
Homelessness in Estonia: Overview and Analysis

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› **Abstract** *Whenever there is a discussion on the topic of homelessness in the Baltics, perspectives and angles are varied and appear to present a conundrum. During Soviet times, there was apparently little homelessness; people had jobs and everyone had some means of survival, yet the freedom to choose and make progress was missing during this time of repression, and the standard of living was very low for most Estonians. In contrast, since freedom came to Estonia in 1991, homelessness has become a social problem and organizations have sprung up to mitigate this problem. While the standard of living in Estonia is, at times, held up as a model for Europe, especially during the Euro crisis, economic hardships have been among the causes of homelessness, along with other social issues such as alcoholism. This article reviews existing data and presents anecdotal evidence about homelessness in Estonia during Soviet times and in the transition period, and looks at its current status. Included are interviews with personnel who work with homeless people, with four sample organizations represented. Some research studies are also referenced.*

› **Keywords** *Baltics, Estonia, homelessness, Soviet, transition, social services*

Introduction

Estonia, the smallest of the three Baltic nations and approximately the same size as Switzerland, Denmark and the Netherlands, has existed since approximately 9000 BC, according to evidence found of communities existing in Northern Estonia. Its long history of occupation by many peoples and countries, first by the Teutonic Knights then by Sweden and finally Russia in 1721, accounts for its varied cultural characteristics, evident in societal and cultural characteristics such as literature and food. It was proclaimed an independent republic in 1918 but was annexed by the USSR in 1940 as a constituent republic, the Estonian SSR. Germany invaded in 1941 and the repression of Estonians' rights continued during this time. In the autumn of 1944 the Soviet armies returned, deportations continued and almost all remaining rural households were collectivised. A significant decline in population due to the effects of war, deportations and occupation occurred during World War II, with casualties estimated to be a quarter of the population. With the break-up of the Soviet Union, Estonia regained its independence in 1991. An article published in 2006 in *The European Journal of Housing Policy* provided a primary examination of homelessness at that time in Estonia, and reflected a growing interest in this area of social dysfunction. Because it was an academic, post-occupation effort at quantifying, explaining and suggesting solutions, the 2006 article expounded on the definition of homelessness, using theoretical definitions and research results from a rather wide range of European literature.

According to the website of the *European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless*, FEANTSA, the development of a European Typology of Homelessness and housing exclusion (ETHOS), launched in 2005, provided a common language for discussion on homelessness. As the website states: "Homelessness is perceived and tackled differently according to the country. ETHOS was developed through a review of existing definitions of homelessness and the realities of homelessness which service providers are faced with on a daily basis. ETHOS categories therefore attempt to cover all living situations which amount to forms of homelessness across Europe:

- rooflessness (without a shelter of any kind, sleeping rough)
- houselessness (with a place to sleep but temporary in institutions or shelter)
- living in insecure housing (threatened with severe exclusion due to insecure tenancies, eviction, domestic violence)
- living in inadequate housing (in caravans on illegal campsites, in unfit housing, in extreme overcrowding).

The ETHOS approach confirms that homelessness is a process (rather than a static phenomenon) that affects many vulnerable households at different points in their lives.” (FEANTSA [on-line]).

The current article is the result of research carried out in 2014. Interviews conducted for this article reflected the ETHOS approach, and the interventions described by the interviewees covered the four points listed in the above definition. Another valuable aspect of the 2006 article was its attention to the economic and psychological causes of homelessness, and the fact that it offered preliminary solutions. In 2014, many of these solutions have been implemented, reflecting the validity of the 2006 suggestions.

A major difference between the 2006 article and this article – in addition to the eight years between their publication – is that the 2006 research used the city of Tartu as its base, whereas this article investigates the status of and reasons for homelessness in the capital city and one other smaller city, focusing on how homelessness is handled and remedied. Even today Tallinn, as the capital city, has more funds to develop and implement services than Tartu. In addition, many people who are unemployed migrate to Tallinn from all over Estonia in the hopes of finding work in a larger city – a city that is also the seat of the country’s government. Homelessness in Tartu can thus be considered quite different from homelessness in Tallinn.

