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Social care services for the homeless people based on the attitudes of residents towards homelessness

Abstract

There is no Strategic Plan for tackling and preventing homelessness in Slovakia, which exacerbates the unsystematic process of social services for homeless people. For this reason, we point out the positives and negatives of the whole system. The research focuses on mapping the current situation of homelessness and describes the aid system under the auspices of the non-profit sector. The participants in the research were social and street workers who provide care and counseling for the homeless on an outpatient basis, on a residential basis or directly in the street where they live.

Keywords

Social services, homelessness, attitudes to homeless.

1. Introduction

In general, care for the homeless in the capital of the Slovak Republic, Bratislava, is provided mainly by third sectors, which form a network of assistance in providing low-threshold services, accommodation facilities and street social work.

Church organizations and charities connect paradigms of social work with the pastoral care, that is necessary to empower vulnerable people.¹

2. Characteristics of the homeless

Průdková and Novotný² perceive the homeless as people who, for several reasons, found themselves on the fringes of society. They have no housing or are in danger of losing security of the place where they live and live in places that do not meet optimal housing conditions. The term homeless people is also used in society, which suggests that these people have lost their homes; not only their home in the form of a roof over their head, but also family contacts, the love and care of family members, as well as a place to live in.

Barták³ claims that most homeless people are within the productive age group. He justifies this by saying that the homeless die prematurely because of their lifestyle and most of the help services in society are intended for the elderly. We also find young people among the homeless. These are mainly young adults who have left children's homes, or fled from their home and cannot or do not want to return there due to disagreements with their parents (crime, drug addiction, failure to accept a child's partner, etc.). They are immature, do not have enough life experience and can be part of a group with dangerous/criminal or risky behaviours.

We can find the homeless virtually anywhere. At train or bus stations, on benches in parks, around supermarkets, department stores, in abandoned buildings, in forests or in temporary dwellings.⁴

¹ Cf. L. Ujházi, *The Significance of Charity (Caritas) in the Governing, Sanctifying, and Teaching Mission of the Church*, "Bogoslovni vestnik" 80 (2020) Nr 4, pp. 783–802; *Rodzina w społeczeństwie – relacje i wyzwania*, eds. E. Osewska, J. Stala, Kraków 2019, Wydawnictwo naukowe UPJPII.

² Cf. T. Průdková, P. Novotný, *Bezdomovectví*, Praha 2008: Triton, p. 65.

³ Cf. M. Barták, *Bezdomovství v ČR: Zdravotní stav bezdomovců a jeho determinanty*, Ústí nad Labem 2011: Univerzita J.E. Purkyně, p. 11.

⁴ Cf. I. Hradecký, *Profily bezdomovství v České republice: Proč spí lidé venku a kdo jsou tí lidé*, Praha 2005, p. 8.

Budayová⁵ recalls that there are many homeless people who do not belong to the Roma national minority, but are among them. Social exclusion is more than symbolic. These people suffer not only from being homeless, but also from being different in skin color.

State social policy creates a system of supporting unemployed and low-income individuals and families, but often the weakest groups and individuals do not use employment policy measures out of ignorance, unwillingness to enter into relations with the authorities, due to having been refused assistance, and for other reasons.⁶

According to Budayová⁷, assistance to the homeless population is being implemented not only in the legislative, social and political systems. Social work has many methods, techniques and approaches that, in essence, help the homeless not only to survive everyday life, but also to provide them with social support.

The only solution that is possible for the homeless is to get a job. It is difficult for many homeless people because they have given up their status, refusing to submit to the norms that society considers common in life⁸. Many homeless people have difficulty finding employment for several reasons, e.g. they have a criminal record, precarious housing or no place to sleep. After all, it is unrealistic for a person who has a job to go to bed on the street after work and then back to work⁹. Many employers are also able to provide housing for their employees. In this case, the problem of having a roof over their head would be solved. However, there are not many opportunities where homeless people can work. According to the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, Working meeting on the issue of collecting statistical data on the homeless¹⁰, a homeless person can be involved in:

1. community service in the municipality
2. work on construction sites, work in warehouses

⁵ Cf. Z. Budayová, *Social exclusion of the Roma ethnic group in the interest of social work*, Warszawa 2017: Fundacja, p. 41.

