The Life Alternatives of Young People Without Shelter in the Context of Mental Health

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Original Article

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Abstract:

The paper deals with issues related to the life of homeless young people in the context of their mental health. The aim of the article is to present an alternative to the life of homeless young people on the street and their specifics from the point of view of age, causes of their social decline in this phenomenon, loss of background, etc. Attention is also drawn to coping with the stigma of one's own past, but also to other consequences of a non-standard life, such as drug addiction, registration in the criminal record and accumulated debts. Life on the street is mentioned, where one loses privacy, the ability to satisfy basic needs and often-even self-respect, which must endure in order to survive here. In society, homeless people are stigmatized, moreover, if they suffer from a mental disorder, in-

cluding dual ones. Even if social work is providing professionally, their full integration back into society is complicated. The use of existing mental health centres in this issue appears to be beneficial, which is a new element of care for people with mental illness using the CARe system. That is, to provide help in the treatment of mental illness, but also support in all necessary areas of the client's/patient's life (general health and psychological state, housing, employment, social and social status, etc.), which can help in solving the mental health of homeless young people in the affordable involvement of a psychologist or psychiatrist in their social reintegration back into majority society.

Introduction

Currently, homelessness is a global problem with an increasing proportion of young people who have ended up on the streets for various reasons. Based on this fact, many experts in the Czech Republic, as well as abroad, started to take a targeted interest in the addressed issue. Tracking young homeless people and their specifics in terms of age has considered a serious problem for a long time.

In order to approach this serious issue, we first introduce some authors, experts, who focus on this social group and are, used to compare the entity to the addressed problem, for example Janebova, 1999; Boydell et al., 2000; Burt, 2007; Prudkova, Novotny, 2008; Reeve, 2011; Piotrowski, 2011; Marek, Strnad, Hotovcova, 2012; Vagnerova, 2014; Marschall, 2016; Kidd et al. 2018; Cerna, 2019; Tompset, Fowler, Torro, 2019; Nesporova, Holpuch, 2020; Vokurkova, 2022; Skodova, 2021; Pavelkova 2022, etc.

Each country has a specific approach to the entity in terms of historical and social context. Based on this point of view, we present in more detail professional works that deal with the social environment of the solved issues in the Czech Republic. M. Vagnerova and the team already dealt with homelessness as an alternative of the life of homeless young people in detail ten years ago (Vagnerova, Csemy, Marek, 2014). They draw attention to the causes of formation of this phenomenon, the loss of their background, which they never even had. They describe life on the street, where one loses privacy, the ability to satisfy basic needs and often-even self-respect; they show what must endure in order to survive here. They also describe the opposite process, of returning from the street back to society, and the difficulties that must overcome to make this possible. In their opinion, it is not only a matter of managing the stigma of one's own past, but also other consequences of a non-standard life, such as drug addiction, registration in the criminal register or accumulated debts. The text is an authentic image of the mentioned social group. However, the positive thing is the stated fact that, especially for young people, life on the street can only be a temporary life phase.

J. Marek (2018) devoted himself to the research project "Psychosocial determinants in the reintegration of young homeless people", which concerns an age-specific young population between the ages of 18 and 26. He confirms the results with the genesis of homelessness, which begins long before the very fall on the street; looks for and presents situational factors as well as personality characteristics leading to the emergence of homelessness that existed even before that. He finds many sustaining factors that affect the individual during life on the street. He describes the reintegration process itself in overcoming barriers to reintegration back into mainstream society (how to deal with the past, detach from the current situation and find the meaning of life directed towards the future).

In her publications from 2010 and 2014, J. Pavelkova presents extreme forms of poverty, respectively misery, as a manifestation of social exclusion using the example of homeless people and beggars. She provides basic information about this social target category of people who

are clearly poor, living on the fringes of mainstream society and characterized by their specific way of life, with a focus on the younger generation. In 2022 she presented three consecutive professional articles dedicated to the alternative life of homeless young people in the professional journal Clinical Social Work and Health Intervention (The Issue of Homeless Young People; Homeless Young People – Relationships and Risks of living on the Street; The Issue of Homeless Young People as an Alternative of Life - Subjective Evaluation of Life on the Street).

