

Jakub Marek, Aleš Strnad and Lucie Hotovcová (2012)

Bezdomovectví v kontextu ambulantních sociálních služeb [Homelessness in the Context of Low Threshold Services].

Praha: Portál

This 2012 volume was written by three authors with different backgrounds. Jakub Marek is a Ph.D. student of pedagogical psychology at the University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice and works with a research team at a Prague-based psychiatric centre. Aleš Strnad is the team leader of an outreach programme for homeless people and has worked with homeless people for the past ten years. He studies at the Protestant Theological Faculty in Prague. Lucie Hotovcová works as a social worker in a day centre for homeless people.

The goals of the monograph are: “to draw attention to the ways of working with the homeless with regard to the practical aspects of this work and to attempt to stimulate a discussion about the situation of the homeless in the Czech Republic” (p.12). With outreach- and social workers as its primary audience, the volume covers a broad range of issues, from the definition of homelessness to describing everyday challenges in social work with homeless people.

In the first chapter, the authors discuss a possible definition of homelessness based on the Czech etymology of the word and its usage in Czech legislation (i.e., ‘a stateless person without the right to domicile’). The authors conclude the first chapter with a list of the causes of homelessness.

The second chapter is devoted to understanding psychosocial barriers to the resettlement of homeless people. According to the authors, in the Czech context these barriers are typically unemployment, addictions, disintegration of the family and social isolation, leaving institutionalised care or ending a prison sentence, having psychiatric disorders or, last but not least, the characteristics of the social and health care systems. With regard to the latter, the authors specifically mention barriers caused by the fact that social welfare assistance is linked to a domicile, barriers due to the indebtedness of households or low pensions, barriers due to the shortage and absence of specific services, and barriers caused by the selectiveness of social services, which mainly works with service users who can demon-

strate a willingness to change their situation. The authors of the monograph report on the use of the 'cycle of change' model in deciding which social intervention should be chosen when working with homeless people. This model reflects the stage of motivation the person is shown as being at. A type of social work intervention is then chosen according to that stage and an adequate social service is matched to the person. This view may, however, be somewhat limiting, especially if it serves as the basis for a narrow view of homelessness from a pathological perspective; the authors state "with a little exaggeration, we may say that for at least a certain percentage of these people, homelessness can be classified as an addictive disease" (p.33).

The third chapter uses another discourse, describing being homeless as belonging to a specific subculture. The authors summarize what is known about the life histories of homeless people, and also describe social policy in relation to homelessness, albeit only from the local perspective – i.e., within the city of Prague. Particularly interesting is the part of the chapter that maps out the methods of survival used by people on the streets of Prague, including 'street culture activities' such as different types of begging, scavenging in garbage bins, collecting waste, using social services, working – including temporary jobs – and pursuing criminal activities. They describe a life of homelessness and the daily regimes of homeless people in different seasons of the year, which gives us a very realistic picture of life and survival strategies on the street.

The fourth chapter deals with homelessness from a psychological viewpoint. The authors classify the homeless population according to their life cycle and attempt to identify the characteristics of each of these stages: young homeless people up to the age of 26, people of 'productive' age and people of 'post-productive' age. The chapter is also devoted to understanding gender stereotypes in the context of homelessness.

The fifth chapter is the central part of the whole monograph, and it discusses the challenges of social work with homeless people in low threshold services. The authors state that in the Czech Republic, "emphasis has traditionally been placed on active change. Support is provided by social services on condition that people show an effort to change" (p.115). The core ideology of the Czech continuum of care system is that clients have to be active. This chapter maps the services on offer in great detail and describes the procedures used in outreach work as well as in day centres for homeless people. With regard to outreach work, the authors focus on mapping the locality, looking for and contacting people, and providing basic social advice. They consider the provision of health care services to be an important part of outreach work in spite of the fact that it is limited. Visits to

hospitals, and accompanying service users on visits to institutions, are also described as being part of Czech outreach work. In Prague, mobile social services are also offered in mobile social vans.

In the section on outreach work, the role of the outreach worker, and relationships between outreach workers and clients are analysed. Possible ethical dilemmas that outreach workers may face while conducting outreach work are listed, such as clients asking to borrow money, clients giving gifts to outreach workers, clients confiding in the outreach worker about their illegal activity, clients badmouthing workers from the same or another organisation, clients expressing erotic feelings, or outreach workers recognising the risk of suicide. The authors offer various solutions to such conflicts but also leave enough room for individual initiatives by pointing out that every situation is unique and the outreach worker's assessment of the situation at any given moment is decisive.

Detailed attention is also paid to the issues of day centres. The authors state that in Czech practice, such centres mainly assist with arranging IDs, organising a minimum amount of regular income, and finding a safe place for homeless people to spend the night. In connection with arranging overnight accommodation, the authors claim that in the Czech Republic, every organisation sets its own specific conditions for admission to the shelter. Many shelters require that homeless people be sober, which some are simply unable to comply with. The authors observe that in Prague, and probably throughout the Czech Republic, there is a lack of wet shelters. While mapping the deficiencies of day centres, the authors express their belief that each day centre should have a general practitioner or at least a nurse present. They also note that cultural programmes such as sports events or excursions, drama therapy, and foreign language or PC courses are rather rare in Czech day centres, although spiritual services are generally available.

The sixth chapter uses descriptions of homeless people's situations to illustrate some of the psychological and social barriers that can work as obstacles to reintegration in certain situations and according to the age of the homeless person. In the last (seventh) chapter, the authors contemplate the various therapeutic approaches that could be utilised when working with homeless people.

The volume provides a thorough description of the situation facing homeless people in the Czech Republic with regard to social services. This is primarily done from the perspective of large service providers, which may be due to the fact that the authors worked for many years in one such organisation. While on the one hand the book benefits greatly from the authors' work experience, on the other hand, it limits their approach in a certain way. In many places, the monograph strengthens entrenched, stereotypical views of homelessness and homeless people. Moreover, the book is clearly based on psychotherapeutic approaches

to homelessness, such that the possibilities of community work or structural social work are completely neglected. In fact, although one of the authors' main goals was to instigate a discussion on homeless, their attitude is, rather, a confirmation of the pathologising discourse of homelessness – the predominant, mainstream view in the Czech Republic.

To conclude, despite the above caveats, the monograph, being one of the very few publications on homelessness in the Czech Republic, brings an interesting insight into the life of Czech homeless people and can be useful reading for practitioners in the sector.

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