⁶ Cf. A. Žilová, *Chudoba a jej premeny na Slovensku*, Baďín 2005: Mentor, p. 19.

⁷ Cf. Z. Budayová, *Sociálne neprispôsobiví občania v intenciách sociálnej práce*, Ružomberok 2019: Fundacja, p. 34.

⁸ Cf. L. Klenovský, *Terenná sociálna práca*, Bratislava 2006: Občianske združenie sociálna práca, p. 19.

⁹ Cf. N. Beňová, *Bezdomovci, ľudia ako my*, Košice 2008: Proti prúdu.

¹⁰ Cf. Štatistický úrad SR, *Pracovné stretnutie k problematike zberu štatistických údajov o bezdomovcoch*, 2010, <https://slovak.statistics.sk/wps/portal/ext/Databases/> (13.08.2019).

3. occasional garden work
4. auxiliary work
5. sale of *Nota bene* magazine.

Not only do homeless people have nowhere to live in and find it difficult to get a job, but most of them do not even have the opportunity to receive unemployment benefits or social benefits. All these benefits are tied to a permanent residence (albeit fictitious), which the homeless are (often) not able to prove because of loss of documents. Sometimes the homeless person is living so far from the place where he had a permanent residence that he is not able to travel there repeatedly.¹¹

2.1. Non-public service providers to the homeless

According to Act n. 448/2008 § 75 par. 1 Coll., the municipality is obliged to provide a financial contribution for the operation of the provided social service to a non-profit social service provider who does not provide the social services in order to make a profit. If the municipality has requested the provision of this social service to a non-public social service provider the facilities provided are: 1. shelter; 2. social facility for vulnerable young people; 3. low-threshold day center; 4. emergency housing facility, 5. dormitory, 6. day care center, 7. dining room and laundry, 8. personal hygiene center, 9. street social service through street programmes.

According to Act n. 448/2008 §12 par. 1, there are the following types of social services:

1. Social services to provide the necessary conditions to cater for the basic needs of living in facilities, which are the types of facilities and social services described above.
2. In Slovakia, care for the homeless is largely provided through the non-profit sector and non-public social service providers which, in addition to facilities for the homeless, provide streetwork associated with harm reduction, counseling, crisis intervention and monitoring. They also organize cultural, sports and social activities to improve the lives of the homeless.

¹¹ Cf. Streetwork s predajcami *Nota bene*, <https://www.notabene.sk/?streetwork> (13.08.2019).

The Slovak Catholic Charity operates several social service facilities, specifically focusing on helping homeless people. The charity provides services in the House of Charity St. Rafaela – a dormitory and low-threshold center for homeless people in Nitra, material help and food provisions, carries out charitable collections, operates a Charitable Social Center – and a shelter, dormitory and low-threshold center in Rožňava. Other facilities for helping the homeless are found in Lučenec, Brezno, Trnava, Košice, Prešov and other towns.¹²

RESOTY – Anton Srholec Resocialization Community is a civic association dealing with the resocialization of homeless people in a hostel with a capacity of 50 clients. Each member of the community has three keys to access the room, the hallway and the front door. A maximum of three men can stay in a room which is equipped with, among other things, a refrigerator and a TV. Resocialization is also a programme to help the clients become responsible for themselves, for the environment and for others. As much as possible, accommodation and meals are paid for in the value equivalent to the price of two packets of the cheapest cigarettes.¹³

PROTI PRÚDU – NGO Proti prúdu was founded by three social work students on March 20th, 2001, with the aim of helping homeless people to integrate into society, to work in the field of prevention of homelessness and to positively influence public attitudes towards homeless people.

They founded the first Theater with Homeless People. Later on, the activity became independent and the Homeless Theater was established.

In 2006, they helped create a low-threshold dormitory; St. Vincent Depaul. NGO Proti prúdu and also co-founders of the Infirmary of St. Elizabeth for the Homeless, established in 2011.

