

## HOMELESSNESS AND ITS PERCEPTION BY SOCIETY

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**Abstract:** As a sociopathological phenomenon, homelessness has far deeper significance than it might seem at first glance, where the loss of one's own home becomes not only the loss of material values, but also non-material ones. In conditions within Slovakia, an ongoing insufficient examination of the homelessness issue can be witnessed whose results are reflected in practice not only in frequent distortion by the housed majority of information about homelessness, but also in the inability to find a comprehensive and lasting solution to it. This paper consists of both a theoretical and empirical part. While the theoretical part consists of basic theoretical reflections concerning homelessness, as an extreme form of social exclusion, the empirical part focuses on exploring the perception of homelessness and its various aspects from the point of view of the majority who have housing.

**Keywords:** Homelessness, Home, Social exclusion, Perception of Homelessness, Society.

### 1 Introduction

Nowadays, homelessness represents an extremely active and serious sociopathological phenomenon characterized by its far-reaching consequences not only for the lives of individuals who suffer from the loss of housing, but also for all of society (Tvrdoň, Kasanová, 2004).

In conditions observed in Slovakia and other countries in the former *Eastern Bloc*, the homelessness issue was brought to attention especially after 1989, when a transformation of society occurred in these countries. Considering that homelessness has still not been sufficiently mapped out and supported by research findings, it may be nevertheless considered a modern social phenomenon in Slovakia.

The consequences of this situation may be reflected in frequent misunderstandings about homelessness by the majority that have housing, or the inability to take a decisive position on this issue due to minimum, and very often only distorted information about homeless people.

### 2 Homelessness and the attempt to terminologically define it

In considering homelessness as an extreme expression of social exclusion, it is necessary first to define the concept of social exclusion itself. It includes, in a wider context, several dimensions of exclusion (Berafe, 2017) which can therefore affect the economic, social, political, community, individual, group or spatial dimension (Gerbery, Džambazovič, 2005).

Concerning the rise of homelessness, no one can specify a singular, universal and generally true cause of homelessness since this phenomenon is affected by several factors of both an objective and subjective nature. In practice, however, these may often enough be interconnected (Turnbull, Muclke, Masters, 2007).

Chronic homelessness can also be described as a syndrome of comprehensive social failure, combined simultaneously with the person's inability to cope with conventional social requirements. In this respect, homelessness is not exclusively associated with the space intended for everyday dwelling, but is mostly intangible in nature (sense of safety, security,...) (Vágnerová, Csémy, Marek, 2013).

Within such a context, it is very difficult to map the actual number of homeless people because they include not only people who have clearly and openly declared their social status, but also a group of hidden or potentially homeless people living either in substandard or poor housing conditions. Two different thoughts have emerged in society about what is causing the rise in homelessness. While the first opinion suggests structural weaknesses within society, which no one individual can

influence, the second view argues that homelessness is strictly a failure by individuals observed in various aspects of his or her life (level of education, employment, health, etc.) (Lux, Mikeszová, 2013).

When it comes to public space, the life of a homeless person is fraught with many risks and threats which non-homeless people do not normally encounter. Concurrently, homelessness is closely associated with increased health problems affecting not just physical health, but also mental health, too (Schranzer, Dominiguez, ShROUT, Caton, 2007).

Homeless people often "*escape*" their mental illnesses through various addictive substances. In this connection, it could even be said that the homeless include those who are injecting drugs into their bodies. However, the administration of drugs by injection is fraught with extremely serious risks, accompanied by the risk of HIV and Hepatitis C transmission which threatens not only the individual's own health, but also public health (Linton, Celentano, Kirk, Mehta, 2013).

Since the fall of Communism, homelessness has become a new social phenomenon in Central and Eastern Europe (Hradecký, 2008).

Yet the transformation of social conditions in these countries has not just caused the onset of homelessness, but also other sociopathological phenomena directly or indirectly related thereto (poverty, government housing policies, unemployment, etc.) (Haburajová-Ilavská et al., 2015).

Nowadays, there are two possible solutions to the issue of homelessness. One method consists of a gradual, "staircase" model of existing social services, starting with those of a low-threshold nature, and culminating with the homeless person becoming independent with his or her own housing. However, this model has been shown in a number of European Union member states as hardly effective (Marek, Strnad, Hotovcová, 2012).

The other solution model whose approach has received attention is Housing First, which has become part of the adopted strategy to tackle the situation of homeless people in several countries, providing social and affordable housing to minimize long-term homelessness in society (Pleace et al., 2015).

Housing First motivates people who would normally not be able to obtain their own housing by maintaining affordable housing, while also providing them with other material and non-material benefits (Habánik, 2016).

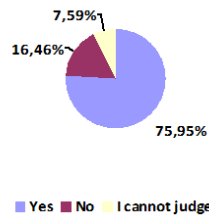
### 3 Objective and methodology

Based on the theoretical part and as part of this paper, we decided to continue quantitative research with a questionnaire covering the period from March 1 to June 15, 2017 in Trenčín, Slovakia, a city which has a low-threshold day center providing social services for homeless people. The overall response rate reached 79%.