Another difference is that the 2006 article presented minimal information about homelessness or its equivalent during Soviet times, whereas this article includes an excellent research study and report that analyzes the homelessness situation under Communism quite thoroughly and lays the groundwork for our exposition of what occurred in the interim period between the decline and fall of Communism and today’s action and activities in alleviating and remedying homelessness.

It is also perhaps significant that the 2006 article states that the list of services for homeless people is short. It is commendable that some of the 2006 suggestions, such as the development of dormitory-like dwellings designed to assist homeless people, have actually been carried out and are reported on in this article.

Although the 2006 article and the article in this volume are written eight years apart, the articles complement each other, the first laying the scientific groundwork on which to build this analysis of homelessness in 2014. The purpose of this article is to focus on Estonian societal conditions, particularly homelessness, during the Soviet occupation and post-occupation years – the years of freedom, which officially began on August 20, 1991. Since Estonia was annexed and not part of the war victory of Soviet Russia, many choose to consider 1918 as the founding date of the Republic of Estonia, although that view did not mitigate or ameliorate the effect of Sovietization from 1940 until 1991, during which time the formerly existing

social structure was destroyed. Prior to the establishment of Estonia as a Republic in 1918, little is recorded about the societal problems that may have existed. The focus was on occupation by other nations, the development of nationalism in the 1900s, and cultural and economic changes.

Parameters and Limitations of the Study

This article depends on various sources that it was possible to accumulate in recent months, including research reports, factual presentations by experts in the field, and personal interviews, both with individuals who presently work with homeless people or homeless causes and with those who lived through Soviet times and are currently engaged in societal issues and/or nongovernmental organizations. These individuals include one of the author's relatives and current leaders in the NGO sector.

The article does not aim to quantify or provide a full examination of the social welfare system of the Soviet era. Rather, a minimal amount of information is included to provide perspective on the transition period and the current status of homelessness, as well as factors that shaped attitudes and actions during the last three-quarters of a century or so.

In addition to analysis of available documents – published or presented in conferences or meetings – interviews were conducted with three sample organizations that work with homeless people, one supporting organization (a food bank) and the Social Ministry of the Estonian government. Because the majority of homeless people are in the capital city, Tallinn, the major focus of the article is on conditions and resources in that area. It would be desirable for future interviews and research studies to expand into rural Estonia and small towns or villages, and to include contact with homeless people themselves as well as with government officials (besides the Social Ministry represented below).

Homelessness in Soviet Times

As the Soviet occupation took hold and became entrenched, social welfare was merely a system of social allowances and subsidies, governed by Soviet rules and regulations. Local social welfare was abolished and the State became responsible for social welfare in all of Estonia. Local authorities were required to implement the guidelines and had no voice in adapting or modifying these according to local needs. According to a document published in 1997 by the Tallinna Pedagoogikaülikool (Tallinn Pedagogical University) which examined Estonian welfare during the Soviet times and during the transition, the Social Insurance Ministry of the ESSR functioned from 1946 until 1979 and focused on training, employment and welfare for

veterans, people with disabilities, retirees and families of fallen soldiers (Tulva, 1997). By 1948 there were 35 social care institutions, which included orphanages and facilities for the elderly and disabled. Although these facilities existed, social welfare was mostly a system for delivering State pensions and allowances. The basic elements of the social security system were wholesale consumer price subsidies, guaranteed jobs, pensions and sick leave, child benefits, the services necessary to raise a child, and free healthcare and education (Tulva, 1997). While these elements seem laudatory and exemplary, they need to be couched in the reality of the times – deportations and war casualties depleted the population considerably; the immigration of Russians, who were imported to work in factories and businesses, swelled the population but also resulted in a stratified society in which Russians received many privileges and benefits denied to Estonians; the collectivisation of rural populations and farms along with some industries such as ship-building forced Estonians to work in situations and places that may not have been of their choosing; and many of society's perceived misfits, such as people with disabilities, were warehoused. As a result, homelessness was not a public situation or problem because of the allowances, subsidies, forced employment and homes for those who didn't fit the idealistic image of the Soviet ideology.

