

**Chapter VII**

# From evidence to practice: Implementation of the Housing First program in Poland

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Likewise in other EU countries, also in Poland a large number of people experience homelessness. In particular, the growing number of long-term homeless people with complex mental problems, for whom effective help is a challenge for stakeholders, i.e. politicians, professionals, scientists and ordinary citizens, is worrying. An innovative solution in this areas is the Housing First (HF) program designed for long-term homeless people with mental problems and/or addictions. The effectiveness of the HF model were shown, among others, by the results of the HOME-EU research project implemented under the Horizon 2020 program. The goal of our article is to present the current situation of homeless people and outline the existing help system. We also want to show what barriers and challenges are connected to the implementation of the HF program in Poland.

**Keywords**

homelessness, Poland, social assistance, Housing First,

## Homelessness in Poland: the current state of affairs

Homelessness is one of the most complex and severe social problems in the modern world. The lack of shelter affects the deprivation of basic human needs, preventing their development and self-fulfilment, as well as achieving a good quality of life related to mental and physical health. Homelessness often leads to social exclusion due to the dangers it brings, such as alcoholism, drug addiction, beginning, crime, prostitution and epidemiological diseases. For example, a random sample study found that 57.4% suffer from mental disorders or are addicted to psychoactive substances (Toro et al. 2014), which proves that a high percentage of Polish homeless adults experience serious mental health problems. The problem

of effective help for homeless people is, therefore, particularly complicated due to the multitude and complexity of the needs they experience.

Access to shelter is a basic human right. Unfortunately, homelessness appears to be expanding due to wars and natural disasters, hunger and poverty due to climate change, lack of access to energy sources, education, as well as rising unemployment and migration. Recent data on homelessness in the EU indicate that about 700,000 people in the EU spent at least one night on the street or in a temporary shelter. In the EU, the levels of overcrowding, uncertainty and inadequacy of assistance to homeless people are constantly increasing (Serme-Morin & Coupechoux, 2019).

There are severe housing problems in Poland because it is the European country with the 2nd highest rate (44.2%) of overcrowding among the population. Approximately 32% of poor households are in housing cost overburden (Serme-Morin, 2017). Although the vast majority of Poles own ownership housing (83.5% of the population), as much as 15% experience poverty, and 9.1% admit to severe housing deprivation (Serme-Morin & Coupechoux, 2018). A nationwide survey of the number of homeless people (Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, 2017) showed that there are approximately 33,408 homeless people in Poland (including 83.5% men). The vast majority (80.52%; n = 26 900) stayed in institutional facilities. Homeless people indicated that the reason for their homelessness is eviction, primarily, check-out (45%) and a family conflict (36.39%), as well as addiction (29.2%), unemployment and lack of work (17.3%). Among the homeless, a quarter were people with a 2-year homelessness period (26.47%) and people who were homeless for 6 to 10 years (25.14%). In 2017, 49% of people declared a very long homelessness, exceeding 5 years, and 54% in 2019, which means that the phenomenon is very serious because now more than half of the homeless in Poland are long-term homeless (Wygnańska, 2014).

## Governmental and non-governmental social assistance

Social assistance is an institution of social policy of the state, aimed at supporting people and families in overcoming difficult life situations. Social assistance provides support in the form of financial, material and in the form of services to meet the necessary needs and enable living under decent conditions. Social assistance also helps prevent difficult life situations and helps to become independent and integrate with the environment. Pursuant to the Social Welfare Act (2004), “social assistance is organized by governmental and self-governmental administration bodies, cooperating in this respect, on the basis of partnership, with social and non-governmental organizations, the Catholic Church, other churches, religious associations and natural and legal persons.”

The Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy (Ministerstwo Rodziny, Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, MRPiPS, 2017) shapes the policy regarding social assistance, defines directions of activities, prepares solutions, develops standards and monitors their implementation. The Ministry also creates and improves service standards in social assistance organizational units, social employment entities and environmental services standards, and monitors their implementation. Currently, MRPiPS implements the nationwide program “Overcome homelessness”. A program to help homeless people, which aim is to inspire and support actions aimed at preventing and solving the problem of homelessness in four modules: prevention (prevention of homelessness); activation of the homeless; infrastructure (supporting

entities in adapting their facilities providing services for the homeless to current standards); innovation (inspiring to implement new solutions in the field of helping the homeless people).

