
Homelessness in Lithuania: Policy and Research

Dalija Snieškienė and Inga Dulinskienė

Department of Social Work, Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania
Charity and Support Foundation “Aušta”, Kaunas, Lithuania

› **Abstract_** *This paper reviews developments in social policy and services related to homelessness in Lithuania over the last 20 years. Using the form of a descriptive case study, it provides an overview of how homelessness is conceptualised, the organisation of homelessness services, the development of social policy related to homelessness, and the support services available within the provision and maintenance of housing, as well as a review of relevant research on homelessness in Lithuania. The paper draws on secondary analyses of legislation, both published and unpublished research results and other sources. It discusses two parallel policies administered by different departments of the Lithuanian government: tackling homelessness and increasing housing quality, and using social housing to alleviate housing poverty. Finally, findings on the problem of homelessness and its relationship to housing policy in the Lithuanian context are discussed.*

› **Keywords_** *homelessness, Lithuania, social housing, social services, government responses*

Introduction: The Emergence of Homelessness in Lithuania

The issue of homelessness was first officially acknowledged in Lithuania after the restoration of independence in 1990. Prior to this, throughout the period of Soviet occupation, the existence of homelessness as an issue was denied by state officials and there was little public discussion on the issue (Sadauskas, 2008). Moreover, during the socialist regime, there was intensive mass construction of state housing

in the form of standardised public apartment buildings and hostels for students and workers, and housing was guaranteed for young people who left care homes. Before the creation of this public investment policy (Vaisieta, 2012), citizens without a home were negatively labelled in dominant discourses, and terms such as 'parasite', 'vagrant' or simply 'person with no fixed abode' were used to describe them. The criminalisation of homelessness was common and often related to such activities as begging, public disorder and prostitution.

After the restoration of independence, the socio-economic context changed dramatically with the dismantling of state guarantees of work, a minimum wage and housing. The Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania (Lietuvos Respublikos Konstitucija, 1992) does not stipulate the right to housing, although Article 24 states that "The home of a human being shall be inviolable" and Article 52 stipulates that the State must provide assistance to those in situations of homelessness. In addition, after independence Lithuanian citizens were given the right to have their property restored in the form of real estate and to privatise residential property. After the ensuing mass privatisation of housing, which often involved high levels of corruption, many of those who had been excluded by the process were forced to sleep rough, or to seek shelter in emergency homeless hostels, abandoned houses or squats; many were also forced underground to sleep near heating pipe systems or to remain in public institutions and other unstable locations. The radical change in the State's social policy meant that responsibility for providing accommodation shifted away from the State to individuals, who had to take full personal responsibility. This had a dramatic impact on many socially vulnerable groups.

First, the introduction of social welfare provisions for individuals and families, which was implemented with the support of international funds, involved very strict limitations. This resulted in many families that were living on unemployment or other social benefits losing their housing as property prices rose. An array of social problems emerged after independence including widespread poverty, unemployment, low wages, poor state support in securing housing, gaps in social housing provision and an underdeveloped social services sector, which was unable to deal with these issues adequately. Combined, they led to a surge of homelessness in the country. Despite this, the development of policy to address homelessness was slow, as evidenced by the omission of the issue from the first Lithuanian Poverty Reduction Strategy in 2000 (Skurdo Mažinimo Lietuvoje Strategija, 2000).

The Concept of Homelessness in Research and Policy

In Lithuania, the first official homelessness counts were published after the first Population and Housing Census in 2001. According to the data, 1 250 people were homeless. A decade later a second Population and Housing Census took place, the results of which have not yet been published (Statistikos Departamentas, 2001 and 2013). Given the direction of public policy and growing inequality, however, it is likely that the numbers have increased. It is important to note that the number of homeless people in the country counted during the Population and Housing Census is likely to be an underestimation of actual homelessness levels, given that the only people defined as homeless by the Census were those who were rough sleeping or had no temporary shelter (Kanopienė and Mikulionienė, 2004). Using the ETHOS definition of homelessness (Edgar, 2009), the Census therefore included only one out of the seven categories of homelessness – rooflessness.

