
Homelessness in Poland: An Analysis of the Pomeranian Province

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Pomeranian Forum of Getting Out of Homelessness

- › **Abstract_** *This review presents the most important aspects of homelessness in Poland based on the results of long-term research carried out on homeless people in the Pomeranian Province by the Pomeranian Forum in Aid of Getting Out of Homelessness. The author uses the results of quantitative surveys carried out in 2003, 2005, 2007 and 2009 to present an analysis of the demographic characteristics of the homeless population, and to indicate crucial problems connected with social and vocational reintegration. Such aspects as health conditions, professional activity, causes of homelessness, and the Polish system of assistance used by the homeless are significant in the description of Polish homelessness, which also contains a critical analysis of the social assistance system for homeless people in Poland.*
- › **Key Words_** *social exclusion, homelessness, getting out of homelessness, causes of homelessness, homeless assistance system*

Introduction

Homelessness is a complex problem that can be and is, certainly in the case of Poland, approached from a range of perspectives. The broadly interdisciplinary nature of research into homeless people in Poland has resulted in the application of a range of theoretical concepts and approaches, with a consequent multitude of definitions and typologies of homelessness, and numerous proposals of how to offer practical support to people experiencing housing exclusion (for recent

examples, see Dębski and Retowski, 2008; Dębski and Stachura, 2008; Browarczyk and Dębski, 2010; Browarczyk *et al.*, 2011). Homelessness is now often related to domestic violence, criminality or addictions, and it is also viewed through the lens of social policy and social work. Despite the fact that efforts to conduct national research have so far proved futile, and even though the issue of homelessness is not yet well established in sociological and psychological research in Poland, it is nonetheless the case that our knowledge of homelessness is no longer rudimentary. There has been increased interest in this issue in academia; the curricula of a growing number of higher education facilities include classes on social aspects of homelessness and homelessness prevention, mainly directed at sociology, psychology and pedagogy students. However, the issue is also addressed through social work with the homeless, namely homeless assistance and street work, and the latter has become a frequent topic of courses organized and conducted by non-government organizations (NGOs) that use this method (e.g. St. Brother Albert's Aid Society in Gdańsk).

It seems that a growing interest in the issue of homelessness is the consequence of an increase in the number of people sleeping rough in Poland, which in turn is the result of the social and economic changes of political transformation (Przyemeński, 2001, p.56). So far homelessness, broadly understood in terms of social exclusion, has been categorized somewhere between poverty and unemployment. It is currently the subject of research as well as of practical activity in terms of the various forms of support offered to homeless people; this support, or intervention, is by no means limited to financial and material aid, but also encompasses social and vocational activation through programmes and projects aimed at excluded groups (integration), and includes support for those at risk of homelessness (prevention).

The practical aspects of combating homelessness are increasingly important, not only for social politicians that frequently present problems such as housing exclusion in local and national policy documents, but also for the growing number of NGOs that include this issue in their statutory activities. Regardless of their legal status, these organizations and institutions work with homeless people and those at risk of homelessness using various tools and methods of social work.

A glance at the map of Poland and its sixteen administrative units or provinces leads to the conclusion that the interest in homelessness appears to be correlated with the activity of dynamic NGOs providing assistance to the homeless in specific regions. At present, the professional activity of third sector organizations in the field of homelessness is observed as contributing substantially to the development of a holistic support system for homeless people, and integrating academic circles through the establishment of regional networks of institutions and organizations dealing with the problem of homelessness. These organizations include St. Brother

Albert's Aid Society, Caritas of Kielce Diocese, Open Door Association, Monar Association, Barka Cooperation Network and the Pomeranian Forum in Aid of Getting Out of Homelessness.

The aim of this article is to provide a brief overview of homelessness in Poland and of the Polish support system for those experiencing housing exclusion. The article firstly focuses on the system's major flaws; despite visible progress in the last 20 years, much remains to be done. A critical analysis of the homeless support system, based on the most recent studies (Olech, 2010a-e; Dębski, 2010), will show that its flaws result from a combination of the currently inadequate social assistance legislation and the lack of a long-term approach to combating the homelessness problem. A detailed analysis of the homeless population is then outlined based on extensive research; as no national research has been carried out, the discussion is based on local research recently conducted in Poland. This data is used to define the main socio-demographic variables of the Polish homeless population, and to present the most common causes of homelessness, a geography of homelessness, and the principle health, social and vocational problems that homeless people have to contend with. The article then turns to panel research that was conducted with homeless people in the Pomeranian Province of north-central Poland, and the results of surveys conducted in 2003, 2005, 2007 and 2009 will be presented.