In the years 2005–2007, they implemented the Krištof project – a comprehensive and innovative approach to solving homelessness (this NGO provided sheltered accommodation, work in their workshop, education, social counseling and social assistance to find a job with selected Nota bene sellers).

In the years 2014–2019, a pilot project of employment and debt relief for homeless people was implemented based at the railway station in Bratislava where homeless worked as luggage carriers.

¹² Cf. Bratislavská arcidiecézna charita, projektová správa, <http://www.charitaba.sk/sk/Bratislavska-arcidieczna-charita.alej> (13.08.2019).

¹³ Cf. Sociálna oblasť, <https://opendata.bratislava.sk/dataset/category/socialna-oblast> (12.09.2019).

The main tool became the project – the street magazine *Nota bene*. It currently gives 350 homeless people, in 17 cities in Slovakia, a chance to gain a decent income every month, in addition to self-esteem and social contacts. NGOs provide homeless people with individual social and legal counseling.¹⁴

MEA CULPA: a shelter founded by the BSK, the Vrakuňa district. It provides care for homeless citizens in the form of accommodation – beds for 35 citizens. The capacity of the facility is fully utilized and the need exceeds the resources available.¹⁵

HOME FOR EVERYONE, o.z. operates two shelters with over 140 beds and one center for personal hygiene. The ambition of the association is to provide a purposeful and long-term social service for socially deprived citizens, regardless of age. The shelters are located and operate in the outskirts of Bratislava. This NGO is a support and an important partner for the Bratislava-Staré Mesto district.¹⁶

Another tool for working with the homeless is streetwork “The aim of field social work is to address those groups that need help but do not actively seek it, or refuse help, and to provide support in coping with the crisis period of life¹⁷. According to Klenovský¹⁸, street social work is justified as follows: A) it offers services that are not provided by an institutionalized network of social services, B) there is a so-called hidden population – people who are not in the population register, or do not have a document and cannot become recipients of benefits, or avoid the help of institutions due to personal incompetence, lack of information or fear of repression. C) it is necessary to integrate clients into the social network (sheltered housing, social hostels, alternative family care, etc.). D) There is a need for more effective prevention of socio-pathological phenomena in children and adolescents with risky behavior. E) At present, there is a need for a qualitatively different type of work with the client on the basis of a partnership – creating a helping relationship with the client, and getting

¹⁴ Cf. Report NGO proti prúdu, <http://www.protiprudu.sk> (13.08.2019).

¹⁵ Cf. Report NGO Depaul Slovensko, *Misia a hodnoty*, <http://depaulslovensko.org/o-n-s/misia-a-hodnoty> (13.08.2019).

¹⁶ Cf. Project report, *Sociálna oblasť*, <https://opendata.bratislava.sk/dataset/category/socialna-oblast> (13.08.2019).

¹⁷ Cf. Z. Gajdošová et. al., *Terénna sociálna práca: skriptá – učebné texty*, Ružomberok 2009: KU Ružomberok, p. 18.

¹⁸ Cf. L. Klenovský, *Terénna sociálna práca*, Bratislava 2006: Občianske združenie sociálna práca, p. 9.

to know and accept his natural world, and the cultural environment in which he lives and from which he originates.

Since 2016, an initiative has been launched to create a National Strategy for the Prevention and Solution of Homelessness. The goal of a comprehensive strategy is not to build facilities and services for the homeless. A comprehensive strategy is to create a functioning system that will allow homeless people to obtain decent housing – to home these people and reduce their number. The activities of organizations working with the homeless are constantly threatened by the finances intended for their operation.¹⁹ The law on social services transferred the responsibility for the problem of homelessness to the local government. However, municipal politicians allocate a minimum of funding to this unpopular area. For example, in Bratislava, the estimated number of several thousand homeless people has only 491 places in dormitories and shelters and 166 places in low-threshold day centers. According to last year's IVPR survey, up to 42% of organizations working with homeless people said that their current budget is not enough to support their activities. The fact that the financing of dormitories had to be transferred from municipalities to the state due to the alarming lack of funds, is also proof that the current setting is not functioning.²⁰

Society treats the homeless in different ways. Attitudes towards the homeless vary on a scale where one extreme is remorse and the other is hatred and contempt. Perception is influenced by emotions and experiences with the behavior of homeless individuals.²¹ It often happens that a person creates an image of all the homeless on the basis of one, perhaps unpleasant experience. People's opinions and attitudes are greatly influenced by the media, which try to attract attention with negative news and thus gain the public's interest. Based on this, the public perceives homeless people negatively. They are indifferent to them, inattentive and try to avoid them.