As summarized by Taimi Tulva (1997), the main parameters of the Soviet social welfare system included the following. First, social problems were frequently ignored or concealed from public scrutiny and this had an effect on public opinion and attitudes. According to those individuals who lived through and survived the Soviet era, it was a case of 'out of sight, out of mind', and in the struggle to make a living and a life during these times, social problems were simply ignored or even forgotten until freedom brought them to the forefront, with accompanying action needed to improve these social conditions. Second, local needs were ignored because all services were centralised, both due to control factors endemic in Soviet society and because of the concept of egalitarianism that prevailed within Soviet ideology. Third, the workplace administered redistribution of resources, and at times this protocol included the handing out of privileges to those in favour at the time. Finally, in spite of the theory of egalitarianism, which was part of the Soviet system, redistribution favoured those who played an active part in the idealization of the Soviet life, such as veterans, political leaders, trade union leaders and heroes.

The matter of homelessness during Soviet times was summarized by Evi Jeesser, a social worker who was born in Siberia during the Soviet era: "Social work was not valued during the Soviet times. There wasn't unemployment at that time because image was important and systems existed that made sure there wouldn't be homelessness—at least not visibly so. Everything was very regulated and everyone had to work or suffer the consequences. Wages were low. There was money, but nothing

much to buy. During Soviet times, if you behaved, you could have a flat – and some still have those dwelling places. If you didn't behave, you were shipped out.” (Personal interview, Evi Jeeser, 2014)

According to the prevailing analysis presented by historians, economists, average citizens and others, the Soviet occupation and annexation of Estonia in 1940 destroyed the country politically, economically and socially. As the second occupation progressed, from 1944 onwards, the Soviet system began to develop in such a way that homelessness began to disappear – along with disappearance of choices in lifestyle, work, education, economy, travel and personal expression. At the same time, social welfare was fully controlled by the state during the Soviet period and was guided by the policies of the Communist party. However, as Jeeser stated, the Soviet system did provide a foundation for the transition period when a great deal changed in society and there was a groundswell movement toward civil society.

The Transition Period from Soviet Rule to a Democratic Society

Tulva (1997) pointed out that the massive societal changes in former socialist countries took place at three interacting levels: in public institutions; in civil society, which includes voluntary organizations; and in the private lives of citizens. The national ‘wakening’, which began in 1988, was significant in establishing an independent welfare state. Tulva (1997) also opined that changes in a transitional society happened faster than people’s ability to adjust to new circumstances. This certainly was the case in Estonia as the nation and its citizens moved from an oppressive and paternalistic society in which ‘learned helplessness’ was the norm to a society where citizens were capable of self-management.

The uncertainty and stress of the transition period caused coping difficulties. Many of the restrictions of the Soviet era resulted in a lack of qualified workers and parents. People with disabilities or those with diseases were able to emerge into society, but without an infrastructure or resources to assist them, they became a burden on an already burdened population. The breakup of collectives – whether rural and agricultural, or urban and industrial – created unemployment, and the benefits that the government were able to provide in the early nineties were insufficient. Not everyone could adapt to the rapid economic and social changes of the transition period, nor could they adjust to the changing opportunities and demands in the workplace.

Among the many social problems that could be enumerated from that era – including the role of women and workforce opportunities, health problems that proliferated, child protection processes, poverty, and other social situations – homelessness was a relative newcomer. During this time the number of homeless people was unknown. Most were assumed to be alcoholics. Shelters began to be opened, supported by the state or religious organizations, and centers for providing social and health care services were established little by little. Social work attained a more respected status and training of social workers began.

During the transition period a system had to be developed that would protect and handle vulnerable groups and individuals. Laws guaranteeing social rights were passed in the Parliament Commission on Social Welfare and problems began to be solved via government action and regulations. One occurrence during the transition period was decentralisation and local governments acquired executive power. Tulva (1997) defined aspects of the developing Estonian social welfare system.

Social protection, which deals with citizens' social security and provides assistance in various forms. Social insurance, which provides security for citizens and pays benefits out of social tax revenues for pensions, sick leave benefits, child care and employment subsidies. Social welfare, which delivers social services, allowances and benefits in cash and in-kind and is directed by the Ministry of Social Affairs and local municipalities.