Major Drawbacks of the Homeless Support System in Poland

An analysis of the homeless support system in Poland clearly shows that it is principally an emergency service. Regulations and systemic solutions in the sphere of homelessness support serve mostly to 'manage' the current problem rather than to reduce the incidence of homelessness through long-term solutions. Prevention programmes for those at risk are still rare, and the social and vocational reintegration programmes currently being conducted, set up after Polish accession to the EU in 2004, seem to lack coordination, monitoring and long-term evaluation.

Homelessness is not well established in official local and national policy documents

Poland is one of the few European countries that does not have a national strategy of solving social problems. Further, many Polish cities and towns do not consider homelessness a major social problem. Efforts to introduce the national strategy for exiting homelessness in 2008 proved futile, and the National Programme for Transitioning from Homelessness and Developing Social Housing 2009-2015 (Ministerstwo Pracy i Polityki Społecznej and Ministerstwo Infrastruktury, 2009) serves to organize the homelessness support system rather than define national strategies for solving homelessness. Moreover, an analysis of over 160 'commune

strategies of solving social problems¹¹ concluded that the issue of homelessness is, indeed, of marginal significance to the authorities; in most cases it is neglected and, where mentioned, is frequently treated superficially. The commune strategies lack in-depth and long-term analysis of the problem of homelessness, an issue that is frequently highlighted in the context of intervention which usually takes place in the autumn and winter months without consideration being given to a year-round approach to helping homeless people. It is also significant that the homelessness issue is mostly overshadowed by such problems as unemployment or poverty in commune strategies of solving social problems.

Current solutions and the homeless support system are not based on empirical research and monitoring

Research on homelessness in Poland largely consists of local surveys, most of which are conducted in areas with active NGOs, and are carried out with homeless people staying in such facilities as shelters or night-shelters, or living in other institutional accommodation. Surveys of homeless people – within and outside of institutional accommodation – covering entire provinces have also been carried out, but unfortunately are still rare, and the lack of in-depth national research that would provide us with specific information on such things as the volume and geography of Polish homelessness is increasingly keenly felt. The purely practical activity beyond the research field, such as monitoring the homeless population, is equally deficient, and the databases used are frequently incomplete or outdated (Wygnańska, 2005, p.7).

Lack of comprehensive housing policy that includes all social policy institutions: homelessness as a problem of social assistance

It is a major flaw of the Polish homeless support system that the issue of homelessness is rarely linked with other social spheres and thus becomes locked in the sphere of social assistance. Such a one-dimensional view of the support system means that government and non-government organizations acting in the spheres of health, housing or the judiciary play almost no role in solving the problem of homelessness.

Unfavourable housing situation

In a detailed description of housing problems in Poland, Olech (2008) describes the general dearth of accommodation and an inadequate structure of ownership, inadequate and insignificant social accommodation for rent, and substandard and

¹¹ A commune strategy of solving social problems is an official document which must be developed and implemented by every commune in Poland. This document forms the basis for long-term programmes aimed at reducing the scale of such problems as unemployment, poverty, domestic violence, alcohol addiction and homelessness.

crowded accommodation. There are two consequences of Poland's slow move away from the social and community housing scheme that was used between 1945 and 1989 (Przyemeński, 2007), and the poor housing situation that has been observed in Poland for many years; first, situations commonly arise in which people at risk of homelessness are evicted, sent to temporary forms of accommodation and later end up in long-term facilities for the homeless, and secondly, the process of transitioning from homelessness is negatively affected. Those at risk of homelessness are in a difficult position as the inadequate number of social rental flats seriously limits their chances of living in decent conditions. Poverty and consequent financial debt means that those threatened with homelessness are frequently forced to leave their residence to stay with friends, move into substandard flats with unacceptable standards (no electricity, water, sewage system etc.), or have recourse to a facility or other form of institutional support for the homeless.