MRPiPS (2017) also coordinates nationwide research aimed at determining the number of homeless people, which is a necessary introduction to any further actions aimed at limiting the negative effect of homelessness and influencing the shaping of social policies at the central, provincial and municipal level. Information on the number of homeless people staying in a given municipality can be the basis for making specific decisions, e.g. about building a facility for the homeless, conducting appropriate housing policy, as well as providing a basis for including the problem of homelessness in Municipal strategies for solving social problems.

The Ministry also oversees the homeless accommodation system. The voivode is obliged to keep a register of places where the municipality grants temporary shelter in shelters for the homeless, shelters for the homeless with care services, night shelters and heating rooms. Pursuant to the Act on social assistance, homeless assistance is one of the municipality's own tasks. The municipality appoints Social Welfare Centres, which distribute government resources intended to help people who are in a difficult life situation. The municipality can provide support in the form of shelter, meals, clothing, as well as targeted for treatment. Municipalities can also outsource these tasks to non-governmental organizations.

Currently, there are many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Poland, both local and nationwide, specialized in helping homeless people. The most well-known ones include the Aid Association of St. Brother Albert, the "Monar" and "Markot" associations, or the BARKA Foundation and Association, charitable institutions, such as the Polish Red Cross and Caritas. Church institutions, such as the Camillian Social Assistance Mission founded by Father Bogusław Paleczny, or the Capuchin Foundation named after the blessed Ancient Kopliński, appointed in Warsaw on the initiative of the Capuchin Minor Brothers of Homeless Pastoral Care. NGOs provide shelter, run diners and offer social and professional reintegration.

Statistical data show (Chochorowska, 2017) that out of nearly 2.5 million beneficiaries of community social assistance in Poland, over 67% (n = 1 667 600) were people below the statutory poverty line, including 1.2% (n = 30 300) of homeless people. There was an increase of over 25% (compared to 2009) in the number of homeless people who were helped by social assistance centres in 2016 due to homelessness. Homeless people benefited from cash benefits, 92%, (n = 26 300) and non-cash benefits, 75%, (n = 21 000) due to homelessness, as well as 43%, (n = 12 900) for health reasons, 31%, (n = 9 500) due to unemployment and 12% (n = 3 600) for social reasons.

However, the existing system of providing assistance to homeless people in Poland presented briefly still has serious gaps noticed by almost all stakeholders. Olech (2011) showed a lack of a coherent government strategy in existing programs to cope with the problem of homelessness. Also at the municipal level, serious neglect in dealing with homelessness is noted. Dębski (2011) points out that municipal strategies for solving social problems in many cases do not at all relate to the problem of homelessness or raise this problem incidentally, without relying on a reliable long-term diagnosis or theoretical knowledge. In addition, the lack of specific assistance programs is particularly evident in the case of long-term homeless people with mental problems, which can most often be seen as begging on the streets of cities

or living in canals or gazebos, occasionally using shelters, lodging houses and other short-term services, without hope for a permanent apartment.

## Challenges and barriers for Housing First in Poland

Most of the municipal programs for helping the homeless in Poland are based on the stairs model. This model assumes that homeless people meet a number of criteria and go through various stages of social rehabilitation to get the right to live in an independent property. Individual tasks are directed at selected risk groups, which leads to a sense of social injustice and exclusion of people who do not meet the criteria. Currently, certain institutional services provided for specific demographic groups (such as children, the elderly, the disabled, the mentally ill, and the homeless) are being questioned in the EU. In addition, the support system varies, depending on who is providing assistance: governmental or non-governmental organizations, non-profit organizations, private companies, charities or religious organizations. In each of these cases, assistance is provided selectively and is usually directed towards one short-term goal (e.g. accommodation, dinner, clothing). In general, stair-based systems do not deliver the expected results to the same extent as programs based on the Housing First (HF) approach. The Housing First housing program is revolutionary approach to solving the problem of homelessness among people affected by serious problems and persistent mental illness. Unlike the “treatment first”, the Housing First approach provides housing for a homeless person suffering from a mental illness shortly after being admitted to the program, without any requirements, as opposed to offering an apartment as a reward for progress in treatment (Nelson et al., 2014).

In Europe, for the first time, a social policy program to reduce long-term homelessness, based on the principles of Housing First, was implemented in Finland (Y-Foundation, 2017). Currently, the HF program is developing in many European countries. In the current HOME\_EU Homelessness as unfairness project, in the evaluation of the HF the following EU member states take part, like Portugal, Spain, Ireland, Sweden, Belgium, the Netherlands, France and Italy (Bokszczanin, Zmaczyńska, 2017).