The results of interesting qualitative research were brought by the work of M. Skodova (2021), focused on young homeless people and their life on the street from the point of view of causes, subjective assessment of the situation, the dangers of living on the street, social relations and the street and the use of social care provided.

Homelessness itself can understand as a complex generalized social failure of an individual. This is a social category of people who are clearly poor, living on the fringes of society and characterized by their specific way of life, which singles them out on the fringes of society based on their inability to participate in the quality of life and disregard for the requirements of the majority society (Vagnerova, 2014).

The aim of the article is to present issues related to the phenomenon of homeless young people and to understand the reasons and causes of their social decline, which led to their unfavourable social situation and the alternative of living on the street. We are talking about a complex phenomenon, where it is not only a lack of shelter, but also other basic factors that condition it.

Among them is the fact whether the individual has a place to live that is suitable for living, whether he has any legal certainty about this place with space for his private life. It is precisely with the loss of home and his social exclusion that he ends up on the fringes of society, his value and normative system and lifestyle change, which manifests itself in changes in all areas of life:

- They will lose their professional position and the related legal access to funds, and the resulting economic self-sufficiency;
- Exclusion from the family community, disruption of relationships with close people and the breakdown of the social network;
- A reduced lifestyle and an increase in dependence on the support of charitable societies, begging and searching through garbage or criminal activity (Prudkova, Novotny, 2008).

Based on life on the street, the individual undergoes a process of de-socialisation. Marginalization associated with homelessness also brings social stigmatization, because the majority society clearly considers life on the street to be a negative deviation from the norm and for most people it is evidence of social pathology and they take a rejecting and condemning attitude towards it.

The causes of homelessness can divide according to the factors that lead to the emergence of this phenomenon, into objective and subjective. The first are influenced for example by the social policy of the state and social legislation and reflected in the observance of human rights; in respect for the law and equal opportunities for all citizens; in the education of citizens; the possibility of employment; in social protection; security in old age and diseases; employment of young people; xenophobia; ethnic problems; emigration, etc. Subjective factors are influenced by the individuals themselves; their families; various social groups or communities; their dispositions and abilities; temperament; age; achievements, etc. (Vagnerova, 2014).

They can be viewed from a material point of view (housing, employment, tragic events in the family, property conditions, unexpected events in society, floods, etc.), or from the point of view of breakdowns and breakdown of relationships in the family (dysfunctional family), community with its subsequent failure or with regard to problems in the personality itself (mental retardation, mental or physical illness, lack of independence, loneliness, disability, addiction to alcohol or drugs, social immaturity, ethnic differences), etc. Situations that arise after released from hospitals, institutions, prisons or after reaching adulthood from etopedic facilities often contribute to subjective factors (Pavelkova, 2014).

According to Janebova (1999), there are still stages of loss in an individual's life, namely the loss of support from family and friends (resources and advice in solving problems, material and spiritual support).

Loss of community support (public institutions and social service organizations), when the resources provided by the community are not always adequate to prevent homelessness, or inappropriate help for people with an unstable address (the path to a chronic homeless lifestyle).

The number of homeless people in the Czech Republic has roughly doubled in the last decade. While the 2011 census recorded 11,496 homeless people, eight years later, i.e. in 2019, according to a survey by the Research Institute of Labour and Social Affairs, there were already roughly 23,830 of them, of which 2,600 were children.