According to Kocai (2006, p.53), “homelessness is one of the forms of social exclusion in which people often find themselves outside the boundaries of civil society”. In 2001, Statistics Lithuania – the Lithuanian Government Department of Statistics – provided a very narrow definition of homelessness: those with no permanent place of residence and without the funds to purchase or rent even basic housing (Lietuvos Statistikos Metraštis, 2013). Kanopienė and Mikulionienė (2004, p.53) provide a broader concept of homelessness to include anyone without a permanent residence, regardless of “whether one is actually roofless or has even a temporary roof above one’s head”. On homelessness in Lithuania, Kocai (2006, p.53) adopts the broader definition, writing that people are homeless “if they have no permanent place of residence or are temporarily unable to use their place of residence and, as a result, are sleeping in random locations or at institutions providing temporary accommodation, and if, in addition to this, they do not possess the funds to purchase or rent housing”. Nevertheless, it can be argued that even this broader definition is not broad enough, since it does not include people living in public institutions or those who live in extremely poor conditions. Homelessness can also be a form of social exclusion; in other words homelessness may include those who are socially and economically marginalised from society.

In the capital of Lithuania, the Vilnius Municipal Council 2013–2018 has established integration programmes for individuals that are vulnerable, that beg and that have no permanent place of residence (Vilniaus Miesto Savivaldybės Taryba, 2013). This programme uses a definition of homeless people and homelessness similar to that used by Kocai (2006), and similar definitions can also be found in current Lithuanian legislation. When considering the concept of homelessness and homeless people in Lithuania, it is worth mentioning that it is very different from those included in the

European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (FEANTSA, 2012). This permits an understanding of the multidimensional nature of homelessness across time and space (Kanopienė and Mikulionienė, 2004).

For the purpose of this article, homelessness shall be defined as follows: individuals or households without a permanent place of residence and without the funds to rent or purchase housing. Our definition will also include those in temporary or unsafe housing, and those who live in Lithuanian institutions. Homelessness will also be treated as a form of social exclusion.

Poverty is a significant driver in generating social exclusion. Vosyliūtė (2002, p.26) claims that “belonging to the class of destitute people creates a feeling and images of hardship, trouble and sometimes pity in the social sphere. Poor people are more likely to commit crimes, they tend to lose their pride within community (they are less valued and respected, there is an unwillingness to communicate with them)”. As such, a chain reaction takes shape, which perpetuates social exclusion over time. In Lithuania, the dynamics of poverty and social inclusion are hard to evaluate objectively due to rapidly changing assessment indicators in measuring levels of absolute poverty as well as relative poverty. A more robust understanding of the change in poverty levels can only be gleaned after 2004, when European poverty measures were standardised. The latest data on the social situation in the European Union show that Lithuania is one of the countries “with the largest increase in the population at risk of poverty or social exclusion”; where severe material deprivation has increased substantially by 6.7 percent; and where “labour market exclusion (unemployment, inactivity) and increase in (quasi-) jobless households have increased substantially” (European Union, 2013, pp.21-2). As poverty rates have increased, the risk of homelessness has increased due to the lack of housing provision and declining living conditions.

Homelessness and Social Policy: The Search for Solutions

The broad theoretical discussion about housing poverty in Eastern Europe is outlined by Hegedus (2011). In the Republic of Lithuania, two public institutions are responsible for the introduction of social policies in relation to housing exclusion and homelessness: the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Social Security and Labour. The first law on the right to housing was adopted in 1992 (Lietuvos Respublikos Gyventojų Aprūpinimo Gyvenamosiomis Patalpomis Įstatymas / Law No. I-2455 of the Republic of Lithuania on Providing Residents with Dwellings). This law gives citizens the right to acquire or rent a place of residence and articulates the nature of associated state support for individuals and households in need. Priority was given to the support of young people leaving the care

system, people with disabilities, single pensioners, large families (four or more children) and single parents with two or more children. However, the law did not include responses to homeless individuals or families. Furthermore, Article 11 of this law states that where the condition of a place of residence has worsened since the adoption of the law, support in acquiring new housing shall be granted but only after 5 years. Taking general economic restructuring and increasingly limited access to affordable housing into consideration, it is reasonable to assume that the number of homeless people increased after the adoption of this law.

