

HOMELESSNESS AND SURVIVAL STRATEGIES OF THE HOMELESS

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Abstract: Homelessness is a multifaceted social phenomenon affecting to a significant degree the nature of individuals in multiple dimensions. The consequences of losing a home are usually accompanied by a change in attitudes and how individuals behave toward both themselves and the majority society. The absence of housing shapes the homeless in terms of their awareness and self-fulfillment, as they search for a place to live and apply strategies for survival on the street. This study aims to analyze the results of concrete research and the survival strategies homeless people routinely use in conjunction with the effort to secure their essential needs.

Keywords: Homeless people, Survival strategies, Labor force participation, Social services, Public space.

1 Introduction

The society is an area in which different social phenomena occur, including factors of their origin and scope (Kubičková, 2015). Homelessness can be characterized in its own complex form as a socially undesirable phenomenon whose causes, course and consequences are closely linked to other social phenomena, transitioning into a subsequent multifaceted nature that affects the overall condition in many respects (and dimensions) of their lives (Brown, Thomas, Hinderlie, 2013).

Barták (2004) argues here that homelessness is essentially a concept often associated with poverty. The homeless can be described as people with neither permanent housing nor employment, which causes exclusion for many of them from access to resources, opportunities and possibilities generally available to everyone living in the community.

In this respect, the concepts of poverty and social exclusion are connected, resulting in a condition where being homeless is likewise accompanied by a feeling of loneliness and social isolation across multiple dimensions and, in connection therewith, homelessness is similar to the concept of extreme social exclusion (Anderson, Filipovič Hrast, Finnerty, 2016).

When the condition persists for a longer period of time and the unfavorable situation cannot be resolved, the homeless become in many cases apathetic and indifferent, with an absence of any vision of how to lead their lives and even absolute hopelessness (Bočáková, 2014).

In relation to this state, Dykeman (2011) considers homelessness to be the absolute descent in an individual's social status, where a homeless person realizes their current precarious existence, not seeing (or even admitting) any possible change for the better.

The very issue of homelessness has for a long time failed to receive sufficient attention in developed and rich countries, with the result that people with no housing remain not only on the margins of society's concerns, but also societal thinking has in many cases been accompanied by prejudice against those who have lost their homes and are residing in public spaces. It can be further said in this context that an overwhelming percentage of the housed majority are unaware of the homeless¹ having likewise the same right to survive and live a dignified and meaningful life (Habánik, 2017).

Keller (2013) agrees and further notes that, even though the right to survive and live a dignified life can be characterized as a certain standard of living in society, a significant part of society is still unable to guarantee this standard. In this context, the question also arises as to what extent the scope of the social state

dimension is realized, also in view of the presence of different social phenomena in society (Horváth, 2013).

Thus, homeless people have developed their own particular subculture within the existing societal model. Members of this subculture occupy the lowest social status level, displaying different behavior patterns and expressing exchanges in social interactions both inside and outside the subculture in conjunction with a specific value orientation among members of the subculture (Matoušek, 2008).

In terms of the subculture in which homeless people live, Tvrdoň and Kasanová (2004) highlight an applied street culture model, characteristically based on its own and specific expressions (including customary rules). Prominent here is an emphasis on the issue of daily survival and the need to mitigate the consequences life without a home entails. In this process, both apathy and indifference to anything happening outside of the subculture is likewise present.

Glasser and Birdgman (1999) emphasize also selection and subsequent grouping of homeless into two subgroups. One subgroup is composed of people actively seeking available assistance from existing possibilities (primarily based on the availability of social services) and the other comprises people who refuse any assistance and are relying solely upon themselves for survival.

In this context, there can be a debate about specific forms, in other words survival strategies employed by homeless people for them to ensure they have what is essentially needed to live. Therefore, a regular and daily system associated with feeding themselves and acquiring resources for daily survival, with these individuals focusing mainly on surviving from day to day with no long-term prospects.

Vágnerová, Csémy and Marek (2013) mention different findings from research conducted abroad exploring strategies for surviving on the street the homeless use to meet their immediate needs. These research findings indicate that such needs are met through small jobs, illegal work, stealing, crime, begging and even prostitution, means to which primarily younger homeless people suffering from drug addiction turn (Cloke, Milbourne, Widdowfield, 2002).

Substance abuse may also be a strategy for survival on the street, along with escaping from reality. Thus, acquisition and maintenance of resources are usually accompanied by alternative forms, too. Although some members of the public still believe the homeless to have alone put themselves in their plight due to distorted perspectives of them as asocial (without ever searching out different characteristics among them, in conjunction with their attitude, conduct and behavior toward themselves and the community), it should be noted here that many people are working and also searching for jobs and seeking to earn an income, despite their difficult life situation.

