

Jan Váně a František Kalvas (2021)

### ***Homelessness: Probes to Excluded Environments***

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At least since 2013, the issue of homelessness has become a dominant part of the public discourse in the city of Pilsen in the Czech Republic. Jan Váně and František Kalvas's peer-reviewed book *Homelessness: Probes to Excluded Environments* proves the seriousness of homelessness in Pilsen. Pilsen is the capital of the Pilsen region, and it has a population of 170,000, which ranks it fourth among the largest cities in the Czech Republic. Therefore, it is no surprise that homelessness is an integral part of the daily life of the city. Between 2013 and 2019, the authors conducted research comprehensively mapping the situation of homelessness throughout the city.

The book consists of seven chapters, five of which present the authors' applied research and one case study using data from the original research, and it is focused on testing the theory of deprivation. The authors' use of data not only serves as an example of methodological approaches to the study of homelessness, but its practicality also acts as a support and a source of data for the Department of Social Services of the City of Pilsen, which is dealing intensively with the situation. The book could also serve as a textbook for applied research.

In the first chapter, the authors present the basic terminology and elementary theoretical basis that is necessary to introduce the reader to the issue of homelessness. The authors base their work on the ETHOS typology (European typology of homelessness and housing exclusion in the Czech Republic), which consists of four main conceptual categories and 13 operational subcategories. Due to the extent of this typology, the authors narrowed down the categories based on the lifestyles of the actors (people experiencing homelessness) and their appearance in public.

In the second chapter, the authors focus on the phenomenon of manifest homelessness, which, along with the third chapter (which discusses latent homelessness), forms the core of the whole publication. The main tool of the research was a questionnaire survey, which was preceded by elaborate preliminary research in the form of group discussions and monitoring of selected places with many people experiencing homelessness and their sleeping locations. The preliminary research gave

the authors a broader insight into the topics that are most difficult for people experiencing homelessness in Pilsen. The topics identified generally covered the causes of homelessness and the needs and livelihood strategies of those people who are experiencing homelessness. The chosen methodological steps enabled the authors to map the phenomenon of manifest homelessness and to achieve high validity and reliability in their data. The questionnaire itself is also an integral part of the publication, including a graphical representation of the places where the data collection took place. The reader can thereby acquire a detailed idea of what was emphasised in the questionnaire.

A total of 238 completed questionnaires were obtained and processed (p.62). The second chapter reveals the remarkable finding that the number of women on the street has increased. This is especially true in the cohort of up to 30 years old. Compared to previous years, the ratio of men and women on the street was the same (p.65). This finding is different from the findings presented in other homelessness publications, which generally conclude that there are more men than women experiencing homelessness in all cohorts. Another important finding is a figure typical of the Czech Republic, i.e., that over two-thirds (70%) of people experiencing homelessness have a low level of education, which increases the chances of them ending up on the streets (p.66). In the second chapter, the authors emphasise, among other things, people experiencing homelessness' time spent without permanent housing. They found that the largest group of people experiencing homelessness (32.4%) had gone over five years without stable housing. This suggests that more than a third of people experiencing homelessness have a significantly reduced chance of reintegrating into mainstream society. If the authors assume that a period of three or more years spent on the street significantly reduces the will to resocialise, then there is a significant problem, and not only in the city of Pilsen (p.67).

Given the limits set by the space allotted for review, I will discuss other findings only briefly. The rest of the chapter also details the findings on forms of housing, indicating favourable prospects for the introduction of forms of reintegration, such as the Housing First and Housing Led programmes. The battery of questions in the survey also look at the knowledge of social services that are being set up in Pilsen and the types of missing documents that are a common obstacle to resocialisation, which the authors summarise into 12 strategies. However, the greatest benefit of this chapter is that it was de facto the first targeted research in the Czech Republic (the research took place in 2014) that examined in detail the economic strategies of livelihood via a census for a particular city.

Perhaps the key finding is to refute the common notion that people experiencing homelessness live primarily on illegal activities, such as theft and prostitution. On the contrary, the findings show that the basic source of income is from legal activi-

ties, such as social security benefits and informal work (part-time jobs, undeclared work, or casual jobs). The reason for informal work is understandable given the fact that most people experiencing homelessness are affected by foreclosures. The last part of the research monitored people experiencing homelessness' levels of life satisfaction and presented a time frame (event history) to conclude the chapter.

