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The everyday lives of street homeless people in the context of welfare initiatives during the COVID-19 pandemic

Abstract

The article discusses the objectives and results of research seeking a better understanding of the everyday lives of street homeless people during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the context of welfare initiatives to support such individuals. The research, featuring interviews, took place in Kraków (Poland) between December 2020 and March 2021. Street homeless people were asked about changes in their everyday lives and whether they used any forms of support. To determine the response of institutions and state authorities to the situation of homeless people during the pandemic, interviews were held with experts and an analysis of the contents of official documents and press publications online was carried out. The analysis of materials was based on the reduction, representation and formatting of data. The results of the research provided an insight into participants' everyday lives and shed light on selected aspects of the operation of the welfare system during the pandemic. It was determined that, while welfare initiatives at a local level were innovative and actively reached those in need, the effectiveness of the system was limited. During the pandemic, problems evident beforehand – street homeless people's lack of trust in the institutional welfare system, objectification and pretence of state action, inadequacies in intersectoral and interministerial cooperation – became particularly visible and acute.

Keywords: homelessness, everyday life, COVID-19, social service and policy

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Introduction

The rapid spread of the infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus led to a global epidemiological crisis at the beginning of 2020, the widespread effects of which were felt by everybody to some extent. Communities experiencing exclusion are particularly susceptible to crises (cf. Banerjee & Bhattacharya, 2021), lacking the essential resources, influence, and social support to protect themselves. One such community is people in homelessness, those living in temporary housing (shelter homeless) and those occupying para-accommodation spaces (street homeless) (Jencks, 1994). During the nationwide quarantine, homeless people on deserted city streets began to attract the attention of the infrequent passers-by, media, politicians, and researchers. This last group took the opportunity to launch various studies and an in-depth analysis. Areas that were explored were the susceptibility of homeless people to infection (e.g., Lewer et al., 2020), the threats associated with spreading of the virus in night shelters (e.g., Baggett et al., 2020), homeless people's own experiences of the introduction of sanitary restrictions (e.g., Adams, 2021), as well as the forms and effects of assistance, intervention, and control initiatives (e.g., Wasilewska-Ostrowska, 2020), whose objective was not necessarily to improve the situation of homeless people (e.g., Wang et al., 2020).

The objective of the article is to discuss the results of research seeking to provide a better understanding of the everyday lives of street homeless people during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the context of welfare initiatives to support these individuals. The research was exploratory in nature, conducted in Kraków (Poland) between December 2020 and March 2021 using qualitative methods. It sought to answer the following questions: had the everyday lives of street homeless people changed, and how? Had these individuals benefited from support and in what forms? What was the response of the welfare system to the situation of homeless people during the pandemic? On the one hand, the perspective of everyday life adopted for the study demonstrated the research participants' situation and personal experiences in the pandemic in the context of the welfare initiatives taking place at the time. It was assumed that this kind of dynamic approach to human actions constitutes the foundation of monitoring the solutions implemented and evaluation of their effects (e.g., Lades et al., 2018). On the other hand, the findings from the research, therefore, contributed to critical analysis and consideration of selected regulations and initiatives of the state authorities introduced at this time. They directly impact the functioning and effectiveness of the welfare system for homeless people, and consequently also its beneficiaries' lives.

The first part of the article discusses statutory measures for homeless people in Poland and cites the results of an audit on their implementation. It also highlights the situation of homeless people in the social welfare system in the context of their everyday lives. The second part presents the objectives and results of my own research. Firstly, based on the research results, it describes the (in)variability of homeless people's daily routines during the pandemic. An important context for these reflections was provided by solutions and good practices in support for homeless people in the city where the research was conducted. Emphasis was placed on changes in the activity

of welfare institutions as a result of specially introduced laws, government guidelines, and recommendations. Secondly, the analysis examines deficiencies in the actions of state authorities and their consequences from the perspective of the welfare system and its beneficiaries. The stability and changes of practices of everyday life revealed the connections between the worsening situation of homeless people – as shown by media reports and statements of aid organisation representatives – and the support initiatives taken by the government. Taking the specific nature of these actions into account, the mechanisms that can lead to reproduction of homeless people's marginal position were determined and described (e.g., creating new, negative stereotypes and sustaining old ones, feigning support actions, omitting in distribution of help, weakening genuine support networks, objectifying the aid process, and removing the voice and agency of welfare services and recipients of assistance). I decided that their identification needed further comment, as they reveal the complex problem of marginalisation of homeless people's issues. This became especially visible during the epidemiological crisis, possibly because pre-pandemic government initiatives to support homeless people were often only apparent. Based on these findings, the conclusion emphasises principles promoted for years but not implemented in practice, which could lead to genuine improvements in the cohesiveness and effectiveness of the welfare system for homeless people.