However, finding long-term employment is extremely difficult because of a lack of permanent housing (including a room designated for privacy, peace and relaxation), where the exclusion of such people from the labor market can be subsequently attributed significantly to the absence of such a place.

Another major problem is abuse of this target group from employers by offering only low-paid positions and providing no existing written contract. This unfavorable situation in which the homeless find themselves often forces them to work with no valid employment contract and without any previously agreed remuneration for work done (Marek, Strnad, Hotovcová, 2012).

¹ In view of the inability to apply a general definition of homelessness, Busch-Geertsema (2010) attempts to define it by utilizing and applying the ETHOS typology¹, such as FEANTSA (European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless) presents it over a long-term horizon.

2 Objective and methodology

This study incorporates findings from our dissertation examining the tools and strategies used by the homeless to survive. With this in mind, we chose a qualitative type of research carried out over a longer period of time stretching from September 2016 to January 2017 in the Trenčín Self-governing Region, in addition to contact work with a target group of homeless people. The research group consisted of 15 deliberately-chosen respondents, nine men and six women, ranging in age from 17 to 62 years. As they were chosen deliberately, we also sought to assign the respondents into two groups, one utilizing a range of social services and the other rejecting any effort to seek out available social services.

Research was carried out with observations and semi-structured interviews either at individual social services facilities (a total of eight respondents of which six were men and two were women) or in their natural environment (a total of seven respondents consisting of three men and four women). In order for the data to be objective, all the respondents were familiarized with the aim and mission behind the research, and all of the respondents gave their consent to be part of it.

Our research enabled us to select six separate categories for us to explore, with the focus on identifying strategies for surviving on the street. Based on their circumstances, we examined and analyzed how they had become homeless, subjectively assessing their current situation from the perspective of the respondents themselves, the most ambitious changes they had made in their lives, the shelters they routinely preferred and how they earned money (to satisfy essential needs) as well as the respondents' attitude toward exploiting the range of social services available and existing in Trenčín Region.

3 Results and Interpretations

The first category involved an exploration of what led these people to become homeless. Family and partner problems are among the major factors driving homelessness, something several of the respondents confirmed in their statements.

Respondent 1 mentioned a brother living in the street because both their parents had died within a year along with their grandmother with whom they had lived, while Respondent 2 said, *"I hadn't gotten along well with my father...and I ended up homeless because I had a business and lost all my money. My father had access to the account and he emptied it."* Respondent 3 told about living in an apartment with her ex-husband, who was a junkie. *"He was smoking meth, and he kicked and beat me while I was pregnant"*, while Respondent 8 mentioned about breaking up with her partner after they had a fight and leaving the place where they had lived. It could be argued that the other respondents had also experienced dysfunctional family relationships, with Respondent 15 running away from home at 16 because he could no longer manage it, Respondent 12 working for several years until he was jailed and then on the streets as soon as he was released, or Respondent 14's husband no longer wanting her to live together with him and their two children after their divorce, *"...and so I had to go away."*

On the other hand, Respondent 6 never felt herself homeless after leaving the place where she had lived following the breakdown of her relationship, saying: *"I was not living in the street, but staying with an acquaintance."* Respondent 4 confirmed the theoretical concepts presenting the difficulties of reintegrating into society, explaining that after he was released from a sentence he was serving in prison, he had no idea where to go. Respondent 5 described alcohol and other addictions: *"I'm gambling and my partner is, too... and there's a judgment being enforced against him, too."*, while Respondent 10 talked about being treated by a psychiatrist for drug dependence. Respondent 11 mentioned growing up in an orphanage until he became an adult. Upon attaining majority age, he returned to his biological mother's apartment, but adverse family relationships took their toll when his mother threw him out on the street after a fight

where he had destroyed furniture. Economic problems could be another cause of homelessness, as was recalled by Respondent 9: *"...we had a nice apartment, but then the debts piled up and we didn't know how to repay them all."* and by Respondent 13, who lost the apartment he shared with his parents due to fraud, forcing them to live on the street. *"We've struggled through several institutions and cities."*

The next category involved a discussion of the respondents' attitude toward their current plight.

In this respect, two meaningful values could be noted that stood in contrast to each other. Half of the replies indicated an attitude of not having resigned themselves to their fate, such as Respondent 1, who said: *"I am not homeless as having no home...I'm trying to make a difference and stand on my own two feet."* Respondent 2 said the same thing in other words: *"I'm going my own way. Whoever wants to work will find a job."* and Respondent 3 saw herself as strong, pointing out, *"I've survived everything, even living on the street pregnant."* Other views included the concise opinion provided by Respondent 6, who mentioned other people living worse off, and Respondent 10, who said that he was wanted to put the pieces back together and afterward start living a normal life. Attention should be paid here to the assertion by Respondent 14 assertion of having everything she needs and Respondent 15's belief in overcoming her current condition: *"I'm turning over a new leaf where I don't have to obey and accept anyone."*