Homeless people do, however, feature in the Law on Social Services of the Republic of Lithuania (Lietuvos Respublikos Socialinių Paslaugų Įstatymas, 1996), which provides that homelessness is a situation for which social services can be provided (Art.4). This law made municipalities responsible for the organisation and provision of services, including temporary accommodation, in response to which shelters for homeless people and families were set up across the municipalities.

The 2000 Lithuanian Poverty Reduction Strategy categorises homeless people as “marginalised”, along with street children, former prisoners, prostitutes, drug addicts, alcoholics and families in conflict, and describes them as clients of municipalities and social care institutions “who are difficult to handle” (Skurdo Mažinimo Lietuvoje Strategija, 2000, p.16). Notably, the document reflects a view of homeless people that is very similar to that of previous USSR legislation. It recommends that shelter be provided to prisoners leaving prison, to young people leaving care homes, and to pensioners no longer in a position to maintain independent housing. However, there are no provisions on housing policy issues in this document and while summer houses were set up in garden communities for pensioners, the housing provision for young people leaving care homes has not been actually been implemented. These authors suggest that municipalities must cooperate closely with NGOs in order to provide effective services to these groups.

Homelessness or homeless people do not feature at all in the current Law on Social Services (Lietuvos Respublikos Socialinių Paslaugų Įstatymas, 2006); they are not even included under “adults at risk” (defined as beggars, vagrants, alcohol abusers, gamblers and criminals) (Art.2). This omission creates the impression that all homeless people are now perceived as people suffering from addictions who are a danger to themselves and to society. For this group of people, short-term institutional care is provided, for which an individual may be charged up to 80 percent of their income.

Nevertheless, in analysing the development of municipal social services, it is important to note that services for homeless people were established prior to the implementation of these laws. For example, in the city of Kaunas the first accom-

modation shelter was established in 1992, catering for 72 men (Nakvynės namai, 2014). By 2012, there were numerous institutions catering for homeless people, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1 Numbers living in temporary residence institutions in Lithuania (2013)

		Number of vacancies in temporary residence institutions units	Number of temporary residence institutions units
Hostels for homeless people	2012	1257	22
Crisis centres, temporary accommodation, and institutions for mothers and children	2012	595	34

Source: Statistical Yearbook of Lithuania (Lietuvos Statistikos Metraštis, 2013)

By the end of 2012, there were 22 hostels for homeless people in Lithuania, accommodating 2 400 residents. One third of service users had been residing in the hostels for more than six months. On average, another 100 people were being provided with temporary accommodation on a night-by-night basis (Lietuvos Statistikos Metraštis, 2013). Crisis centres and institutions for the temporary accommodation of mothers and children held a further 2 500 people – 500 more than in 2011. More than 3 400 persons received other forms of social services such as consultations and psychological help through these institutions, including people not resident there (Lietuvos Statistikos Metraštis, 2013).

These data show that of the 60 municipalities in Lithuania, around one third have opened shelters or provided other services to homeless people. According to data from the Lithuanian Department of Statistics, of all cities with homeless shelters, the city of Kaunas sees the highest demand for its homeless support services. In 2009, one Kaunas shelter received 211 requests for temporary accommodation, of which only 171 requests were granted. A further 245 people requested emergency beds on a night-by-night basis, all of whom were granted accommodation (Lietuvos statistikos metraštis, 2013)

The number of institutions does not reflect the variety of services and accommodation available in each facility. The Kaunas homeless shelter, for example, provides accommodation for roofless men (both on a night-by-night and a more medium-term basis) as well as low threshold services for the local homeless population and a day care centre and shelter for women with children (Nakvynės namai, 2014). However, not all homeless people fit the criteria to access such facilities. First, they have to be over 18 years of age and provide confirmation of their identity, a declaration of their previous place of residence and a certificate from a medical institution confirming that they do not have tuberculosis. Those who have tuberculosis or

mental illnesses and those who are intoxicated are not accepted in the hostels. Such stringent criteria regularly lead to reports on people freezing to death during the winter months or being burned to death in abandoned buildings. However, without robust research it is difficult to say exactly what kind of social services are currently being provided and how homeless people in Lithuania view these services.