The third chapter examines the financial and living situations of people at risk of homelessness due to precarious housing situations. This phenomenon is referred to as "latent homelessness," which endangers a significantly large group of the population in the Czech Republic. According to the Czech Statistical Office data, 8.6% (now 9.5%) of the population of the Czech Republic were below the income poverty line at the time of the research in 2015. Because the research focused on latent homelessness, the authors' attention was centred mainly on Pilsen hostels. Hostels contain people who are experiencing latent homelessness. The reason why there are many hostels is that Pilsen is an industrial city. Preliminary research consisted of analyses of methodological possibilities for understanding individuals and groups at risk of homelessness. It was necessary to resolve the locations of the people concerned and to ensure access to these locations.

Next, the authors present their own questionnaire. The sample of people at risk of latent homelessness consisted of 718 respondents, and the structure of respondents shows very similar characteristics to the research on manifest homelessness. Most notably, 70% of respondents had a low level of education (p.113). In addition to education, research questions also focused on citizenship. Perhaps unsurprisingly, 40.5% of the surveyed respondents were not Czech citizens. These individuals came to the industrially developed city of Pilsen for job opportunities. Their most common problem is generally the absence of documents and a lack of health insurance. The authors point to this as a key obstacle to the reintegration of foreigners from hostels. Looking at housing, if the limit of all manifest homelessness is estimated by the authors within three years, then latent homelessness will not be different. According to the research, 20.7% of people who have lived in Pilsen for more than three years are in hostels (p.119). The chances of reintegration are therefore slim. If we think about the interconnection of demographic indicators (gender, age, citizenship), housing, and documents, we find unfavourable prospects for the future of this population. People face so many unfavourable factors that prevent them from reintegrating properly that, under the pressure of a difficult situation, they often give up and resign from reintegration efforts altogether.

In this chapter, the authors deal, among other things, with children who are present in an environment of precarious living. The issue of latent homelessness could be better elucidated if the authors described and analysed the backgrounds of children in hostels. This would contribute to a better description of the phenomenon. The

reader would better understand the conditions in which generations of children live, that the environments of hostels reproduce the living strategies of these children's parents, which adapt to unfavourable environments. They fail to escape from the trap of a cyclical transition between latent and manifest homelessness. In the section describing the descendants of the respondents, we see only basic variables, such as the number of children and their ages (pp.128-133). Within another set of questions, on the basis of which the authors ascertained the knowledge and use of social services among the respondents, it was found that 33.5% of respondents (calculated from the sample of respondents who have children) admitted to cooperating with the Social Institution for the Legal Protection of Children (OSPOD) (p.155). This agency is a public authority whose task is the legal protection of children in adverse family condition. In my opinion, it would certainly be interesting to focus on the type of cooperation between families and this authority. In the text, the authors also look at the possibilities for change in the uncertain housing situation. The degree of success is also closely linked to the fluctuations between hostels with low incomes and an overall very precarious financial situation. This is related to the forms of precarious work, high rents for affordable housing, and, last but not least, livelihood, for which the main source of funding is social security benefits.

As a supplementary chapter of the presented publication, the authors map needs, satisfaction, expectations, and predict developments in the area of social services in Pilsen. Based on quantitative data, the sample comprised 900 respondents and was collected in a quota form. The groups interviewed consisted of seniors (65+), families with children, the physically disabled, persons at risk of social exclusion, and foreigners. For the purposes of the book and the goal of its focus, this chapter focused mainly on people at risk of poverty, who accounted for 7.5% of the total sample. It is important to emphasise that out of the surveyed sample of 167 people living below the income poverty line, 49.4% confirmed that they would accept social housing offers mediated or arranged by the city (p.221). This demand suggests that concepts such as Housing First or Housing Led would have more than a certain clientele in Pilsen. The remaining groups are interesting but a secondary element to homelessness. However, we must not forget that these groups may also be at risk of poverty.