On the other hand, negative perceptions were presented by Respondent 4, who commented on his current predicament by saying, *"It depresses me...if I didn't believe in myself so strongly, I wouldn't know what to do."* Other respondents took a similar attitude, such as Respondent 5, who talked about her situation being nothing to boast about or envy, or Respondent 7 saying it made no difference to him, or Respondent 9 who expressed herself in the sense of *"I'm unhappy and it's all getting on my nerves."* Other respondents likewise felt indifferent or apathetic, with Respondent 11 commenting: *"I feel alone, abandoned, I have no one close next to me... so I don't care if I screw up."*, Respondent 8 admitting: *"I suffered a miscarriage...found myself a new partner...both of us are doing drugs."*, and Respondent 12's wry, ironic expression of his own predicament: *"Sweet, isn't it!"*

Next we concentrated on examining the respondents' subjective visions and what they would most want to change in their lives. The most pronounced desire encountered as a key factor for leading a dignified life was to acquire their own place to live.

Statements fell determinably in line with the opinions expressed by Respondent 1, who said, *"work's important...if some housing could be found that would allow it."* and Respondent 4's comment of *"I would like to live normally and have my own privacy."* A similar vision came from Respondent 5, who mentioned that her brother had rented a flat where they would like to go. Respondent 2 gave this assessment: *"Maybe everything will change and I'd be finally able to resolve everything."*, while Respondent 3 also considered the need to tackle personal matters as paramount, talking about problems with her former partner, *"She'd tried already to take it up with the police."*

Zero prospects and no ambitions were evident in the attitudes expressed by Respondent 6 on any possible changes, *"I'm not interested and I have no idea where I could even go."* and Respondent 7 talking about being unable to visualize any possible future, and also in the opinions given by Respondent 9 in connection with any opportunity to acquire her own housing, where she believed that it would accomplish nothing, and by Respondent 11, who saw no reason to look far ahead into the future: *"I don't think I'm going to be here long. I'm tired of life because it's completely empty."*

The opposite position was presented by Respondent 15, whose current lifestyle could be described as currently getting by.

"What comes next doesn't concern me." Respondent 8 put her partner's needs in the forefront when she pointed out, "I would've liked to live normally and have children." Other visions were presented in Respondent 12's thoughts touching upon debt relief: "If I could just get rid of all my debts and enforced judgments." and other priorities mentioned by Respondent 14, "To have my daughters live better than I do." and Respondent 13, thinking about starting again from scratch and returning to the town where he had previously lived, justifying it by saying, "I was routinely considering to buy a tent and go back there again as I would certainly get work."

The next category examined how the respondents are able to raise money to meet their essential needs.

Several respondents highlighted the benefits of having a job, such as Respondent 1 who was working to earn money, "...unlike others who are merely scrounging off the state." and Respondent 3 who claimed, "If I want to live decently, I have to work." Respondent 8 also characterized a job as critical, saying "We'd always managed to earn enough to live in an apartment or hotel.", while Respondent 11 talked about earning money from temporary work or getting it from someone. Respondent 15 concurred, "My income is what I earn somewhere temping or what I'm finding with others and I'm selling, picking up and such." But only Respondent 14 admitted not having enough, as she is only collecting a disability pension and has income from her partner. Neither Respondent 6, who was receiving emergency welfare benefits, nor Respondent 7 ever felt any material deprivation, with the latter saying, "there are lot of things sometimes found even in containers." An interesting view was presented by Respondent 2: "I've always been able to take care of myself because nothing scares me, not even death. If you've got nothing to lose, then there's nothing to be afraid of..." But the opposite opinion was also evident in replies given by several respondents, such as Respondent 4: "The emergency welfare benefits I receive are not enough...at least my girlfriend helps me when I need something, mainly with food.", or Respondents 10 and 13 both living on social benefits, or the answer provided by Respondent 12 who has been regularly going to work, and yet "little money remains from my pay after maintenance and garnishments." Respondent 5 also confirmed that she did not have enough funds, relying on just her partners' incomes, as did Respondent 9 receiving an old-age pension, "To survive, we'd need at least a thousand euros with my son in order for us to live decently."

In terms of everyday shelter, Respondents 6 and 14 both said that they had been staying for some time with friends. Respondents 1, 4, 5, 11 and 12 were spending nights in shelters social services provide. Shelters provided by social services were used by Respondents 2, 3 and 13. Respondent 7 replied that he was living in public spaces, sleeping in the woods or anywhere else he could find. Respondents 8 and 10 were living in a little cabin, while Respondent 9 described her catastrophic situation as "living under the trees in a neighborhood of prefabricated panel houses... where else can I go?" Respondent 15 described his situation as "I'm squatting - I'm not going to spend the night in a shelter or any other facility."

