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Young adults in the crisis of homelessness On the margins of the Polish social risk prevention system

Abstract: The article describes the prevailing problems of young adults aged 18 to 25 who have experienced homelessness. The aim of the article is to provide arguments in favor of recognizing the experiences of young adults in homeless crises as a separate phenomenon. It has been demonstrated that the prevention and assistance system for people with homelessness experience in Poland is not adapted to the needs and developmental rights of young adults. There is a need to introduce solutions and organizational forms of support that are focused on fostering the development, social integration, and upbringing of young individuals.

Key words: young adults, homelessness, Poland, aid system.

Introduction

It is a sunny morning in May 2020. At the headquarters of the “po DRUGIE” Foundation in Warsaw’s Powiśle, there is a lot of activity, as is the case every day. Many people are present, and there are numerous matters to be resolved. The sounds of conversations can be heard emanating from various rooms, and the aroma of freshly brewed coffee wafts from the kitchen. Several men enter the office of the president, Agnieszka Sikora. They are clearly older, well past the age of being eligible for assistance from the foundation. The organization focuses on helping young people on the brink of adulthood to overcome life problems. All of

these men share experiences of a very young age, loneliness, and homelessness crises. As they enter the room, a slight mustiness from their clothing and the smell of alcohol is noticeable. They explain that they have brought in a young, nearly 20-year-old boy who “tagged along” with them on the street a few days ago. “He’s too young to be homeless. He still has a chance not to end up like us!” Their voices carry strong emotions and determination. They request Sikora’s help in assisting their “ward” to prevent him from becoming homeless. While there is still time¹.

In the big city, there are many places offering assistance to homeless individuals. However, despite their own extensive experiences with homelessness, the men did not take the young man to a shelter or social assistance center. They had heard about a foundation that helps young people.

Upon analyzing the services provided by various institutions, it becomes evident that there are places that offer support to “youth,” but the criteria for selecting participants are broad, such as 18–40 years of age². That is why Małgorzata Kostrzyńska (2017, pp. 152–153) refers to research results involving users of shelters and overnight accommodations for homeless individuals, labeling such places as a “one-size-fits-all” solution. As a result, these institutions cater to a diverse group of people, including older individuals with extensive prison stays and young adults transitioning from foster care. However, this is not solely an issue with the offerings of assistance institutions. The term “young homeless” encompasses a wide age range in various research reports and scientific analyses. It may sometimes include individuals aged 27–40 years (Gajda, 2021) or 19–45 years (System profilaktyki bezdomności i pomocy osobom bezdomnym w Warszawie, 2013).

In the article, when referring to “young people in the crisis of homelessness,” I mean individuals between the ages of 18 and 25, those who are at the threshold of adulthood. The analysis of the existing state of knowledge has made me aware that homelessness among such young adults is a relatively “new” problem in Poland, to the extent that not only are there inadequate systemic solutions, but there is also a lack of research dedicated specifically to this age group³. Regarding Polish scientific literature, there are exceptions represented by reports from a decade ago on “young homeless” as a new category of beneficiaries in streetworker projects in Krakow (Surmaj, 2011, Michel, 2013). These works highlighted the dominant problems specific to the group of “young” individuals (up to 30 years of age) compared to other people with experience of homelessness. Interestingly, the

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¹ Information obtained from research in the DODAJ MNIE project <https://podrugie.pl/project/dodaj-mnie/> (accessed: 20.11.2022).

² For example, this is what the Otwarte Drzwi Association offers <https://otwartedrzwi.pl/szukam-pomocy/bezdomni/> (accessed: 18.11.2022).

³ I am referring to the state of affairs at the end of 2022.

phenomenon of “young homeless” observed by social workers was predominantly associated with “young men,” and as a result, their right to social assistance was questioned due to potential work opportunities (Michel, 2013, p. 156).

Around the same time, in 2012, the phenomenon that required separate attention was also signaled by workers from a non-governmental organization in Gdańsk in the “Podręcznik dla streetworkera bezdomności” (“Handbook for Streetworkers dealing with Homelessness” (Dębski, Michalska, 2012). Similar to Małgorzata Michel (2013), they quite clearly narrowed down the concept of “youngest homelessness” mainly to the experiences of former wards of care or rehabilitation institutions: (...) we are increasingly dealing with young homelessness in Poland; (...) We are talking about graduates of children’s homes, educational and care centers, and young individuals leaving correctional facilities. It seems that their number is steadily increasing, although there is very little scientific research in this area (Dębski, Michalska, 2012, p. 71).

There are statistical reports from that period (Piekut-Brodzka, 2013) that specifically identify the youngest group of people experiencing homelessness (up to 25 years of age). The research only covered individuals residing in shelters and hostels, and young people rarely use such facilities, making them an exceptionally challenging group to identify. I will develop this topic later on.

