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Wohnungslose mit Migrationshintergrund in Nordrhein-Westfalen. Eine Untersuchung zu den Lebenslagen. [Homeless with Migration Background in North Rhine-Westphalia. An Explorative Research of Living Conditions.]

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In 2009, the *Land* of North Rhine – Westphalia (NRW) launched a new action plan to tackle homelessness after the previous action plan had been discontinued. Apart from funding innovative projects, the funds of the action plan were used as well to commission targeted research. In 2011, the line Ministry of the *Land* tendered a research project to assess living conditions and challenges of homeless migrants. This project was carried out through a broad range of methods, focusing on selected *Kreise* – smaller geographic units comprising mid-sized towns (*Kreis Kleve* and *Kreis Minden-Lübbecke*) – and on the cities of Bonn, Düsseldorf, Duisburg, and Munster. A qualitative survey of 39 homeless migrants was supplemented by 41 expert interviews held among service providers and other institutions, and some participant observation in selected services. The goal was to learn more about the variations of paths into homelessness among different groups of migrants, and to explore what major challenges homeless migrants face within the service provision.

This in-depth explorative study picks up on a key message from one of the interviewees who have been the first ever to be included in such a regionally targeted homelessness research: *“Institutions claim one must study. And when you study you get homework. But if you do not have a home, you cannot do your homework”* (p.8). This message contains several key elements of what the report aimed to further explore, in particular the paths into and barriers out of homelessness for NRW migrants. It reports on the combination of lack of marketable education and the lack of efficient support by institutions and family to obtain such education, and hence lack of access to a adequate employment. However, the study did not only

aim at reconfirming of what has been commonly known about general patterns how people with low levels of integration gets on the housing ladder, but it also aimed to explore the mechanisms of these challenges in a dynamic migration landscape, and why the mechanisms worked for some, but not for other migrants, who generally face higher poverty risks in Germany than non-migrants. The research sought to contribute to an understanding how a general change in migration patterns has been contributing to a perceived nominal increase of migrants in homeless provision in NRW in the recent some years, despite a general decrease of the levels of homelessness.

Who are the Homeless Migrants in NRW?

From among the approximately 10000 people in 2011, who on a given day were homeless and provided with temporary accommodation by municipalities in NRW, an estimated 2600 (over 26% of all homeless persons in this type of accommodation) had a migration background. In addition, 6300 clients of NGO services for homeless persons were counted on the same day and of these nearly a quarter had a migration background. Also, low threshold service providers' statistics report more and more non-German citizen claimants. There is, however, a large heterogeneity within the homeless population and across the selected geographical units within NRW.

There is a reported increase and overrepresentation of young men. They have more often migrated some time – or even a generation – ago from the former Soviet Union and Poland in particular. New waves of migration have brought about an increase in numbers of Roma from new member states of the EU (mostly from Romania and Bulgaria), people from Africa, and the Arab countries, which has generally changed the composition of the group. Turkish migrants are heavily underrepresented among homeless persons, a result provoking questions which the study could not answer.

Homeless migrants have very different levels of education, but most of them have either lower levels of schooling, or have obtained certificates in their home countries that have not been acknowledged in Germany. Most of them have no jobs; still, many of them have income levels that correspond to the general income levels of the homeless population. The income and labour market situation seems to be considerably better among women.

What are Reasons for the Different Patterns?

Variations in levels of homelessness across nationalities were ascribed to cultural differences, period-effects of migration history, scale of more recent “poverty” migration waves, general labour market conditions around entry times to Germany, discrimination, migration status, language barriers that also affect lack of communication between landlords and tenants and which can effectively lead to evictions, lack of adaptation skills, and various illnesses and addictions. Last but not least, for all groups, a general obstacle is lack of access to adequate housing. The study shows that these reasons are at work one by one across all migrant groups, too, but the decisive element of the variety of paths into homelessness among migrants is to be found in the nature and strength of their family relations.

Family relations that are highly varying across the migrant groups mainly due to cultural embeddedness which can efficiently protect one from losing one’s home. Or, on the contrary, just because it represents the strongest social net especially in the migrant individuals’ everyday life strategy toolkit, for all people who have not or cannot make use of the welfare arrangements and back-up services, losing family ties can be a fast-track to the street. The most important message is, thus, that all service provision should be reflective on the main reasons for this diversity.

The strength of the study is its fine-tuned reflections on the heterogeneity of the migrant groups, their needs, conditions, and the obstacles the service providers have to deal with that are related with this increasing range of demand. The report reads well, it is very informative on previous research findings, the legal framework of migration statuses, (social) services that migrants can obtain, and on types and scope of service provision in the selected geographical units. Its further strength is a conclusive list of recommendations for various stakeholders that could improve the effectiveness of service provision for homeless migrant people, including tackling language and cultural barriers, informing about rights and obligations and support services, better answering housing needs, and beyond some further ones, establishing the essentially basic conditions for better cooperation among partners to ensure migrants would get access to a legal status, and (hence) to more intensive care if needed.

To conclude, the report is a very useful reading for various stakeholders and it feeds into a successful implementation of the action plan for tackling homelessness. It does so by offering new empirical findings and a review of earlier results about the situation in NRW. Nonetheless, the quantitative part suffers from insufficient and inconsistent data availability at services' levels. The report could have been a little more ambitious in linking the emerging homeless migrants phenomena with the broader dynamics of German or NRW welfare arrangements, and exploring intersections of housing risks that are especially faced by the various groups of "poverty" or (new and old) labour migrants more in-depth.

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