Regarding present or past use of social services, the respondents tended mainly to have used primarily low-threshold social services (night shelters and low-threshold day centers). Respondent 1 pointed out that he was spending nights in a shelter for the second time, as was Respondent 12, while Respondent 10 mentioned the same experience with the social service as did Respondent 11, saying that he had been spending nights in a shelter. Respondent 4 and 5 saw shelters as the only available possibility in light of their unfavorable situation, while Respondent 4 claimed that she had been staying in one ever since she had the ability to do so and Respondent 5 saying "that I started going to shelters when there was no longer any other options available." Regular visits to a low-threshold day center were also confirmed by Respondent 15, saying, "I go there were friends... I can take the time to relax and talk with the other people there". Respondent 2 was staying in a shelter, noting,

"This isn't the first time I've been living on the street and I'd already been in shelters in Prague." as was Respondent 3, who said that it was the first time she had been in one. Respondent 8 said that she only used social services when either she wanted to change syringes or was looking for work, while Respondent 13 also confirmed his experiences with a range of social services, commenting that "we had bounced between several facilities." On the other hand, Respondent 6 was opposed to the social services that are provided, pointing out "I've always had somewhere to live." Such opposition was also reflected in statements by Respondent 9: "I would never go there, I wouldn't think of it.", by Respondent 14: "I never had any interest in seeking help from social services, I always knew how to take care of myself." and by Respondent 7, who took the same view of never seeing himself utilizing the existing social services.

4 Discussion

In light of what was told to us, there is no general and universal scheme in the case of the homeless to describe how homelessness originates. Homelessness is often enough influenced by not only a single factor, but in many cases practically due to the interconnection and interaction of subjective and objective factors. In the case of homelessness, it can be mentioned as a multifaceted phenomenon affecting all dimensions of an individual's life, including further behavior and actions taken against both inside themselves and against their social environment.

In terms of reviewing how the respondents evaluated their current precarious existences, visible contrasts in thinking were encountered, identifying significant heterogeneous elements in their perceptions of homelessness as a sociopathological phenomenon. There were respondents that felt determined and motivated to lead their lives, while others looked apathetic or even frustrated with life, which was not solely due to being homeless, but reflected other problems they could not control and were unable to solve. In this context, it was simultaneously possible to note efforts among the homeless with a true concern in seeking to resolve their problems, including social reintegration, and also those people whose indifference and total disinterest in their lives was present, to differentiate themselves.

In examining the category covering a subjective vision of the future, the ambition most commonly encountered was to become independent and acquire their own housing, a primary and essential factor for survival with a decent lifestyle alongside the importance or tackling their own personal problems, which is the basis for a renewed social restart.

The respondents were able to earn enough money to survive mainly through work, something they mentioned in interviews which came from either long-term or short-term activities, although some were receiving emergency welfare benefits. Here two respondents were receiving old-age/disability pensions and all of them were economically active, yet despite this, a contrast in thinking could be also perceived among the homeless people regarding the significance of working (and the benefits derived from it) and among the people who were only resigned to receiving emergency benefits and often unable to provide for their own essential needs. In this context, the existence of so-called "alternative sources" of income can be highlighted, characterized as one possible strategy for homeless people to survive.

When examining the answers provided by the respondents, it was further seen that the vast majority of them were currently using the existing and available portfolio of social services. According to Dávideková (2017), social services can be identified as an important tool of social policy, which serves to solve, prevent or eliminate the unfavorable social situation. The reasons for utilizing them by respondents consisted of securing some form of accommodation, alongside using them as a way to spend idle time and contacting other people. On the other hand, there were a number of reasons encountered for strictly refusing any assistance (pride, shame, concern about taking care only of

themselves) from either public or private social services providers and relying exclusively on their own capabilities and capacities for surviving without a home.

In terms of securing accommodation every day, what prevailed among those respondents utilizing the full range of social services was that they were spending nights in shelters of a low-threshold nature or in other types of shelters provided by social services. On the other hand, those respondents not utilizing the existing range of social services preferred primarily to look for temporary shelter in open areas, mainly public spaces in cities with no increased concentration of people (either gardens or recreational facilities).

5 Conclusion

Homelessness can be described as a modern and ever-deepening social phenomenon. In this respect, it is important to clarify that no one ever expressed a free choice to be homeless, but rather it was often the consequence of several interacting factors. Homeless people represent a specific subculture within modern society whose characteristic expressions are of how they conduct themselves and behave. No one is going to claim in this respect that homelessness is the most significant challenge faced in terms of social policy, but there do exist specific, structural weaknesses in the direction society is heading.

Likewise, we advocate the necessity for society to acquire objective and unbiased information about the causes, expressions and consequences of homelessness. Survival strategies may also provide more opportunities and tools for homeless people to survive, regardless of whether they became homeless through their own fault or in connection with other aspects of losing their homes.

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