Pre-pandemic initiatives for homeless people and self-organisation of the everyday lives of street homeless people

Homelessness is a particularly acute and complex social problem. I begin with this observation as, while it may seem obvious, only by defining homelessness can we estimate its scale as well as determine and evaluate appropriate measures for dealing with the issue. On the one hand, homelessness in a broad sense can affect a considerable section of the population, adults facing housing exclusion (including families with children), who cannot afford to rent or buy their own home and are forced to live with their relatives or friends (Eurostat, 2017, pp. 34–35; Robinson & Coward, 2003). The society does not perceive these people as homeless and they usually do not receive benefits for homeless people. This hidden homelessness (see: Baptista & Marlier, 2019) is not covered by government statistics in Poland. On the other hand, in societies concentrated on homes, losing one's abode and living without a roof over one's head is degrading and stigmatising (Nózka, 2020). These are the people included in nationwide research on the numbers of homeless people coordinated by the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy (now the Ministry of Family and Social Policy)². These studies showed that almost 30,000 people in Poland were homeless; 80% of them were staying in shelters and 20% were living in the public space and places regarded as uninhabitable (Ministerstwo Rodziny, Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, 2019).

² The research was conducted for the fifth time on the night of February 13–14, 2019. Although the research has been carried out regularly every two years since 2009, in 2021 it did not take place.

The latter are street homeless people, whose numbers – statistically speaking – increase in the spring/summer period when they leave the low-threshold shelters they visit in winter.

Having a place to live is not a privilege but a fundamental, protected human right. According to article 75 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland from April 2, 1997, public authorities are obliged to combat homelessness. In theory, fulfilling this obligation entails pursuing preventative measures, offering help to homeless people to meet their basic needs and support initiatives to enable them to leave homelessness. The type and scale of aid provided to homeless people in Poland is regulated by the Social Welfare Act of March 12, 2004. Fundamental needs regarding accommodation, food, clothing, health and hygiene are statutorily regulated, with support provided in the form of individual programmes for leaving homelessness and social work conducted, among others, by streetworkers. Homeless people are also entitled to various forms of benefits allocated on the basis of an administrative decision, e.g., allowances, welfare services, and travel tickets.

According to Article 48a of the amendment to the Social Welfare Law of August 5, 2015, temporary accommodation can be provided by shelters, warming centres, and refuges. Homeless people can also benefit from help in the form of a meal served by cafeterias and soup kitchens, usually open five days a week and serving one hot meal a day. Clinics run by NGOs offer medical and pre-medical aid to uninsured people, providing specialist consultations with doctors and support from nurses as well as dispensing medication. The welfare system includes psychological and specialist counselling centres for homeless people geared towards damage reduction and leaving homelessness. These offer preventative schemes and provide information on entitlements and available forms of support. In big cities, bathhouses and laundries also operate where people can go to bathe and to wash and dry their clothes and which provide cleaning products and offer clothes swaps (see: Cendrowicz, 2017).

Statutory measures for homeless people are organised by government and local authority administration bodies, including social welfare centres operating in every municipality. These entities should work together in partnership with NGOs, religious associations, and individuals as well as legal entities. According to a Supreme Audit Office report, however, these entities do not constitute a cohesive and effective system ensuring support and activation in the process of leaving homelessness. They usually operate independently, and with a few exceptions, lack complete information about the effectiveness of their own activities. In violation of the social welfare act, the minister responsible for social security did not oversee their activity, failing to conduct analyses of the effectiveness of the aid given to homeless people or to monitor the level at which shelters, refuges, and warming centres were meeting service quality standards (NIK, 2020). The audit showed that, in keeping with Article 23, section 1 of the Social Welfare Act, the minister outlined the concept and directions of development of activities concerning homelessness issues. The ministry also promoted new forms of activity, including providing financial support to non-governmental organisations. However, there was no ongoing monitoring of the implementation of government programmes. The audit encompassed two of the 117 agreements formed in 2016–2017. The minister, therefore, did not have reliable information on whether funds were

spent appropriately. The audit revealed an inappropriate approach of the state administration to the solution of the problem of homelessness. It is seen as obvious that welfare scheme projects, apart from dispensing money, should also take effectiveness indicators into account and plan to measure them. Otherwise, their implementation is unprofessional and superficial and leads to wasting of money (cf. Cendrowicz, 2017). Failure to monitor the effectiveness of measures implemented within the welfare system for homeless people also prevents checks on whether the needs of its diverse beneficiaries are being met and what the impact on their living situation is.

