

The report on the state of poverty in Brussels 2010

Thematic report: “Homelessness in Brussels”

Summary and conclusions

“Homelessness in Brussels” is the subject of the thematic part of the Brussels 2010 poverty assessment report. It does not set out to present a complete picture of the problem of homelessness in Brussels. The objective is rather to increase awareness and knowledge of the issue of homelessness from two points of view.

Part 1 is the result of a participatory approach, as provided for in the order of 20 July 2006 on the assessment report on poverty. Homeless people and social workers in the homeless services sector were given the opportunity to express their views. Their numerous, fully typed accounts present the reality and experiences of the homeless. The scale of the problems experienced by fieldworkers and those who use the services of the homeless services sector falls within the province of the decision-making support function of this report.

Part 2 contains the summarised recommendations of the legal research into the prevention of homelessness.

Part 1:

“HOMELESSNESS IN BRUSSELS” A PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

Part 1 is the result of the participatory process required by the order of 20 July 2006 on the preparation of the report on the state of poverty in Brussels. The aim of the participatory process is to encourage field workers in the homeless services sector and homeless people themselves to express their views.

The observatory organised 41 group interviews which were devoted to questions relative to the experiences of homeless people, how they manage day to day, their needs and their reintegration difficulties.

1. Extreme poverty: being homeless

Living on the street or being homeless is the most visible sign of extreme poverty, but this is only the tip of the iceberg.

Asked about their experiences, people often spoke of a “bad start”: instability, sometimes complicated family situations, an accumulation of difficulties, break-ups, rejection and abandonment, institutionalisation, deprivation, debts, violence, mental health issues, alcoholism, administrative

problems, housing difficulties and sometimes eviction, a life with no prospects. The situations experienced by the homeless are often reproduced from generation to generation.

It is events and break-ups which result in people leaving their homes. In such circumstances, some people then find themselves living on the streets, while others find temporary housing solutions in the homeless services sector. All the people affected in this way adapt to their new environment: wandering the streets for some, and a “recovery” process for others.

Living conditions on the streets are inhuman, subject to the hazards of the street environment, circumstances, opportunities and meetings. They are marked by a sense of loss and deprivation: loss of home, loss of security, wasted energy, lack of hygiene facilities, broken family ties, loss of dignity. Each problem leads to another, and generally the administrative problems encountered cement this downward spiral. These accumulated losses can be a “hammer blow” and prevent the people involved from getting back on their feet again and finding their place in society.

Some situations are specific: women recently arrived in Belgium and victims of violence, illegal residents, young people, people with mental health issues, people released back into society after a period of incarceration, etc.

2. Growing diversity among the most vulnerable groups

Existing services

The homeless services sector provides a wide range of services.

Night shelter accommodation is only a short-term solution. Spending a night in a shelter is an immediate response to an urgent problem. However, such immediate responses do not provide long-term structural solutions. The problem requires both emergency assistance and structural support. It is essential to address both aspects jointly with close cooperation between the stakeholders.

In addition, we need above all to focus on preventing emergency situations. Prevention remains a fundamental tool and preventive actions need to be developed further in order to avoid situations of exclusion: detecting difficulties, awareness-raising actions, preventing situations from deteriorating, etc.

Day centres not only provide homeless people with a drop-in centre during the day but they also help to create social ties. It is essential to recognise and stabilise the financial situation of these centres. It would also be worthwhile considering ways of ensuring their complementarity with night shelters.

The objective of homeless hostels is to facilitate reintegration. This need for “results” sometimes leads hostels to select their target groups with a view to achieving results as quickly as possible, whereas the groups with the most serious problems are excluded, for example people with behavioural problems or those with diseases pose organisational and care problems.

In terms of existing hostel places, there are severe shortages as regards facilities for young people, fathers with children, couples, families, etc. In addition, there are no approved residential facilities for people aged under 60 who suffer from various troubles and/or early ageing and who are reliant on social support.

Finally, people who are excluded from hostels because they suffer from very serious disorders are forced to turn to more “tolerant” structures. Consequently, structures that are not part of the homeless services sector are being used (retirement homes, for example) and in some cases facilities

have been specially constructed on a commercial basis (non-approved housing structures) to house them.

In addition, groups not targeted by hostels are sometimes housed by them: disabled people, people suffering from psychological disorders, etc. because they do not have access to suitable structures. Thus, the sector absorbs the inefficiencies of the social system.

Moreover, the homeless services sector supports people whose only problem is accommodation. It is in fact impossible to find housing given the current state of the housing market in Brussels. Consequently, the hostels are at full capacity and cannot meet new demands, irrespective of whether those seeking help are living on the streets or come from night shelters or via other circuits.

