

CHILDREN ROUGH SLEEPERS - FROM THE ANALYSIS OF THE PHENOMENON TO AN ATTEMPT TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM

INTRODUCTION

Homelessness among children and youth is a profoundly disturbing phenomenon, and its dimensions are difficult to diagnose unambiguously (GUS, 2012, 2013; MPiPS, 2013; Szczygieł, 2013, 2014a). Owing to the complexity of the factors determining the emergence of this phenomenon, its individual course in each case, and the diversity of the ways of getting out of it, in-depth research in this scope has to be conducted. It is also necessary to scrutinise the phenomenon from different viewpoints – the one of young people who experience this state, as well as the institutions dealing with the solution and prevention of this problem. The aim of this paper is to present the results of research on the phenomenon of homelessness among children and youth realised within the scope of the project *Children Rough Sleepers* (The Daphne III Programme) and to elaborate on the role which multi-institutional partnerships can fulfil in the area of social problems that are difficult to solve, using funds from the EU budget.

THE ASSUMPTIONS OF THE PROJECT *CHILDREN ROUGH SLEEPERS*

The project *Children Rough Sleepers* (full name: A Study Relating to Children Rough Sleepers who are Runaways & Homeless and Victims of Sexual Exploitation/Abuse & other Violence on the Streets and Development of Knowledge Transfer Activities that Improve Services & Policies to Support & Protect these Vulnerable Children) was implemented in the beginning of 2013 in a partnership comprising ten institutions, the headquarters of which are located in nine countries of the European Union. The project manager is Professor Kate Moss, a leading British homelessness specialist and scientist at the University of Wolverhampton (The UK), who is also the project coordi-

nator. Besides the University, the partnership also comprises the Association *Komunikujeme* (Czech Republic), International Child Development Initiatives – ICDI (The Netherlands), *Conversas de Rua Associacao* (Portugal), CCRESS Ltd. (The UK), Romanian Society for Lifelong Learning (Romania), *AGreenment* Association (Italy), EuroCoop (Slovenia), Simetrias (Spain), Regional Social Welfare Resource Centre (Hungary) and the *Centre of Education and Enterprise Support* Association from Rzeszow, which represents the Polish partner in the project. Such a construction of the partnership enables optimum realisation of the major assumptions, namely:

- evaluating the scale of the phenomenon of children who run away from home as a result of experiencing violence, sexual exploitation or abuse;
- offering complex aid and content-related support for people who take care of such children.

The project has clearly distinguished two aims, which refer to the diagnosis of the situation and the development of ways of preventing it and assisting those involved. Hence, the system of partnership and the division of responsibilities for the realisation of particular tasks that are assigned according to partners' experience and the main objectives concerning prospective realisation effects. This division takes into account abilities and experience, which some of the partners gained during the realisation of the previous project under the guidance of the University of Wolverhampton, which related the diagnosis of the situation and the development of the ways of helping homeless women (the project *Women Rough Sleepers*, also realised within the scope of the Daphne Programme). The results of the research conducted in that project enabled the determination of the current project's objectives, as well as its territorial scope, with particular regard to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. For this reason, institutions were invited to the new partnership, which in their activity encountered difficult social problems and realised projects aimed at youth. It is the practical experience of partner institutions within the scope of the support offered to children and youth and activity, with a view of strengthening the aid provided by public institutions, which is the key element deciding upon the success of the activities realised within the project. Owing to the fact that the activities are realised in two stages (i.e. a diagnosis of the situation through research and the development of the forms of support and aid) the key experience of the partners did not have to be research work, but the ability to offer support for children and youth. Due to the fact that while this paper was being prepared, while the realisation of the project was still in progress, some of the elements under discussion will be based on the assumptions of the project realisation.

THE RESEARCH PART OF THE PROJECT

The University of Wolverhampton was responsible for the formulation of the entire research concept. The aim of the research was to determine the scale and the causes of the existence of the phenomenon of homelessness among children and youth (in the project the phrase *children rough sleepers* was used). Owing to the broad generalisation in such a formulated major purpose and the fact that there two observation dimensions were established – children and youth as well as aid institutions – it was decided that a range of specific aims within the scope of the research conducted in both groups should be distinguished.

The aims that were established for the group of children and youth experiencing homelessness comprise (Szczygieł, 2014b) :

- the identification of homelessness determinants;
- the determination of the character of homelessness;
- the indication of the key experiences connected with homelessness;
- the identification of the factors eliminating and preventing homelessness.

