

Permanent Temporariness: The Situation of Refugees and Migrants at Risk of Homelessness in Poland



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Aneta Szarfenberg explores the growing issue of homelessness and housing precarity among refugees and migrants in Poland, with a focus on Ukrainian refugees. Drawing from new research and lived experiences, the article highlights five interlinked mechanisms contributing to “permanent temporariness” for foreigners. Structural and legal barriers, psychosocial impact (including trauma), and fragmented support systems create long-term institutional dependency. The piece also underlines the essential, though under-resourced, role of NGOs and the informal cooperation networks propping up Poland’s inadequate state response.

Context

Approximately 31,000 people living in institutions and non-residential spaces are considered homeless in Poland (single-night census, February 2024). Among them, foreigners constitute a relatively small but steadily growing group (around 1,800 people, an increase of 250% since 2019). Over 29,000 Ukrainian refugees live in collective accommodation centres—these individuals are not officially recognised as homeless.

A study is currently being conducted on homelessness and the risk of homelessness among foreigners in Poland (Szarfenberg et al., 2025¹), with a special focus on the situation of Ukrainian refugees. The research includes (besides data analysis) 52 individual interviews: 15 with refugees, 5 with representatives of various levels of government, 8 with representatives of public support institutions, and the rest with representatives of NGO and managers of collective accommodation centres. Below, I present the preliminary findings from this study.

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No strategy, no choice – mechanisms of homelessness risk for vulnerable groups

The analysis of migrants’ situations was based on a theoretical model adapted from Pleace’s typology, which identifies two key drivers of homelessness among foreigners: (1) legal conditions regulating residence and associated entitlements, and (2) access to the social support system (welfare regime). This concept was further developed by Ryszard Szarfenberg and served as the main theoretical framework for the present research. The final model identifies five mechanisms leading to homelessness among migrants:

1. **Structural-economic mechanisms:** Availability of housing, barriers in the housing market, income inequalities, and their impact on the residential stability of migrants and refugees. The research found that systemic solutions focus mainly on short-term assistance,

with limited pathways to protected or social housing. Foreigners usually seek housing in large cities, where jobs are easier to find but housing is more expensive. At the same time, loss of employment or health leads to the immediate loss of residential stability. Particularly vulnerable groups (people with disabilities, seniors, and large families) who cannot support themselves through work tend to use collective facilities, where temporary and emergency stays often turn into permanent residence.

2. **Psychosocial mechanisms:** Trauma, migration-related stress, social isolation, and the emotional consequences of lacking stable accommodation. Respondents highlighted the lack of systemic psychological and integration support—such services are mostly provided by NGOs or only occasionally available. Long-term residence in institutions fosters passive compliance, stagnation, and deepening social isolation, further exacerbating psychological difficulties and unprocessed traumas. The challenge is the feeling of permanent temporariness, lack of agency, dependency on the support system, very limited choices (e.g., of companions), and the daily reality of institutional regimes (including rules and sometimes restricted access to basic amenities).
3. **Socio-economic mechanisms:** Limited access to employment, non-recognition of professional qualifications, low income, and restricted opportunities for economic development, all affecting the ability to maintain stable housing conditions. The study confirms that the main risks for those threatened with homelessness are the lack of stable employment and low income, as well as the non-recognition of qualifications. Those who could achieve independence in the open labour and housing market have left collective facilities. Those who remain are people who, due to age, health, or life circumstances, cannot become independent, that is, afford rent and function without support.
4. **Discriminatory and exclusionary mechanisms:** Discriminatory practices in the housing market and support institutions hinder access to assistance and lead to social exclusion. Participants point to racism and discrimination from landlords, who often refuse to rent to foreigners, especially those from outside Europe. Migrants face additional requirements, such as higher deposits or proof of income. For those without regularised status, exclusion is even deeper—they have no right to most social (and housing) services and avoid formal contact with institutions for fear of deportation.

5. **Legal and institutional mechanisms:** Administrative procedures, legal regulations, uncertainty regarding legal status, and their impact on access to housing support. The research shows that the Polish refugee support system is split into two main tracks: for Ukrainian refugees (UKR) and for other refugees (with three subgroups: those with regularised residence, those in legalisation procedures, and those without the right to legal residence). Thus, rights and obligations vary for people in different groups. In this diversity, there is a lack of coordinated cooperation between institutions; siloed public sectors (e.g., crisis management and social welfare), information gaps, and limited competencies make effective support challenging.

