Homelessness as a Social Problem – Socio-Pathological Phenomenon – Qualitative Analysis

Miroslav Tvrdoň

Department of Social Work and Social Sciences,
Constantine the Philosopher University
Tr. A. Hlinku 1, 948 01 Nitra, Slovakia
E-mail address: mtvrdon@ukf.sk
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5977-4081

Radoslav Lojan

Faculty of Theology, The Catholic University in Ružomberok
Hlavná 79, Košice, 040 01, Slovakia
E-mail address: lojanr@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8657-124X

Tibor Máhrik

Evangelical Theological Seminary of Prague
Stoliňská 41a, 193 00 Prague, Czech Republic
E-mail address: mahrikt@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7799-5841

Stefan Zaharia

"Prof. Dr. Alexandru Obregia" Clinic Hospital of Psychiatry
Șoseaua Berceni 10, Bucureşti 041914, Romania
E-mail address: stefan.zaharia193@gmail.com
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9042-9606

Vladimirovna Ekaterina Davydova

Institute of Russian Language, Russian Language Department
Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University)
Miklukho-Maklaya 6, 117198 Moscow, Russia
E-mail address: davydova-ev@rudn.ru
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8603-2713

Abstract

Aim. In qualitative research, the authors identify the most frequent cases of homeless people staying on the street and identify general prejudices against homeless people who come into direct contact with the public.

Methods. The study analyses and interprets the risk aspects of the real life of the homeless. Through qualitative research based on open coding, the creation of a system of categories, and analytical induction, the authors established a final hypotheses.

Results. Studies confirm that homelessness affects not only the life of an individual, but also points to the experience of homeless society and the image of the homeless today. The authors analyse and identify the opinions of social workers who have experience with this target group.

Conclusion. The scholarly and professional opinions and contributions in this study highlight the strength and diversity of homelessness. By conducting qualitative research, they identify prejudices against the homeless and the causes that contribute to homelessness.

Keywords: Homeless People, social problem, socio-pathological phenomenon, qualitative research, prejudices, causes

Introduction

Homelessness as a phenomenon not only in Slovak society is a problem that contains many handicaps, not only material, social and financial. Homelessness means not only the loss of a home, but also a layer of a person's social and emotional relationships with their loved ones, as well as with the wider environment. Homelessness as a group is a heterogeneous community with the causes and consequences of social life, which affect the experience of a person, the value system of a homeless person. In the following text, we point out homelessness as a social phenomenon, the causes of homelessness, but also the investigation of the causes of homelessness and the analysis of the public's prejudices against homeless people.

Homelessness as a Social Problem

Homelessness, a social problem of individuals and groups that does not concern us at first glance. It is poverty and misery, a struggle for daily survival and a roof over your head entering the area of Slovak cities, which still leaves a large part of the population and legislation completely cold. Homelessness is not a regional phenomenon, it is a global problem affecting even the most advanced economies in the world, Slovakia and Košice are no exception in this case. Homelessness "allegedly" did not exist in the countries of the Eastern bloc, of which we were part for many years. Some authors even support the idea that with the advent of socialist society, the problems of the people disappeared from evening to morning. The solution to the problem was prisons, psychiatric hospitals and facilities of various

kinds, which ensured that "successful socialism" was represented only by the working people. For this reason, the terms homeless and homelessness disappeared from the Slovak dictionary for many years. This may also be one of the reasons why it is more difficult for today's society to accept these people, often blinded by social stereotypes (Cf. Budayová, 2019; Budayová & Ludvigh Cintulová, 2021), which form the basic equipment of our identity as well as our hidden and obvious, unperceived and conscious (i.e., stereotypical) view of all kinds of the differences (Rychnová et al., 2022; Tkáčová, Al-Absiová et al., 2021; Tkáčová, Pavlíková Tvrdoň et al., 2021).

Táňa Průdková and Přemysl Novotný (2008) they define homelessness as a social phenomenon preceded by various processes and ways of behaving, leading to a loss of life security, background and social exclusion. At the same time, however, they point to the fact that this is a situation that is influenced by individually different factors, objective or subjective. Homelessness affects all areas of human life: social, mental, financial, health, etc. From the point of view of society, this is primarily a way of life that is characterised by insufficient or no shelter.

Thus, the European Union does not consider as homeless only a person who lives on the street or in sanitary facilities, but also people wandering from apartment to apartment, from hostel to hostel, etc. Among the homeless he also counts people who are serving a prison sentence, medical facilities or children's homes and who remain homeless after leaving these facilities. Among the potential homeless, it classifies people who are at risk of losing their shelter due to insecure or unsatisfactory housing. There is only a thin dividing line between the homeless and the potential homeless, in some cases it is only a matter of time before one loses one's home (Beňová, 2008).