The aims for the group of aid institutions are (Szczygieł, 2014b):

- the determination of the role of aid institutions with reference to children and youth experiencing homelessness;
- the identification of the state of knowledge on children and youth homelessness;
- the analysis of the regulations in force within this scope;
- the analysis of institutions' needs in the scope of trainings and content-related support;
- the identification of the current community solutions and common initiatives;
- the identification of the examples of effective activity;
- the determination of the proposals of necessary changes.

For the purpose of the research it was agreed that the notion *child* would refer to a person under the age of 18 (in individual cases – a person under the age of 21, as long as it was consistent with the aim of the research realisation). Owing to the difficulty mentioned in the introduction, in diagnosing the phenomenon of homelessness among young people, it was decided that the definition of the phenomenon would comprise three semantic distinguishing features, namely homelessness, flatlessness, the lack of a roof above the heads of children, determined by the following characteristics (Moss & Singh, 2014):

- living on the street in the widest sense including inhabiting wasteland, unoccupied dwellings, sleeping or bedded down in the open air (streets, doorways, parks, for example) using non-significant or sporadic specia-

- lised resources or housed homeless and living in the open or in non-adapted accommodation;
- children who spend the majority of their time on the street or outside of the care of responsible adults;
 - living in a situation where that child is inadequately protected, directed or supervised by responsible adults;
 - children who run away, leave home or are thrown out, commonly referred to as ‘Runaways’: including young people who stay away from home for at least one night without the permission of their parent or caregiver;
 - a homeless child who has no home where they can be expected to live, and who may be staying with friends, in a hostel, a refuge or in a shelter or another type of ad hoc or temporary accommodation;
 - a street homeless child who is sleeping rough outside on the street or elsewhere in a place not designed for regular sleeping, or who is living in accommodation not designed for human habitation;
 - children in “roving” accommodation;
 - roofless according to the European ETHOS typology of triple exclusion that is, social or legal or physical.

The acceptance of such a broad definition ensued from the will of reflecting not only the concrete experiences of children but also cultural dimensions or the differences between the countries that participate in the research.

The first stage of the research was literature review, which also comprised the analysis of the available research results coming from public statistics. This review enabled an indication of the main sources of available data (in the case of Poland there was the data of Central Statistical Office and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy), the analysis of the research results conducted by the research institutions within the scope of the projects, indirect inference on the percentage of homeless children who experienced this state as a result of violence or abuse. However, since on the basis of the literature review it was not possible to indicate the determinants of the occurrence of the phenomenon of homelessness among children and youth, it was necessary to carry out a complex, structuralised measurement, which gave the possibility of comparing the results in particular countries, which could not be obtained on the basis of the literature review alone. During the course of the work two semi-structuralised questionnaires of in-depth interviews were prepared, which respectively consisted of 38 questions addressed to children and youth and 18 questions addressed to institutions. The research was conducted in nine European countries on the same principles, namely among 20 children, and comprising 20 institutions assisting them in various aspects (within the scope of the present paper the results of the research conducted

in Poland be presented mainly). The research was being realised in the period of July – December 2013.

THE SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH CONDUCTED AMONG HOMELESS CHILDREN AND IN AID INSTITUTIONS

The interviews were conducted with 20 children, 9 of which were boys and 11 were girls between the ages of 8 to 18 years. All children were of Polish nationality. A part of them were staying in educational care facilities or foster families, whereas some of them returned to their biological families or managed to become independent. Eighteen of the children were studying and half of them stated that they had difficulties with learning. Five of the children smoked regularly and one admitted to have taken drugs. Three children used to drink alcohol. The cause that was most frequently indicated to be the reason of homelessness was the social dysfunction of the family, which ensued from the lack of an emotional bond between the child's parents, the alcoholism of a parent or abandonment by their family and the lack of the possibility of being supported by the other parent. None of the children explained that the reason for their homelessness was a result of the death of their parents. Describing their families, the children indicated the symptoms of the problems, but a clear tendency to soften the description was observed, so the interviewer did not have a negative image of the family. Only a few of the children (the older ones) endeavoured to present an objective description, giving an explanation for the situation as well as indicating the concrete shortcomings on the part of the parents, and their emotional attitude towards the situation. Virtually none of the children led a roving mode of life (except for one case) nor was a gang member (except for two cases). Children did not possess firearms nor did they commit offences (only petty thefts were diagnosed). The children were not forced into prostitution, and did not experience sex-related violence during the stay outside the home (none of the children indicated this problem to be the reason of their homelessness and did not experience it at any stage of their lives). The majority of the children were not offered any aid before having become homeless. At a later period, aid was provided after a child returned to their family or foster care. In the opinion of the majority of the children, effective prevention of the phenomenon of homelessness can consist in support for parents and families in the realisation of the child-rearing process, getting out of a difficult situation (e.g. alcoholism), and building an honest relation between

