



European  
Research Area

# EUROPEAN POLICY BRIEF



April 2011

**Combating Social Exclusion among Young Homeless Populations: a comparative investigation of homeless paths among local white, local ethnic groups and migrant young men and women, and appropriate reinsertion methods**

Finalised project: 1<sup>st</sup> May 2008 – 30<sup>th</sup> April 2011

## **SOCIAL EXCLUSION OF HOMELESS YOUNG PEOPLE IN EUROPE**

### **SUMMARY**

#### **Objectives of the research**

To combat social exclusion and poverty among young homeless people and those at risk of homelessness by gaining in-depth knowledge of the life trajectories of different young homeless populations in four countries – Netherlands (NL), Portugal (PT), Czech Republic (CZ) and the United Kingdom (UK) – and to explore the effectiveness of early intervention and reinsertion programmes.

#### **Scientific approach / methodology**

Methodologies used include literature reviews, secondary data analysis, interviews with NGOs, engaging homeless and ex-homeless young people as co-researchers, interviewing young homeless people, and observing and testing methodologies of intervention and case management in national contexts.

#### **New knowledge and/or European added value**

Family problems in combination with problems to find a proper and stable place to stay are the main risk factors and triggers of homelessness and social exclusion. Institutional and structural factors impact on homelessness and social exclusion as well, but at a later stage.

#### **Key messages for policy-makers, businesses, trade unions and civil society actors**

The solution to combating homelessness and social exclusion in Europe cannot be found in improving social services alone. Countries have to create pre-conditions on a structural level first to make improvement on the institutional level a success. Some research evidence exists that structural improvements can start at local level.

**Objectives of the research**

The objectives of the CSEYHP project are fourfold:

1. To understand the life trajectories of different homeless populations in different national contexts
2. To develop the concepts of risk and social exclusion in relation to the experience of young homeless people and to the reinsertion process
3. To test how different methods of working contribute to the reinsertion process for young people
4. To investigate the roles of and relationships between the young person and trusted adults, lead professionals, peer mentors and family members in the delivery of these programmes across all four countries.

**Scientific approach / methodology**

Methodologies used include mainly interviews with homeless young people and key-workers, literature reviews, secondary data analysis, the testing of interventions and discussing findings in national workshops. 54 young homeless people were interviewed by trained co-researchers who were themselves ex-homeless. The sample was based on the inclusion of an even number of young men and women and different ethnic groups. The sample of young homeless intended to reflect the range of young people across Europe who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and the ways in which they are excluded or not. In this study we see social exclusion as a multi-dimensional concept that covers economic, social and political aspects (Sen, 1985). We distinguish between a socio-cultural dimension (non-material) and an economic and structural component (Jehoel-Gijsbers, 2004). In this study we focussed on the risk factors contributing to social exclusion, on the process and on the condition of social exclusion, according to the following causal chain: Risk factors → process of social exclusion → condition of social exclusion (Jehoel-Gijsbers, 2004). In this study we compare the four countries in a descriptive way<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Because of the mixture of a quantitative and qualitative approach, the diversity of our sample and the relative small sample size per country, this study is not designed to make an index of social exclusion and risk factors.

## New knowledge and European added value

### ***Social exclusion as a condition***

According to our operationalisation of social exclusion as a multi-dimensional concept<sup>2</sup> the *condition* of social exclusion certainly applies to *our sample* of homeless young people. In terms of economic and structural exclusion, not surprisingly, a lack of a place of one's own and a lack of a stable home situation form an elementary form of social exclusion. Of interest are the differences between the four countries. In NL, the UK and PT, respondents rarely have no roof over their heads; they manage to find (temporary) shelter with friends, family or in social service facilities. Nonetheless, more than half of the young people who were interviewed did not have a place of their own. In CZ the situation is different: many respondents (60%) are actually living on the streets.