Oldřich Matoušek (2008) points out that the term homeless is used less frequently in the current discourse, as it has been replaced by "homeless people." This is mainly because the word homeless has over time become synonymous with a neglected, dirty, smelly person who begs or drinks alcohol on the street, especially a man. The reason for such stigmatisation is the fact that, despite the fact that this group of homeless people is a minority among all the homeless, they are the most visible and quickly recognisable. Nevertheless, it is a concise and concise concept, neutral, in its essence not offensive, so it is possible to keep it in professional terminology (Kobylarek, 2016, 2021; Kobylarek et al., 2022; Matoušek et al., 2005; Matoušek et al., 2013; Maturkanič, Tomanová Čergeťová, Konečná, et al., 2022; Maturkanič, Tomanová Čergeťová, Králik et al. 2022. Štefan Strieženec (1996) defines a homeless person as a citizen who, for various reasons, does not have permanent or temporary accommodation, the possibility of using basic hygiene needs or regular meals. Matoušek (2008) in the dictionary of social work defines a homeless person as a person "living without permanent residence and usually also without permanent employment, cut off from resources that are normally available to other citizens" (p. 31).

Facts of Homelessness

Alcohol, job loss, divorce, family, despair, addiction and other factors can be one of the reasons that condition homelessness. Also in connection with the past Covid-19 pandemic, in addition to many radical changes (Judák et al., 2022; Radulovč et al., 2022; Tkáčová et al., 2022) and responses of governments in the form of declaring a state of emergency and longterm closing national and regional borders (Murgaš et al., 2022), homelessness has also proved to be a specific social problem that is increasingly affecting us and calls for effective solutions, including the individual participation of individuals and the responsibility of the whole human community (Králik et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2020; Roubalová et al., 2021).

Homelessness is characterised by its multifactorial nature. As with other socio-pathological phenomena, the cause of its occurrence can be any risky behavior or phenomenon, such as poverty, unemployment, addiction, prostitution, domestic violence, crime, delinquency, CAN, etc. The professional public therefore tends to the polyethiological theory of homelessness, i.e. it examines the causes of origin from a bio-psycho-social point of view. From such a point of view, we can divide the causes into endogenous and exogenous (Matoušek, 2008; Petrikovičová et al., 2021). Authors Zuzana Budayová et al. (2022), Budayová et al. (2020) and in the 2021 post authors Lucia Ludvigh Cintulová et al. state that all groups that are in a problematic situation experience worse life situations compared to the rest of the population, and the degree of rehabilitation and re-engagement in life is much more difficult to implement.

Endogenous factors include innate - biological factors that are genetically determined. As well as psychological factors that are directly related to personality development. Exogenous factors mean a long-term stay in a faulty environment, which can be a family, groups of peers, we also advise here the negative effects that can occur in facilities such as prisons, re-education centres, children's homes, etc (Matoušek, 2008; Matoušek et al., 2013). In practice, we may also encounter the division of causes into subjective and objective. Objective factors are those that an individual cannot influence by their own behaviour, whether positive or negative. We mainly advise on the social policy of the state, which includes employment policy, housing policy, family policy, etc. In addition to politics, this also includes the overall social setting of the perception of homeless people and their attitudes towards them. "Subjective factors" are influenced by individuals, families, social groups, their abilities, traits, temperament, character, age, etc. (Budayová et al., 2022; Mátel & Schavel, 2011).

Jolana Hroncová et al. (2006) they divide them into four groups:
- Material, this includes in particular the loss of property and related housing, employment, financial security, personal debt, etc.
- Relational, this includes in particular the breakdown of the family in the form of divorce, its disruption due to broken relationships at diffe-

rent levels and combinations, which may be due, among other things, to the presence of other social pathology in the family, such as alcoholism, sexual abuse.

• Personality, somatic illness or disability and associated disability. Mária Vágnerová (2008) points out that

it can be a mental retardation, a personality disorder, or a deviation due to long-term alcohol and drug abuse, a mental illness, etc. People suffering from mental illness often become homeless, who, after being released from the hospital, are not always able to make an acceptable adaptation to independent living. The risk of social failure increases their tendency to behave abnormally, their dependence on psychoactive substances and their non-compliance with treatment (p. 56)

• Institutional, this is the last category of subjective factors of homelessness and we include people released from institutions, prison facilities, re-education homes or children's homes, etc. (Hroncová et al., 2006).