NGOs and religious organisations play a significant role in working with homeless people in Lithuania. Caritas Lithuania, for example, currently owns and manages homeless shelters and provides people with food, clothing and other services. Homelessness is intimately intertwined with the ability to access affordable housing and the following section provides an overview of social housing in Lithuania.

Social Housing as a Solution to the Homelessness Problem in Lithuania

The results of the 2011 Population and Housing Census published by Statistics Lithuania (Lietuvos Statistikos Metraštis, 2013) show that in Lithuania, 96.6 percent of residential housing is owner-occupied. The data also shows that 11 percent of residential housing is not suitable for habitation. State- or municipally owned housing makes up only 1.4 percent of the entire housing stock of the country.

It is difficult to provide an exact definition of social housing as up until 1 January, 2003, the concept of social housing, as such, did not exist. Municipally owned residential housing belonged to the four foundations: the Main Fund, the Manoeuvring (Temporary Housing) Fund, the Official Fund and the Special Residential Housing Fund. According to the subsequent Law on Providing Residents with Dwellings (Lietuvos Respublikos Gyventojų Aprūpinimo Gyvenamosiomis Patalpomis Įstatymas, 1992), which was applicable until 1 January, 2003, residential housing that belonged to the main housing funds would be rented to citizens with no other housing according to financial need and for an indefinite period of time. Manoeuvring (Temporary Housing) Fund's residential housing premises were temporarily provided to citizens being relocated for reasons including residential overhaul, reconstruction, modernisation, and liquidation due to natural disasters or other issues. Residential housing that belonged to the Official Housing Fund were given to the employees of particular institutions. Premises that belonged to the Special Residential Housing Fund included dormitories, single-family housings, homeless shelters and care homes.

On 1 January 2003, these four housing funds were abolished and the concept of social housing was clarified. Social housing – or municipal residential premises rented on a non-commercial basis in accordance with government tax procedures – is provided to accommodate individuals and families on low incomes in accord-

ance with the law. The official social housing category does not include professional residential housing premises, dormitories, shelter homes, nurseries or residential care premises, though definitions of social housing that include these are still used in Lithuania. The new concept of social housing united two municipally-governed residential housing funds: the Main Fund and the Manoeuvring (Temporary Housing) Fund. However, the law did not unite the two remaining funds: the Official Fund and the Special Residential Housing Fund, which included dormitories. Municipal residential premises in the form of dormitories are residential housing premises (rooms) suitable for a person or a family, located at formerly purpose-built dormitories owned by municipalities (Lietuvos Respublikos Gyventojų Aprūpinimo Gyvenamosiomis Patalpomis Pakeitimo Įstatymas, 2003).

Residential rent in dormitories is regulated by the Civil Code of the Republic of Lithuania (Lietuvos Respublikos Civilinis Kodeksas, 2000) under articles 6.623, 6.624, 6.625. These articles state that such dormitories may accommodate workers, employees, and students and schoolchildren during school term, and that such dormitories are designed for this purpose. Nevertheless, dormitories that are part of the residential housing premises owned by the Kaunas municipality are rented to individuals or families on low income who meet the criteria for social housing. Following the Kaunas municipality council decision of 9 April 2009 No. T-237, residential housing premises could be temporarily rented to a family of four people until such time as the family were given social housing. Based on this decision, it could be argued that a dormitory is not considered to be social housing, but rather a temporary substitute for social housing. Although municipally owned residential premises comprising dormitories are not categorised as social housing, because the dormitories are rented to individuals and families, they comply with the concept and functions of social housing procedures. Due to the overlap between the two in this particular context, dormitories are included as equivalent to social housing in this article.