There is a real need to develop the services available to be able to provide a tailor-made response to the growing diversity and complexity of the problems faced by homeless people.

Social work within living conditions

While it is necessary to improve the existing systems needed to assist people who are homeless, it is also necessary to develop services focused on new practices: assisted living, post-housing social follow-up services and support, boarding houses with low access thresholds.

New initiatives

To supplement the systems in place, the sector's services and workers have developed new initiatives, notably the **solidarity housing** and **temporary lease agreement** initiatives among others. These initiatives are the result of wide-ranging cooperation within the sector, but also involve outside stakeholders, in particular social real estate agencies. These projects combine housing and social support and represent a high-potential approach for the most vulnerable groups. They need to be supported by the public authorities.

Other solutions need to be implemented alongside these initiatives, housing formulas with low access thresholds for groups that do not fall within the scope of current systems. A **boarding house** model should be put in place, with or without professional supervision. But these initiatives need to be approved by the public authorities in order to guarantee living conditions, facilities and human rights in accordance with the Constitution. Non-approved housing structures could be reconverted for this purpose.

3. Multi-dimensional social work

The acquisition of social rights

Shortcomings exist as regards access to information. There is a lack of suitable facilities for consulting available information. Opening hours for existing facilities need to be extended. New channels must be found to improve the dissemination of existing information ("Sans-abri, des addresses...", "Guide pour les sans-abri").

When people need to regularise their administrative situation (for example with a "domiciliation address") they often encounter difficulties at the level of the CPAS and/or municipal authorities. A more positive approach must be adopted towards implementing this right.

A greater emphasis needs to be placed on facilitating social reintegration, emancipation and stabilising the situation of homeless people as an alternative to the "charitable" concept of help, which is limited to providing a free solution to people's basic needs, thereby perpetuating their poverty and the precariousness of their situation. In this context, one initiative that should be

developed is that of the “trajectbegeleiders”, namely mentors who provide individual support to vulnerable people at all stages of their social reintegration.

Collaboration with other sectors

It is essential to increase collaboration with other relevant sectors, the legal authorities, community care (social services, help for citizens seeking justice, etc.), health and mental health, culture and housing sectors.

Collectively, in order to ensure continuity of support and care, the homeless services sector has developed a very concrete and very effective collaboration, not only between homeless sector services, but also, among others, between CPAS services, between street work and legal services, between the mental health and community care sectors, between the housing and social support sectors, etc.

However, the sector’s services have to contend with institutional and financial difficulties. They waste time and energy as a result of not only divisions between services (social and health services, public and associative services) but also institutional and community divisions within the Brussels Region. The sector suffers from the tensions that exist with the CPAS. We need to move beyond these divisions in order to tackle the overall Brussels situation at regional level.

4. A high-quality social policy

Overall, we need to succeed in establishing an integrated system which takes account of the situation of “people entering” and “people leaving”. We need to eliminate the divisions within the homeless services sector and develop synergies with other sectors. This means that we must move beyond political limits and those of sectoral or territorial policies in order to give greater importance, on the one hand, to prevention and, on the other hand, to policies to provide homeless people with a solution via housing. This can only be achieved by taking into account the various dimensions of the problem of homelessness¹.

Over and above improving community care systems for homeless people, the prevention of the impoverishment of the population requires consistent, cross-cutting policies for combating poverty for the population as a whole. In addition, we must move beyond an approach based solely on categories and develop policies which cover the complete life path of people affected.

Numerous measures, systems and services exist, but they need to be refined, diversified, and coordinated and their complementary aspects need to be clarified as elements of the problem as a whole. Furthermore, we need to harness the strengths of fieldworkers and political stakeholders in order to integrate as humanely as possible people living in severe poverty so that they live with dignity.

¹ www.webzinemaker.com/diogenes

Part 2:

“EVICTIONS AND HOMELESSNESS IN THE BRUSSELS-CAPITAL REGION” A CROSS-CUTTING LEGAL APPROACH

The prevention of evictions and re-housing assistance are an important part of the strategy for combating poverty. Social workers do not have enough legal knowledge to help people who are under the threat of eviction.

To support this thematic part of the report, a research assignment was entrusted to Nicolas BERNARD and Laurent LEMAIRE (Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis), in order to identify clearly the legal aspects of the problem and to put forward recommendations for combating poverty.

The results of their research have been published in a report entitled “Evictions and Homelessness in the Brussels-Capital Region. A cross-cutting legal approach”.

You will find in this section the research report’s recommendations. They provide a good summary of the document’s content. The full research report is available on the Observatory’s site (www.observatbru.be), only in French.