The subsequent chapter, titled "When respondents are asked about what reasons led to their homelessness, what do they mean when they choose the category 'other' as their response?" is a continuation of research into latent homelessness. Its aim is to verify what respondents mean by using the answer 'other' for the reasons leading to their loss of stable housing. This answer was used frequently for this question (40% of respondents). This raises the issue of whether there was a social phenomenon in the hostel environment, a cause that had not yet been addressed (p.231). For this reason, Váně chose to use an ethnographic approach,

which he carried out in hostels. Originally, a quantitative survey was conducted within the city of Pilsen to this end (see the third chapter). In addition to participatory observation, 28 in-depth interviews were conducted, which revealed a number of individual and structural causes leading to cyclicity in the study environment. Examples included frequent debt, unsatisfactory reproductive strategies (multiple families), ethnicity, which acts as a barrier in the effort to obtain more adequate housing (especially the Roma ethnic group), and high rents for standard flats. The result of the chapter is that the environments where the respondents live are highly stigmatised, depressing, and full of anger. The segregation of these individuals reinforces the reproduction of poverty patterns inhabited by 'other' individuals who have the highest chance of reintegration and stable housing if caught early. At the end of this chapter, Váně suggests several possible reasons that led to the situation in Pilsen. One of the six possible recommendations is analysing the awareness of the pilot project of social housing among the latent homeless, which the author points out in the subsequent chapter (p.254).

In the penultimate chapter, "Merit versus necessity: Housing First and its forms in practice," Váně focuses on the principles of merit and need, along with their role in the implementation and introduction of the Housing First concept in Pilsen as a solution, which was implemented in Pilsen under the Social Housing Programme. From a methodological point of view, the research was conceived as a combination of qualitative approaches focusing on various forms of interviews. Participatory observation, unstructured interviews, subsequent semi-structured interviews, and in-depth interviews were used, both with NGO clients and with NGOs and political staff themselves, who significantly influenced the programme during its implementation, by either enforcing or blocking it. Váně points out the ambivalence of opinions in Housing First in Pilsen. Many talks about providing housing for those who need it most, so that a procedure based on the principle of a 'selection procedure,' which is dominated by the principle of merit, is used. The Housing First program, presented by representatives of the city of Pilsen, faced barriers (many different opinions and ideas from NGOs and the city; difficult organisation) that were constantly modified and unintentionally complicated during operation. Furthermore, the author detected complications in the implementation of the Housing First programme, with leaks of necessary information and, conversely, their concealment, when the boundaries and rules were variously bent by both applicants and founders according to the ideologies of the relevant actors.

In the end, the rules did not have a decisive influence but were determined by the power of the 'patrons' (these were mostly individuals from NGOs who managed to push their clients within the system). The dispute between the city and the NGOs was framed primarily by controversies and speculations about the enforcement of clients at the expense of the introduction of clear rules. The decision-making was

framed by the questions of who needs more and who deserves more and how to push your client into the appropriate program regardless of the established rules. Unfortunately, as the authors put it, “The Housing First programme and law enforcement will continue to depend on the enthusiasm and perseverance of small groups, such as NGOs and relevant local authorities” (p.283).

In the final chapter, “Does higher deprivation increase religiosity? Case study of homeless people in Pilsen conclusion,” we are acquainted with the results of a study in which both authors participated and that questions whether religiosity is increased by a higher rate of deprivation in manifest people experiencing homelessness. The authors came from the empirically demonstrable assumption that deprivation is often an inseparable part of the lives of people experiencing homelessness, not just in economic terms, but also in psychological, social, organic, and ethical terms. The authors’ initial hypothesis was that “Homeless people will be more likely to admit religious belief than the general population” (p.294). The significance of the tested hypothesis lies in the fact that the Czech Republic is considered to be one of the most secularised countries in the world. This hypothesis would therefore be unique in this environment if it were verified. As a result of the comparison between two populations in Pilsen—the general population and the homeless population—using regression analysis, it was found that it was not possible to prove the statistical significance of the hypothesis. Despite the failure to confirm their hypothesis, the authors emphasised the theory of deprivation, which future research should not neglect, due to the fact that increasing religiosity can be seen in the two lowest classes of the Czech population (p.309).

Despite some of the criticisms toward, and my own comments on, this book, its main goal, which consisted of a detailed mapping of the content of apparent and latent homelessness in Pilsen, was accomplished. Many years of research, which the authors presented in individual chapters, are documented by a series of graphs. The publication also has a rich appendix containing maps from the locations of individual data collection, which comprehensively complement the plasticity of the phenomenon of homelessness in the city of Pilsen. This is the first publication to focus on an overall analysis of homelessness in a particular city in the Czech Republic. The book has been published in English and is therefore accessible to a wide foreign audience, giving it a unique opportunity to convey an idea of how homelessness research is carried out in the Czech environment. The authors are currently conducting another series of studies on the phenomenon of homelessness. You can certainly look forward to other great publications like this one.

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