Health Social Worker employed by Trinity College, confirmed that there is no central database recording these cases (K. Cronan, personal communication, July 20, 2026). TAP similarly does not have a dedicated CRM category specifically recording housing insecurity (S. Grimson, personal communication, August 10, 2026).

This means that Trinity is currently unable to establish how many students are affected, what forms of housing insecurity are most common or whether demand is increasing across the university as a whole.

5.2 Much of the homelessness identified is hidden

The consultations showed that rough sleeping represents only a small portion of student homelessness within Trinity. More commonly, students were described as couch surfing, moving between temporary accommodation, living in unsafe or overcrowded housing, facing

eviction, staying in emergency accommodation, or experiencing homelessness following domestic abuse. Cronan also encountered students living so far from Trinity that regular commuting was not sustainable (K. Cronan, personal communication, July 20, 2026).

Grimson reported similar forms of housing insecurity within TAP, including couch surfing, temporary accommodation, overcrowding, hotels and hostels, and students without a reliable place to sleep. TAP had also heard of students sleeping in the library. In some cases, students from outside Dublin were staying in backpacker-style hostels, including large shared dormitories containing approximately 20 beds (S. Grimson, personal communication, August 10, 2026).

These findings show that having access to a bed or an address does not always mean that a student has secure housing. They also suggest that students experiencing these situations may not always identify themselves as homeless, making housing insecurity more difficult for Trinity to recognise and record.

5.3 Housing insecurity affects students' participation in university

Housing insecurity was described as having a direct impact on students' ability to engage with their education. Cheasty reported that housing difficulties can affect concentration, time management, employment and overall participation in university, alongside wider impacts on physical and mental health, hygiene and relationships (L. Cheasty, personal communication, August 4, 2026).

Grimson also discussed that the suitability of accommodation is important for students, not just if they have somewhere to live, as this can impact a student's ability to function effectively in university. Students may have somewhere to stay but still lack enough sleep, a quiet place to study, facilities to cook or maintain personal hygiene, or a stable environment where they can complete academic work. Overcrowding was also reported to affect students' physical health, which can create further barriers to attendance and study (S. Grimson, personal communication, August 10, 2026).

Long-distance commuting was identified as another educational barrier, particularly for students who cannot afford accommodation in Dublin. Extended travel times can reduce the time and energy available for lectures, independent study, placements and other academic responsibilities. TAP suggested that short-term or flexible accommodation options may support students who cannot afford to live in Dublin full-time (S. Grimson, personal communication, August 10, 2026).

These findings show that housing insecurity can affect educational participation even where a student is not literally homeless. Students without stable housing or access to financial and family support may have fewer options when difficulties arise, increasing the risk of disrupted attendance, reduced study time and poorer engagement with university. Housing insecurity can therefore contribute to unequal educational experiences between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

5.4 Trinity has significant existing supports, but access is fragmented

This research has identified a range of services already supporting students experiencing housing difficulties. These include TAP, College Health, TCDSU, accommodation services, the Disability Service, the Student Counselling Service and financial and welfare supports. The main issue identified was not an absence of support, but how these services are accessed and coordinated.

Cheasty described TCDSU's role as involving substantial navigation and signposting. Depending on the student's circumstances, they may be directed towards accommodation services, local authorities, financial supports or other internal and external services. Across Trinity, housing difficulties are addressed by whichever service a student is already connected with, or whichever one is most suited to them (L. Cheasty, personal communication, August 4, 2026).

TAP provides a strong central support point for students already connected with the programme. However, Grimson noted that students outside TAP do not necessarily have an equivalent central point through which their housing needs can be coordinated. She supported the idea of a more centralised or coordinated approach across Trinity (S. Grimson, personal communication, August 10, 2026).

Cronan's Mental Health Social Worker role is another significant existing strength because it allows complex mental-health and social issues, including housing and financial difficulties, to be considered together. However, the role currently receives referrals through a limited number of services, cannot accept self-referrals and has a substantial caseload. Housing insecurity may only become apparent after a student has been referred for another issue rather than because housing was the original reason for referral (K. Cronan, personal communication, July 20, 2026).

Overall, the findings suggest that the support a student receives depends on which service they are already connected with and whether they disclose their housing difficulties.

5.5 Emergency accommodation and financial support exist but are limited

Some practical emergency support is already available within Trinity. Grimson reported that emergency accommodation can sometimes be accessed on campus for students in acute crisis. However, availability is extremely limited, may vary throughout the year and cannot be relied upon as a guaranteed option (S. Grimson, personal communication, August 10, 2026).

Emergency financial assistance may also help prevent a housing problem from developing into homelessness. In urgent circumstances, TAP reported that financial support may cover the amount required for a student's first month of rent. However, the amount of funding available varies and may become depleted during the academic year (S. Grimson, personal communication, August 10, 2026).

This demonstrates an important difference between accommodation being available and being financially accessible. A student experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage may identify suitable accommodation but still be unable to access it without assistance with the initial costs.

5.6 Some students face additional barriers

The findings also suggest that housing insecurity is not experienced equally across the student population. Grimson identified mature students, student parents, students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds and students without family support as particularly vulnerable (S. Grimson, personal communication, August 10, 2026).

TAP also identified particular difficulties for students living in International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS) accommodation. Their housing circumstances may involve additional restrictions and may not fit easily within standard student-accommodation solutions (S. Grimson, personal communication, August 10, 2026).

Cheasty also raised concerns about students living in unsafe or exploitative accommodation. These included overcrowding, having no written agreement or receiving difficult-to-understand contracts, as well as reports of accommodation being offered in exchange for sexual activity (L. Cheasty, personal communication, August 4, 2026).