Social housing and related policy in Lithuania can provide a real opportunity for homeless people to acquire a home. The principal law currently regulating housing policy and conditions is The Law on State Support for the Acquisition or Rent of Housing and for the Modernisation of Multi-Family Buildings of the Republic of Lithuania (Lietuvos Respublikos Valstybės Paramos Būstui Įsigyti ar Išsinuomoti ir Daugiabučiams Namams Atnaujinti (Modernizuoti) Įstatymas, 2013), that was accepted in a place of the law, accepted in 2003 and with many amendments in 2008. This law defines four methods of state support: assistance in acquiring housing (S.2, Arts.3-6); municipal social housing rent (S.3, Arts.7-11); privatisation of municipal (public) premises under preferential terms (S.4, Art.12); and state support for the modernisation of multi-family buildings (S.5, Arts.13-16). In terms of finding a solution to the problem of homelessness through the provision of social

housing in Lithuania, the first two methods – support in acquiring housing and municipal rents – will be considered; these create a real opportunity to reduce homelessness numbers.

In 2008 an amendment to the Laws on the State Support for the Acquisition or Rent of Housing and for the Modernisation of Multi-Family Buildings of the Republic of Lithuania was drafted (Lietuvos Respublikos Valstybės Paramos Būstui Įsigyti ar Išsinuomoti Bei Daugiabučiams Namams Atnaujinti (Modernizuoti) Įstatymas, 2008). The aim was to reduce the number of people waiting for social housing and this was done by adding two new ways: first is of acquiring social housing or rent to the existing ones and second is to compensate for up to 50 percent rent price of others houses which are in market. This draft was later amended by the Ministry of Social Security and Labour (Socialinės Apsaugos ir Darbo Ministerija, 2013), which deemed that, given the general economic situation in Lithuania, existing legislation does not respond to the reality of supply and demand in social housing. This perspective was reinforced by municipality data showing high numbers of people waiting for social housing. In 2012, the number of people waiting for social housing exceeded 31 500, while in the same year the State rented just over 1 000 new social housing units (Socialinės Apsaugos ir Darbo Ministerija, 2013). Therefore, it seems apparent that state support for housing acquisition or the provision of social housing does not meet demand, leaving tens of thousands without support. Some people have had to wait for six to seven years, and sometimes more than ten years to receive state support for housing acquisition or rent. It is expected that after the amendments and procedures for the implementation of legislation are adopted by the Seimas (The Lithuanian Parliament), they will be formalised after 1 January, 2015.

Only those individuals and households that meet the criteria as defined by the aforementioned Law (Lietuvos Respublikos Valstybės Paramos Būstui Įsigyti ar Išsinuomoti ir Daugiabučiams Namams atnaujinti (modernizuoti) Įstatymas, 2008) are eligible to apply for social housing. According to this law, those with the right to receive state support for housing rent are defined as follows: 1) families and persons over the age of 18 years; 2) families and individuals who do not own housing located in the territory of the Republic of Lithuania, or whose housing space per family member is less than 10 square metres (in cases when a member of family is disabled 14 square metres); 3) families and persons whose assets and income value do not exceed the levels defined in the Description of Procedures for Estimation of Annual Personal (Family) Income and Assets (Lietuvos Respublikos Valstybės 2008) Bylaw documentation provides precise income, property and family composition criteria, which are quite restrictive (see Table 2).

Table 2. Levels of income and assets for persons (families) entitled to social housing rent as defined by the Government of the Republic of Lithuania

Place of residence	No. of family members	All available assets in thousands of LTL	Net annual income in thousands of LTL
Cities or district municipalities of Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipėda, Palanga, Neringa.	1	32,5	13,2
	2-3	58,5	26,4
	4 and more	26,0 (per capita)	7,7 (per capita)
Other areas	1	19,5	11,0
	2-3	39,0	22,0
	4 and more	19,5 (per capita)	6,6 (per capita)

These figures were compiled based on (Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė, 2008) Analysis of these regulations suggests that in order to receive social housing, family size must be proportional to household income. In this way, rising real estate prices may create a situation when any housing – even that in extremely poor condition – may become an obstacle to accessing social housing, particularly if the minimum wage also increases. Without an increase in wages more individuals and families will qualify for social housing income support, thus the numbers awaiting social housing will continue to grow. Differentiation between household income and the number of family members would increase social justice among those who would qualify for social housing rent based on determined income levels.