The sample consisted of 158 respondents living in the wider environment around the low-threshold day center who anonymously replied to a set of questions. This paper aims to identify the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents toward the homeless utilizing a range of social services in the closer social environment of those participating in the survey.

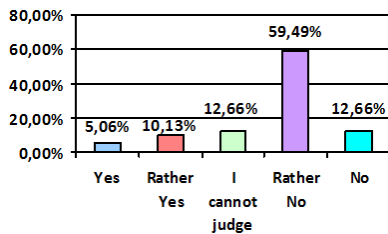
4 Results

Figure 1 : Do you consider homelessness to be a significant and current social problem?



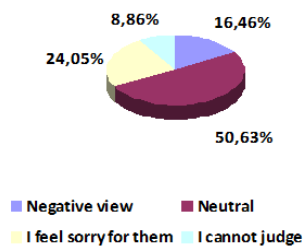
Regarding their perception of homelessness, 120 respondents considered it to be an extremely current and visible social problem. On the other hand, 26 respondents did not perceive homelessness as a major social phenomenon, while 12 respondents were either unable to comment on the issue or did not have an opinion.

Figure 2: Do you believe that society is paying sufficient attention to the issue of homelessness?



It can be concluded from an analysis of the responses that an overwhelming number of respondents (114) feel that society does not pay sufficient attention to homelessness. On the other hand, only 24 respondents were of the opinion that today's society is giving the issue proper and sufficient attention, while 20 respondents were unable to express any opinion about the issue or take a position.

Figure 3: What is your personal opinion of homeless people?



We encountered very interesting opinions when examining subjective views by respondents about the homeless. The most common response seen was a neutral attitude regarding these people (80 respondents), followed by feelings of pity (38 respondents). Negative opinions towards the homeless and homelessness were expressed by a total of 26 respondents, while 14 respondents had nothing to say about the issue.

Figure 4: Do you believe that the homeless are themselves responsible for homelessness?

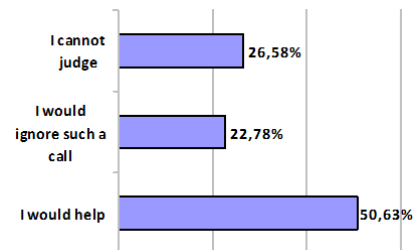


In examining responsibility for homelessness, 52 respondents were convinced that individual responsibility could be found for the rise of homelessness, while only 20 respondents believed that other factors were in the forefront. Something quite interesting was the option of "other answer", which 86 respondents entered and is consistent with the inability seen to generalize all homeless people and the cause for the rise in homelessness, while it demonstrates, on the other hand, the necessity of taking an individual approach toward each person when investigating homelessness.

Table 1: What do you think is the most common cause of the rise in homelessness?

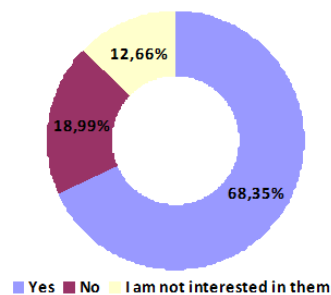
No willingness or interest in working	13.58%
Breakdown in family or partner relationships	19.20%
Loss of shelter	18.74%
Departure of minors from children's homes	6.09%
Incapacity to integrate into society after being released from custodial sentences	10.30%
Mental issues	21.08%
Voluntary decision	6.09%
Cannot judge	3.04%
Other answer	1.87%

Figure 5: How would you respond if a homeless person asked you for help?



In this respect, a heterogeneity in opinion can be seen. While more than half of the respondents (80 persons) declared their concern and willingness to provide assistance when asked by a homeless person, 36 respondents would ignore and refuse to respond to such a call for help. A very interesting finding was the large number of respondents (42) failing to state an opinion; whether it was a positive or a negative attitude on their part toward the issue.

Figure 6: Have you ever in some way helped someone who was homeless?



Following up on the previous question, we were still concerned about whether respondents sometimes provided assistance in some way to homeless people. To this question, the highest number, 108 respondents, said that they had provided some kind of assistance, while the exact opposite answer was given by 30

respondents and the remaining 20 respondents expressed the opinion that they had no interest in this target group.

## 5 Discussion

The quantitative research demonstrated by us shows that most respondents perceive homelessness as a current and significant social issue to which society has not given enough attention. The dominant view expressed argues that homeless people do not themselves contribute exclusively to the loss of housing, with the presence of other reasons leading to the rise of homelessness. We also consider a major conviction among respondents not to morally condemn the homeless, with most respondents taking a neutral position or pitying people without homes. This view was confirmed by the fact that most of the respondents have helped the homeless in some way, or would not refuse such a call from someone living on the street.

## 6 Conclusion

Homelessness can be characterized as a multi-faceted sociopathological phenomenon that is influenced by several factors and causes. In this context, no universal and unified scheme of homelessness can be stated, and as a result it is essential to prefer individual treatment for people who are homeless. The results from a quantitative survey show the public not to perceive homelessness negatively, although in order to obtain a better understanding of homelessness, it is necessary for further research to be carried out to find and address it in society also in future.

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