Matoušek (2008) argues that objective and subjective factors are inseparable. It highlights the social skills of the individual and considers them necessary for effective crisis management. Social skills are conditioned by the high demands and conditions of society, in which social as well as economic factors participate, but last but not least, the fatal individual shortcomings of the homeless. The absence of such skills makes it impossible to deal with situations and meet the demands of today's, complexly structured society (e.g. complications in losing and finding a job, housing or divorce). Such incompetence later leads to the loss of material and relational background and a slump across society. Helena Draganová (2006) states that the most common cause of homelessness is job loss, which represents 23%, followed by divorce – 20%, family departure – 11%, release from imprisonment – 11%, misconduct – 3% and last but not least, exit from another institutional facility – 2%. It is a free and voluntary decision for only – 7% of homeless people, but even in this case we must take into account personality factors such as mental disorders and the like.

Most society perceives the homeless through individual factors. Such a perception of the problem of homelessness can be divided into two theories:

• The first of the theories blames the homeless, claiming that the victim is also the culprit. A homeless man who finds himself on the street is himself responsible for his situation and is perceived as an alcoholic, deviant, tramp, etc. Since the perception of a homeless person in this case is not favourable, the proponents of this theory are not in favour of wider assistance in the form of providing permanent housing, etc.

• According to the second theory, a person becomes homeless on the basis of his own failure or incapacity, but he is not held personally responsible for this condition. From such a perception, the provision of minimal assistance to the homeless is absolutely insufficient (Matoušek, 2008).

Research

The main goal of the research was to identify and subsequently analyse the views of social workers on the problem of homelessness and to suggest ways to improve their unfavourable situation. The secondary goals were:

- identify the most common causes that have caused people to end up on the streets;
- to identify public prejudices against homeless people.

By identifying the main goal as well as the sub-goals, we set the following preliminary hypotheses for the needs of the research:

- Preliminary Hypothesis No. 1 (PH1)

We anticipate that social workers, from previous experience in working with the homeless, will state that the most common cause that contributes significantly to people ending up on the streets is alcoholism rather than unemployment and divorce.

- Preliminary Hypothesis No. 2 (PH2)

We assume that social workers will state that the public attributes to the homeless as the reason for losing their home rather than not wanting to work than drinking alcohol.

We used the interview method, which Peter Gavora describes as "a specially conducted interview of the researcher with the researched person (s)" (2006, p. 48) in the implementation of the research itself and in the gradual acquisition of all information necessary to achieve the required goals. It is characterised by direct contact of both actors, i.e. it is a face-to-face communication (telephone interview is not typical for qualitative research). The interview is not just an alternation of questions and answers aimed at obtaining information, it is also a social relationship between two people at a specific time and environment. The aim of the interview is to find out the facts, opinions, beliefs and attitudes of people through questions. The answers help the researcher to understand the people, situations and environments in which they live. In the interview, people talk about what they know, what they have experienced, what they have done, how they testify, and their statement is first-hand and given in the first person singular, observation and case studies (Bačíková & Jánovská, 2018). We used open coding as another method of our research. Roman Švaříček and Klára Šeďová characterizes open coding as follows:

coding in general represents operations by which data are analysed, conceptualised and compiled in a new way. With open coding, the text is broken into units as a sequence, these units are given names and the researcher then works with the newly named (marked) fragments of the text (2007, p. 211)

We obtained all the detailed information about the participating participants in person before the start of the interview itself. For reasons of anonymity, we have abbreviated the names and surnames as follows:
- SP1 – 55 years, 5 years of professional experience in the social field,
- SP2 – 45 years, 7 years of professional experience in the social field,
- SP3 – 48 years, 27 years of professional experience in the social field,
- SP4 – 44 years, 6 years of professional experience in the social field,
- SP5 – 47 years, 22 years of professional experience in the social field.

During the research, we asked the participants the following research questions:
- In your opinion, from your previous practice, what are the most common causes that contribute to people ending up on the streets?
- What prejudices against homeless people do you encounter most often?

We conducted interviews with participants during the months of March and April 2022. They took place in the form of personal meetings directly at the social department of the city of Poprad. The participants were informed about the overall course of the interview and were asked 6 identical questions. The duration of the individual interviews ranged from 15 to 25 minutes. We recorded the answers in writing and with a voice recorder. Following the end of all meetings, a literal transcription of the recorded interviews was performed, i.e. there was a literal transcription of all terms used, interjections, non-literary terms, or unfinished words used in the recorded conversation (Gavora, 2006). Transcription is a process in which a researcher translates a recorded speech from an individual interview or group discussion (Hendl, 2016). After literally rewriting the interviews, we then did open coding and categorisation. The researcher is referred to under the letter "R" in this transcript.

