

HOMELESS AND HOMELESSNESS IN BULGARIA

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INTRODUCTION

Officially homeless and homelessness in Bulgaria are relatively new phenomena. They became public issues for the first time after the breakdown of the former regime. During the years between 1945 and 1989 the presence of poor, homeless, unemployed or other socially deprived individuals was not recognized in our country even when there was evidence for it. The ideology of the political regime assumed that the socialist state provided the best basic conditions for living and prosperity for all citizens. To recognize the existence of the above-mentioned groups would have implied the failure of the system.

Although they did not exist in theory, in reality before 1989 there were homeless people. Details about their presence, categories and number still remain unclear: there were no statistics or other information on the subject available to the public. There are only suggestions. Moreover the term “homeless” was restricted to those people sleeping rough and living on the street or the *roofless*. The cases of *houseless*, or with shared houses, with temporary or supported accommodation, the cases of *insecure housing*: with no tenancy, eviction order, violence, the cases of *inadequate spatial and hygienic housing conditions*, were not considered as a kind of homelessness. Unfortunately this general understanding has not been changed a great deal till present day.

HOUSING SECTOR IN BULGARIA

Bulgarian population nowadays is about 7,8 millions (in 1990 there was – 9,0 mlns). It disposes with around 3,7 dwelling units (incl. secondary homes), or about 460 units per 1000 people (a bit higher than the EU average). The structure of this stock is as following:

- 57,2 % - 30 – 50 sq m
- 25,3 % - size below 30 sq m
- 14,5 % - size 60 – 89 sq m
- 3 % - more than 90 sq m

These statistics discover that the available housing stock is not large in surface. The living space per capita is calculated more than 15 sq m in the towns, and 22 sq m in the countryside. 97 % of the housing stock is private. The public housing stock is near to disappear. The number of people in housing needs is growing. Ownership still

be considerable. Private tenancy started to develop since 1990, but still be low in proportion. Having in mind the general statistical numbers of the housing stock and the number of population after 1990 the state institutions and the local authorities judge the housing situation in satisfaction. Politically housing is not evaluated of social in priority interest. Housing is not even mentioned as a subject during the elections. Currently there is no general state housing policy in BG, there are only some steps about it. Only a practical strategy how to refurbish the existing blocks in the large housing estates has been elaborated, but until now these recommendations, with the exception of several experiments are considered only in a written way.

Just for comparison: during the former period 50 % of the newly build housing stock was public, aimed to house families in housing needs. According to the rules, every local authorities were obliged to keep 2 % of the public or council housing stock empty in order to house people became homeless as a consequence by a natural desastre, fire, floods or other 'force major' circumstances.

HOMELESSNESS AS A CURRENT POLITICAL ISSUE

By the time of the changes after 1989 and the recognition of the marginal social group in the country, there was no housing strategy or policy in the country regarding the homeless. During the transition some relative housing assistance started to be established in Sofia and some large cities for poor people and rough sleeping, but it is far to meet the homelessness needs. So far there is no state institution or specialized service committed to establish a policy and to reveal the conditions in which the homeless could live. No strategy or policy for prevention or protection has been developed. Until now in Bulgaria still be no legal recognition of homeless, no definition about them, no statistical methods to number them and to differ their profile and types. The recognition should be combined with some policy of support. May be this is the explication why legal regulations are still lacking for recognizing and identifying the homeless. . . . There is a current joke: "No people – no problems".

INFORMATION ABOUT HOMELESS AND HOMELESSNESS

Although they are not recognized by the policy makers and institutions today the number of homeless people is increasing. Hence data on this category is not collected and such people are not statistically observed homeless could be evaluate quantitatively and qualitatively by different indirect and direct sources. The indirect sources could be: degraded housing buildings, houses planned to be demolished, restituted houses (owners and tenants are evicted by restituted owners), massively privatised public dwellings, unemployment, strong migration to large cities, immigration, local authorities register of people in housing needs, applications for shelter in the few services for emergency or temporary housing for rough sleeping etc. The direct sources at the moment are few surveys and collected sporadic data by different investigations (academic, police, health services).

Indirect sources:

1. At the periodical census of the population and housing carried out every 10 years, supplementary sample studies are carried out too. But special sample studies of the homeless have not been conducted so far. The data on housing makes evident only what the state of housing property is or what is the share of people without housing property and what is the quantity of degraded buildings. But this does not mean that all these people are homeless or

buildings are inhabitable, so estimations on homelessness can't be reliable on this basis without crossing with other indicators.