Some homeless people satisfy various needs outside of the institutional support system. The street homeless people avoid temporary stay centres and exclude themselves from some of the benefits they are entitled to. They occupy uninhabited buildings and heating ducts, adopt covered spaces such as areas under bridges, passageways, or bin shelters, or build huts for themselves (Nóžka, 2016; 2014). Para-accommodation spaces occupied and organised by street homeless people usually give them a greater sense of home than shelters and hostels, and this is something that is not obvious to non-homeless people (cf. Schneider, 2022). Referring to their own experience, they indicate that life in such places (like a shelter or hostel) runs in a sense of constant pressure generated by oppressive rules denying them their subjectivity, crowded together in a way that reduces the sense of home comfort and control (cf. Kostrzyńska, 2018). Living in para-accommodation, meanwhile, often creates a chance for regaining these opportunities lost in a shelter: autonomy, a sense of freely organising and arranging one's own space, which usually makes it necessary to keep an eye on it. Effective way of supervising a space is sharing it with another homeless person and looking after it on a rotating basis. Practices performed to protect and monitor the site also include establishing a neighbourhood, which is reproduced using multiple mutual influences and often prosaic, routine contacts (cf. Nóžka, 2020).

An established and accepting neighbourhood is a potential source of diverse goods (e.g., footwear, clothing, hot meals, everyday items), shared by its non-homeless and homeless residents. People therefore constitute an integral element of livelihood practices. Homeless people might make a living, firstly, through work offered by non-homeless people, which is usually unofficial and seasonal, entailing minor services. Secondly, they are often engaged in a type of "self-employment" involving begging and/or collecting. The effectiveness of the latter activities depends on the presence of other people, as they occur with their participation or thanks to them. The presence of others is also often indirectly necessary, e.g., when people leave cigarette butts from which tobacco is obtained or bottles and cans, which homeless people collect and give to recycling collection centres. The means necessary for life – recyclables, domestic equipment, clothes, food – are often obtained from rubbish containers found on housing estates and adjacent to restaurants, industrial plants, etc. (Nóžka 2016; 2020).

Since some citizens not only have no home but for various reasons do not make use of welfare institutions and remain outside of the support system, I was interested whether and to what degree, during the epidemiological crisis, the restrictions and directives implemented by the government had an effect on street homeless people's everyday lives. It is worth emphasising that data on everyday life has enormous

potential in supporting design of the strategies and tools of action within the wide-ranging welfare system (Zinn, 2013). This data provides the basis for understanding the situation of people on whose behalf and with whose participation welfare, intervention and development programmes are carried out. A dynamic approach to human actions constitutes the foundation of monitoring the solutions implemented and evaluation of their effects (e.g., Lades et al., 2018).

Empirical data sources

An exploratory study was conducted between December 2020 and March 2021 in Kraków (Poland) in an effort to fill the gaps in knowledge on the everyday lives of street homeless people and initiatives to help them during the COVID-19 pandemic. Kraków, as well as other large Polish cities, is characterised by greater homelessness than smaller towns. Homeless people choose to stay in larger conurbations because of the availability of para-accommodation spaces, casual work, and an extensive support system. The study focused on the situation of what is called street homeless people owing to their everyday routines discussed above, in which important needs are met outside of the institutional support system. The study had two stages. In the first stage, I wanted to determine whether these people's everyday lives had changed, and how. What forms of support did they benefit from, if any? In ascertaining the homeless people's everyday practices, I considered two related contexts: establishing a dwelling (place of residence) and making a livelihood. This information was gathered using semi-structured interviews with homeless people.

Selection of the sample for the research was purposive, based on availability of participants. For ethical reasons, only adults who had given their voluntary and informed consent were invited to take part. The interview was conducted in the place where the subject was currently staying, a para-accommodation space organised by the individual. The participants were recruited during the Winter Action programme, with the permission of the department for homeless people at the Municipal Social Services Centre. This programme entails social workers (streetworkers) accompanied by the municipal police visiting places inhabited by homeless people. The aim is to monitor the situation of people occupying spaces regarded as non-residential, giving them support during the winter, in the form of information about available benefits, pre-medical help, and transport to shelters or medical centres. The interviewer was a streetworker with experience working with homeless people and conducting interviews. During the field visits, the streetworker contacted 94 homeless people, not all of whom were included in the research. People who did not give consent, those under the influence of psychoactive substances, as well as those in a bad mental and physical condition for whom a pre-medical intervention had been conducted within the Winter Action initiative did not participate. In total, interviews with 42 homeless people were analysed. Each meeting lasted about half an hour, beginning with a presentation of the objective and procedure of the research, information on its anonymity and that it could be interrupted at any moment. An interview then took place based on the questionnaire, containing questions on the place where the

participants were staying (whether it had changed and when, how long they had been there), contacts with people, ways of organising a livelihood, whether anything had changed in their lives since the introduction of sanitary restrictions in the public space and what, how they had been informed of them, as well as whether they were scared of infection with the COVID-19 virus and whether and how they protected themselves against it. In line with the interviewees' preferences, the interviews were not recorded. The streetworker conducting the interviews noted the responses and at the end described the participant's dwelling (type of para-accommodation, technical condition, availability of heating).