Although some groups face additional structural barriers, housing insecurity should not be understood as affecting only recognised access groups. A university-wide response needs to be available to any student whose accommodation becomes unsafe, unaffordable or unstable.

6. Comparison with Other Irish Universities

Comparison with other Irish universities identified several approaches that may be useful for Trinity. TU Dublin provides one of the clearest examples of a structured response. Its Student Accommodation Team reported that students who are homeless or at immediate risk are prioritised and offered an individual assessment of their housing and financial circumstances. Students may also receive a dedicated Homeless Support document, while short hotel stays of approximately two to three nights may sometimes be funded in acute safety situations (TU Dublin Student Accommodation Team, personal communication, August 11, 2026).

UCD uses a coordinated model through its Student Advisory Service. Dr Niamh Nestor, Head of UCD Student Advisers, reported that advisers help students access internal and external supports and maintains continuity throughout the process. UCD's Student Emergency Fund can also provide priority payments of up to €500 in immediate financial emergencies, and short-term accommodation within UCD Residences may sometimes be utilised in serious cases (N. Nestor, personal communication, July 31, 2026).

At the University of Galway, Student Support Officer AnnMarie Gilchrist described a coordinated response involving accommodation, financial and wellbeing services, the possibility of emergency accommodation being arranged on or off campus, with follow-up provided where appropriate (A. Gilchrist, personal communication, August 5, 2026).

Public information from other universities also provides useful examples. UCC has a dedicated Accommodation and Community Life Office that offers accommodation and tenancy support to students, providing a clearly identifiable institutional contact point (University College Cork, 2025). DCU also publicly identifies a specific emergency accommodation route for students at risk of homelessness, while its Access Service uses subsidised accommodation as a preventative support for some financially disadvantaged first-year students. (Dublin City University, 2026) (*Accommodation Support - DCU Student Life*, 2025)

Overall, these examples suggest that clear entry points, coordinated referrals, rapid financial support and some capacity for short-term intervention could strengthen Trinity's existing response to students experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this project and the approaches identified at other Irish universities, Trinity could consider a number of measures to strengthen its response to student homelessness and housing insecurity.

7.1 Explore the development of a Trinity-wide Student Accommodation and Housing Insecurity Strategy.

This would clarify institutional responsibility for housing insecurity and connect accommodation more explicitly with access, affordability, wellbeing and academic participation. This approach would align with the National Student Accommodation Strategy 2026–2035, which requires higher education institutions to develop their own accommodation strategies.

7.2 Consider introducing a broad institutional definition and anonymised monitoring system.

A definition could include hidden forms of housing insecurity such as couch surfing, temporary accommodation, threatened eviction, overcrowding and unsafe housing. Consistent anonymised recording could help Trinity better understand the scale and nature of need and assess whether current supports are sufficient.

7.3 Explore the feasibility of a clearly advertised housing-support pathway.

Rather than creating an entirely new service, Trinity could consider whether one existing service, designated coordinator or agreed case-management pathway could act as a clear entry point for students experiencing serious housing difficulties. Research on higher-education homelessness liaisons supports the value of designated professionals who help students navigate university and community resources (Haskett, Buccelli and Renbarger, 2022).

7.4 Consider strengthening preventative support.

Trinity could explore ways of identifying and supporting students before they become homeless, including those facing eviction, unsafe accommodation, unaffordable rent or other signs of housing instability.

7.5 Review options for rapid crisis support.

This could include examining whether short-term emergency accommodation and faster access to emergency financial assistance could be made available in urgent cases. Approaches used by UCD and TU Dublin, including priority emergency payments and limited short hotel stays, may provide useful models for consideration.

7.6 Explore stronger external partnerships and follow-up procedures.

Trinity could consider formalising referral relationships with organisations such as Threshold, local authorities and homelessness services, alongside procedures for checking whether students successfully accessed the support to which they were referred.

7.7 Consider more flexible and equitable accommodation options.

Possibilities could include short-term accommodation for students facing long commutes, greater flexibility outside the academic year, and consideration of serious housing insecurity within accommodation-allocation decisions. Flexible two- or three-night arrangements may also benefit students who cannot afford full-time accommodation in Dublin.

8. Limitations

This project was completed over a six-week period and was designed as a scoping study rather than a comprehensive assessment of student homelessness at Trinity. A major limitation is the absence of centralised institutional data, meaning it was not possible to determine the prevalence of homelessness or housing insecurity among Trinity students.

The project also did not include direct interviews with students who had experienced homelessness or housing insecurity. As a result, the findings primarily reflect the perspectives of staff and student representatives rather than students' lived experiences. Some relevant Trinity services and external institutions did not provide direct responses, and in these cases publicly available information was used instead. Public webpages may not fully reflect how services operate in practice.

Comparisons with other universities should therefore be understood as examples of different approaches rather than a formal ranking or evaluation of institutional performance.

9. Conclusion

Student homelessness and housing insecurity demonstrate how socioeconomic disadvantage can continue to shape students' experiences after they have gained access to university. The findings of this project suggest that Trinity already has a number of important supports available through services including TAP, College Health, TCDSU and accommodation and financial supports. However, these supports are distributed across different parts of the University, and there is currently no consistent institutional definition, centralised monitoring system or single coordinated pathway for students experiencing housing insecurity.

As a result, the support a student receives may depend partly on which service they are already connected with, whether they disclose their housing difficulties and what resources are available at the time. Comparison with other Irish universities shows that clearer referral pathways, coordinated case management, rapid financial assistance and limited short-term accommodation can strengthen institutional responses.

Housing insecurity should therefore be understood not only as an accommodation issue, but as one that can directly affect educational participation, wellbeing and socioeconomic equality. A more coordinated, preventative and evidence-informed approach could help Trinity respond more consistently to students experiencing housing difficulties.

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