When comparing the criteria for social housing rent, it is worth mentioning that around 20 percent of Lithuanian citizens live below the poverty line; they receive state aid in paying utility charges, which is part of a housing loss prevention strategy, and are eligible for social housing (Lietuvos Respublikos Piniginės Socialinės Paramos Nepasiturintiems Gyventojams Įstatymas (Law on Cash Social Assistance to the Poor Residents of the Republic of Lithuania, 2003). Another state support implemented by the Lithuanian Government relating to housing provision (laid down in the same law) is state-sponsored housing credits. Only a small segment of the population (mostly families) is entitled to receive such credits.

Therefore, the criteria in determining the right to housing are related to the absence of housing as well as annual income and assets, which may not exceed the levels defined in the Decree No. 1162 „For subsidized housing credits description of the procedure of approval & quota (Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė, 2011) the yearly net income of a single person may not exceed LTL 27 500 and assets may not exceed LTL 40 300; 2) the yearly net income of a two- or three-person family may not exceed LTL 38 500 and assets LTL 81 900; 3) the yearly net income of a four- or five-person family may not exceed LTL 46 200 and assets LTL 109 200; and 4) the yearly net income of a family of six or more may not exceed LTL 7 920 per capita and assets per capita may not exceed LTL 26 000. The threshold numbers for social housing rent and those for state-sponsored housing credits are significantly

different. As such, differences between the value of assets and annual income, the right to receive social housing rent and the right to receive state-sponsored housing credit are rather high. This reveals a paradox: those who have income and assets exceeding the values allowed for social housing rent may also not meet the criteria for state-sponsored housing credits and may be unable to receive state support.

It should be mentioned that a prior amendment to that currently in force, issued on 10 October 2008, contained an article stipulating the procedure and conditions of rental in the private sector and making state compensation available for the 80 percent difference between the rental prices of private and social housing (Lietuvos Respublikos Valstybės Paramos Būstui Įsigyti ar Išsinuomoti Bei Daugiabučiams Namams Modernizuoti Įstatymo, 2008) This measure was benevolent and was intended to reduce the number of people waiting for social housing. However, it was expected that bureaucracy and the participation of the private sector in the market would prevent the measure from becoming well-established and, indeed, the amended article expired within two and a half months.

Another piece of legislation relevant to the implementation of social housing policy is the Decree On The Level of Annual Income and Assets Based on the Right to Receive Social Housing (Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė, 2011-02-17), which was ratified by the government of the Lithuanian Republic in 2003 (active amendment from 25 February, 2011). The decree defines the value of personal (family) assets and net annual income that should not be exceeded in order to qualify for a social housing. In other words, it clearly identifies groups of the population who are entitled to rent housing and those who are not. It should be emphasised that this legislation is directly related to the Law on Declaration of the Property of Residents of the Republic of Lithuania (Lietuvos Respublikos Gyventojų Turto Deklaravimo Įstatymas, 2013), which provides that each person must declare their assets to the State Enterprise Centre of Registers, and that a declaration of assets must be provided when applying for social housing.

State housing policy is based on the Lithuanian Housing Strategy (Lietuvos Būsto Strategija, 2004), the aim of which is to set out long-term housing policy objectives and priorities. The strategy set out measures for housing development, the renewal and modernisation of properties, and the implementation of financial and social support programmes. One of the main tasks outlined in the strategy is the production of social housing through building new social housing facilities. By 2020, the relative share of social housing is anticipated to increase to 4-5 percent of all housing; i.e. during the period of 2004-2020 the social housing fund should be supplemented by 20-30000 housing units.

The final relevant aspect of the implementation of social housing policy in Lithuania is the social housing development programme, intended to ensure the implementation of the Lithuanian housing strategy (Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė (2004). The programme supported people in accessing affordable housing and rents in the period 2008 to 2012, and LTL 126 million was designated for this purpose. The biggest amount allocated was LTL 69.2 million in 2008 while the least amount allocated was LTL 13.3 million in 2012, but the social housing fund has not increased since the launch of the strategy in 2004. It is claimed that this is due to increased prices in the housing market and the fact that over the last four years 17 860 new apartments came onto the market – almost 8 times as many apartments as were created by the social housing fund in the same period. It could be inferred that no progress has been made on the goal of increasing the relative social housing fund share to 4-5 percent as laid down in the strategy; that figure is currently 2.4 percent, despite the fact that the State allocates sufficient funds for the implementation of the strategy.