The results are supported by the authors Nešporová and Holpuch (2020), who created a monograph to support the long-term conceptual development of the research organization for the period 2018–2022, which is part of the project "Research of the homeless population in the Czech Republic taking into account economic activity depending on the stages of the life cycle" (VUPSV, Prague). It provides representative data on people sleeping "outdoors" in the Czech Republic, in Low-threshold hostels, in asylums, in halfway houses and in non-commercial municipal hostels for homeless people. The text provides information on the basic socio-demographic characteristics of homeless people, their family and social background, and the length and continuity of homeless life. It also monitors the economic activity of homeless people, their sources of income, indebtedness and the saturation of basic life needs. Attention is devoted to often-poor physical and mental health and addictions to alcohol and drugs. The level of use and demand for individual types of social services for homeless people is monitoring. The forms of help that homeless people themselves consider be key are also specified. Compared to those who use at least occasionally some type of accommodation service, homeless persons who sleep outside are the poorest, the most socially excluded, with the least basic life needs met and most often physically or verbally attacked. At the same time, addictions to alcohol and other addictive substances are the most widespread among them.

Homeless Young People

A significant part of the addressed subculture, almost half, consists of young people under the age of 26 (Vagnerova et al., 2014).

The specifics of the life of young people living on the street

Homeless young people represent a separate group that requires a different approach (Vagnerová, Csemy, Marek, 2014). Some young people without shelter, for example, refuse to use social services for this social target group, on the condition that there are also elderly homeless people in this facility. (Marek, Strnad, Hotovcova, 2012; Cerna, 2019). The thinking and behavior of younger people without a background is different and meeting the older generation can often cause tension. It is necessary to realize that in early adulthood young people have to deal with a number of challenges, such as gaining independence, studying at university or getting a job, establishing important partner relationships, etc. This age group appears to experience greater levels of stressors than the homeless population. In terms of mental health, young adults show higher levels of hostility and paranoid ideas than other age groups (Skodova, 2021). The difference is also in the feeling of the loss of background. Compared to older homeless people, they do not lose the built environment, but only the environment in which they brought up and they did not choose the environment. The same applies to the loss of previous roles and built-up social status, which older homeless people bear harder (Marek, Strnad, Hotovcova, 2012).

According to the German Youth Institute, homelessness is increasingly affecting young people (Marschall, 2016). A study from 2015 talks about 20,000 thousand young people under the age of 27 living outside the system. They do not go to school, they do not have a job and they do not even receive support from the state. Many of them end up homeless or drug addicts. "*But you do not see these young people on the street*

very often," says social worker Ines Fornaçon from the Berlin street worker Station Off Road Kids. They usually do not sleep directly on the street, but spend the night with different friends, often for years. They are called "Sofa-Hopper" here. "They have moved their social contacts to the Internet: "*They meet more on Internet applications such as WhatsApp than in public spaces*." This is how hidden homelessness actually arose. However, this trend can observe for approximately ten years.

From the point of view of substance abuse, there are no major differences compared to older homeless people. Tompset, Fowler and Torro (2019) reported that alcohol abuse was involved in 50.6% of younger and 56.5% of older homeless individuals. Drug abuse involved 47.4% of younger adults and 56.3% of older adults.

Causes of the social decline of homeless young people

The causes for young people are often the breakdown or dysfunction of the family. Furthermore, the causes can divide into so-called throwaways, i.e. people whom thrown out by their own families, and so-called runaways, i.e. people who left their families on their own (Marek, Strnad, Hotovcova, 2012). Compared to older homeless persons, younger adults report nearly twice as many experiences of family abuse and neglect (Burt, 2007). Young homeless people also often run away from home repeatedly, even before finally leaving for the street, almost a quarter of them (Vagnerova, Csemy, Marek, 2014).

A risk group is also persons brought up outside the family, leaving a children's home or other institutional facility. Young adults leave home unprepared and without other supportive social background, they have no one to turn to, which increases the risk of failure (Marek, Strnad, Hotovcova, 2012).

Depending on the reasons for leaving the street, a different approach is required in the process of reintegration, but also prevention from the point of view of, for example, excessive use of drugs or alcohol, inability or unwillingness to work systematically, a combination of behavioural disorders and mental illness.

Excessive use of drugs and/or alcohol is clearly a possible trigger and accelerator of falling into the street.. The result is an inability to manage work, the high cost of obtaining drugs leads to the inability to pay bills or the accumulation of debt. They easily lose their jobs, are kicking out of their rent or hostel, or even their home. It is also possible to mention obstacle in the availability of housing, poverty, the impossibility of paying for housing (40.0% of one's income for housing). (Vokurkova, 2022).

