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Jürgen Evers and Ekke-Ulf Ruhstrat (2005)

Effectiveness of Personal and Economic Support in Preventing Homelessness.

Bremen: Wohnungslosigkeit und Hilfen in Wohnungsnotfällen [Homelessness and Support for People in Urgent Need of Housing]. pp 143

This study, published online in February 2005, is one of several research reports commissioned by the Federal Ministry for Education and Research on people in urgent need of housing. Under the auspices of the research association 'Wohnungslosigkeit und Hilfen in Wohnungsnotfällen' (www.bagw.de under 'Forschung' [Research]), the Bremen-based research institute 'GISS e.V.' was entrusted with the topic 'Prevention of Homelessness'. This action-oriented and practical research demonstrates for the first time the lasting nature and effectiveness of German homelessness prevention policies. Extensive quantitative and qualitative surveys were conducted with municipal prevention authorities and people previously threatened by homelessness were interviewed. The quantitative part of the study documented more than 3,600 prevention cases in 43 municipalities over a period of some six weeks. While there are several distinctive, and possibly unique, characteristics of the prevention systems established by German municipalities – for instance, they are informed regularly by the courts and by real-estate companies about households threatened by eviction and their core tasks consist of preventing homelessness by assuming rent arrears and by negotiating with landlords – nevertheless, as this study demonstrates, the objectives and outcomes of the policies are of relevance to an international audience.

The core results of the study show the predominance of rent arrears as the main contributor to homelessness in all types of households. In fact, rent arrears were the direct cause of impending homelessness in at least 80% of cases among families, among people living alone, and among both female and male headed households. Estimates by prevention authorities show that rapid crisis intervention sufficed in preventing homelessness in just over a third of cases; however for the remaining two-thirds more extensive support and intervention was required. In about one fourth of all households, this more extensive need for support was essentially financial, e.g. settling debts. A further 40% of all households threatened with homelessness needed additional support, including support to cope with

addiction problems, mental disturbance and ‘particular social difficulties’ – serious difficulties for which specialised support is available in Germany.

Repeat cases were over-represented among households with more extensive need of support. Nearly one in three of the households threatened with homelessness had been threatened at least once in the previous past five years reflecting the fact that the support provided was often not sufficiently sustainable to prevent new threats to the ability to pay the rent. The general trend in such repeat cases was that people living alone were often excluded from renewed debt relief while families with children had better chances to get their rent arrears assumed a second time. The authors moreover draw attention to the rising number of precarious employment relationships as well as precarious self-employment that seems particularly problematic against the background of the policy-driven deregulation of the labour market.

Geared to both social and housing policy-makers as well as all social workers and administrative staff working with people in urgent need of housing, the study ends with a number of conclusions and recommendations. These recommendations range from a call to provide information on people threatened with homelessness as early as possible, to make early and frequent contact with threatened households, to a need-directed expansion of follow-up support (after the crisis intervention, to improve the sustainability of preventive work). In addition to individual support, the authors are of opinion that the social and housing related consequences of the new German social legislation (the Hartz reforms) must be examined, in order to prevent a rise in the number of homeless people. Further development of concrete recommendations is needed on how to act to prevent and remedy homelessness.

The broad empirical basis of the research work underpins, with concrete evidence, what experts and those working in the field have been calling for years. At the time of the Hartz reforms when short-term savings possibilities are sought without sufficient consideration of the long-term consequences, the study offers many suggestions for optimising the support system. It is moreover clearly arranged and contains repeated summaries for ‘readers in a hurry’ who want to get only a brief overview of the prevention of homelessness.

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http://www.giss-ev.de/pdf/GISSWirksamkeitPraevention02_2005.pdf.