The aim of the second stage of the research was to answer the question: what efforts were made to support homeless people during the epidemiological crisis? What were their potential effects? Determining this information and discussing the effectiveness of welfare initiatives was based on diverse materials going beyond the data collected during the interviews with homeless people. The collected materials were supplemented with information obtained from streetworkers and municipal police officers working in the street homeless community day-to-day and involved in Winter Action. The unstructured interviews concerned the situation of homeless people during the pandemic and the varying services offered to them. In addition, according to key words applying to the research area (e.g., homeless people, pandemic, COVID-19, social welfare, forms of support, vaccination, social intervention), a review and then analysis of the contents published on websites was carried out: from online magazines, the Ministry of Family and Social Policy, Human Rights Commissioner, and Supreme Audit Office. The materials collected during the research were categorised and condensed. The data was selected considering the research objectives and problems (Maison, 2010). Its representations were then determined, dividing the materials into thematic segments (e.g., forms of support, aim, implementer, organisation, implementation, effects of initiative). The data was formatted using matrices (Miles & Huberman, 2000). Extracts from texts and informants' statements were arranged in a table into rows and columns. The data included governmental/legislative initiatives with official data, highlighted needs and problems (of homeless people, welfare institution staff), and views on their implementation, accessibility, and effects.

The (in)variability of everyday life of street homeless people in the context of the forms of support offered to them during the pandemic

The sanitary restrictions introduced by the Polish government in March 2020 contributed to the work of support organisations in the homeless community being remodelled, with tightened admissions and rules for staying in shelters and hostels. Some of these rules made access to such centres harder, while others discouraged their use (e.g., demanding a current COVID-19 test, imposing quarantine). From the time of the introduction of the first restrictions to the beginning of the research in December 2020, a great deal changed in this regard and good practices were developed. Certain constraints were scrapped, while the centres and organisations working for homeless people also introduced various new solutions. The expert interviews revealed that in

Kraków, in the research period, hostels accepted homeless people without the previously required COVID-19 test. Limits on admissions were raised in hostels and shelters, thus increasing crowding. Accommodation in the municipal warming centre was available without restrictions. A new initiative was a mobile aid point, a night bus taking homeless people looking for accommodation to the warming centre. Kraków's soup kitchens, meanwhile, were working according to government guidelines, serving food to poor people to take away or packed lunches. Organisations that had supported homeless people in the public space did not resume activity in this form owing to laws prohibiting large gatherings in the public space. Some operated in the form of mobile information points or by visiting homeless people in the places where they lived, providing them with hygienic materials, clothes, and hot meals.

What do the everyday lives of street homeless people look like in this context? Let us begin with the homes set up by the research participants and the ways they are organised. The vast majority (41 people) were not interested in benefiting from accommodation in facilities. This aversion was caused by bad experiences and negative ideas about such places as well as the perceived benefits of staying away from them. There were negative evaluations of the institutional regime and lack of acceptance of the rules binding at such institutions, as well as distaste towards the people using hostels, emphasising their unethical and uncouth behaviour as well as poor hygiene. The participants emphasised their familiarity and/or attachment to the places they currently occupied and people from the neighbourhood, their own independence and self-reliance in earning a living. They also said that the pandemic had also put them off using homeless hostels. For several people, the state of epidemiological threat was an additional argument for avoiding them. In their opinion, the likelihood of SARS-CoV-2 infection increased in crowded hostels.

The data collected by streetworkers showed that before the outbreak of the pandemic, street homeless people were more willing to use accommodation offered by hostels or warming centres on freezing nights – conditions which prevailed during our research. This particularly applied to people living in unheated para-accommodation, which was the case of most of the participants (34 people). The participants occupied diverse spaces and chose various forms of dwelling, with only allotment gazebos, stairwells, and lofts and heating ducts being heated. The remaining dwellings, which did not have heating, were buildings and houses to be demolished; tents and huts; a car and camping trailer; garages; a storage room and recreation shelter located in the estate space, a cellar; the loft of a tenement house, cavities of buildings, a recess under a flyover. Irrespective of the place and form of the dwelling, the participants do not maintain many social contacts, with some claiming not to keep any and saying that they only have fleeting relations with other people.

The participants usually said that they did not want institutional help because they could manage on their own, or that they received support from homeless and non-homeless people from their neighbourhood. Especially people living long-term in a given place claimed that from their perspective nothing had changed. Most of the participants continue to make a living from “self-employment”, meaning begging and/or collecting recyclables. As before the pandemic, they also look for necessary resources (e.g., clothing and food) in rubbish bins.