The inability or unwillingness to work systematically has usually manifested already in childhood in relation to education. We can describe individual as reckless, irresponsible and lazy. They tend to take advantage of the family and if family run out of patience, they end up on the streets. Individuals with a combination of behavioural disorders and reluctance to work are often burdened with debt problems and delinquent and criminal activity, manifesting as theft and cheating; they procure their finances illegally (Vagnerova et al., 2014).

According to Skodova, mental illness can also be the cause of an individual's fall on the street.

Depressive and anxiety disorders, suicidal behavior, post-traumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders appear in homeless youth (Skodova, 2021).

Among other causes, we can add belonging to a sexual minority and a different sexual orientation (sexual minority ranges from 6.0 to 35.0%; often stigmatized) and is often not acceptable by the family (Burt, 2007).

An alternative of street life

As M. Skodova states, homeless young people like to claim that they chose life on the street voluntarily and that they enjoy such a life. For them, the street represents a place of freedom, where they do not have to follow the rules, e.g. of their own parents, teachers, educators, superiors, etc. The impulse can be failure to finish school, conflicts with the parents' new partner, or different ideas about their future. Young adults sometimes themselves sense that the contradictions are great and leave the family background. Life on the street can also be a manifestation of be-

longing to various subcultures, e.g. punk or hip hop, a certain rebellion against the system (they do not identify themselves as homeless people, but consider it their own choice as "street children, squatters". It is also often a reaction to losing one's home.

Social Services

Social services, according to Act No. 108/2006 Coll., on social services, as in Slovakia (similarly Act 448/2008 Coll., on social services), include social counselling, social care services and social prevention services. Homeless people use social prevention services the most. These help to prevent the social exclusion of persons who are at risk of a crisis social situation, life habits and way of life leading to conflict with society, a socially disadvantageous environment and a threat to the rights and legitimate interests of another natural person. The goal of social prevention services is to help people overcome their unfavourable social situation and to protect society from the emergence and spread of undesirable social phenomena. Social prevention services that concern homeless people include asylum houses, low-threshold day centres, shelters, outreach programs, halfway houses, contact centres and social rehabilitation services, etc.

The main goal of social work with homeless people is their return to society and change their philosophy of thinking. We must take into account the specifics of this subculture and maintain of an individual approach (reintegration into the client's natural environment, his mentality, changes in the subjective causes of homeless life, but also public attitudes, effects on family and society, etc.).

According to Skodova (2021), social services represent an important component in the lives of young homeless people. They provide an opportunity to carry out hygiene; they offer a space where clients have accepted without prejudice. Also, represent a fixed point or a certain pattern of ordinary life. The approach of an experienced social worker plays a big role. However, the lack of one's own space or privacy has considered a disadvantage. She also mentions a similar problem with social services, identified as a lack of privacy and peace (2019). According to mentioned author, another of the barriers to the use of social services is the accumulation of people with a similar problem in one place, which can lead to conflict, especially in the winter months.

Numbers of homeless people

According to the UN (2020, in Vavro, 2021), there are over 150 million homeless people in the world, which is an approximate number, because statistics are unfortunately only kept by developed countries and big cities. This is almost 2.0% of the world population. The largest number of homeless people occur in big cities.

Getting an accurate picture of the number of homeless people in the world is quite difficult, for several reasons. The first such reason is the definition of homelessness. Second, states lack the resources and commitment to measure this globally widespread phenomenon. State governments tend to underestimate homelessness. Currently (2024), as a result of the military conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza in conjunction with global ecological disasters, it is possible to state a further increase in the number of homeless people, among whom there is certainly a large percentage of the young generation.

The biggest problem is getting numbers on the number of homeless people in developing countries. Manila, the capital of the Philippines, said to have the largest number of homeless people of any city in the world, but estimates range from a thousand to a million. Trends in recent years show that homelessness rates have increased in England, Ireland, the Netherlands, Italy and New Zealand, while falling in Finland and the United States. The majority of homeless people in the USA are male and younger. Most states do not intend to fight poverty or homelessness politically, which will probably keep this problem part of modern life (Chamie, 2020 in Vavro, 2021).