Lack of cooperation between those directly involved in helping the homeless

Instead of close cooperation in bringing about an end to homelessness, the situation in Poland resembles more of a competition, an issue that is exacerbated by the frequent underfunding of those working most closely with the homeless: the NGOs. Regional fora of institutions providing assistance to the homeless are currently being created but they are still very rare.

Failure to work with the homeless towards getting out of homelessness

Before the accession of Poland to the European Union, social work in homeless facilities was basic, but the availability of EU structural funds enabled non-government institutions and organizations to develop and conduct reintegration programmes. However, social workers are still only able to tackle homelessness at the level of the individual, and the number of those successfully getting out of homelessness remains very small. It seems that in many organizations the system of short-term assistance for the homeless, so popular in the times of communism, is still applied, and this is especially visible in social assistance centres. Improvements are observed among NGOs, which use EU funds more frequently than social assistance centres and whose staff members are mostly young people.

Lack of national standards for working with the homeless

There are some coincident standards for working with the homeless across Poland (in Gdańsk, Gdynia and Kielce) but no national guidelines have been worked out yet. Local working standards, which provide a framework for the provision of assistance to the homeless, focus on a number of areas, including standards of housing, social assistance, employment, education, street work and ethics. The lack of such guidelines may engender a variety of consequences: homeless people of different ages, health conditions, vocational statuses and prospects of getting out of home-

lessness share the same homeless facilities; assistance for the homeless is inadequately professionalized; services for the homeless are inadequate for their needs; and there is no possibility of developing complex and integrated support systems.

Selected Demographic Characteristics of the Homeless Population in Poland based on Local Research

There is no doubt that understanding the character of homelessness in Poland in terms of its scale, demography and geography is crucial to shaping national policy on the prevention of homelessness, as well as on temporary assistance, and social and vocational (re)integration. However, the fact that no national research has been conducted with a representative sample of the homeless population greatly hinders the process of defining the demography of the homeless population; most research on homelessness is local in character and usually limited to the homeless populations of particular facilities. At least three reasons for this may be identified: first, funds allocated to the scientific research of homelessness are insufficient; secondly, many people, organisations and other bodies fail to see the importance of researching the causes of homelessness; and finally, there is a belief that communes bear the greatest responsibility for solving the problem of homelessness in Poland, a view that accords with Polish legislation. Surveys conducted by communes are therefore currently used to help solve the problem of homelessness in a given region.

In order to provide an approximate demographic profile of the homeless population in Poland, I drew on the results of local research that had been conducted using various methods at different times and across different regions in Poland (CBOS, 2005; Śledzianowski, 2006; Masłowski and Sosnowski, 2009; Przewoźnik, 2009). Significant factors in defining the homeless population include: the number of homeless people, age, sex, education, marital status and place of residence. The views presented are based on socio-demographic research since 2001. Research data on the Pomeranian Province, deliberately excluded from the observations presented below, is presented in Part Three of the article.

Determining the scale of homelessness may be approached in two ways. The first involves the number of homeless people staying in a given area, provided using the headcount method and without additional social or psychological profiling. The second involves making policy recommendations to end homelessness (Kwaśniewski, 2006) and the monitoring of homelessness (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2008). Efforts to provide a definitive count of homeless people are problematic for at least three reasons. The first relates to the large number of existing databases established by various government and non-government organizations and institutions; these are frequently outdated and incomplete, and each presents a different number of

homeless people. Another reason stems from the difficulty in providing a comprehensive definition of homelessness; according to Sochocki (2010), the number of definitions and typologies of homelessness is an important factor in the divergence of homelessness counts in Poland. The third reason relates to the impossibility of monitoring homelessness resulting from labour-related migration (Goryńska-Bittner, 2010); there are currently no accurate data on homeless Poles, either abroad or having returned to Poland due to a lack of success abroad, and although articles have appeared relatively frequently on homeless Poles in various EU states, there is a clear lack of professional monitoring of the problem (Kurzeja, 2010; Mostowska, 2010).