Other legislative acts regulating social housing are formed at municipal level. In accordance with housing policy, municipalities set social housing rental procedures and rules, and manage social housing waiting lists, rental agreements and other decrees. In general, it could be argued that the legal framework regulating social housing rental procedures and fund development is adequate. However, in spite of sufficient funding, targets are not being met and access to social housing in Lithuania has become more restricted than ever over the last two years.

Review of Research on Homelessness and Social Housing Issues in Lithuania

In Lithuania, research on homelessness and social housing issues is limited. In her work entitled *“The Issue of Homelessness in the Context of the Lithuanian and the European Union Policy”*, Andruškevičiūtė (2013) examined how homelessness is addressed in Lithuania through a comparative analysis with other European countries. The focus of Indriliūnaitė’s (2013) PhD thesis centred on survival strategies among a sample of homeless shelter residents. In her earlier article *“Criminal Subculture Outside the Prison: Former Convicts as Homeless People”*, Indriliūnaitė (2009) analysed this specific subgroup of homeless people – former convicts – and tried to understand their criminal subculture and how it manifested itself outside the prison. In the work *“Home Significance and Homelessness Experiences: Biographical Narrative Perspective for Internally Displaced Women”*, Žilinskaitė (2013) researched the perspectives of women who had lost their home through biographical narratives. Norkūnaitė (2013), in her work *“Children Living in Shelters Adaptation Peculiarities at Vilnius City Schools (Evaluation of Children, their Parents and Social Workers)”*, links the issue of homelessness with low levels of engage-

ment with the schooling system. Blažaitienė (2011) and Verbauskienė (2010) in their respective studies researched the theoretical and practical provision of social services to homeless people and attempted to identify the needs of homeless men living in temporary homeless shelters. In Sadauskas' (2008) work *"Homeless People as a Group of Social Exclusion"*, he viewed homelessness in the context of social exclusion, and later in 2010, he focused on service provision and working with homeless people (Sadauskas, 2010).

Research on social housing and housing has been even more limited. The issue of housing for young families was analysed along with employment patterns by Jurevičienė (2007) in her work *"Social Housing Policy in Lithuania: The Case of Šiauliai City Municipality"*. Tverijonaitė (2012) investigated social housing policy in the city of Šiauliai. Mockienė (2009) investigated problematic aspects of state support for housing acquisition or rent. Similar research was described in Sičiūnienė's (2009) work *"Social Housing and its Residents as an Object of Policy: Socio-Political Insights: The Vilnius Case"*.

Since it is impossible to perform a meta-analysis on the research to date, only some shall be discussed in greater detail. Sadauskas (2008) analyses the results that emerged from a quantitative study of people in Lithuania without housing, which was conducted in 2003. This research was undertaken by both teachers and students of the former Faculty of Social Work at the Lithuanian University of Law, together with the public institution Social Policy Group. The sample consisted of 606 homeless people: 467 men (77.1 percent) and 139 women (22.9 percent). The research attempted to capture the living conditions of the respondents to determine the extent of their social exclusion. The majority of the sample consisted of homeless men aged between 30 and 49. In most cases, before becoming homeless, they experienced a long period of unemployment, had weak social support systems and developed addictions. Homeless women reported greater health adversity due to violence and abuse that they were exposed to. Routes into homelessness were impacted by varying risk factors according to age and education and it was found that the duration of homelessness impacted on the extent of social exclusion. The author's main argument that emerged from the analysis was that the longer the duration of homelessness, the deeper the level of social exclusion, as with time individuals become increasingly entrenched into a life of homelessness, making it more difficult return to mainstream society.