Because of 2020 engulfed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of homeless people has undoubtedly increased. This virus originated in China, from where it began to spread to the rest of the world. Because of this expansion, the WHO declared a global pandemic that affected every country. Many people lost their jobs

and the associated housing of people who until recently led a completely normal life without problems. The pandemic had a huge impact on the increasing number of homeless people in the world (Tab. 1).

As stated by Vavro (2021) "Spatial Differentiation of Homelessness in Europe - An Analysis" is carried out at the level of 36 European countries. It should note that smaller states and states for which no data find are not included in the work. The average rate of homelessness in European countries is 181.2 per 100,000 inhabitants. The highest values achieve Albania (1124.2) and the lowest Croatia (11.4).

In the environment of the Czech Republic, not so much attention is devoted to the issue of homeless young people. Based on the mentioned entities, a pilot qualitative research (5 participants of young homeless people who used low-threshold social facilities), carried out in 2021, led by Skodova, using the technique of collecting information through a semi-structured interview, which resulted in interesting conclusions that confirmed the mentioned facts.

Table 1 Countries with the highest and lowest rates of homelessness in Europe

State	Homelessness per 100,000 inhabitants
Albania	1 124.4
Slovakia	430.2
Germany	405.9
Latvia	358.2
Luxembourg	335.4
Sweden	325.0
Serbia	286.5
Austria	243.4
The Czech Republic	223.6
Bosnia and Herzegovina	218.0
State	**Homelessness per 100,000 inhabitants**
Croatia	11.4
Belgium	22.7
Lithuania	30.7
Belarus	42.2
Portugal	42.9
Russia	44.3
Montenegro	48,2
Spain	48.9
Bulgaria	49.8
Switzerland	64.0

Source: Vavro, 2021

The first area investigated was the cause of homelessness. Marek, Strnad and Hotovcova (2012) describe that the cause of homelessness among young people is often the breakdown or dysfunction of the family. The impulse to leave the family can also be different ideas about their future. Other identified causes were substance abuse, an irresponsible relationship with finances, job loss and an adverse psychological state. Vagnerova, Csemy and Marek (2014) divided the causes of leaving to the street into several categories, namely excessive use of addictive substances or alcohol, inability and unwillingness to work systematically, a combination of behavioural disorders and mental illness. In the mentioned research (2021), the abuse of alcohol or other addictive substances also figured as a cause, which subsequently led to the loss of a job and other problems associated with the use of substances. Hodgson, Shelton, and Los (2013 in Kidd et al., 2018) describe a complex relationship between mental health, substance use, and homelessness. They state that 48.0-98.0% of homeless youth would meet criteria for at least one mental health diagnosis, which is acceptable within the results obtained.

Homelessness as such, homeless young people perceive in various ways. The resulting situation includes feelings of guilt, it can serve as an escape from the past, but it also represents a life experience and a form of lifestyle. From the data analysis of the presented research, we came to very similar results as Marek, Strnad and Hotovcova (2012), where for their participants, life on the street symbolized a place of freedom, where young adults do not have to follow rules or fulfil any obligations.

Based on the mentioned comparisons, it follows from the research that it is important to consider care for the mental health of young people and the involvement of a psychologist

or psychiatrist in the process of reintegration of a homeless young person. Quality screening activities within the provision of field social services and active resolution of the situation are also essential.

Currently, mental health centres, established at psychiatric hospitals following the reform of psychiatric care in the Czech Republic, can be using to solve the issue of the availability of psychologists and psychiatrists within the framework of providing social work. The general aim of the reform is to improve the quality of life of people with mental health, the fulfilment and exercise of the rights of people even with addressed disadvantage. It is the providing of systematic, coordinated, interconnected care focused on recovery (*Recovery*) of the client/patient in a multidisciplinary team. As mentioned, almost 40.0% of homeless youth suffer from various mental disabilities. Here the possibility of the availability of rapid primary psychiatric care with the providing of timely diagnosis and treatment of basic mental irregularities and disorders has demonstrated. A de facto balanced care model for the client's mental health offered (*Balanced Care Model)*.