2. There are other routes for discovering data on habitable but unfit buildings: for instance on the territory of Sofia there are currently dozens of buildings planned to be demolished, but not all of them are residential buildings. Consequently we cannot judge as to the number of the homeless from this figure either.
3. Indirect assumptions about homeless may be made on the basis of the unemployment situation and the level of poverty. But this approach could be valuable only in combination of other indicators, like housing ownership and share of ownership (there a lot of people with a small inherited part of ownership of a house).
4. Through statistical correlations between housing property and the number of households, it is hard to identify the potential number of the homeless. The figures for private housing property are quite high. But this does not imply that homes are distributed evenly in space and among the population. A portion of the homes are possessed by few landlords or in co-ownership and their use is conditional.
5. At the moment many homes in villages and small cities are vacant. Due to the high unemployment, there is a great accumulation of active population in the capital and the large cities who is in difficulties to find there secure accommodation. The percentage of the population not possessing housing in the cities is higher. Adequate possibilities for renting a dwelling are lacking.
6. Indirect data on the homeless, however inexact, can be found in the municipalities where a register of the people in need of housing is still kept. This practice survives from the past when the municipalities had at their disposal public housing stock for renting. But in many places these registers are incomplete, not adequately kept due to the lack of prospects for circulation of tenants; with regard to the few municipal dwellings that remain. The criteria and indicators for assessing the condition of housing and the rates of homelessness are obsolete, so that they do not provide knowledge as to the situation with regard to homelessness in the country or the number of the homeless. Moreover, in the rules for registering people in need of housing, the category of "homeless" is not included.
7. Certain large urban municipalities have recently started to maintain a special supply of buildings for sheltering homeless persons who have found themselves in difficult domestic situations. In Sofia there are 3 services that have been specified for this purpose (totaly for 580 people). Living conditions there are quite poor and the time for residing, limited. These municipal blocks are insufficient in number, especially considering that many requests for shelter remain unsatisfied. There are also many cases of homeless persons living in the streets, who have not filed requests for shelter.

A policy for prevention, assistance and protection of the homeless In Bulgaria should be in the sphere of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. Currently they confirmed that their institution did not yet collect data on the homeless in the country and hence did not have a ready strategy and policy regarding this category.

At the municipal level there are also no data about the homeless and assistance. The only effort made is for eventual registration of requests by persons in need of

housing, and for redistributing the minimal supply of dwellings that remain at the disposal of the municipality for social needs. In rare cases new municipal homes are being built or old ones are being renewed. For instance after 1989 the Sofia municipality privatized its housing and only a critically small supply of dwellings remain at its disposal; this is being used to shelter needy people who are victims of natural disasters or have sustained damages. In the cases when municipal departments of housing policy do exist, they should observe the housing situation of the population on the territory of the municipality; yet so far they have no such policy. Unfortunately at the moment the municipal administration is without opinion on the matter.

Soon after the fall of the Berlin Wall the civic, non-governmental sector began to emerge in Bulgaria. Under foreign influence and with foreign assistance, specialized NGO's appeared and took under their care children living in the streets. At the start they operated only on the territory of Sofia, but later they gradually built structures in other large Bulgarian cities. They are created a model home for prevention, support and offering a chance in life for neglected children. The associations work with abandoned children and their families in the city and the regions, as well as with children in risk providing for children services similar to those of the specialized center, including an asylum, informal and formal training, work for socialization, and if possible, finding families with whom the children can live.

This organizations also work for the prevention, among the Roma in particular, the ethnic group having the largest contingent of homeless or children with social retardation, with sexual abuse or abandoned children who have been victims of violence.

SURVEYS: Direct data for homeless

The first survey on the homeless in Bulgaria after the end of the former regime started in 1993 at the Institute of Sociology of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.¹ It was based on the experience of several studies on homelessness in UK but has developed proper original methods for gathering empirical data on the variety of homeless persons. Since then other research studies have been carried out but indirectly focused on this topic, or in the framework of other social surveys like poverty. For instance the housing problem is included in most of the research on the Roma community.

The homeless and homelessness is usually included as a topic in studies of the poor and of poverty, of the unemployed and unemployment. But these data on the homeless, although partial, are not being collected together in one place so as to enrich our information of the processes connected with homelessness and the homeless in Bulgaria. In addition there is always a risk of inaccuracy in making comparisons, considering the differences in establishing the same indicators.

¹ In 1992-93 there was a proposal before the Scientific Council of the Institute of Sociology of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences to carry out a scientific research of the homeless and homelessness, which was at first rejected for the motive that this was "not a social problem of Bulgarian society". Later, in 1994-95 an empirical research on the homeless in Bulgaria was financed by the National Fund for Scientific Investigations at the Ministry of Education and Science. The results of this survey were given a high evaluation by the Fund.