I've been homeless for 25 years and I've never taken advantage of the help of the Municipal Social Services Centre, because I don't need them.

Some of the participants do casual work, benefit from the financial support of a social welfare centre or have a regular income in the form of a pension or disability allowance. Those supported by welfare institutions were usually aware of their changed rules of operation. They had learned this information from other homeless people and employees of welfare institutions and uniformed services. In terms of institutional help, the participants mainly benefited from meals. They were unhappy about the closing of cafeterias, where they could previously go, warm up, talk, and eat a hot meal at a table.

To conclude, the informants usually declared that, despite the ongoing ban on spending time in public places, their dwelling and livelihood had not changed, and it was also suggested by the comparative analysis of the everyday routines of homeless people before the pandemic. This was stated by people who knew the area where they were living and continued to receive support from people who knew them, including residents tolerating them sleeping in their stairwell and employees of estate shops offering a hot drink or to heat up their meal. Those people who rummage through rubbish bins around blocks of flats had not noticed a difference in access to resources: *[Nothing's changed here] I collect food from the buns. Lots of people live in the blocks and lots throw things away. No, I don't need help.* Some of the participants also pointed to the benefits arising from the ongoing crisis. They noted the better food served in soup kitchens and greater engagement from the staff of welfare institutions and non-governmental organisations, who have shown more interest than they did previously. Sometimes, people's previous everyday routines for making a living, which constituted an element of activity structuring their day before the epidemiological crisis, have been replaced by waiting for help that was delivered to the place where they were staying.

A few of the participants had also noticed difficulties caused by the pandemic. One manifestation of this was greater fear of homeless people among non-homeless people, which can make it difficult for them to get support and reduce opportunities for casual work. Some practices of homeless people became ineffective on empty streets – such as “angling”³ among passers-by. Furthermore, those participants who made a living from collecting recyclables said that fewer people in the public space meant that there were not so many cans and glass bottles in rubbish bins. Recycling collection centres had also changed their working model, and some of them had suspended operations.

I collect cans and bottles. There aren't so many now, because fewer people are going outside, so for example today I only collected 5 zloty.

According to these informants, possibilities for making a living during the pandemic are complicated. Despite this, however, they did not consider changing the associated practices, which are part of their day-to-day routines.

The findings from the interviews led to questions on the effectiveness of the welfare system for homeless people. Firstly, it was ascertained that the research participants

³ “Angling” is a popular phrase used in the Polish homeless community to describe “fishing” for potential people to help, entailing active, frequently pushy begging.

had begun to adapt to the situation of diminishing resources, which were already scarce before the pandemic. Yet, this situation did not prompt them to make use of institutional help. Secondly, it was noted that an aversion to specific forms of institutional support before the pandemic discouraged people from using their services in the epidemiological crisis. Among the manifestations of the lack of trust in institutional support was the fact that using a shelter was seen as being riskier than staying outside of it. The risk of hypothermia or lack of basic needs sometimes became secondary. Thirdly, certain solutions halted the research participants' everyday activity, which was a source of material and social resources. Some of them in isolation began to expect help. Particularly important in this context are the findings from the analysis of government communications and media statements of welfare institution staff concerning initiatives to support homeless people during the pandemic. The next part of the article examines those solutions which were not effective and could actually worsen the situation of street homeless people by triggering mechanisms reproducing their marginal position.

Mechanisms of reproduction of the marginal position of street homeless people in the context of state authorities' actions to reduce the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus

According to streetworkers, the most difficult moment for homeless people was the first half a year after the Polish government introduced restrictions associated with the state of epidemiological threat, between mid-March and August 2020. There was a great deal of disinformation at that time, and the laws and procedures were changing dynamically. As a result of sanitary requirements, access to welfare institutions was reduced considerably, cafeterias, bath houses, and public toilets were closed, and soup kitchens operated under new rules. There were arguments, name-calling, and fights outside closed cafeterias. Most homeless people at the time declared that they were afraid of the virus. "People in a homelessness crisis often do not understand the current situation. The entire system for bringing them help was turned on its head" (Wroczyńska, April 14, 2020). Concerns were caused both by changes to the operation of the support system for homeless people and by increasingly empty streets as a result of the introduction of a restrictive ban on movement and the threat of fines for violations.

The laws later began to change, as restrictions were loosened and aid institutions developed new working methods. And although many participants in the research declared that the pandemic had not changed their situation, comparative analysis of dwelling and livelihood practices before and during the epidemiological crisis shows a break in the continuity of everyday routines. This was confirmed by some of the informants, as well as streetworkers, whose long-term observation revealed the dynamic of changes in the everyday practices of street homeless people. Analysis of the interviews with homeless people and employees of various aid centres demonstrated the potential links between these practices and the actions of state authorities aiming to reduce the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. These actions did not necessarily contribute to an improvement in their situation.