Information on the scale of homelessness in Poland, first released by government departments and the mass media after 1989, was mostly based on statements provided by Marek Kotański, the founder and leader of MARKOT centres for the homeless (Przymeński, 2001). According to this information, the number of homeless people increased considerably from 200 000 in the early 1990s to 500 000 in the first decade of the 21st century (Przymeński, 2008a; 2008b). However, Przymeński (2008a) claims that this data lacks credibility for two reasons: there is no information on the methods used by Kotański to research this problem, and numbers were deliberately overstated in order to draw the attention of politicians to the issue.

An effort was made in the 2002 national census to count the number of homeless people in Poland; while census takers had no difficulty contacting those in homeless facilities, there were problems reaching homeless people in the so-called uninhabitable places like railway stations, shafts, train sidings and so on. As a result, the Central Statistical Office did not publish the data collected at the time which registered: 771 group accommodation facilities for the homeless with 13 997 inhabitants; 2 271 people in 112 social assistance centres for pregnant single women or women with children; and 5 700 dwellings (uninhabitable places) with 11 500 inhabitants. Another attempt will be made to count those in homeless facilities such as night-shelters and other shelters, as well as in uninhabitable places (as per the roofless category of ETHOS – European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion) in the 2011 National Census of Population and Housing (Browarczyk *et al.*, 2010; Sobieszak *et al.*, 2010).

A very clear method of defining the scale of homelessness in Poland was devised by Przymeński (2001) who used the results of his research and the opinions of practitioners working with the homeless to evaluate the proportion of homeless people using facilities (shelters, night-shelters etc.) as against those remaining outside institutions; this proportion ranges from 1: 1 to 1: 2 for the homeless sleeping rough. At that time – in 2000, Przymeński evaluated the number of homeless as ranging between 24 000 and 45 000, though observed in a later publication that the upper range limit had been overestimated as the numbers of homeless people using

temporary forms of accommodation had been overstated by 2-4000, and he determined that the number of homeless people amounted to 35000 (Przymerński, 2008a), figures largely in accordance with data collected by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MPIPS). According to information provided by MPIPS on 26 January 2010, there were 20960 people staying in homeless facilities, with as many as 10000 homeless people staying outside institutional forms of temporary accommodation. So far, the most significant data has been collected by Wygnańska (2010) but, as can be seen in the table below, the figures are still very inaccurate.

Table 1. Indicative statistics on, and estimations of, the size of the Polish homeless population

SOURCE	FIGURES	DESCRIPTION/DEFINITION	CONSTRAINTS/DRAWBACKS
National Population and Housing Census, GUS 2002	27 748	People living in facilities of multiple occupation: welfare homes, homes for women with children and non-residential facilities	Incomplete data – the number of facilities in databases exceeds the number of surveyed facilities; no information on the homeless sleeping rough
National Welfare Statistics, MPIPS, 2007	34 235	Clients of public welfare centres who received support due to difficult life situations caused by homelessness	Many homeless people do not receive benefits and are not mentioned in the statistics
National Welfare Statistics, MPIPS, 2007	11 145	Clients of public welfare centres who were granted shelter	Incomplete data – shelter is provided not only by social assistance centres but also NGOs
National Programme “Return to Society”, MPIPS, 2007	83 804	Clients of NGOs that received grants from the National Programme “Return to Society”	Data possibly overestimated – one homeless person may receive support from several organizations and be counted several times
National Extrapolation of Regional Data on Homelessness from Socio-demographic Portrait of the Homeless in Pomerania (Dębski, 2008)	41 524	Roofless and homeless people defined according to ETHOS typology, measured in the Socio-demographic Survey in Pomerania, and extrapolated proportionally to overall population of the country	Provinces differ in terms of population size, structure of homelessness and homeless support structure – figure mentioned here is a generalisation

Based on Wygnańska (2010)

Demographic analysis shows that the average homeless person is male; men constitute over 80% of the homeless population and are usually older than homeless women (Masłowski and Sosnowski, 2009; Przewoźnik, 2009; Dębski, 2010). Most

homeless people are 40 or over, and people aged 40-60 constitute the majority of this population. There is also, however, a notable rise in the number of young homeless people whose condition is frequently related to the inefficient social policy system; these are young people who have left children's homes, school and education centres or penal institutions. Although research on youth homelessness is not extensive, this group seems to be continuously expanding.