Young people in our sample are also affected by social exclusion in terms of *material deprivation*. In the UK, PT and NL, about half of the young people interviewed did not have enough money to manage financially. Interestingly, in CZ, this applied to only one fourth of the young people, despite the fact that 80% of the young people in CZ reported having debts. The problem of debt is relatively significant in the other countries as well.

One important subjective indicator of social exclusion is the *sense of being unsafe* that many (between 48% and 75%) of the young people said that they had experienced in their life.

In terms of *social participation*, another dimension of social exclusion, the majority of the young people in all of the countries reported having a group of friends and someone they could turn to when they feel unsafe. This suggests that there is less exclusion in this regard. In-depth interviews with respondents, however, show that social contacts do not always have a positive effect on young people. The vulnerability of their positions places young people at risk of encountering people (like juvenile delinquents, drug dealers, pimps) who take advantage of them.

### ***Risk factors of social exclusion***

The interviews with young homeless people looked back to their past lives. This gives a picture of risk factors on different levels (individual, relational, institutional and structural). Risk factors on different levels are interrelated.

#### *Individual and relational*

- *Family situation main risk factor*

The main risk factor or trigger for social exclusion is a problematic family situation. The family problems originate in and follow two different routes: the financial-economic route and the socio-cognitive route. Stated briefly: homeless young people

<sup>2</sup> De Groot & Rensen, 2010: 25, table 2.3

do not have a stable childhood because their parents have insufficient financial resources or lack the necessary skills to raise their children well. Almost all of the families were characterised by conflicts. Some of the young people were neglected or (physically or sexually) abused. Some of the parents, although their intentions were good, were incapable of raising their children because of psychosocial problems. Traumatic events in family life, like divorce, imprisonment or even death of one of the parents occurred well above average and form an additional risk. Ultimately this leads to losing or leaving the permanent place of residence.

This situation in turn contributes to a high level of mental health problems (see also Martijn and Sharpe, 2006) and suicide attempts (half of the respondents in CZ). These problems form a serious barrier to day-to-day functioning.

This finding is in line with evidence found in earlier research on (youth) homelessness which mentions “eviction (...) and relationship or family breakdown” as “the most important events leading to homelessness in most EU countries” (Busch-Geertsema, 2010: 6).

Remarkably, and as far as we know not found in previous research, in NL, UK and PT there is a marked decrease in most of the mental problems faced by young people *after* they have left their last place of residence. The results of CZ on this topic give a mixed picture. So, some evidence is found that young homeless are better off homeless than ‘at home’. This says quite a lot about the severity of the situation they were escaping from<sup>3</sup>.

- *Shelter & mental wellbeing*

The interviews we conducted demonstrate the close links between difficult family life circumstances and the lack of a stable shelter. After losing or leaving their last permanent place of residence a lot of our respondents could not find a stable place of their own and even live in the streets temporarily. Most of them live in numerous different places<sup>4</sup>. This sets the scene for a disordered existence from which it is no longer possible to get back on track. From the point of view of our respondents the main risk factor is the combination of family circumstances and the lack of a stable shelter.

Young homeless may land in a vicious circle in which different risk factors work together towards social exclusion and homelessness and staying behind at school and in the labour market.

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<sup>3</sup> De Groot & Rensen, 2010: 37

<sup>4</sup> De Groot & Rensen, 2010: 31-2

<sup>5</sup> De Groot en Rensen, 2010: 33, table 3.3

### *Institutional and structural*

One clear finding of the study is the difference in social provision in PT and CZ on the one hand and NL and UK on the other. NL and UK have an extensive and differentiated system of social services for the larger part financed by the (local) government (NL) or by private funding (UK). In PT and CZ there is a lack of services for homeless youth.

Part of the Combating Youth Homelessness project is the testing of two intervention models. The test made perfectly clear that PT and CZ lack the infrastructure (finances, places, personnel) for early intervention or key-working. Building such an infrastructure requires some structural changes.