Increasing susceptibility to stigmatisation and persisting negative stereotypes

The fact that the public space was deserted and street traffic disappeared almost overnight made homeless people, usually hidden in the urban crowd, more visible. This made the problem of homelessness more visible for decision makers than it had been before the pandemic. Information about disoriented homeless people in the public space began to be broadcast in the media, and welfare organisations operating on behalf of homeless people pointed out that they were being overlooked in government support programmes. Welfare institutions lacked personnel, hygienic materials, masks, and clear rules regarding their continued activity.

The state authorities' reaction to the situation was public manifestation of care, which included appeals on ministry websites to support homeless people. One publication stated that "given their current situation, homeless people are at the most risk from the effects of the virus"⁴. Unintentionally, these well-meaning words stigmatised and ultimately compounded the negative public response to homeless people – this time as potential carriers of COVID-19 (cf. Wołodźko, 2020). We can identify two factors to explain this mechanism. Firstly, the epidemiological crisis has brought invisible, constant, and unclear sources of threat. Anybody can potentially infect anyone else. This situation casts a shadow on strangers and socially uncertain people. Homeless people, living on the margins of society, are regarded as such individuals (cf. Lee & Schreck, 2005), with their everyday practices embedded in the public space highlighting their marginal nature. Secondly, therefore, although homeless people do not have many social contacts and there is no evidence that they contribute to the spread of the virus more than other citizens, the circumstances resulting from their life situation help to heighten this kind of stigma. Homelessness means being in the public space without a home in which to isolate, daily mobility eking out a livelihood; ascribed and actual lack of hygiene (cf. Culhane et al., 2020). These factors are viewed as variables that increase the risk of infection. As a result of the fear of infection, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, the suggestion – albeit expressed out of concern – that homeless people could be responsible for transmission of the virus fell on fertile ground. This in fact unjustified emphasis on a selected – and socially stigmatised and unintegrated – group of people as spreaders of the virus, which entered the public consciousness in the form of a government communication, could not fail to have an impact on the attitudes of others during the epidemiological crisis.

Even when there was no coronavirus, people treated us homeless like lepers [...]. And when the pandemic started, most people decided that it was us who spread coronavirus [...] people completely turned away from us (statement of a homeless person, in: Trębacka, July 25, 2020).

With time, homeless people began to be aware of the new stigma. The interviews with experts working with homeless people showed that, concerned about avoiding passing on infection, they put on protective masks and gloves, and were often told: *Don't be scared, I'm not contagious.*

⁴ Example publication on the ministry website: "Help for homeless people during the pandemic" (Ministerstwo Rodziny, Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, March 20, 2020).

Apparent action – pushing and keeping street homeless people out of the social service system

According to representatives of NGOs, the concern for the fate of homeless people manifested by state authorities did not result in sufficient initiatives. As such, the state authorities' actions proved to be only apparent. Such measures highlight the contrast between the official objective and their actual uselessness, and even harmfulness. They usually do not serve to solve the problem directly and are taken as a matter of course, out of caution and for show, to maintain the positive image of policymakers as fulfilling formal requirements and/or social expectations. Sometimes, such initiatives are simply incompetent (cf. Lutyński, 2018). As such, they might generate major social costs.

Homeless people are not entitled to COVID-19 tests. Because although tests are also for uninsured people, to get a referral [from a doctor] you need to be insured. And yet one positive test at a shelter with several dozen people can lead to infection on a mass scale, said the [opposition] MP Hanna Gill-Piątek during a parliamentary debate (Nowosielska, October 28, 2020).

The aforementioned exclusory laws reproduced the status quo by only appearing to give homeless people the right to free COVID-19 tests. The apparent nature of this action is displayed not just by contradictory regulations, but also by conflicting messages sent to homeless citizens. On the one hand, they were persuaded of the need to isolate and avoid gatherings and fined for contraventions. On the other hand, when it became clear that there were outbreaks in social welfare homes, and contrary to the opinions of experts that communal accommodation increases the risk of infection, homeless people were expected to isolate in overcrowded hostels. Bearing in mind that the homeless population in Poland is mainly made up of older and sickly people (Ministerstwo Rodziny, Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, 2019), a dual risk was created. Only few individuals, however, stated outright that the reason why they did not use a hostel was the risk of infection. Asked whether they were afraid of infection, only three of the informants said that they were afraid, the rest answering that it was “hard to say”, that this did not affect them and they had no reason for concern. Some also diminished or downplayed the problem.

I think I already had coronavirus. I felt this foul, bitter taste. But maybe that was spoiled food from the kitchen [laughs] [living in a tent].

