Support for the homeless in Poland

Legislation, welfare system & NGO sector
Homelessness in Poland

- Housing crisis started by the post-war baby boom and the bankrupting state’s inefficiency in providing new housing in the late 1970s & 1980s
- „Shock therapy” in the early 1990s leaves many behind – the austerity plan introduces poverty in Poland
- Post-transformation housing legislation focused on private sector, municipalities sell their housing stock to the tenants, evictions introduced
- National housing programmes limited to supporting mortgages
- Degradation of the remaining municipal and co-op housing stock
- Lack of affordable housing for rent, no legislation on private rentals, social housing almost non-existent
- Poland remains at the bottom of EU’s housing saturation, overcrowding and age of leaving parents’ home indexes
Modern homelessness emerges at the end of 1970s, intensifies greatly after 1989

1981 – first homelessness focused NGO founded (St. Brother Albert’s Aid Society)

1990 – first Social Assistance Act: homeless support becomes a municipal task

2001 – first regional homeless headcount (Pomerania region)

2003 – Public Benefit and Volunteer Work Act regulates commissioning public tasks to NGOs

2004 – Poland joins the EU: ESF projects, Polish NGOs in FEANTSA, migration wave starts

2008 – first NGO call to the government for a homelessness strategy

2009 – first national homeless headcount by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy

2013 – national homelessness NGO Federation established

2013-15 – homelessness peaks with over 45 thousand people a year using public services

2016 – major reform of the homeless support system focused on standardisation of shelter and cooperation between municipalities and NGOs
Homelessness in Poland

- National headcount of 13/14 February 2019 revealed 30.3 thousand homeless people (decreasing - 33.4 in 2017, 36.1 in 2015)
- 19.8% (6 thousand) rough sleeping on the headcount day (decreasing)
- 14.6% homeless are women, 3.3% - children under 18, 2.6% - youth 18-25
- Majority of the homeless men are in their middle age or elderly, age of women more evenly spread; growing age of the overall homeless population
- The problem of youth homelessness is not seen by the system
Measuring homelessness 1999-2019
Homelessness in Poland

- Growing length of homelessness episodes (54.6% over 5 years; 49.0% in 2017, 43.0% in 2015)
- Most common reasons given by the homeless: family conflict (9.8 thousand answers), addiction (8.5), eviction (8.0), debts (5.1), unemployment (4.6), health (4.0)
- Well developed shelter network - 870 facilities with ca. 25 thousand beds; majority provided by the NGOs
- 5-7 thousand evictions yearly
- Permanent housing crisis is the major obstacle in reintegration for these remaining in the shelters
- 70-200 people dying of hypothermia each winter (majority of them are rough sleeping homeless)
Length of homelessness episodes
Legal framework for homeless support

Constitution of the Republic of Poland – article 75:

„Public authorities shall pursue a policy conducive to meeting the housing needs of citizens, in particular: preventing homelessness, supporting the development of social housing and supporting citizens’ efforts to obtain their own housing.”

…but it does not mean that housing is a right
Legal framework for homeless support

Social Assistance Act of 2004:
- defines a homeless person
- imposes obligations on municipalities:
  - providing shelter, clothing and food
  - providing social assistance benefits (financial and material)
  - creating local strategies for solving social problems
- enables commissioning social assistance tasks to NGOs
- defines the local jurisdiction in homeless assistance
  - municipality of last registration
- defines the principles and tools for conducting social work
- defines the standards of homeless institutions
Homeless services

- Municipality (Municipal Social Welfare Centre):
  - pays social benefits
  - provides social work
    (incl. social interview, social contract, individual programme for leaving homelessness)
  - provides shelter, food and clothing (administrative decisions)
  - manages municipal housing stock incl. social housing (different department)

- NGOs – apply to municipalities for financing their services within municipal tasks or provide assistance regardless of municipalities (charity, social enterprise)

- The cooperation between municipalities and NGOs is regulated by the Public Benefit and Volunteer Work Act and executed within obligatory local cooperation strategies

- The system is focused on intervention - no systemic solutions for prevention and reintegration
Homeless services

Homeless institutions defined by the Social Assistance Act:
- Emergency shelters (less than 20%) – overnight shelter, warming-up stations (winter only)
- Integration shelters – homeless hostels, homeless hostels with care services, hostels for mothers with children
- Separate systems for dependent, disabled, elderly and refugees

Health services – health insurance required, obtained by registering as unemployed, signing a social contract or by a municipality’s administrative decision (in emergency – up to 90 days)
- Limited access to psychiatric services
- Problems with post-hospital care
- Detoxification treatment free only for insured
- Street services provided by NGOs
Homeless services

- Shelter services for intoxicated – warming-up stations, sobering-up stations (drunk tanks), hospitals (ER), police
- Labour market services – social employment (social integration centres), public benefit works, supported employment (Employment Fund), social economy
  - cooperation between social assistance, public employment services and partly NGOs
  - numerous projects from ESF and other funds
- Outreach – not regulated, street work and other services for rough sleepers provided mostly by NGOs
- Food & clothing – widely available, mostly in cooperation with NGOs (Food Banks / FEAD, soup kitchens, „soup on the street”, distribution points)
- Housing projects – mostly in staircase model (transitional housing)
  - Housing first starts in 2020 (50 apartments – Warsaw, Gdańsk, Wrocław)
  - Social rental agencies (Warsaw, Poznań)
  - Gdańsk social housing programme
  - Housing-led solution for Roma people in Wrocław
Overnight shelters & hostels
Thank you for your attention

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