Differences between NL/UK and CZ/PT can be traced back to the structural level. Welfare state models in the different countries influence daily lives of young homeless (Stephens et al., 2010: 257). The central question is: is there any state intervention when the market does not provide an income or other primary needs like a roof above one's head (Esping-Andersen, 1990). In NL and UK the state offers an income to young homeless people if they can't live at home and are willing to accept guardianship and participate in education or work.

Those young homeless are eligible for social services including (temporarily) shelter, which is paid for them. In PT and CZ state intervention is much less available. In PT the family takes over part of this interventionist function. Young homeless in CZ and PT have to arrange housing for themselves, which is extremely difficult because of scarcity and high market prices.

Structural and institutional risk factors are reflected in the situation of the young homeless in PT and CZ. In CZ, the situation of our respondents worsened over the years, as they tell in retrospect. They ran a greater risk of living in the streets. The risk increases remarkably quickly between their 12<sup>th</sup> year and the moment they were interviewed, reaching 60% at the time of the interview<sup>5</sup>. Mental problems and drug related problems increase as well. In PT the lack of state intervention is partly compensated for by the family, which supplies money and shelter. Yet the disadvantage is that young adults have to stay with their parents, even if the situation is unbearable.

In both CZ and PT chances on the labour market and earning a sufficient income are more limited because of lower levels of education, and badly paid cash-in-hand jobs. In UK and NL chances for young people to overcome their excluded position, seem to be somewhat higher. Young people are better educated and can rely on benefits more often.

### ***The process of social exclusion***

The main risks for social exclusion for young homeless people arise at the individual and relational level. This holds true for all four countries.

However, the way social exclusion of young homeless people

develops over time is to a large extent determined by risk factors on the institutional and structural level. Our results match robust research evidence that understands homelessness “as the outcome of a dynamic interaction between individual characteristics *and* structural change” (Pleace, 2000, in: Busch-Geertsema, 2010: 12). Here we find interesting differences between the four countries. The lack of a sufficient social safety net in CZ and PT, especially social services, increases the risk of growing social exclusion and limits the chances of overcoming the excluded position, while in NL and UK the social safety seems to limit the risk of an increasingly excluded position of young homeless people.

**Key messages for  
policy-makers,  
businesses,  
trade unions and  
civil society actors**

### ***Combating Poverty***

2010 has been labeled the European Year Against Poverty and Social Exclusion. According to the EU Youth strategy (2010-2018) “The social exclusion and poverty of young people and the transmission of such problems between generations should be prevented.”

Our research shows that the level of social exclusion and the risks for social exclusion differ per member state. This means that combating social exclusion and homelessness in PT and CZ has to take place on a structural and institutional level as well as on an individual and relational level. Structural measures have to be taken to create pre-conditions for an infrastructure in which effective interventions can be applied.

Recent research on (youth) homelessness shows that “a range of local influences may shape policies towards homeless people, not simply the overarching structure of the welfare regime” (Olsson and Nordfeldt, 2008; Hansen LÖfstrandt, 2010). Whether local policy can make a difference depends on which institutional and structural factors are within the responsibility of the local authorities. As Busch-Geertsema states: “effective homeless strategies aim not only at improving the effectiveness of homeless services (...) but also at filling the gaps in mainstream provision” (2010: 49).

### ***Prevent social exclusion by early intervention and family support***

Social exclusion of young homeless people starts at a young age and is often rooted in a disadvantaged family situation. Interventions are needed that will be aimed directly at these family problems at an early stage. Interventions like these should at least consist of: a risk assessment to identify young people at risk (with a checklist of important risk factors like economical deprivation, arguments accompanied by violence, death of parent and running away), family mediation and support to improve the family situation. Family support should ideally consist of an integrated approach in which different domains, like parenting, finances, education and relational aspects are covered. When the family situation does not improve and the (mental) health and safety of children is at risk, more drastic interventions like placing in care or alternative housing should take place.

### ***Provide affordable social housing for youth***

Affordable social housing provisions for young people are scarce in most countries. This means that the possibilities to run an independent household are very limited for young people with a low income and disadvantaged position – even if they are essentially able to do so. Different types of accommodation should be available for different types and ages of homeless youth, from emergency accommodation to permanent and

independent accommodation. Less independent youth might need supported accommodation for some time<sup>6</sup>.