The isolation experienced by homeless people relates to the decline of particular aspects of life, education being one of them. The analysis of education among homeless people leads to the conclusion that the majority have basic or vocational education, with those declaring higher education not exceeding 3%. Research conducted locally also shows that homeless people are frequently divorced. Homelessness in Poland is largely an urban phenomenon. Research carried out using the street work method shows that the problem is related to "migrations from rural areas and small towns, where unemployment is considerable, to highly industrialized regions" (Przyemeński, 2001, p. 41). Migration from large cities to small towns and rural areas is limited to groups of men that move according to their seasonal agricultural work. Other important factors that determine the choice of city or region include the availability of accommodation, the possibility of employment, and in general, the presence of conditions and options that allow homeless people to live in dignity.

The issue of homelessness can be approached either from a structural or an individual perspective, but increasingly researchers consider this distinction a major oversimplification of the complex social reality (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2000); believing that it is not the division between social and individual factors that is of crucial importance, but the interaction between those two dimensions. Despite this criticism, let us consider the macro-social factors that appear in Polish literature as contributing factors to the homelessness problem:

- a. the social and economic situation of the country (Moczuk, 1999),
- b. flawed social and economic policy (Piekut-Brodzka, 2006),
- c. difficult labour market situation (Piekut-Brodzka, 2006),
- d. unemployment (Porowski, 1998; Sikorska, 1998),
- e. loss of entitlement to benefits, lower benefits, shortened benefit entitlement period, radical reduction of resources allocated to labour market programmes, failure to respect the right to work (Zalewska, 2005)
- f. poverty (Porowski, 1998; Sikorska, 1998; Romański, 2002),
- g. inefficiency of the health service (Moczuk, 1999; Zalewska, 2005),

- h. inefficiency of the social assistance system (Bartosz and Błażej, 1995; Moczuk, 1999; Zalewska, 2005),
- i. demographic changes and social mobility (Porowski, 1998; Piekut-Brodzka, 2006),
- j. difficult housing market situation (Bartosz and Błażej, 1995; Porowski, 1998; Zalewska, 2005),
- k. dysfunctional institutions (children's homes, education facilities, young offenders' institutions, prisons) that fail to provide aftercare (Bartosz and Błażej, 1995; Porowski, 1998; Moczuk, 1999; Piekut-Brodzka, 2006); poorly funded post-penitentiary aid (Pol, 1997),
- l. legal regulations (Bartosz and Błażej, 1995; Piekut-Brodzka, 2006) or the general legal situation in which evictions for rent arrears are possible without having to provide the tenant with substitute accommodation (Moczuk, 1999).

Turning to micro-social factors of homelessness, the most significant include:

- a. addiction (Bartosz and Błażej, 1995; Moczuk, 1999; Piekut-Brodzka, 2006; Porowski, 1998),
- b. delinquency (Moczuk, 1999; Porowski, 1998; Piekut-Brodzka, 2006); imprisonment (Frąckiewicz-Wronka and Zralek 1998),
- c. domestic violence (Bartosz and Błażej, 1995; Moczuk, 1999; Porowski, 1998; Piekut-Brodzka, 2006),
- d. breakdown of formal and informal relationships (Sołtysiak, 1997; Moczuk, 1999),
- e. breakdown of family, and divorce (Sołtysiak, 1997; Moczuk, 1999),
- f. lack of care from, and rejection by, family and friends (Bartosz and Błażej, 1995; Moczuk, 1999),
- g. lack of support in primary social groups (Porowski, 1998),
- h. disrupted socialisation process (Sołtysiak, 1997),
- i. mental disorders (Porowski, 1998; Piekut-Brodzka, 2006); personality disorders (Piekut-Brodzka, 2006; Moczuk, 1999; Popielarska, 2001/2002).

Homelessness in Pomerania: Selected Aspects of Panel Research on the Socio-demographic Profile of the Homeless Population

Selected aspects of research methodology

The afore-mentioned research project on the Socio-demographic Profile of the Homeless Population in the Pomeranian Province is a response to the lack of research on homelessness. What makes this survey different from others conducted in Poland is the fact that it is conducted cyclically – every second winter since 2001 – and it also includes those homeless people not using or staying in homeless facilities. The definition of homelessness adopted in the Pomeranian surveys was operationalised according to ETHOS and the surveys include two initial categories of homelessness: roofless (no abode) and houseless (in temporary accommodation).