Analysing their statements and everyday practices revealed during the interview, I looked for the connection between the current situation and the homeless people's declared fears after declaration of the state of epidemiological threat. I assumed that the initial disinformation and concerns about infection would be significant, and, coupled with the lack of support for coping during the pandemic as well as adequate measures as it spread, might bolster repression and denial of the potential threat (World Health Organization, 1992, p. 11). The same participants on the one hand declared that they were not afraid of infection or its consequences, but on the other spoke about isolating, avoiding contacts with other people and avoiding the hostel – even when it had free spaces and could actually be used.

Streetworkers' observations showed that the number of people living in unheated para-accommodation and adopted (not always) covered places in the public space increased. It was observed that people occupying such spaces tended to make use of institutional accommodation on cold days before the pandemic, but have now begun to avoid them. The Ministry of Family and Social Policy guidelines seeking to improve the situation of homeless people in fact overlooked these circumstances. Without appraisal of the situation and consideration of the diverse needs of the recipients of help, they assumed that the obvious place of support and temporary residence for homeless people is shelters and hostels and their needs comprise accommodation and food. This reductive way of thinking is far removed from the needs of homeless people, who faced significantly reduced possibilities of independent functioning as a result of the epidemiological crisis. As was the case before the pandemic, in their everyday residential and livelihood practices, the participants in the research have various ways of sustaining conditions allowing them to satisfy their most important needs, such as autonomy, self-determination or a sense of belonging, e.g.: *I don't want to use a centre, wherever I lay my head is my home* [living in a tent]. Provision of the offered support to satisfy the physiological needs evidently omits an array of important psychological and social needs of homeless people. Such initiatives point to the objectification of the aid process and of the people at whom the aid is targeted. The risk of objectification appears on every occasion in a situation when aid concentrates largely on what is offered, rather than whom it is aimed at.

Omissions in the support distribution process and exacerbating deprivation of needs

Homeless people in the margins of society during the current crisis may experience the omissions in the support distribution process in various ways (cf. Kaniasty et al., 1990). There is no shortage of views that "people in a crisis of homelessness have been lost somewhere in all the procedures prepared for the fight with the coronavirus pandemic" (Hanna Gill-Piątek, opposition party MP, in: Gontarek, October 28, 2020). For example, although the most difficult moment for homeless people was the first half a year after the Polish government introduced restrictions associated with the state of epidemiological threat, at that time non-governmental organisations supporting the homeless were not covered by any additional solutions (The appeal of the Human Rights Commissioner; Rzecznik Praw Obywatelskich, March 17, 2020). On the ministry website, however, under the heading "The homeless are not without help during the pandemic", we read that government instructions mainly involve identifying infected homeless people and isolating them (in collective isolation centres), and that procedures have been created for institutions supporting homeless people, for instance obliging them to keep staff to a minimum. There were appeals: "to social organisations, employees and volunteers of social organisations and people of good will for help and support, especially for centres supporting homeless people" (Ministerstwo Rodziny, Pracy i Polityki Społecznej, March 20, 2020).

The findings on the circumstances reveal that the measures undertaken by the authorities overlooked homeless people's real situation regarding access to resources,

including the fact that even if they have a social support network, it is fragile and usually unstable. By assigning support of homeless people in the pandemic to citizens and relying on their self-organisation, the government seems to be overlooking both the extraordinary aspects of the situation that hinders this self-organisation, e.g., restrictions on movement represent an additional level of difficulty in delivering aid to street homeless people, and the economic weakness of the system of socio-institutional support for the homeless.

The situation is so difficult that soon people will be arriving in homeless shelters just to die [...] homeless shelters are mostly run by NGOs. That's why we're invisible in the system. If I want to get a COVID-19 test done, I have to contact the founding organisation of the mission, that is myself (Adrianna Porowska, head of the Camillian Mission for Social Assistance, which runs a hostel for homeless people, *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna*, November 7, 2020).

To a great extent, this system's activities in Poland are based on unstable financial sources, low-paid jobs and volunteering. This translates to limited and low-quality support.

Conclusion

Before the pandemic, there was a lack of shielding and community measures targeted at them, as well as reliable data on the availability and effectiveness of services they could benefit from on an everyday basis (cf. Baptista & Marlier, 2019). The epidemiological crisis resulted in homeless people and their everyday practices becoming more visible in the public space, with the governments of many countries taking unprecedented steps to support them in the pandemic (e.g., Sadler, 2020). Among the motives was the assumption that homeless people's living conditions and lifestyles increase the risk of illness and spread of infections. Homeless people's lifestyle was seen as representing a threat to the health of all citizens (cf. Parsell et al., 2023). The Polish government's actions also reproduced the generalised image of homeless people as contravening restrictions and constituting a potential source of spreading of the virus. By promoting solutions involving isolation of homeless people in communal living institutions, at the same time, they brought about a continuing drain on community welfare services. The aim of closing welfare centres and minimising street work was to limit the spread of the virus. New solutions emerged over time that can also be seen as good practices after the pandemic, such as mobile aid points. These were provided by a bus travelling around the city providing information and handing out hot drinks, where people could warm up and be taken to a shelter if they wished. Increased flexibility and adapting initiatives to changing needs can also be regarded as a good practice – this includes distributing packed lunches or organising open-air canteens.