Social services, which provide opportunities for assistance for people in need, such as family care, counseling, health provisions. Social assistance, which consists of cash or in-kind support. Social protection, therefore, can be summarized as having three components: financial, services, and special intervention.

The transition period in social welfare and services took place quite rapidly, given the highly controlled Soviet era practices and policies and the new freedoms that both the State and its citizens acquired. Leppik (1996) described it as a 'transition from childhood to youth'. During this time, the number of people who needed help in Estonia increased, particularly as Estonian society was undergoing considerable changes. One of the most notable changes was the increasing level of stratification and the distribution of family income. Estonia's Gini coefficient has been steadily higher than the European Union average in recent years (it was 31 in 2009), and social problems are exacerbated with the process of stratification, including homelessness.

Addressing Homelessness Today

In addition to the perspectives provided above regarding homelessness during the Soviet period and the transition period, the article published in 2006 in *The European Journal of Housing Policy* provides a baseline for examining the situation in Estonia in 2014. The 1995 Social Welfare Act did not contain a specific definition of homelessness but subsumed it under this phrase: “The purposes of social welfare are to provide assistance to persons or families in preventing, eliminating and relieving difficulties in coping, and to assist persons with special social needs in social security, development and integration into society.” Also addressed in the 2006 article were some of the economic and psychological causes of homelessness, which by 2014 have become part of standard practice in managing and providing services for homeless people. Most importantly, the article offered recommendations for solutions while listing the services available. Fortunately many of the recommendations have been implemented by 2014 and are described in this current article.

One aspect that has not changed in the intervening eight years since the *The European Journal of Housing Policy* published information about Estonia is the legal status of homeless people in Estonia. The Social Welfare Act dating from the year 1995 is unchanged as of now (see [Legal aspects of homelessness in Estonia \[on-line\]](#)). It addresses all aspects of social services, including aid for homeless people, the jurisdiction of local entities, remuneration, the rights of homeless people and services to be provided. These services, as outlined in the Act, are consistently implemented, along with solutions that have emerged since the 2006 research was conducted.

This article focuses on Tallinn, the capital of the Republic of Estonia, as well as another smaller city, Haapsalu. Today, Tallinn has a population of 432 012. Estonia’s population is 1 315 819 meaning that 33 percent of the population lives in the capital. Unemployment, a major factor in homelessness, is 5.5 percent throughout Estonia and in Tallinn, 2 percent of residents are unemployed.

During 2011 and 2012 the Tallinn Social Work Centre conducted a survey of homeless people and found approximately 1 225 living in shelters and 146 living on the street. Being homeless was defined as not having personal or rented housing, not having permanent housing opportunities, or sleeping in a temporary place.

The above facts were set out in a report by Meelika Limberg of the Tallinn Social Work Centre and Krista Tammsaar of the Tallinn Social Welfare and Health Care Board (Limberg and Tammsaar, 2014). They included in their report what Tallinn is doing to address homelessness. Three major initiatives are underway. First, preventive measures, which include clubs for the unemployed, debt counseling, free public transport and raising citizen awareness of homelessness. Second, an early

intervention system that includes resocialisation and transitional accommodation. Third, ensuring minimally acceptable living standards for the so-called 'hopeless cases'; this includes those who don't want to change their lifestyle or those who live on a minimum income in the form of subsistence benefits. It also includes those with addiction problems (Limberg and Tammsaar, 2014).

Among the preventive measure that Tallinn utilizes are cooperation between departments, as well as cooperation with governments at all levels and NGOs. The state provides employment services, local governments provide maintenance level work, and NGOs provide additional services such as training for employment. In addition, in Tallinn there are health care services for those not covered by insurance, as well as counseling aimed at helping homeless people achieve independence. Resocialisation services are provided in stages, the first being a shelter, with the next level being transitional accommodation or residence in a social housing unit. A client sets goals while in the resocialisation plan and after six months can apply for lodging in a municipal or social service home. According to Andrus Toompuu of the Tallinna Sotsiaal- ja Tervishoiuamet (the Tallinn Social and Health Office), the following residential options, both short-term or long-term, are available for homeless people in Tallinn (Toompuu, 2014).