The surveys are carried out using the questionnaire method, with separate questionnaires for adults (over 18) and children (who are represented by their parents or guardians), and survey conductors try to reach all homeless people in the region; surveys are always conducted in a 24 hour period with the participation of the uniformed services (police forces, railway protection services, border guards), social workers, social assistance workers (care assistants, managers and staff of homeless facilities), street workers, volunteers and students. 400 people from the Pomeranian Province are involved in carrying out the census, the aims of which are to provide a relatively definite number of homeless people in the region, to define basic socio-demographic data and the structure of the homeless population, and to present selected aspects of living conditions of the homeless population in a given time frame (Duracz-Walczak, 2001/2002). Apart from these principle aims, further objectives include:

- a. to develop spatial maps of the location of homeless people outside institutions,
- b. to provide a better understanding of the whereabouts of the homeless,
- c. to ensure homeless people are brought to appropriate facilities when their life is in danger,
- d. to highlight the homelessness problem,
- e. to strengthen cross-sector cooperation,
- f. to provide data for comparative analyses of the dynamics of homelessness in Pomerania,
- g. to improve methodologies of research on homelessness (Dębski, 2007).

The information presented below represents only part of the research results. As a co-author of the survey reports, I decided to focus on the information that seems most interesting or significant in terms of long-term aid for homeless people in the Pomeranian Province. Although the surveys have been conducted since 2001, the results presented here are from 2003 onwards, as the database and questionnaires from the first surveys were unavailable.

Demographic characteristics of the homeless population in Pomerania

As many as 2841 homeless people – 2620 adults and 221 children – took part in the 2009 survey. To compare this with previous surveys: in 2007 we reached 2211 homeless adults; 2470 in 2005; 2169 in 2003; and 1871 in 2001. When analysing the sex of respondents, it becomes clear that homelessness is predominantly a male issue; men constituted 85% of respondents in 2009 while 15% were women; similar results were obtained in 2005 and 2007. The results of the 2003–2009 surveys are comparable in terms of educational levels; in 2009 the majority of respondents claimed to have vocational or basic education, while only 15% had secondary education. A minority claimed an incomplete basic education or higher education.

The surveys highlight the ageing process of the homeless population in the province; the average age of a homeless adult increased from 46 years in 2003 to 50 years in 2009, and the age difference observed in the span of six years (2003–2009) is statistically significant. The relatively old age of the homeless population considerably influences their attempts to get out of homelessness; those who have been homeless for many years have little chance of finding a job compared with young people who have been homeless for a relatively short period of time. The age difference between men and women in 2003 amounted to seven years (average age of men – 47.6, women – 40.5) and was only four years in 2009.

The research also shows that the average period of homelessness increased from 5.9 years in 2003 to 7.6 years in 2009. There are visible differences between men and women, and men tend to be homeless for longer periods of time. To analyse this aspect in detail, periods of homelessness should be considered from the perspective of phases of homelessness. We can distinguish five phases: the initial phase (less than two years); the warning phase (between two and four years); the adaptation phase (between four and six years); the chronic phase (between six and ten years); and, finally, long-term homelessness (over ten years). In Pomerania, there has been a visible increase in the number of people in the final two phases; the percentage of respondents classified as long-term homeless increased from 13% in 2003 to 22% in 2009, and those in the chronic phase increased from 19% in 2003 to 26% in 2009.

There are several aspects to consider with regard to the location of homeless people in Pomerania. First, respondents live mainly in large cities; the surveys reveal that the majority are in Gdańsk (687 people), Gdynia (430 people) and Słupsk (142). The second point to consider is the current place of residence of respondents. At the time of the 2009 survey, over half were in facilities for the homeless, 16% were living in garden allotments and 15% were staying in other uninhabitable places such as railway stations, or uninhabited flats or buildings. Only 5% of respondents were in supported flats, and 4% were staying with friends. As such, two thirds of those surveyed in 2009 represented the so-called institutional homelessness and a third fell into the category of non-institutional homelessness. The three latest surveys show a gradual and steady increase in the percentage of homeless people using various forms of institutional support.

