Homelessness

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INTRODUCTION

Defining 'homelessness' and the 'homeless person' might not be the most straightforward task. The definition of homelessness varies according to the person defining it, the purposes of defining it and the different lenses used to examine and describe the phenomenon and its prevention and management. Irrespective of whether one intends to explore or measure homelessness, the resulting outcomes will depend on the particular definition used and the approach taken.

The way in which we define homelessness is important because, when attempting to quantify the number of homeless persons, results will depend on the definition and methods which are used to count the homeless. Adopting a narrow definition of homelessness risks ignoring the large number of persons living in dire conditions and situations and those who are far from living in safe and secure housing.

A substantial proportion of the homeless population is not accessible to researchers. Most are invisible, sometimes also by choice, often due to embarrassment, stigma or unwanted social control. Those sleeping rough, those living in unstable housing arrangements, those living in vehicles and those doubled up with friends and family are excluded from being counted. Quantifying the homeless population in Malta is even more problematic. This is because data on homelessness is lacking, and also because very often the numbers of homeless persons presented by authorities merely reflect those persons reported to be sleeping outdoors.

CAUSES

The main causes of homelessness amongst the homeless population in Malta are social problems, such as domestic violence; difficult childhood experiences; childhood homelessness (including out-of-home placements and any other situation in which children live a separated life from their immediate family); dysfunctional marriages; the loss of significant others such as parents; unhealthy or dysfunctional relationships with family members; unemployment; debt; addictive behaviour (one's own or that of family members); mental health conditions; past imprisonment; and a lack of secure accommodation further to leaving care (Demanuele, 2004; Mifsud, 2009). All these factors contribute to the risk of homelessness as well as prolong the state of homelessness.

Research also shows the crucial role of immediate family as the main source of support and stability in the Maltese society (Vakili-Zad, 2006; Mifsud, 2009). Therefore, the lack of such support acts as a risk factor in relation to homelessness. Moreover, strong family ties and support act as important factors to move out of the homeless state. In fact, literature shows that a large number of homeless persons in the Maltese population do not have, or have lost, a support network (Demanuele, 2004; Vakili-Zad, 2006; Busuttil, 2007; Mifsud, 2009).

The fact that homeless persons sleeping rough on Maltese streets are not visible in the same way as can be witnessed in other countries must not hinder the Maltese society and authorities from acknowledging the existence of homelessness and addressing this issue. One reason behind such invisibility could be that, given

the small size of Malta where everyone knows one another, and in a context wherein owning a home is valued, one might feel a sense of shame if spotted sleeping rough. Thus, the most common kind of homelessness in Malta involves people living in inadequate and insecure housing.

NOT JUST AN ECONOMIC ISSUE

Homelessness is not merely an economic issue. In fact, socio-economic issues produce the necessary conditions which place particular individuals and groups in the community at a greater risk of becoming homeless and at a disadvantage when trying to move out of the homeless state. Remarkable economic growth and the need for foreign labour to make up for resulting labour shortages has given rise to increasing rental prices in Malta. This does not help the situation of homeless persons or persons at risk of homelessness. Old houses which could have otherwise been used for cheaper renting are now being sold, demolished and converted into numerous apartments which generate a higher income for owners. Many explain that, while the bank would not offer the necessary financial assistance to purchase a home, it is also very difficult to rent accommodation while on social benefits or engaged in low paying employment (Mifsud, 2009).

The homeless are not a single entity but rather a highly heterogeneous group with a variety of problems and needs, and the homeless population contains sub-types that need to be distinguished. In doing so, we can more fully understand the human dimension of this major problem in both rich and poor nations. Amongst the increasing number of people experiencing housing difficulties, there are particular groups who are at a higher disadvantage and thus facing greater risks of becoming homeless when compared to other individuals. Structural conditions mostly impact on groups with particular attributes. In fact, variables such as age, gender, race, mental health, disability and poverty have, nearly always, acted as predictors of homeless situations (Johnson, Scutella, Tseng, & Wood, 2015).

The needs of homeless individuals are not just material. All individuals need a sense of belonging and human fulfillment. Thus, social care is just as important as physical care, when it comes to wellbeing. Homeless persons tend to have weaker personal support network resources, as they face various challenges for maintaining and developing networks of supportive relationships. The provision of valid and effective social support services is crucial for homeless persons who would otherwise rely on their immediate social surroundings.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMES

Another crucial factor to improve the state of the homeless person is the provision of training services. It is important to have educational programmes which address issues such as employment and job development; financial planning; discrimination; family support and communication; diversity; and cultural connections. Nevertheless, it might not always be easy to engage homeless persons in training programmes due to the difficulties encountered to reach such persons and the reluctancy from their end, being more preoccupied with resolving their housing problem.

When it comes to interventions aimed at preventing homelessness, the State has an obligation to prevent homelessness by ensuring the physical infrastructure for adequate housing; encouraging the supply of affordable housing; and providing measures such as housing subsidies to assist groups or individuals in society who would otherwise be unable to enjoy the right to adequate housing. Specific assistance should be given to persons, men or women, fleeing domestic violence since such individuals and their children are driven back to their violent homes if no alternative accommodation is found once their period at the shelter expires. Homeless persons are offered a period of approximately six months at shelters and very often they would still be waiting for their social housing application to be processed when it is time for them to leave the shelter. In view of the significant social housing list and the ever-rising prices for renting adequate

accommodation, homeless persons in Malta find themselves in a continuous struggle for accommodation. Homelessness is not an issue which can be automatically resolved by improving the housing market or the overall economy. Rather, any attempt to eliminate homelessness must identify and target the causal factors of such a phenomenon. Apart from the number of persons who are actually homeless, it is also vital to gain in-depth knowledge on those who are at risk of becoming homeless. Therefore, solutions should not only be found for those who have no home but also for those who live in inadequate housing conditions, those who live with friends or family, those planning to leave abusive and violent homes and those paying more than half of their income for rent or housing loans. Moreover, solutions for homelessness situations must be based on a flexible and on-going process of evaluation.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Housing rights have increased in importance in international human rights instruments and States are obliged to adopt the necessary measures and policy to exercise the right to adequate housing for all. Such policy must clearly define its objectives while particularly focusing on the disadvantaged and vulnerable in society. It should also identify the resources available to reach its objectives in the most cost-effective way in a given time-frame. Results also need to be monitored and adequate measures for violations should be planned. Nevertheless, housing rights still remain a rather vague issue under the Maltese legislation which lacks any express provisions to guarantee adequate housing for persons living in Malta. Thus, the State's housing obligations stem from international instruments which Malta ratified. One must bear in mind that in virtue of Malta's dualist system, international law does not become part of domestic law automatically and must be passed through an Act of Parliament.

CONCLUSION

Homelessness is considered a result of both structural and individual factors which intersect and contribute to a person entering into and exiting homelessness. Evidence shows us that certain groups of people in a particular society and at a particular time are at a greater risk of entering into homelessness and at a lesser chance of exiting the homelessness state. This means that analysing the interaction between personal and contextual factors is crucial for the development of valid and effective policy to target this issue. Identifying the main groups of people in Maltese society who face the highest risks of becoming homeless is the first step to tackling the homelessness phenomenon. Focusing on and suggesting permanent shelter accommodation, services, and benefits results in targets towards emergency assistance, rather than towards providing stability and preventing the movement into and out of homelessness. Such interventions usually target individuals rather than groups in society, thus ignoring socio-economic factors which produce the necessary conditions which place particular groups at a higher risk of becoming homeless.

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