Lodging for a night: there is a total of 124 beds among three shelters.

Shelters for homeless people: these are in four locations through Tallinn with a total of 140 beds.

Sites for resocialization: these are in five locations with a total of 427 places. In these, clients may live 2-3 per room and families with children have their own rooms. The client pays a monthly fee of 38.35 Euros, with children costing an additional 3.83 Euros.

Additional services include an active soup kitchen, the Food Bank (more information will be shared later in this article about this resource), healthcare centers and a day center where homeless people can use the Internet, and benefit from assistance in finding work, counseling in finance or in dealing with psychological problems. In addition, NGOs are involved. For example, the Salvation Army provides food and clothing, among other services such as work therapy and drug addiction programmes. The Estonian Red Cross provides traditional services such as crisis preparedness and intervention, and also assists vulnerable populations in various ways.

Selected Sample Programmes Providing Residential Services for Homeless People

The shelter in the Nõmme District on Männiku Street in Tallinn

This residence has 92 places in total, with 13 families on the third floor. Most families consist of a mother with children; only three families have a father present. Of the residents, 30 percent are Estonians. The rest are Russian or other nationalities. Half of the residents work to pay the cost of residence; €38.35. Two-thirds pay their own fees; if a resident is unable to pay, the city provides the funds. If a resident is registered in one of the eight Tallinn districts and can't pay, the local district then assists.

Residents are involved in a resocialization plan that lasts for six months, after which the plan is reviewed and evaluated. If the resident has no place to go after six months, he or she is allowed to stay another six months. The resident also must do his/her best to acquire work skills and visit the employment office.

The reasons that the shelter's residents are homeless vary greatly and are not uncommon in the general field of homelessness – largely due to work that disappeared after Soviet times (e.g., factories and collective farms), the loss of an apartment (in some cases apartments were reclaimed by those who owned them pre-World War II), a lack of language skills, living at bare subsistence level or below for pensioners, and substance abuse problems.

Residents must get their own food. This may be from a soup kitchen, the food bank or NGOs that provide meals or food supplies. If healthcare is needed, city clinics are available. Two social workers are available for 92 people. A total of twelve workers are employed at the Tuulema residence, which include eight social work assistants and one coordinator. According to Evi Jeesser, formerly a social worker who worked for twenty-three years with the mentally handicapped, there is more respect now and understanding for persons who undertake this profession (Personal interview, Evi Jeesser, 2014). Unlike Soviet times, there is no longer any need to be embarrassed about being a social worker, and training is available. She confirms the prevailing view that Estonia has made much progress in a short time, which included a somewhat chaotic transition period, and most importantly, social services not only provide services for almost all who those need it but work in a preventive manner as well.

The shelter in the North Tallinn District on Tuulemaa Street

Hannes Vetik is the director of this residence (Personal interview, Hannes Vetik, 2014). On the first floor there are 16 rooms with 51 beds. On one side of the second floor are 18 rooms with three men per room, and the other side houses families and women. The third and fourth floors are designated for families, with a total of 47 rooms. This shelter serves a total of 220 persons, with one-third being Estonians and two-thirds Russians. As with other shelters, residents pay the fees – some from their pensions or from the mother's subsidy, common in Estonia. The state provides a homeless person with €95 in social support (an average pension, by comparison, is approximately €200 per month) and from this, those who cannot work for various reasons can pay for their lodging.

Employed in this shelter are six social workers and one coordinator, plus a director and a social caretaker who helps clients in learning to accomplish their living chores.

According to Vetik, shelters began to open around the turn of the last century, the year 2000. Prior to that, mutual help was prevalent. Vetik states that the public perception of homelessness is frequently shaped by the media – what sells is the negative, and the media tend to publicize the bad issues and situations. More attention is paid by the public during the cold times of the year, and feature stories at these times help to build a more positive view. Vetik emphasizes that a comprehensive approach to resocialisation and rehabilitation is a positive factor and is working. Other Estonian cities such as Tartu, a university town, also have units or shelters like Tallinn has; it is not a State system.