In society, homeless people are stigmatizing; moreover, if they suffer from a mental disorder, including dual ones, even if social work is providing professionally, their full integration (reintegration) back into society is complicated. The team includes peer workers, care users who also participate in the provision of the service (people with their own experience of mental illness, who use this experience to support other clients and to strengthen their hope for recovery. Family members are also used.

The CARe system is not only able to provide help in the treatment of mental illness, but must also provide help and support in all necessary areas of the client's/patient's life (general state of health, housing, work, social and social status, etc.). The team is composed, and coordinated by workers from various professions and institutions. These are community teams, ambulatory care, acute inpatient care, follow-up and specialized inpatient care. The most important and accessible are mental health centres, which is therefore a new element of care for people with mental illness (a group of clients/patients most at risk of institutionalization, but also exclusion/exclusion from ordinary society (*Early Intervention*).

The team consists of a doctor, a psychologist, a psychiatrist, an addictologist, a health and social worker, mainly in outpatient and field services. Interdepartmental cooperation with ministries is also an essential part of success. It is supported by European funds (Integrated Regional Operational Program and Operational Program for Employment).

The so-called CARe (Comprehensive Approach to Rehabilitation) methodology is using, which has existed for 25 years and used in the Netherlands and other countries, authors D. Hollander and J.P. Wilken. It is a method of a comprehensive approach to rehabilitation and includes theoretical starting points, a basic vision, a practical work method and the necessary tools, including reintegration into the work process, life in the majority society. CARe is based on recovery (personal and social), focus on presence and empowerment. It teaches to deal with past events, teaches to deal with one's own vulnerability and to look again for solid reference points in the present and the future (Hollander, Wilken, 2016). Researches in the introduced entity brought justification of the used methodology also for homeless young people (Shepherd, 1984; Anthony et al, 2002; Liberman, 2008; De Girolamo, 2008; Wilker, Hollander, 2012 in Hollander, Wilken, 2016).

Recommendations for practice

1. Homeless young people have often experienced various negative and even traumatic experiences in their past. It would be appropriate for them to have easy access and the possibility to solve their problems, or the consequences left by these events on mental health with a psychologist, psychotherapist, psychiatrist or other mental health experts during the providing of social services.
2. According to current statistics, the number of homeless young people is increasing. It is therefore important to think about enough low-threshold day centres for young people without shelter and their sufficient capacity.

3. In the case of the social phenomenon addressed, the rule applies that the longer an individual lives on the street the harder it is successfully reintegrate into mainstream society.

Based on this fact, it is important to motivate homeless young people to change their situation, as soon as possible; actively search for this social group within field social services and offer it help (Act No. 108/2006 Coll. on Social Services).

Conclusion

Having a home, facilities and a stable roof over your head is one of the basic things that a person needs. Its absence represents a problem that affects all aspects of an individual's life, affecting personal, work, and economic and health areas. In the environment of the Czech and Slovak Republics, there are similar tendencies in the providing of social work to homeless people.. Unfortunately, the problem is mostly solved by non-profit organisation. With the help of the mentioned information, it is necessary to expand the knowledge about the addressed phenomenon, which has an increasing tendency and present a serious social problem. It is necessary to deal with new methods, approaches and recommendations for clinical practice for social workers when providing social work with the addressed disadvantaged social group of homeless young people. We consider it important to take care of the mental health of homeless young people and the consistent involvement of a psychologist or psychiatrist in the process of their reintegration. It is also essential to perform high-quality screening activities within the framework of field social services and actively resolve the situation that has arisen in order to influence changes in the philosophy of life of homeless young people, including with the use of spiritual help.

Only appropriately applied social work supported by motivation for change and a vision to the future of the addressed social subculture can stop or reduce the number of people living on the streets and help with their successful reintegration back into mainstream society.

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