parents. Some of the children also indicated their parents' attitude towards one another (a flexible and open one was more desired than a strict one); the will to experience such a state was also diagnosed among the children (the wilful escape from home). In describing their plans for the future, the majority of the children showed a will to finish the next stage of education or to start studying at a university, become independent and start a family.

The results of the research conducted in aid institutions indicated that the key way of providing support for homeless children is to run educational care facilities for children, who do not have their home, and as a result of the decision of the court are placed in such institutions. The majority of the respondents consisted of workers from these types of institutions, but the interviews were also conducted with the employees of the foundations and associations acting for the benefit of children, streetworkers, psychotherapists, and at a police station. The participants of the research indicated that the problem of homelessness is extremely difficult to diagnose and to evaluate its dimensions even in the area of a particular institution's activity. The difficulty of the diagnosis ensues not only from the hidden character of the problem, but also the fact that it was not diagnosed at previous stages of administrative procedure that were followed with respect to children. Virtually in all cases that were discussed during the research, the justification of the court concerning placing a child in an educational care facility or foster care never contained the information regarding homelessness (understood as broadly as it is in the project), but in more than the half of the cases, episodes of running away from homes or frequent staying the night outside home were diagnosed. Such a situation is the reason for which the caregivers and the employees of the institutions themselves had to find solution and a form of help for children experiencing homelessness. None of the respondents was a participant of a course concerning the subject or presenting ways of working with a child who had experienced homelessness. Within this scope the participants of the research indicated their own methods of therapies and work with such children in their institutions. Almost every participant of the interviews emphasised the procedural inconveniences ensuing from regulations, which caused instability in the aid system. What was mentioned here was the financing of the centres, which annually have to sign a contract, which makes it impossible to employ the personnel for a long term, causes high fluctuation and, as a result of that, a lack of stability among children, who experience constant changes. Moreover, the participants fiercely criticised the present model of aid, which assumed that community interviews are conducted by the employees of Community Social Welfare Centres within the scope of social work, which results in problems not being perceived in the previous

phases of their arousal, but only an extreme situation is diagnosed. The main factor preventing the occurrence of such phenomena would be, in the respondent's opinion, work with the entire family in their natural environment. Some of the institutions in which the interviews were conducted, managed to establish such a pattern of conduct, though, for formal and legal reasons it was hard to realise it completely, however it had already produced the predicted effects (after a few years after it had been implemented).

DEVELOPING FORMS OF AID AS A RESULT OF EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIP AND PROJECT REALISATION

Within the scope of further project realisation, there was a plan to prepare guidelines for the employees of institutions and for the children who experience homelessness (as a final effect of research realisation, apart from the report presenting the results), and also to organise workshops on the subject dedicated to aid institutions. In the workshop phase of the project, partner institutions will be particularly engaged; they will present their ideas concerning the subjects of the workshops and organise them in their environment. This practical dimension of project realisation would not be possible without the participation of the institutions which assist children and youth in various aspects or active work in aid institutions. The proposition of the workshops prepared by the academe, in spite of the high content value, might not have sufficient application value, which ensues from the lack of practical knowledge on the subject of assistance and the mechanisms functioning in this area. Only the knowledge acquired on the basis of the conducted research, in spite of its key role, and owing to the aim of the project, does not provide direct tips "how" homeless children and institutions operating in particular countries should be supported in the best possible way. Thus, the element that is necessary for the proper realisation of this undertaking are the institutions dealing with the realisation of similar or even the same actions in everyday work. This is an added value of the project, which also enables the use of the previous broad experience in the activity of those institutions. This experience comprises not only the skill of providing direct aid for institutions or children, but also the skill of providing multidirectional support, including the organisation and conducting of workshops, the creation of sources and forms of knowledge popularisation, so that the project effects could reach as wide a circle of recipients as possible. Considering the aim of the project, which was not only the diagnosis of the situation but also the proposition of a concrete, adequate and trusted help, it was necessary to