Between law and daily reality – support from public institutions and NGOs

Foreigners represent an increasingly large segment of Poland's homeless—and an even larger number are at risk of homelessness. Both concepts are difficult to define clearly (and thus, the scale of the phenomenon is hard to estimate). In the first case, this is due to collective accommodation sites, which were initially intended to be temporary but have now, for the fourth year, served as “home” for particularly vulnerable groups: people with disabilities, seniors, and single parents with children (mostly mothers). At the same time, practically all foreigners without resources and/or stable income enabling them to rent (or buy) housing are at risk of homelessness—especially those with irregular status (including those in legalisation procedures, who are unable to work for the first six months).

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The study of Polish support practices revealed several specific features of the support system:

1. Siloed systems (crisis management, social welfare, education, etc.) and individual institutions operate in parallel within their competencies, with little information flow and no joint planning of actions for the same individuals.

2. The actions of public institutions are strictly limited by legal frameworks. In practice, situations arise that are not addressed by law—for example, people with UKR status “illegally”² (rarely) staying in shelters for the homeless, or the existence of (few) private collective accommodation centres for Ukrainian refugees not subject to state oversight.
3. NGOs were the first entities to respond actively to emerging needs. To the extent their financial resources allow (and these resources are decreasing), they provide integration, psychological, activation, child-care, and advisory support. Two aspects are characteristic: first, that informal cooperation between local government and NGOs—funded mainly from external grants or the organisations’ own resources—was perceived by most study participants as a sign of an effective support system; second, that NGOs provide specialist, expert support, including training for public institution staff.
4. Intervention support—for example, referral to another facility or provision of specialist assistance (both intersectoral and within sectors)—is based on personal relationships among committed individuals. This means that the most effective cooperation occurs when staff members know each other personally and can directly connect to seek appropriate help for their clients, making it possible to solve any problem.
5. Permanent temporariness shapes a passive life attitude. Residents of collective accommodation centres have “learned” to live in such institutions. Everything they need is provided for them. They feel that the period of waiting for change may last for many years and that, for them, the situation may never change. These people also often have nowhere (and nothing) to return to after the war.

Polish practice - specific features of the support system: siloed structures, NGOs, and informal cooperation

At the macro level (from the country’s perspective), these difficult situations affect a clear minority. Of around 900,000 Ukrainian refugees, about 29,000 live “permanently” in temporary accommodation centres—people who, due to their condition, will likely never achieve independence on the housing market. A comparison with the number of “Polish homeless people” (about 31,000 according to the 2024 census) highlights one dimension of Polish reality.

At the micro level (from the perspective of individuals and families), these

are overlapping traumas, sometimes helplessness, and sometimes old age and/or disability, which cause people to get stuck in a system that perpetuates powerlessness. In the most difficult, dead-end situations are people and/or families with complicated legal statuses.

“The most effective cooperation occurs when staff members know each other personally and can directly connect to seek appropriate help for their clients”

At the other end of the spectrum are staff and volunteers of support institutions and organisations, who experience (or are at risk of) burnout, mainly due to their powerlessness in the face of legal provisions and limited resources. Refugee centres were created as short-term accommodation and were not equipped with tools for social work, motivation, or integration (as is the case for migrants supported through individual integration programs). There is no such offer for Ukrainian refugees; collective accommodation centres only provide (by law) lodging and meals. Thanks to NGO support, “soft” services (psychological, educational, integration) were available, but their accessibility is diminishing as American government funding is cut.

The findings above illustrate the complexity of systemic solutions in Poland. Challenges related to housing for the homeless (or those living in precarious housing conditions) are nothing new—they have long been the subject of debate. However, one could argue that foreigners, especially refugees at risk of homelessness, lay bare the weaknesses of the housing system. They also highlight the importance of cultural contexts in defining who is “us” and who is “other”—which becomes particularly significant in a context of housing scarcity.

Stories from the margins - voices of refugees and migrants

“Nine years of temporary residence in a centre.”