¹⁹ Cf. I. Paluš a kol., *Samospráva obce (vybrané problémy)*, Košice 2009: UPJŠ Fakulta verejnej správy.

²⁰ Cf. Project report, *Sociálna oblasť*, <https://opendata.bratislava.sk/dataset/category/socialna-oblast> (13.08.2019).

²¹ Cf. T. Průdková, P. Novotný, *Bezdomovectví*, Praha 2008: Triton, p. 66.

3. Research methods

The basic method of data collection was through interviews with social and street workers, who provide counseling and assistance for the homeless in the capital city. The research involved 16 professionals, whose age ranged from 27 to 41 years. Of these, 9 were women and 7 were men with a university degree in social work. The research took place from January to February 2020, when the vast majority of homeless people move into social facilities. The aims of the research were:

- To analyze the phenomenon of homelessness in the capital Bratislava – Old Town.
- To map the current situation of the homeless in terms of the development of social services.
- To identify public attitudes towards the homeless as a factor determining the aid system and a willingness to help homeless people.

4. Results

We analyzed the statements of social and street workers by open coding, which we summarized into categories. We coded the individual answers by coding into dimensions: 1. associations 2. reasons of homelessness 3. level of social services and assistance, and 4. impacts of homelessness.

VO1: What views do you encounter on the homeless in your work? What are people's reactions to a begging homeless man?

The most common associations reported by participants are linked to maladaptation, refusal of help and addictions. The most common forms of addiction in the homeless are drug addiction, alcohol dependence and gambling. They often encounter repulsive reactions, xenophobia and the belief that the homeless spread health diseases, are dangerous and stink. The prevailing opinion in society is that the homeless are to blame for the life situation because they do not try hard enough and do not want to change anything in their lives. On the other hand, the homeless themselves suffer from self-blame, self-pity and feelings of shame. Begging on the street in public evokes a feeling of human degradation, just as homelessness itself causes degradation of a personality if it is long-term.

Table 1: Associations linked with the homeless

Coding	Social workers	Street workers	Total
Inadaptable group	7	15	22
Refusal of assistance	4	11	15
Addictions	12	7	19
Degradation of personality and humanity	8	4	12
Repulsive look	5	8	13
Xenophobia	6	13	19
Guilt, self-blame	7	5	12

Source: own research

V02: In your opinion, what are the reasons why a person becomes homeless?

The results of the research showed that there is no single cause of homelessness, but it is a combination of several problems that one cannot cope with in life, then trying to solve them in an incorrect, pathological or otherwise undesirable way that deepens this problem and social assistance. Once on the street, where the homeless person manages to find himself while in a difficult situation, he usually succumbs to other addictions, health issues and other problems. Participants commented that alcohol, drugs and slot machines are common side effects of homelessness.

Table 2: Reasons of homelessness

Coding	Social workers	Street workers	Total
Indebtedness and fraud	7	15	22
Loss of employment	4	11	15
Addictions	12	7	19
Crime	8	4	12
Family breakup	5	8	13
Difficult life situation	6	13	19
Leaving the orphanage	7	5	12
A combination of several factors	11	9	20

Source: own research

Selected answers of participants:

P4M27r.: alcohol or drug addiction, debts, fraud, divorce

P2M40r.: These are usually long-term family problems that result in the loss of control over one's life or inconsistency with the life situation or family breakdown, client resignation.

P8Ž28r.: job loss and the associated drinking of alcohol either as a result of job loss or drinking alcohol directly at the workplace as a routine matter. Early drinking at a young age is also common.