The HF program showed a significant improvement in the quality of life and social integration, a significant decrease in medical and psychiatric hospitalization, as well as a high rate of residence stability among 50 HF participants in Portugal (Ornelas, Martins, Zilhão and Duarte, 2014). According to research (Ornelas et al., 2014), participation in the Housing First program increases the sense of belonging to their neighbourhoods and social integration (using local resources and participating in social activities). The individual process of reversing homelessness is oriented in the HF approach on consumer choice and the ability to decide on the priorities in the received social support. Research indicates (Martins, Ornelas, & Silva, 2016) that the active participation of HF program beneficiaries in the recovery process control significantly increases its effectiveness. Poland also joined the EU countries in which the HF program will be developed. The process of introducing this program is associated with serious challenges that the Polish society, politicians and professionals operating in the arena of social services as well as scientists will have to face. These challenges are primarily to overcome negative stereotypes about homeless people, change the housing policy and thoroughly evaluate the interventions (Bokszczanin & Rogowska, 2019).

## Roles played by civil society stakeholders in implementing the HF

The important role of scientists and practitioners should be to present and disseminate research results showing the evidence-based effectiveness of the HF approach in combating long-term homelessness. Such a role is already fulfilled by several centres operating in Gdynia, Gdansk and Warsaw (Dębski, 2011), and Opole (Bokszczanin & Zmaczyńska, 2017; Bokszczanin & Rogowska, 2019).

For several years, analyses of housing availability for the HF program in Poland and proposals of future solutions have already been known (Różycka, 2016). Standards for collecting data on homelessness and source materials characterizing the HF program and its various studies within the projects: Housing First – Evidence based advocacy (HFEA) (Wygnańska, 2014) are also developed. The goal of HFEA is to obtain a positive attitude of stakeholders, in particular decision makers, to programs based on the idea of Housing First.

Thanks to the determination of the group of activists and scientists, in 2019 the implementation of the HF program began in Poland. The program implemented by the Aid Association of St. Brother Albert is financed by the Ministry (MFLSP) from the European POWER fund. The experimental version of the program will be introduced in three large Polish cities: in Gdansk, Warsaw and Wroclaw, with the substantive support of the AEIPS organization (Associação para o Estudo e Integração Psicossocial, Portugal). Challenges for the research team, which also includes scientists from the University of Opole, which undertook the scientific evaluation of conducted activities, are mainly related to the time and budget constraints of the project. At the same time, the HF program is implemented in the Cooperation Fun Foundation in Warsaw. The success of both projects is also associated with maximizing their faithfulness to the original program proposed by its creators. Empirical evidence indicates that the greater the faithfulness of the program, the better its effectiveness due to achieving housing stability and improving the quality of life (Aubry et al., 2018).

The existing barriers and challenges mean that today the further development of the Housing First program in Poland should be viewed with cautious optimism because the results of experimental projects will be known only in a few years. However, today we should direct the view of politicians, signatories and stakeholders to long-term solutions of the problem of homelessness. The solution which is the HF program today seems expensive but in the long run leads to spectacular results, reversing homelessness and, as a result, reducing the incurred costs. It is necessary to constantly remind the public that the right to housing is a basic human right and developed societies should take care of such legal and systemic solutions to ensure that all people enjoy decent living conditions and prevent the loss of housing for people in difficult living conditions. The participation of the team from the University of Opole in the HOME\_EU Homelessness as unfairness program allowed to reach many politicians and stakeholders in facilities for helping the homeless by presenting the results of our research which prove that it is possible to eliminate homelessness. We are also convinced that the dissemination of information about our activities related to HOME\_EU will in the future result in more favourable attitudes towards homeless people, greater understanding and support for the HF program.

The issue of homelessness and intervention principles of the Housing First program have been permanently introduced by us to the curricula at the Institute of Psychology of the UO. We believe that education of young people in this field should be systematically introduced into the curricular at all universities. Universal and reliable education is an important path that leads to an increase in openness and support (advocacy) of innovations in the sphere of social assistance.

As research has shown (Duarte, Costa, & Ornelas, 2018), close cooperation, sharing experiences related to the implementation of the HF program and mutual learning from HF participants from other countries significantly supports development. It is necessary to constantly evaluate HF programs and compare them with other programs aimed at helping the homeless. Important steps in this regard have already been made as part of the HOME\_EU project. It is necessary to continue these efforts to provide evidence of the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of programs based on the HF approach in the economic, psychological and social area. Establishing the EU strategy and adapting it to the solutions in force in individual Member States should eliminate homelessness in Europe by 2030 (Serme-Morin & Coupechoux, 2019).

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