Reza³, a citizen of Iran, left his homeland out of fear of persecution. After several years in Bulgaria, he emigrated again with his family (his wife is a Bulgarian citizen), also due to fears of repression. He reached Poland via Norway and Austria. He describes himself as entrepreneurial: he holds a PhD, has experience advising governments on economic matters, and ran his own restaurant. He is looking for a safe home, but due to the Dublin Regulation, he cannot find one anywhere. For nine years, Reza

has lived with his wife and five daughters in a single room in a reception centre. Two of his daughters have no citizenship at all, as they were born in countries where their parents were denied legal residence.

“A post-soviet family.”

Nino is a Georgian woman with Ukrainian citizenship, the daughter of an Armenian father and a Ukrainian mother, lived with her parents in Georgia until age 15, then the family moved to Ukraine. Her husband is from Chechnya and has Russian citizenship. Nino, holding Ukrainian citizenship, and her children, who hold Russian citizenship, applied for and were granted international protection in Poland, as their differing citizenships made it impossible for the family to apply together under the same legal basis. Now the woman and her children have legal residency in Poland, but her husband remains without a regularised status. This is the result of their migration history—he received a negative decision and, due to the current regulations, cannot reapply for status, meaning he resides in Poland illegally. For a year, his application for humanitarian stay has been pending; during this time, he has no right to health insurance, cannot work, and cannot legally live with his family in supported housing. He also has no documents, as all were taken during the legalisation procedure, and his temporary certificate has expired. Nino works and is awaiting social housing with her children.

1 Szarfenberg A., Szarfenberg R., Mostowska M., Bińczycka E., Teliuk O.: Analysis of the risk of homelessness among foreigners in Poland in the period 15.01.2025-31.05.2025. Research report., National Federation for Solving the Problem of Homelessness, Habitat for Humanity Foundation, Warsaw, 2025

2 The fact that some foreigners are not allowed to stay in shelters for people experiencing homelessness does not result from a single legal provision explicitly prohibiting it. Rather, it stems from a combination of legal regulations, administrative interpretations, and institutional limitations. Below is a step-by-step explanation of the situation:

i. No explicit ban – but also no legal basis: Polish law does not contain any provision that directly prohibits foreigners from staying in shelters. However, the [Social Assistance Act \(Journal of Laws 2004 No. 64, item 593, as amended\)](#) defines who is entitled to institutional support, including shelter. One of the eligibility criteria is having a place of residence on the territory of Poland and meeting certain income and social conditions. Foreigners without legal residence status or those without a PESEL number may not meet these requirements, which leads social assistance centers (OPS) to deny them services.

ii. Article 5 of the Social Assistance Act: This article outlines which categories of foreigners are eligible for social assistance. It includes only the following groups: (a) foreigners with a permanent residence permit or long-term EU resident status, (b) foreigners with international protection (refugee status or subsidiary protection), (c) citizens of Ukraine covered by temporary protection (under the so-called special act).

Foreigners outside these categories – such as those with pending applications, without documentation, with negative decisions, or victims of trafficking awaiting status – are not entitled to services such as access to shelters.

iii. Shelters as a form of social assistance: According to the 2019 regulation of the [Ministry of Family and Social Policy on shelters for homeless persons \(Journal of Laws 2019, item 2007\)](#), a shelter is considered an institutional service delivered by social assistance centers. To access a shelter, a person must receive an administrative decision issued by the OPS. However, such a decision can only be granted to an eligible person. If a foreigner lacks legal residence status or a PESEL number, the OPS cannot issue this decision, which makes a formal referral to a shelter impossible.

iv. Institutional practices – a “soft ban”: In practice, many shelters do assist foreigners, operating under the belief that if someone is experiencing homelessness, they should be provided with safe accommodation and support – regardless of their nationality. However, shelters are not formally able to account for the costs of hosting individuals without legal residence status. Fortunately, many local governments do not strictly enforce reimbursement procedures for shelter stays. As a result, overnight support for foreigners without regulated status (as well as those under UKR status) often takes place outside the formal legal framework. Yet, due to the humanitarian circumstances, this is generally tolerated, and no negative consequences follow.

3 For both example cases, names have been changed.