



Addressing homelessness with evidence-based policy in Slovakia

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In the autumn of 2016, the first thorough census of homeless people was conducted in Bratislava, the capital city of Slovakia. The detailed data it collected have been fed into the preparation (by the municipality of Bratislava and relevant stakeholders) of a strategic and evidence-based approach at local level. This, in turn, has encouraged the preparation of a national strategy involving all relevant stakeholders.

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Description

Homeless people are among the most vulnerable categories; they suffer from both extreme forms of deprivation and limited access to social protection, public services and other public policy interventions (Ondrušová et al., 2015). Previous efforts to address homelessness in Slovakia have been hampered by a lack of knowledge as to the size and composition of this population. This situation has undermined the preparation of long-needed strategic documents to satisfactorily address the homelessness issue at national and local level.

The first estimates of the extent of homelessness in Slovakia were produced by the Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic, based on the 2011 Population and Housing Census. In line with Commission Regulation (EU) No.519/2010, this census also collected some basic information about homelessness. According to the census, in 2011 there were 23,483 homeless people in Slovakia, i.e. around 0.4% of the total population. Very little attention was paid to these findings, which did not feed into public discussions or attempts to elaborate strategic approaches to tackle homelessness. In addition, the number calculated on the basis of the census refers only to “secondary homelessness” (Ondrušová et al., 2015), i.e. persons living in long-term, transitional shelters or similar arrangements and persons with no place of usual residence who move frequently between various types of poor accommodation (Baptista et al., 2012: 14). Thus, the core categories of

homeless – persons living rough or staying in night shelters – were not included.

In the autumn of 2016, largely as a result of pressure from those involved in the provision of services to the homeless, the municipality of Bratislava and the Institute for Labour and Family Research conducted the first census of homeless people in Bratislava, including both primary and secondary homelessness (Ondrušová et al., 2016). The aim of this census was to assess the number and main socio-demographic characteristics of the homeless in the city. It involved the participation of all relevant stakeholders, including local district authorities, NGOs, social workers, healthcare service workers and volunteers. The definition of homelessness that was used followed the ETHOS classification (FEANTSA, 2006), covering homeless people living rough, in overnight shelters, homeless hostels, temporary and other transitional accommodation as well as penal or medical institutions. The census was accompanied by a survey on the living conditions of homeless people.

The census shows that there were 2,064 homeless people in Bratislava (representing 0.5% of all inhabitants of Bratislava) in the autumn of 2016, including 284 children (92% of them in temporary accommodation). In terms of the ETHOS classification, people in accommodation for the homeless (ETHOS category 3) and people living rough (ETHOS category 1) were the

most frequently present groups among the homeless. Men (65%), persons aged 25–49 (36%) and persons living alone (40%) were over-represented among them. Bratislava attracts people from the whole country: 36% of homeless people came from outside Bratislava. Half of the homeless people suffered from long-term health problems, with women being more frequently at risk. These findings have provided solid empirical basis for an evidence-based policy action plan on preventing and tackling homelessness, which is currently being prepared. This local action plan is expected to define the main areas of intervention, the forms these interventions take, the basic principles of the cooperation between the municipality and other stakeholders, as well as the funding and sustainability of these activities.

This local-level initiative has led to a commitment by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family to begin drafting a national strategy for preventing and tackling homelessness. A Task-Force was set up at the beginning of 2017, consisting of representatives of relevant public authorities and of actors involved in help to homeless people. Outputs of the drafting process are expected to be discussed with representatives of the homeless population. The national strategy should propose an integrated approach to preventing and tackling homelessness, together with a division of responsibilities and competences, a model of sustainable funding to implement the strategy, and a series of concrete steps in the forthcoming national action plan.

So, the mobilisation of NGOs has contributed significantly to the successful implementation of the census of homeless people in Bratislava. The latter has led to the preparation (jointly by the municipality of Bratislava and relevant stakeholders) of a strategic and evidence-based approach at local level, which, in turn, has encouraged the

preparation of a national strategy involving all relevant stakeholders.

Outlook & commentary

The lack of an integrated, strategic approach to homelessness is one of the main problems faced by the providers of services in Slovakia (Ondrušová et al., 2015). The homeless census in Bratislava has provided an empirical basis for such an approach, offering evidence on the incidence and composition of homelessness in Bratislava.

Successful preparation of the strategic documents and their future implementation, both at the local (Bratislava) and national level, depends on several factors. First, various stakeholders will have to reconcile the different opinions they have in almost all areas. This will not be easy and will require compromises, because preventing and tackling homelessness is a complex task, which can involve a broad range of different solutions. For example, there can be disputes between the proponents of the “staircase model” (homeless people are offered first shelter services and then a range of transitional housing options up until a permanent home) and the “housing first” approach (which gives priority to the direct provision of own housing). The choice of the main approach is a crucial one. It has consequences for the funding, architecture of other social services etc.

Secondly, it will be important for all the members of the Task-Force to participate actively in the discussions. This requires the capacity to draft text and comment on submitted proposals. This also puts an additional burden on the NGOs, which are already struggling with limited human and financial resources.

Thirdly, empirical evidence is required on the size and composition of the homeless population in other cities and districts. It is encouraging that the census in Bratislava is widely

viewed as a good practice that could be used by other municipalities and local authorities in charge. This provides hope that it will lay the foundations for empirical-based policies in this area addressing the multi-dimensional aspects of homelessness across Slovakia.

Fourthly, in order to ensure ownership and commitment, it will be crucial to involve from the very beginning all relevant stakeholders (see above) in the implementation of the future national strategy for preventing and tackling homelessness.

Further reading

Baptista, I., Benjaminsen, L., Pleace, N. and Busch-Geertsema, V. (2012): Counting Homeless People in the 2011 Housing and Population Census. European Observatory on Homelessness: Brussels.

FEANTSA (2006): European Typology on Homelessness and housing exclusion - Taking stock. Available at: <http://www.feantsa.org/en/toolkit/2005/04/01/ethos-typology-on-homelessness-and-housing-exclusion>

Ondrušová, D., Gerbery, D., Fico, M., Filadelfiová, J., Grandtnerová, L. and Lorenc, I. (2015): Ľudia bez domova: príprava empirického výskumu, analýza nástrojov prevencie a riešenie bezdomovectva [Homeless people: preparation of empirical survey, analysis of prevention and policy solutions]. Institute for Labour and Family Research: Bratislava.

Ondrušová, D., Gerbery, D., Fico, M., Filadelfiová, J. and Csomor, G. (2016): Záverečná správa z výskumu a sčítania ľudí bez domova na území mesta Bratislavy v roku 2016 [Census and survey on homeless people in Bratislava in 2016. Final Report]. Institute for Labour and Family Research: Bratislava.

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