Of course, when I say “new,” I do not mean that there were no young people with experience of homelessness in the past, and they only appeared in Poland a few years ago. The “newness” of the phenomenon means that this problem did not previously receive separate attention or was only signaled. Only in recent years has this phenomenon started to gain strength to the extent that non-governmental organizations dealing with preventing social hazards began to treat it as a significant problem requiring separate attention and strategic actions. Perhaps the observed increase in the population of young people in a homeless crisis is linked to the increased visibility of organizations helping such individuals. As a result, more people are directed to these places, making them more visible than before.

In the article, I will describe the most characteristic features of this group of individuals and provide arguments for the need to give the experiences of young adults in a homeless crisis a separate status, requiring organizational assistance solutions that consider the developmental needs of the young individual, as well as their socialization and upbringing.

I used information from materials provided by non-governmental organizations directly involved in work with young people. The main source of data for me was three research reports prepared by organizations in Warsaw from 2015 to 2022. Before delving into the specific issues, I will briefly describe these source materials and demonstrate the validity of their use.

Non-Governmental Organizations' reports as a source of data on young adults in the crisis of homelessness in Poland

Communication of the current needs of society is one of the most important tasks of non-governmental organizations in a democratic state. These organizations identify issues and introduce innovative solutions before specific phenomena become subjects of interest in social policies or in-depth scientific analyses (Zajda, 2018). It was through my involvement in a project with one of the non-governmental organizations dealing with resolving social issues among youth that I noticed the specificity of the crisis of homelessness among young individuals⁴. Indeed, non-governmental organizations, based on their own experiences from direct work with young individuals, have also identified the problem and conducted its preliminary recognition. The reports I came across contain the results of diagnoses with precisely described methodologies of their own research. All of them utilized data from qualitative research methods.

The first report I utilized was a study from 2015 prepared by the Warsaw association Program Stacja, titled "Problem bezdomności młodzieży i młodych dorosłych w Warszawie. Diagnoza sytuacji" (Tędziągowska et al., 2015). The study focused on the problems of homelessness among youth and young adults aged 18–26⁵, residing in the Śródmieście (Downtown) district in particular. These individuals were reached through outreach workers (streetworkers) and the snowball sampling method. The study focused on their family, educational, health, occupational situations, places of stay, reasons for homelessness, familiarity with support institutions, and factors aiding or hindering crisis resolution. Interesting data was collected using interviews during research walks, as well as in-depth and focus interviews. Additionally, a technique known as "whispered interviews" was employed, where the research participants became researchers themselves, tasked with gathering responses from their acquaintances.

The second source is "Warszawska diagnoza sytuacji mieszkaniowej młodzieży w wieku 17–25 lat zagrożonej lub dotkniętej bezdomnością – raport z badania." The study was prepared by Marta Czapnik-Jurak (2019) as part of the PO DRUGIE foundation project. The research involved 21 young adults aged 18–25, including individuals with experience of street homelessness, youth from training flats, and former residents of care and educational institutions. The aim of the research was to establish and analyze the everyday lives of young people in the crisis of

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⁴ Project "DODAJ MNIE" <https://podrugie.pl/project/dodaj-mnie/> (accessed: 18.11.2022)

⁵ Individuals were 30 years old, but the study referred to their previous experience.

homelessness. The study used focus group interviews and employed the vignettes (episodes) method.

The last material I consulted was the document titled “Raport z badań dotyczących działalności fundacji po drugie, zrealizowany w ramach projektu: Trampolina do bezpiecznej dorosłości – program przeciwdziałania bezdomności wśród młodzieży i młodych dorosłych,” prepared by Mariusz Granosik (2021), a researcher from the University of Łódź. The focus group interviews involved users of support from the Warsaw foundation. The selection of participants was guided by the principle of maximum contrast: male – female, short “tenure” of using the foundation’s support (a week) – long tenure (several years), with or without addiction, with or without children, employed – unemployed, students – non-students, younger (19 years old) – older (25 years old). The research provided insights into the problems faced by youth, the support offered, paths leading to the foundation, and the needs and types of support received.

The utilization of reports prepared by Warsaw organizations may seem unrepresentative due to the experiences of one city. Certainly, the contemporary phenomenon of homelessness among young adults applies to the entire Poland, not just its capital. However, Warsaw attracts many young people from smaller towns and cities across Poland. They come here with the hope that solving their problems or surviving will be easier in the big city (Tędziągowska, 2015 et al., Dutkiewicz, 2021). Moreover, these were the only studies with results where the situation of young adults in the crisis of homelessness in Poland was the subject of analysis.