Exiting homeless is done progressively, with a homeless person starting the rehabilitation process by staying at a night shelter, progressing to units and services like the ones described above, and finally securing an apartment or room. Other services with which Vetik's shelter cooperates are the food bank, the housing department of the city or region, job assistance, soup kitchens and social welfare departments that provide benefits.

The majority of homeless people have problems with alcohol. A relatively small number are veterans or become homeless as a result of mental illness, and a few are on the street by choice – they want to be free! How is the success of this programme measured? By securing a city apartment, becoming independent, finding a job, and staying clean from substance abuse. Between twenty and twenty-five people were successful in achieving these goals in 2013.

The shelter and social services in Haapsalu, 85 km southwest of Tallinn.

Kaja Rootare, who is the vice-mayor of the city of Haapsalu, stated in her interview that in order to improve conditions for homeless people in that city of 11 000 citizens and region, the root problems need to be addressed – a lack of education and of work opportunities (Personal interview, Kaja Rootare, 2014). She stressed that the problems relating to homelessness are many and often interrelated, and that it is necessary to train people to help themselves. More men than women are homeless in Haapsalu. The causes of homelessness are familiar – alcohol abuse, lack of work, loss of apartment or residence. However, two aspects that make Haapsalu somewhat different are that, first, if people in rural areas are homeless, they come to the city; and second, there are more young people that come through the orphanage system. Foster families are few, so children growing up as orphans often don't acquire the personal or work skills to enable them to cope when they reach adulthood.

The Haapsalu system includes emergency locations, shelters and soup kitchens, and apartments like those found in Tallinn. Rootare believes that smaller shelters are better, such as those which house approximately 40 persons. She also states that those who are housed with others who have similar problems find this to be beneficial. Every month there are approximately fifty persons residing in the social service apartments and 38 in shelters.

One example of resources available for homeless people in Tallinn

According to Eesti Toidupank (the Estonian Food Bank) in Tallinn, from which food is distributed throughout Estonia, poverty is a major problem in Estonia (Personal interview, Piet Boerefijn *et al.*, 2014). More than 230 000 people have difficulty in securing a daily, healthy meal, and of these, 63 000 are children. Food banks across Estonia acquire food from food stores, wholesalers and food manufacturers; they keep these products from spoilage and disposal; and they deliver food to those who live below the subsistence level. The Food Bank was established in 2010 by Piet Boerefijn, manager of the Estonian-Dutch Charity Foundation Päikeselill, and other like-minded individuals, and after one year, nine other food banks were established across Estonia. Today it is the best-known charity in Estonia.

But Boerefijn and his team are not willing to maintain a status quo; they believe that there is still a long way to go and they continue to strengthen existing partnerships and establish cooperation with new ones. Food for the bank is not purchased, except in some rare cases or projects. The food banks are logistic centres that gather the food and receive donations. The process begins with producers, wholesalers and stores providing food, which volunteers pick up and social workers distribute to those in need. Other supporters are those that provide financing or manage campaigns, and partners such as charity organisations.

The assistance the Food Bank provides is for families and people who have financial problems and need assistance meeting basic needs. This includes homeless people. Help is free of charge and designed to be temporary.

Summary of statements by a representative of the Social Ministry

Raimo Saadi, head of the Welfare Department of the Ministry of Social Affairs, reiterated much of the information secured through documents and interviews in our interview with him (Personal interview, Raimo Saadi, 2014). The Social Ministry does not exercise direct control over any aspects of homelessness but works with regions, counties and organizations. He agrees that Soviet times provided a base for today's activities and services, even while exacerbating the situations and problems that lead to homelessness, such as the loss of work or living quarters. The reasons for homelessness are, unfortunately, quite universal, although the Soviet repression of almost fifty years was a hugely negatively influence. Alcoholism is a major cause, along with a lack of language and work skills, psychological or mental problems, breakup of the home, and, at times, movement from rural areas to the city, causing a loss of control over one's life. Saadi agrees that the growth of social services for homeless people in Estonia has been rapid, moving away from the paternalistic practices of the Soviet era, establishing priorities and processes during the transition from Soviet rule to democracy, and experiencing success and ongoing improvement in today's society. Addressing both the root causes of homelessness as well as the situations in which homeless people find themselves is today's mentality in Estonia, providing both hope and help to those in need.

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