Literal Transcription Interview

R: *"Good day. At the beginning of our meeting, let me thank you for your willingness to take part in this interview. I appreciate your helpfulness and the time you give me. During the following interviews, I will address you by name, but in its transcript, due to anonymity, your name will be replaced by the abbreviation SP with the assigned serial number of the participant. All questions and answers will be recorded in writing and by voicemail. If you have any questions that you are asked incomprehensibly, please let me know. So, if you'll allow me, we'll go straight to the interview."* R: "In your opinion, what are the most common causes that contribute to people ending up on the streets?" (Question 1) SP1: *"Causes of homelessness? This is clearly a job loss for my clients due to alcohol consumption. I see it this way. Although my colleagues may have other experiences."* SP2: *"You know, there are different groups of people on the street, both young and old, even seniors. Each of them has a story behind them. Sometimes they are to blame, but sometimes others help them. I have been working with homeless*

*people for many years, so from my point of view and many years of experience, I could say several reasons for losing a home, but I consider alcohol addiction to be the most common, triggering a chain reaction in a person's life when he finally finds himself on the streets."*SP3: *"It's individual. I meet this community quite often, and I can tell from their conversations that many ended up on the streets as a result of losing their jobs and failing to take care of their families. Then despair comes and they succumb to the situation, they start drinking alcohol and the family can no longer handle it with such a person. Divorce ensues and the despair of a person deepens even more, he can't take more advice with himself and so he ends up on the street."*SP4: *"The causes of homelessness are certainly the most common alcohol dependence, job loss. It alternates, you know, it encourages the other. Many were unable to get rid of their gambling addiction, losing all the savings the family had. How do you think it ended? Divorce, despair, the loss of the roof over your head. You don't even know how and you will become homeless."*SP5: *"Most often? So probably the job loss associated with alcohol. But there are other reasons that have deprived people of their homes. For example, they took out quick loans, which, of course, they could not repay, then executions came and confiscated their housing. Furthermore, divorce partners cause a person to lose a roof over their head, they do not have enough income to pay for housing. The reasons can be different."*

Open Coding

alcohol, job loss, divorce, family, despair, addiction

Category 1: The effects of alcohol on homelessness

In their response, all participants SP1, SP2, SP3, SP4, SP5 mentioned alcohol as the cause of homelessness. Alcohol addiction then triggers a chain reaction in a person's life until he or she finally finds himself on the streets. However, participants SP1, SP3, SP4, SP5 cited job loss as another possible cause of homelessness. These two causes alternate, one stimulating the other. According to participants SP3, SP4, SP5, another cause of home loss is divorce. According to SP3 and SP4 participants, divorcing partners deepens a person's despair, so the family has some influence on whether a person loses their home, especially in their willingness to solve the problem of their family member.

R: "What prejudices against homeless people do you encounter most often?" (Question 2)SP1: *"I feel that many people see homeless people as a special kind of people who have chosen it as their lifestyle. Or even that they are people who have failed fatally and this is their punishment. It's definitely a controversial topic, and maybe people don't quite understand why some end up on the streets. I'm sorry we don't see what some people, such as Nota Bene vendors, are doing to move on. They have already taken the step necessary to end homelessness, and many of them have two or three jobs. But what is missing here is for us as a company to take a step."*SP2: *"The most common prejudices are that everyone drinks alcohol, that they do not want to work and that they only beg and annoy people. Many times I do not know which was the first - whether the addiction did not come until after the people on the street. Suddenly you are alone, the circle of friends is radically narrowed or reduced to people who are in the same situation as you. You are*

*frustrated, depressed, you have no family to lean on, no background, no life goal. Therefore, it often happens that people resort to addiction. Not just the alcoholic one."*SP3: *"The homeless community is generalising, they are just dirty people, still drunk in alcohol who does not want to work. They are a burden for society. Going to work from the street is impossible. These people have nowhere to sleep, so they are still tired, they feel cold at night, which increases the fatigue and worsens their health. They have nowhere to eat, wash, shave, wash clothes."*SP4: *"This group of people is uninteresting to the public, they have the label homeless. They consider them unnecessary for society because they do not work, drink alcohol all the time, go after begging. In my work experience, a lot of people are impressed, unfortunately, illegally. There are several reasons. They often do not have documents and without documents you will not get a job legally. Many of them are older, have health problems or are of Roma origin, so that's why they have a big problem finding a job. And the biggest problem is basically obvious - they live on the street."*SP5: *"We try to communicate a lot about our work and explain to the public why it is important. Why it is important to open this topic and take an interest in it. But of course, there are also people who think that homeless people are to blame and therefore do not need to help them. People often think that if a homeless person wants to live decently, he should start working first. As a result, people think that the homeless do not want to work. Except they don't realise how difficult it is to go to work when you live on the street. It's just the opposite: first is housing and then you can work. Only when you have housing do you suddenly have room to work."*

Open Coding

Lack of interest in working, society, alcohol, begging, health problems, housing.