### ***Stable and continuous care and social provisions for youth at risk***

Our research shows that a broad network of social services for young people offers chances to surmount their homelessness and social exclusion. Therefore the existence of social provisions for young people at risk is a prerequisite to combat social exclusion of homeless young people. A second requisite is the safety and stability within these provisions. Social provisions should not be a risk factor to young people. Social services and key working are important, but cannot and should not take over individual responsibility of the young homeless for their own lives. Empowerment can serve as a basis for young people to get a grip on their own lives. By increasing their resilience they are able to fight possible setbacks in the future.

### ***Further debate***

Macro-policies impact on youth homelessness in different countries. Nevertheless, homelessness seems to be triggered by family problems *in the first place*. It seems that youth homelessness in the four countries under research is hardly ever caused by structural factors – like poverty – alone<sup>7</sup>. Without a negative family background, no young person becomes homeless. Even with the older respondents under research, especially in PT or CZ, hardly any respondent (between 16-25) reported a happy family life and homelessness thereafter caused by structural (or institutional) factors<sup>8</sup>. This is quite interesting and not debated as such in homeless literature. Longitudinal research on pathways to homelessness and social exclusion may shed light on this subject, which can offer useful insights into direct youth homelessness interventions.

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<sup>6</sup> However, there is some proof that ‘housing first’ and ‘housing led’ approaches, which offer a direct place of one’s own, are successful (Tsemberis, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> We are talking about poverty of the respondents not about their family.

<sup>8</sup> With the one exception of a part of the young homeless asylum seekers and refugees in the study, who did have a happy childhood until they left their country of birth.

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<b>Website</b>	<p><a href="http://www.movisie.nl/homelessyouth">www.movisie.nl/homelessyouth</a></p> <p>All national, thematic and comparable reports related to the project can be downloaded from this website.</p>
<b>Further reading</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Busch-Geertsema, V., Edgar, W., O'Sullivan, E., Pleace, N. (2010). <i>Homelessness and homeless policies in Europe: lessons from research</i>. FEANTSA.</li> <li>• Esping-Andersen, G. (1990). <i>The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism</i>. Polity Press. Princeton University Press.</li> <li>• Groot, N. de &amp; Rensen, P. (2010). <i>Combating youth homelessness (CSEYP). Social exclusion and youth homelessness in Northern, Southern and Central Europe</i>. Utrecht: MOVISIE.</li> <li>• Hansen-Löfstrand, C. (2010). Reforming the work to combat long-term homelessness in Sweden. <i>Acta Sociologica</i> 53(1), 19-34.</li> <li>• Jehoel-Gijsbers, G. (2004). <i>Sociale uitsluiting in Nederland</i>. Den Haag: Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau.</li> <li>• Martijn, C. &amp; L. Sharpe (2006). Pathways to youth homelessness. <i>Social Science &amp; Medicine</i> 62, 1-12.</li> <li>• Olsson, L.E. &amp; Nordfeldt, M. (2008). Homelessness and the tertiary welfare system in Sweden – The role of the welfare state and non-profit sector. <i>European Journal of Homelessness</i> 2, 157-73.</li> <li>• Sen, A. (1985). A sociological approach to the measurement of poverty; a reply to Professor Peter Townsend. <i>Oxford Economic Papers</i>, 37, 669–676.</li> <li>• Stephens, M., Fitzpatrick, S., Elsinga, M., Steen, G. van, and Chzhen, Y. (2010). <i>Study on housing exclusion: welfare policies, housing provision and labour markets</i> (Brussels: European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities).</li> <li>• Tsemberis, S. (2010). Housing First: Ending homelessness, promoting recovery and reducing costs. In: I. Gould Ellen &amp; B. O'Flaherty (eds.), <i>How to house the homeless</i>. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.</li> </ul>