Aid provision

Homeless respondents in the Pomeranian province are willing to accept the support offered to them. Research shows that only 17% of the total homeless population have not used any form of assistance. Those who did receive assistance were given food (65%), shelter (57%), financial support (50%) and clothing (35%). Opinions were sought for the first time in 2009 survey as to whether the assistance offered to the homeless helps them to combat the problem of homelessness, and responses are largely polarized: 42% of respondents (mostly women and younger people) believed that the aid they received generally helps them get out of homelessness, while 58% claimed the opposite. Respondents were asked whether they had received support from social assistance centres prior to becoming homeless; one third of respondents had – mainly women below 40 years old and in the initial phase of homelessness.

Subjective health conditions

That there were health issues among the homeless Pomeranian population was recognized following the 2005 survey, which indicated that poor health conditions were gradually becoming a widespread social problem, visible both in terms of the growing number of disability certificates among the homeless and the rising death rate. As a result, a project called 'Homelessness and Health' was created that involved a number of debates between theoreticians and practitioners in the field of homelessness, as well as a cross-sector conference on the issue. An extensive guide to the relevant issues was subsequently published, which in turn led to research on the health conditions of the homeless in Trójmiasto (Dębski, 2008). The surveys reveal that the majority of homeless people are insured, and the percentage of this group remains constant (78% in 2003 and in 2009), with a gradual increase in the number of homeless people with disability certificates – from 39% in 2003 to 46% in 2009, when as many as 11% of the remaining respondents were waiting to obtain a certificate. This group largely consists of men in the 51 to 60 age group.

Life changes and approaches to combating homelessness

As the issue of getting out of homelessness began to receive increasing attention from commune and district authorities, members of the Pomeranian Forum decided to examine this problem in more detail, and included a question in the 2009 survey on the likelihood of respondents acquiring their own place of residence by the end of 2010. Respondents evaluated their chances on the scale of 0 to 100, or as a percentage. 23% of respondents considered it possible to combat homelessness, though the median of 5% was reached by less than 50% of respondents; the majority considered the possibility of changing their life situation to be zero, meaning that 1 126 homeless people believed it impossible for them to regain their independence over the next two years.

In terms of the independent variables affecting respondents' belief in the possibility of combating homelessness, gender analysis shows that women more frequently consider it possible. Analysing according to age reveals that young people tend to be most optimistic, while the readiness to combat homeless decreases in the over-60 age group. Respondents in two first phases of homelessness (initial and warning) have a greater chance of exiting homelessness than those who have been homeless for more than four years. Another group of factors which influences respondents' approaches to getting out of homelessness are the so-called housing factors. These include applications for flat allotments (social flats) and being on the flat allotment waiting list. Undoubtedly, homeless people expecting to be allocated a flat tend to perceive the possibility of getting out of homelessness as far greater than those who are either not on the waiting list or have not applied for it.

The 2009 survey shows that health conditions also affect respondents' perceptions of getting out of homelessness. Respondents with disability certificates are less inclined to consider themselves as having a high chance of combating homelessness (the ratio of 25.6% of respondents without disability certificates to 19.3% with disability certificates, with the median of 0% and 10% respectively). However, it is found that the subjective view of one's health (*How do you evaluate your health condition?*) does not have an impact on this perception, while willingness to take up employment does. According to the results of the recent survey, those who responded positively to the question *Would you be willing to take up employment in the immediate future?*, put their chances of combating homelessness at the level of 28% (the median of 10%), as opposed to 15% (with the median of 0%) for those who are not prepared to take up employment immediately.

The homeless population may be divided into two groups in terms of their perceived chances of getting out of homelessness; those with little perceived chance and those with a relatively high chance, where 15% is considered borderline. According to this analysis of frequency, up to 58% of homeless people in Pomerania consider

that they have a relatively small chance of combating homelessness (up to 15%), while the remaining 42% perceive a relatively good chance. The 2009 survey shows that over a half of respondents made no attempt to change their situation, with 27% claiming to having made sporadic attempts to do so, and every fifth respondent claimed that they frequently tried to get out of homelessness.