P12M24r.: Criminal activity is not unusual, consequent inability to resocialize, continuing crime and a difficult life situation;

P3Ž23r.: alcoholism, pathological gambling, debt are the most common combinations connected with people who later live on the streets and can no longer manage to keep the situation under control.

P4M25r.: alcoholism, family problems, family disputes, the family rejects a person for various reasons, or refuses to continue to help him.

P16M32r.: it is mostly a combination of several factors, frequently homeless people are those who come from a difficult family environment, or grew up outside the family, got into debt, became victims of fraud, wanted to solve debts through playing with slot machines, and this subsequently led to even greater indebtedness and personal bankruptcy.

VO3: How do you evaluate the system of help and social services for the homeless in the Old Town-Bratislava?

Research has shown that the social services system for the homeless is complex, financially undersized, not tailored to the needs of the homeless and lacks the material and financial needs and capacity to completely tackle the issue of the homeless, literally move the homeless out of these public spaces. According to interviews with participants, this assistance and intervention is insufficient, ineffective and unhelpful. They also pointed out the systemic shortcomings and factors that affect the homeless assistance system, which we divided into the following categories by open coding:

1. Public attitudes towards the homeless (11) – these negative attitudes have a very negative effect on the willingness of the public, municipalities and cities to tackle the problem of the homeless, as they consider them an inadaptable and irreparable group of citizens in whom it is not worth investing money. There is also a fine line between overcoming and not coping with the social situation in life.

2. Disclaimer (7): for citizens who came to Bratislava from other places in the Slovak Republic, the city solves social problems that they have not managed to handle in other cities (even though at least half of the homeless people had their original permanent residence in Bratislava). On the other hand, the homeless are described as those who are responsible for their life situation.
3. Non-addressability and insufficient effectiveness of preventive measures (14) aimed at addressing the problems of defaulters, children from children's homes, persons released from prison, people with psychiatric illnesses who are at risk.
4. Financing (15) – low priority of the social problem of the homeless in terms of financial subsidies (the financial support required to solve the problems of homeless people is several times higher than what is being invested in them; currently public administration subsidies range from hundreds to thousands of euros).
5. Unclear /lack of competencies (8) among the subjects of the local government, the essence of which lies in the fact that the problems of the homeless in the city have outgrown (personnel and financial) the possibilities of city districts (despite the fact that several successful NGOs operate in the city and the city has set aside premises for the operation of low-threshold services).
6. The absence of a unified concept of social services for homeless people (12) and thus the absence of its implementation in the city and in the territory of the Bratislava self-governing region.
7. Absence of community planning (7) for the homeless, part of public and non-governmental organizations at local and regional level.
8. The disparity between the supply and demand of services (5) in the city comparing public and non-public providers.
9. Absence of networking (4): The social problems of homeless people no longer affect only individuals but also entire families, including children who are already born homeless, there are very poor services in the city for families who find themselves on the streets.

VO4: What do you consider to be the most serious consequences of the homelessness?

Participants with experience of working with the homeless stated that living without a home puts an extremely great strain on the psyche, mental experience/

health, emotions, self-confidence, and on the awareness of their self-awareness. On the other hand, living without a home is also a problem for health, as the homeless do not go for preventive check-ups. They do not even follow basic hygiene habits, and can transmit various infectious diseases. Participants pointed out that homeless life is extremely difficult and that homeless people face inhumane attitudes, discrimination, racism and xenophobia.

Loss of security, safety and family background or inability to work causes deepening addictions, increasing poverty and social isolation. Research has confirmed that the consequences of homelessness bring with them a combination of several factors that negatively affect several aspects of life.

Table 3: Consequences of homelessness

Coding	Social workers	Street workers	Total
Deterioration of health	7	9	16
Deepening dependencies	5	11	16
Mental health problems	8	8	16
Personality degradation, loss of value	6	4	10
Discrimination and violations of human rights	4	4	8
Loss of family and work facilities	8	8	17
Loss of security and sense of security	8	7	15
Social isolation	6	5	11
A combination of several factors	5	6	11

Source: own research

Selected answers of participants:

P9M28r.: Homeless people are often dependent on themselves, the family rejects them, they are isolated.