In her article based on her PhD research, Kocai (2008) analyses the process and stages of homeless people's social exclusion. The study reveals that the exclusion of homeless people is caused not only by their difficult financial situations and broken social bonds but by their own personal attributes, which are negatively viewed by wider society leading to stigmatisation and ostracism. The methodology

employed in this research consisted of secondary analyses of various scientific, public and statistical sources combined with semi-structured interviews with homeless people. Based on her research results, the author recommends community-led actions to prevent homelessness and to promote community coordination and integration between stakeholders including the State, the private sector, community-based organisations and homeless people themselves.

The article by Mikelionienė and Stankūnaitė (2013) drew on a qualitative study of semi-structured interviews with 32 people living in a male shelter during winter. The majority of service users were over 60 years old; they had no housing, no family support and no fixed income, and during the cold season they resided in the shelter. Here, they were provided with hot meals, showers, warmth and medical attention. At the time of interview, their main sources of income were retirement pensions, disability pensions, rummaging through waste, begging and shoplifting. The authors recommended the provision of better individual support and social services for homeless people.

The quantitative research conducted by Verbauskienė (2010), in which 109 homeless men aged between 30 and 62 were surveyed using structured interviews, showed that those interviewed differed in many ways. They became homeless for different reasons and the services they received were very varied, though the demand for services was almost the same. The majority of homeless shelter clients did not receive any social work services or support, nor were they even informed about the possibility of receiving social services elsewhere, something that may exacerbate their situations.

In conclusion, it should be emphasised that research on the issue of homelessness adopts a narrow definition of homelessness and most individuals in the research samples are living in highly unstable situations such as in train or bus stations, on the streets and in homeless shelters. Those residing in substandard, institutional or unstable accommodation are overlooked entirely in the Lithuanian research to date.

Conclusion

Homelessness in Lithuania emerged as a more prominent social problem after the country's separation from the Soviet Union – a separation that prompted rapid economic reformation, the privatisation of real estate and a re-structuring of the labour market to capitalism. This complex period of transition provided the backdrop to the creation of housing legislation to ensure all citizens had a right to housing. In more recent legislation, homelessness has been defined as the absence of housing or any kind of home combined with the proven inability to acquire housing. There is a tendency, however, to expand this definition of homelessness

in line with international definitions. In the absence of measurements documenting extreme poverty in the country, statistics highlighting the rising number of people receiving social services can be used to suggest that poverty rates are increasing.

State policy for tackling homelessness is divided between two governmental departments that do not always coordinate policy actions, resulting in a fragmented policy response to the issue of homelessness. Since the implementation of state policy, there has been a focus on increasing access to affordable housing, but the uncertain economic context has meant that these efforts are insufficient. Given the growing gap between rich and poor, there are significant challenges in improving the living conditions of an impoverished and disadvantaged population. In cases of extreme homelessness, interventions are delayed and most homeless shelters that provide accommodation (which are often only open during winter time) do not provide social work services, and this lack of services can lead to greater difficulties for homeless people in exiting homelessness. Those residing in medium-term accommodation who also receive social services have greater opportunities to improve their situation and exit homelessness. Such services are not provided in all municipalities. Moreover, the perception that homeless people are “persons at risk”, i.e. former prisoners or addicted to drugs, is widespread; this leads to the stigmatization of such social services, which in turn results in many people losing their home as they delay seeking help. Those who have tuberculosis or mental illnesses have no chance at all of being provided with shelter – other than hospitalisation.

Homelessness impacts every facet of a person’s being: identity, relationships and physical and mental health, and exiting homelessness without support is extremely challenging. Social housing offers only limited solutions because even when social housing is granted, rental and utility charges still have to be paid for. This is particularly challenging for those who experience long-term homelessness, as it is extremely hard to find a job with a criminal record or only basic education or skills.

Scientific research on homelessness reveals the stigmatisation of people experiencing homelessness. There are several unpublished works evaluating service provision but there are no studies on the living conditions of homeless people, and those who are waiting for social housing or have already secured social housing have not been studied at all. Those living in institutions are also entirely overlooked by the research on homelessness, despite the fact that those exiting these institutions are at a substantial risk of homelessness. Such challenges need to be acknowledged when it comes to creating policy adequate for tackling homelessness in Lithuania.

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