Two-thirds of respondents consider that acquiring a flat is the most important factor facilitating the process of combating homelessness. Employment and assistance in finding employment ranked second (42%), followed by financial support and benefits (28%). Other forms of support include: improvement of family relations, family support, professional medical attention, medical care, treatment and rehabilitation, therapeutic support, assistance in applying for documents (registration for permanent residence, ID, health insurance) and material support. Only 7% of the respondents suggested that nothing could help them combat homelessness. In terms of the forms of assistance required to get out of homelessness, the majority (41%) of respondents consider one form of support sufficient, every third respondent (31%) said they would need at least two forms of support, and less than 20% would require three different forms. The remaining 10% consider that they need more than three forms of assistance in order to regain independence.

Vocational activity of homeless people – missed opportunities

A large majority of the homeless men surveyed and over half the homeless women stated that they had professional qualifications. However, being qualified does not necessarily lead to employment, and only 17% of respondents had gainful employment in 2009; comparing this with the 2003 and 2005 surveys, it emerges that the numbers of homeless people taking up gainful employment decreased considerably from 25% in 2007 to 17% in 2009. This is likely to be linked to the deterioration of the local job market after 2007. Taking up employment is largely dependent on the age of the homeless. It should be emphasised that no marked differences are observed for different phases of homelessness, but it is notable that those *not* staying in homeless facilities constitute the majority of the working homeless population (25.6% as against 13.6% of those living in the institutions).

One of the questions in the survey concerned the legality of the employment held by respondents. The numbers with employment contracts in 2009 were four times higher than in 2003 and 2005. In 2003 only 6% had a contract, 8% in 2005, 29% in 2007 and 25% in 2009. According to the data obtained in previous surveys, homeless women reported having permanent employment much more often than homeless men, and the 2009 research shows that over half of homeless female respondents have legal employment.

Sources of income and debts

Welfare benefits are the main source of income for the majority of homeless respondents in all research periods. What is noticeable, however, is the slight growth in the number of people who receive benefits from aid institutions (39% in 2003 and 45% in 2009). The second most important source of income for the homeless is seasonal work, mentioned by 19% of respondents in 2009. It was followed by scrap collecting (16% in 2009) and retirement and pension benefits (13% in 2009).

Table 2. Sources of income by year of survey

	2003		2005		2007		2009	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
temporary seasonal job	537	25.7	650	27.9	529	25.8	446	18.8
social assistance benefit	806	38.6	946	40.5	857	41.8	1065	44.8
other benefits	142	6.8	185	7.9	173	8.4	147	6.2
scrap collecting	436	20.9	496	21.3	358	17.4	374	15.7
begging	101	4.8	150	6.4	110	5.4	104	4.4
alimony	56	2.7	41	1.8	28	1.4	50	2.1
pension	190	9.1	226	9.7	201	9.8	308	13.0
other	137	6.6	146	6.3	142	6.9	92	3.9
no income	347	16.6	311	13.3	315	15.4	428	18.0

Looking at the percentage structure, it emerges that 74% of all homeless respondents with some form of income indicate that this is from only one source; 21% of respondents report having two sources; and the remaining 5% claimed to have three or more sources of income. The 2009 survey shows that 39% of the homeless have debts, representing a slight increase from 2007 (34%). The majority of those with debts are men, which may relate to maintenance arrears. Financial problems are also closely related to the phases of homelessness; unpaid debts and loans are very common in the initial (45%) and warning (46%) phases of homelessness.

Conclusion

The 2009 Pomeranian survey clearly shows that in most cases the same people have been interviewed, which means that there has been little migration of the homeless population. This may relate to the mainly interventionist nature of the assistance system and the obvious lack of elements aimed at preventing, and facilitating getting out of homelessness. Thus one might say that the results of this research reveal not only information about the lives of the homeless but also point to the drawbacks of the homeless support system. Poor housing situations in Gdańsk, Gdynia, and many other Polish cities may contribute to the low incidence of homeless people successfully combating homelessness. Research on homelessness is undoubtedly a great challenge. The analysis of needs in the sphere of homelessness shows that research carried out in Poland in the future should:

- be conducted nationally and not only locally,
- include the homeless staying outside specifically designated homeless facilities,
- focus on homeless women and children,
- follow examples provided by other countries in Europe (e.g. electronic databases),
- use electronic databases and paper records to find out about the clients of the homeless support system (e.g. period of aid provision, seasonal homelessness, flow of the homeless through the support system),
- refer more to social sciences and social economy.

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