P4Ž29r.: Eliminating the consequences is very difficult, we mainly try to ensure that the health of the homeless does not deteriorate and that they are able to take care of themselves and survive on the streets, especially those who are elderly.

P15Ž34r.: Work is demanding and impacts are multifactorial, they especially need to be helped to find a way to prevent homelessness and we largely do harm reduction, we do not try to change them, but support them in the ability to take care of themselves in the way they can, while providing them with low-threshold services.

P12M24r.: I often encounter various mental problems, there are often severe forms of addiction and their health is not good.

P2M36r.: Homeless people encounter everything on the street, but most of all people's misunderstanding, ignorance, discrimination or people's fear that they might catch some disease from them, people avoid them.

5. Discussion

Research has shown that homelessness is closely linked to poverty, to the inadequacy of the social conditions of people without financial resources, and staffing capacity to overcome a state of emergency. Since the home is a place for satisfying the basic needs in connection with hygiene, housing, clothing and meals, by losing their home these people also lose any possibility of satisfying their basic needs and of having a sense of security. Losing a home does not only mean the deprivation/loss of housing, but especially social isolation, loss of emotional and social relationships with one's immediate surroundings, loss of working conditions and collegial relationships.

Concentrating limited, short-term social services in one place is inefficient, promotes overcrowding, and places enormous demands on the work of social workers. In addition, a large proportion of socially deprived citizens avoid these services and prefer illegal places in public spaces, gardens, bunkers, abandoned buildings, and pubs.

The risk group are those who are in unfavorable social situations due to long-term unemployment, people with chronic diseases, disabled citizens, people from dysfunctional families with consequent loss of a social network, citizens without a social background (eg citizens who grew up in children's homes), citizens with long – term addictions to toxic substances, and migrants. Before becoming homeless, many of them would have been receiving social security benefits, are registered as unemployed with social affairs offices and families, or were provided with other support and probation services.

We see homeless people mostly wandering in the streets without looking for a job. However, there are also those who are aware of their situation and by selling *Nota bene* magazines at least try to improve their situation a little; they are trying to earn enough to cover their basic needs. They use the money to cover costs for accommodation in a shelter centre or food. This magazine also gives them the opportunity to regain their working habits. Any form of work

or production gives the homeless a chance to satisfy their basic needs and pay for accommodation and hygienic services. At the same time, employment is the first step for a homeless person to become independent. At present, the situation of homelessness is very complex and the system of social services is set up to provide clients with accommodation, food and counseling or prevention advice, but it does not have significant opportunities in influencing the integration of disadvantaged groups into the work environment.

There is no specific cooperation between state and public administration, and non-profit organizations on the basis of special prevention programs aimed at preventing, mitigating and reducing the negative impacts of homelessness.

Tománek a Matejová have shown that the family plays a key role in the care of people in crisis. If the family exclude the family member, there is a great gap between family and state support.²²

Overall, field social services such as streetwork are insufficient, although this method of social services is considered to be effective and adequate. Streetworkers or social assistants should be employees of low-threshold social centers, community partners of the city district within the framework of special development programs.

6. Conclusion

Homelessness requires a specific approach to deal with the lives of those who remain marginalized. The connection between the homeless and the social services, is often without the successful integration of the homeless person into everyday life. The social system for this target group must not only consist of the provision of low-threshold services, but must also link social work and health care with charitable and spiritual services to help them solve their problems. Homelessness is characterized by social isolation, discrimination and exclusion. Public attitudes towards these people greatly affect the quality of social services as well as the perception of the problem of homelessness. On the other hand, the homeless person is so frustrated with his situation that in many cases he is not interested in solving his situation and thus degenerates to this social status.

²² A. Mátejová, P. Tománek, *Family and Current Sociolegal Measures for its Members in the Slovak Republic*, in: *Strong Families – Strong Societies*, ed. E. Osewska, Krakow 2019: Uniwersytet Papieski Jana Pawła II, p. 69–89.

This is the most vulnerable group, requiring the social care/services just like other social groups.

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