guarantee balance in the partnership scheme. Therefore, the University of Wolverhampton, a strong scientific centre which has the experience in diagnosing the phenomenon of homelessness, formulated the project research concept. In the partnership it constituted the only scientific centre, which provided research coherence and enabled the use of the experience from the previous projects and actions realised within the subject of homelessness. The remaining partner institutions, which were private training institutions, social welfare centres, and nongovernmental institutions, which operate *inter alia* for the benefit of excluded people and conducting the activities within the scope of direct support, have the experience necessary for the realisation of the second phase of the project – workshops. Owing to their previous activity, they can propose the most adequate support on the subject, and, acting in concrete conditions, they can test its effectiveness. Considering the adopted construction of the project, the support was decided to be implemented in the form of workshops, though, giving the possibility of choosing from the proposed subjects. It will enable the avoidance of a situation in which the theme would be artificially imposed, as it would not be effective. It finds its justification not only in the lack of knowledge on the phenomenon of homelessness among children and youth *a priori* (before the project realisation), but also in the characteristics of each country, in which the *faces* of homelessness are definitely different, and also in association with the local aid and institutional environment, in which the research was realised and the situation was diagnosed. During the research, a complex review of state policy and the regulations on aid for children and youth experiencing such a state in each country enabled the drawing concrete conclusions, which will also be taken into consideration while preparing the form of support for institutions. Owing to that, the proposed subjects of the workshops and their evaluation after being realised will enable an international comparison of the expected aid forms in the particular countries of the project.

While analysing the situation of the functioning of the partnership itself, the feature that was worth noticing was its hierarchy, which, however, allows the flexible and democratic realisation of the undertaken actions. These features translate into the achievement of the very good effects of this project realisation. As the coordinator is a scientific institution, it is considered by the partners to be an *expert* in this area. It was of great significance in a situation in which the research tools were being prepared, where a constant and very intensive cooperation between the partners and the coordinator presenting particular versions of research method was observed. The partners were willing to share their experience, and those comments were taken into account in particular elements of methodology, which enabled the partner

institutions to become convinced that they were treated *partner-like*. This element of management of the project realisation was fruitful in the effective and quick preparation of the research plan and the particular interview questionnaires as well as the conducted research. Also, the content-related support of the coordinator while the interviews were being conducted helped the partner institutions (which had no previous experience in the realisation of a research project) with their efficient conduct. Similarly, a complete and wide information flow at every stage of project realisation resulted in the clarity of the realised tasks and it made the project a model example of the good cooperation of the academe with the practical sphere.

CONCLUSION

Effective international partnership is a guarantee of the realisation of the planned activities. Undertaking difficult issues, through a careful diagnosis of certain problems, can be fruitful only in an environment that gives complete comprehension of the aim and the realised activities. A key element is also the efficient management of the entire process, emphasising the significance and importance of each institution engaged in the project realisation. The presented example of the program *Children Rough Sleepers* gives the basis for an indication of the key elements enabling a solution to difficult social problems. The co-participation of the world of science and practice does not have to lead to tensions and a lack of understanding, but is based on the knowledge and experience of each subject – can contribute to the proposition of concrete, adequate and necessary solutions. The role of a coordinator is of key significance in this respect, and does not consist in emphasising their casting vote, but the ability to choose and combine the most necessary elements of knowledge and experience in all of the subjects involved in the project realisation.

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Summary

Homelessness among children and youth is a profoundly disturbing phenomenon, and its dimensions are difficult to diagnose unambiguously. Owing to the complexity of the factors determining the emergence of this phenomenon, its individual course in each case, and the diversity of the ways of getting out of it, in-depth research in this scope has to be conducted. It is also necessary to scrutinise the phenomenon from different viewpoints – the one of young people who experience this state, as well as the institutions dealing with the solution and prevention of this problem. The aim of this paper is to present the results of research on the phenomenon of homelessness among children and youth realised within the scope of the project Children Rough Sleepers (The Daphne III Programme) and to elaborate on the role which multi-institutional partnerships can fulfil in the area of social problems that are difficult to solve, using funds from the EU budget.

Key words: homelessness, children, partnerships