Although the welfare system responded innovatively at the local level to the fact that some citizens not only have no home, but for various reasons do not make use of welfare institutions and remain outside of the support system, this was not taken into account in national quarantine projects. It is symptomatic that the majority of

participants in the research, despite their worsening living situation, did not take advantage of the available institutional help. Facing an epidemiological threat, in an uncertain situation (e.g., changes in access to services taking place overnight), and with limited opportunities for an independent livelihood, these people reacted by adapting. The identified forms of adaptation involved redefining and becoming accustomed to the situation, neutralising the threat by denying or downplaying it, as well as, in the case of diminished livelihood opportunities, adjusting by further reducing their own needs. As one participant said: *People are going out less now, and besides it's winter, so there are fewer bottles. So less money. And when there's less money, you need to demand less. I reduced my demands, but you know, I get by [laughs].*

Looking at the situation of homeless people from the perspective of their everyday routines leads to the conclusion that both the social and the institutional circumstances caused by the epidemiological crisis not only contributed to reproduction of the marginal position of homeless people but could also lead to their further exclusion. These circumstances were also worsened not only by the sanitary restrictions expected during the pandemic, but also the apparent reaction from the state authorities to the visible and/or known problems of homeless people. This appearance of actions originates from disregard for this knowledge, including: (1) the complexity of the needs of the internally diverse homeless community, and (2) the complexity of the homeless welfare system (connected to various ministries: health, education, housing, finance etc.), including ignorance of the peculiarities of the workings of NGOs, which are the mainstay of the system in Poland. This is one of the reasons for the implementation of solutions that are inadequate, and even mutually exclusive and in practice useless.

Yet it was not the epidemiological crisis that contributed to apparent actions; the crisis highlighted the appearance of actions from the state authorities to solve the problems of homelessness, failure to diagnose the needs and extent of effectiveness of offered support, and lack of understanding of the challenges faced by organisations working on behalf of homeless people. This knowledge may have reached the government as a result of work with employees of welfare institutions, experts and consultations planned for implementation of measures. After all, a key principle in building a cohesive and efficient support system is making decisions based on expert knowledge and genuine intersectoral cooperation. Even before the pandemic, however, the Polish government was limiting dialogue with civil society organisations, politicising, and centralising its administration (Pazderski, 2018).

The Polish authorities also saw it as inexpedient to coordinate the activities of various ministries on behalf of homeless people, although this was recommended in 2020 by the Supreme Audit Office and Human Rights Commissioner, highlighting the ineffective dispersion across various ministries of measures for homeless people. For example, it was presumably a lack of interministerial cooperation that resulted in contradictory regulations coming into force and uninsured citizens being denied access to COVID-19 tests. Similarly, despite the suggestions of these bodies, the appointment of a plenipotentiary for homeless people was deemed to be unjustified (Rzecznik Praw Obywatelskich, February 19, 2020), although advocacy for homeless people seems to be a self-evident element of building a cohesive and effective support system. Ignoring

the voice of the people for whom the system is organised means that their needs are also overlooked. The actions undertaken by government and local authority administration bodies and non-governmental organisations mostly cover satisfying basic needs: accommodation, food and essential clothing (NIK, 2020). The results of the research show that the epidemiological crisis did not change anything in this respect.

It should be noted that homeless people's affairs were also not valued in political programmes before 2015, when the right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) party came to power in Poland, ruling for the next eight years. Homelessness is not perceived – either by ordinary citizens or by the government, which is sensitive to their views – as a common problem requiring extraordinary measures, considered and diverse interventions. On the one hand, the results of the research revealed systemic mechanisms connected with such thinking for (re)producing and perpetuating the marginal position of homeless people as well as individual and social problems associated with homelessness. On the other, they add to knowledge on the principles of building a cohesive, effective, and resistant support system. The pandemic confirmed the importance in crisis management and in a crisis of trust in the welfare system as well as interpersonal solidarity. Trust and solidarity reduce the level of fear and bolster civic (self)discipline, cooperation, and mutual support in uncertain times. As a social resource, they develop over a long period and require engagement. They are promoted, firstly, by civic and anti-discrimination education, and secondly, by the principles mentioned above, including knowledge-based initiatives, cooperation, and empowerment. Understanding the need for state authorities to implement these principles is a condition for building the social cohesiveness that is so important on an everyday basis and during a crisis, and a key element of which is a resistant and effective social welfare system.

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