Consequently the introduction of certain specific research approaches is necessary in order for these data to be used more fruitfully.

THE HOMELESS IN BULGARIA: PROFILE AND TYPOLOGY

The study of the homeless in Bulgaria, conducted by the Institute of Sociology, placed the topic of homelessness as a real existing phenomenon in Bulgaria and first attempted to identify and classify in quantitative and qualitative terms the homeless in this country. After the completion of the survey in 1996, some of the findings have been twice updated. A recent survey has been conducted (May 2005) in Sofia about the services for homeless.

The results of the survey and its continuation are richly informative. Overall 15 groups of homeless and inhabitants in risk of homelessness were identified and studied. This profile is combining sole general, classical for every country groups and some local, specific ones. Of them a typology of 5 basic types of homeless persons has been proposed:

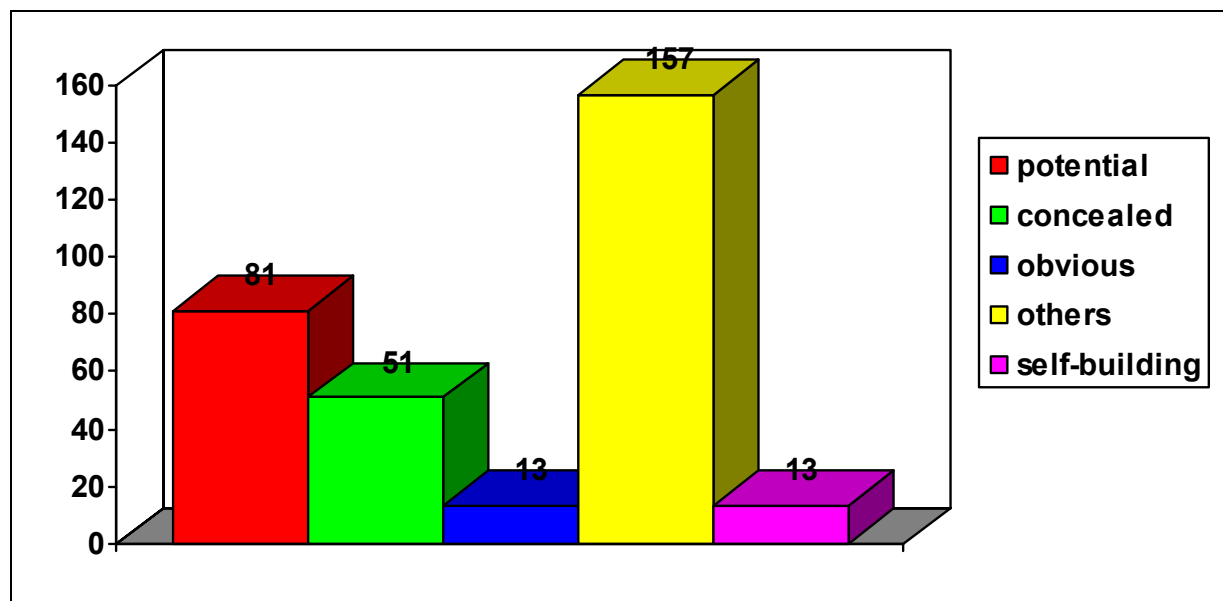
- “Obviously” homeless: roofless or rough sleeping;
- “Hidden or concealed” homeless : shared housing;
- “Potential” homeless: temporary shelter;
- “Active” homeless: bankrupted people, roofless after a desaster ("self-saving" from homelessness by self-help building, looking actively for solving the houseless);
- "Particular" homeless (homeless people with housing property of their own).

This typology does not pretend to give a definitive picture of the social groups and situations connected with homelessness or with increased risk of homelessness; it is only a research hypothesis that has to be developed and verified in a longer period. Other sub-typologies are possible. For instance, the homeless can be ranked according to frequency of evident homelessness such as:

- Seasonal homeless
- Temporary homeless
- Permanent homeless
- Sporadic homeless

As a result of the empirical survey a distribution of respondents (417 in all) according to types of homelessness:

1. Potential homeless	81 persons
2. Concealed homeless	51 persons
3. Obvious homeless	13 persons
4. Active (self-building)	13 persons
5.Others: Particular homeless	157 persons



Also it is interesting to see how the surveyed persons define which people may be called “homeless”.