Category 3: Unemployment versus alcoholism

Participants SP2, SP3, SP4, SP5 state that the most common prejudice of people is the lack of interest of the homeless. According to participants SP2, SP3, SP4 it is alcohol and according to SP2 and SP4 it is also begging. The public perceives the homeless as dirty alcoholics and beggars, who are a burden to society and are unnecessary because they do not work. SP3 and SP4 participants point to a problem with the work of the homeless in connection with health problems and housing. People often think that if a homeless person wants to live decently, let him start working first. Social workers say that housing is needed first and then you can work, because when you live on the street it is difficult to go to work, and the public is not aware of this.

Analytical Induction

We arrived at the generation of individual hypotheses through analytical induction. According to Gavora

in analytical induction, the researcher moves from the research sample to the empirical data and from them to the hypotheses, and then from them to the new sample and to the reformulated hypotheses. This cycle is repeated until the hypotheses are sufficiently verified, and so they become a theory (2006, p. 50)

Based on the preliminary hypotheses and the information obtained from the interviews with the participants, we established the final hypotheses (FH).

PH1: We anticipate that social workers, from previous experience in working with the homeless, will state that the most common cause that contributes significantly to people ending up on the streets is alcoholism rather than unemployment and divorce.

We verified the preliminary hypothesis through research questions 1 and 2. From the answers of the participants, we found that the most common cause of homelessness is alcoholism, which triggers a chain reaction of other causes that cause people to lose their homes and that is job loss, divorce. One encourages the other. Less significant factors that can contribute to homelessness status are quick loans, foreclosures. An important element in preventing home loss is prevention, which can catch the problem and thus help prevent the problem from getting worse. Know about your problems, talk to family, loved ones, friends, or seek professional help, thus preventing the accumulation of other problems. From the results of the research we can state that PH1, in which we assumed that the most common reason why people end up on the streets is alcoholism rather than unemployment and divorce, was confirmed, based on which we formulated it as the final hypothesis No. 1.

- FH1: We assume that social workers will state from previous experience in working with the homeless that the most common cause that significantly contributes to people ending up on the streets is alcoholism rather than unemployment and divorce.
- PH2: We assume that social workers will state that the public attributes to the homeless as the reason for losing their home rather than not wanting to work than drinking alcohol.

Our assumption that the public thinks that homeless people do not want to work was the basis for determining PH2. The participants told us about questions 3 and 4 that the most common prejudices of people towards the homeless is their reluctance to work, as a result of which they got into this situation. Others attribute to the homeless their alcohol dependence, which has caused them to lose their jobs and housing. The public also sees the homeless as beggars who harass people. However, the biggest prejudice is that they do not want to work. However, there are people who, for various reasons, want and are willing to help this community, whether it is by providing food or a small financial alms. It is important to say that as marginalised society has excluded them, society can be the element that will help them reintegrate into society and help them improve their quality of life. Based on the information obtained, we can state that the public attributes the reluctance to work to homeless people as a reason, which confirmed PH2, and in the same wording we formulated it as the final hypothesis No. 2.

- FH2: We assume that social workers will state that the public attributes to the homeless as the reason for losing their home rather than not wanting to work than drinking alcohol.

Conclusion

We have come to realise that the most common reasons why people lose their homes are alcoholism, which triggers other reactions such as job loss and subsequent divorce. By finding themselves on the street, they become the subject of a negative public view of their person with a lack of understanding of their condition and their needs. Social workers make an effort to prevent this situation, but their efforts are sometimes unsuccessful, because if there is no interest on the part of the person who has the problem to solve the situation, then any effort on the part of the social worker is pointless. Insufficient interest from the state must be replaced by local governments and third sector organisations, which try to help this target group to improve their living conditions in the form of shelters, dormitories, food, clothing ... The lack of affordable housing is the cause of deepening problems Because ensuring each of them housing is a long run, many times with an unsuccessful end.

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