No	Answer	%
1	Not having a home of one's own	31,7
2	Living with others	8,0
3	Whose dwelling is physically unfit	1,9
4	In danger of being forced to leave at any time	12,5
5	A person only temporarily sheltered	14,4
6	A person living in the streets in the open	17,9
7	A person not knowing where he/she will spend the night	11,2
8	Other	2,2

CONCLUSIONS

Some trends in the evolution of the homelessness issue are:

- Rising number of homeless persons
- Expanding categories of homeless and of groups in risk of homelessness
- Increasingly complicated situation of the homeless and of some groups in risk
- Aggravation of housing exclusion as a social phenomenon in combination with poverty and other social problems.

- Young homeless people prove to be in the most difficult social situation compared with all other groups. Unfortunately, their number is growing, specially among Roma children and youngsters and their problems are becoming more aggravated and enhanced. Some information about is collected by the police and NGO's.

- Real homelessness is registered in cases of elderly people without a housing property of their own and with very low income (living only on a pension²), without a

² Currently pensions in BG are very low: 30 –210 euros monthly. The majority of pensioners have low type pensions.

family support. Such people cannot provide a shelter by themselves and are in a desperate situation. This group is growing in number. Elderly in BG have the privilege to own their house. But those who does not own has no solution to rent or to live on their own. This group is not so far well socially protected and is suffering a lot.

- A complication of the housing situation can be observed in cases of changed marital status, of occurrence of unemployment. It is deeply connected with poverty, with the social position of the individual. Housing problems of the unemployed and of the Roma are only an attendant phenomenon that enhances the process of social disintegration.

- There are homeless among physically or socially disabled persons or marginal personalities.

- Homelessness in Bulgarian conditions is more than the lack of living space: it is an incapacity to develop some job activities.

Obviously during the years of transition significant changes have occurred in this country in the views of people on their housing conditions and in how they perceive the presence or absence for them of a home. They estimate in a new way the participation of the state in providing housing for the needy. While before 1989 the major assistance for providing a home was realized through advantageous state loans and through low-rent municipal housing, today it is exceptional for the homeless to believe that such provisions could be helpful for them.

It is interesting to point out another change in the attitudes of people in need of housing: their lack of willingness or preparedness to engage by their own labour in building a home for themselves. Impressive also are the highly degraded criteria in the estimation of respondents as to how much they are satisfied by their present housing conditions. The same could be said regarding the size of the dwellings. The reasons for this are probably various in terms of motivation, but in general these findings reflect the disrupted bond between individual and society and the underdeveloped social policy in the country.

SOME GENERALIZATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS CONCERNING THE POSSIBILITIES FOR HOUSING THE HOMELESS IN SOFIA (survey May 2005)

1. The homeless in Sofia far exceed in number the capacity for sheltering them. For a population of 1,5 million in the capital city, these 3 services for temporary housing are inadequate for meeting the full needs. At present there is no known social and housing policy aimed at improving the situation of the homeless.
2. No data are kept as to the ethnic origin of the homeless, but it is evident that a considerable part of them are of Roma origin or are refugees from other countries.
3. The age structure of the homeless is most varied and one cannot say any particular age stratum is more disadvantaged than the others.
4. With regard to gender the inhabitants are comparatively evenly represented, yet males have a slight preponderance. Women find solutions to the shelter problem more easily than men and adapt to various situations, so as to avoid the risk of remaining without shelter; besides, they are better protected with regard to housing, being housed as a priority because of the children dependent on them.

5. The educational level of the homeless in most cases is very low or they have no education at all, nor work skills. This makes it harder for them to find a job and integrate into society.
6. The rules for length of stay are not observed in any of the services.
7. The homeless are hard to approach and it is difficult to get them to share with the interviewer. They avoid talking about themselves and, unless the administration intervenes, they flatly refuse to be interviewed. It turned out to be impossible to organize a focus group discussion. Overall they have a negative attitude to the outer world and are aggressive rather than friendly.
8. The physical and mental health of the homeless is shaky. Some of them have serious in-born disabilities or acquired disabilities; others have never had the opportunity for adequate socialization.
9. The income of the homeless remains unknown, but in general they obtain means and objects for consumption by legal and illegal means.
10. The use of alcohol and cigarettes is widespread. The use of narcotics is limited, but not to be excluded.
11. In the city there are many homeless persons that do not find assistance for being sheltered, because they do not meet the criteria used when selecting people for housing. There are some data about this category in the police (impossible to have an access).
12. There is a no permanent soup kitchen for the homeless in the city. Only on holidays and on some other special occasions temporary soup kitchens are organized.