Attempts to estimate the size of the phenomenon of young adults in the crisis of homelessness

Quantitative Invisibility. According to data from the latest *Ogólnopolskie badanie liczby osób bezdomnych. Edycja 2019* coordinated by the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Policy, the largest number of people experiencing homelessness is in the 41–60 age range (nearly 14,000). When it comes to the youngest, there were almost a thousand individuals under the age of 17 and 784 young adults aged 18–25 experiencing homelessness. In the scope of these studies, during just two nights of the census, the PO DRUGIE Foundation recorded 105 individuals between the ages of 17 and 25 experiencing homelessness in the public spaces of Warsaw. Approximately 180 young people seeking help due to homelessness reach this organization every year (Czapnik-Jurak, 2019).

The actual extent of homelessness in Poland is not known. These difficulties arise from various ways of defining what is and what is not homelessness, mobility, and different strategies for dealing with homelessness. The easiest way to determine the number is to count those who seek help, but not every person in a homeless crisis utilizes institutional support. The scientific literature well

describes the issue of individuals who consciously and for various reasons avoid such places (care avoiders) (Maesele et al., 2013).

Estimating the scope of homelessness among young adults is even more challenging. The report prepared by Czapnik-Jurak (2019) mentioned that during the homelessness census in Warsaw, enumerators noticed that particularly young adults staying in shopping centers or train stations were reluctant to make contact, attempting to conceal their situation. Above all, young people rarely reach places specializing in aiding those in homelessness crises. Young adults with experience of homelessness also avoid support institutions more often than older individuals in similar situations, seeking alternative solutions. They find shelter with friends, rent rooms in hostels, or hide in squats (Granosik, 2021, see also Surmaj, 2011). Identifying young adult homelessness is difficult due to the (self)camouflaging of problems through engaging in specific lifestyles that suggest fun, traveling, or adventurous experiences. Are individuals spending time in nightclubs or taking seasonal jobs at the seaside considered homeless?

Young adults experiencing street homelessness observe phenomenon of decreasing age of youth on the street (Tędziągolska et al., 2015). There is an increasing number of minors experimenting with homelessness rather than being forced to lead such a lifestyle. Do they meet the criteria for homelessness, and if so, how can one reach them and attempt to assess the scale of teenagers experimenting with street life?

Qualitative Invisibility. The specificity of places that serve as meeting points for young people in homelessness crisis makes the identification of this phenomenon difficult, not only in terms of quantity. They are invisible to the system because they are very reluctant to use traditional forms of assistance, such as shelters or hostels for the homeless. They are also inconspicuous on the streets because their bodies are not yet worn down by extreme living conditions. They wear trendy clothes, have careful makeup and hairstyles. They frequent areas near shopping centers, main transportation hubs, and 24-hour fast-food restaurants. Anywhere they can access restrooms, WiFi, and shelter from the cold. They spend their time on café sofas and “on their phones” or in shopping malls, giving the impression of carefree young people. At the slightest, they do not evoke the association of a homeless person to casual observers. Furthermore, even streetworkers and public service employees who have daily contact with such young people admit to difficulties in identifying them:

While certain behaviors that are characteristic of the group can be identified – for example, several people sitting together with one portion of fries or one shared drink for an extended period – often the appearance of youth experiencing homelessness does not differ from their peers (Czapnik-Jurak, 2019, p. 52).

Moreover, they do not see themselves as homeless individuals.

The invisibility of young adults in homelessness crisis is also due to their specific migration. Observations by streetworkers indicate that they have several

meeting places where larger groups of youth gather regularly. Young people usually spend their time in these places talking or “scrounging.” Some play instruments to collect money from passersby. Sometimes they share common passions and pursue them together (e.g., practicing parkour). However, the locations where youth and young adults stay change periodically for various reasons. These changes also involve the composition of the groups (Tędziągolska et al., 2015).

Dominant experiences of young adults in homelessness crisis

Stigma multiplied. When thinking about homelessness, the first issue that comes to mind is the lack of housing. Therefore, it is surprising to find the conclusion of Czapnik-Jurak’s (2019) research with young people in a homeless crisis, stating that young adults in homelessness crisis do not define their life situation through the lens of lacking a safe, permanent place to live. They primarily attribute instrumental values to the concept of home, so they do not place much importance on housing stability. Home, for them, is more of a place that facilitates achieving goals such as resting after work or personal hygiene. This is why accommodations in hostels, workers’ hotels, or staying with friends are seen by them as acceptable solutions.

Much more frequently than housing situations, the problems experienced and felt by young people in a homeless crisis are related to family conflicts, addictions, difficulties in maintaining employment, or temporary employment. According to them, it is precisely these life difficulties that demand intervention as a priority. It turns out that they carry the burden of multiple stigmas, but homelessness does not occupy the most significant place among them. They struggle more with the label of someone who grew up in a children’s home, stayed in a re-socialization institution, and experienced violence and poverty. These findings are confirmed by the research conducted by Danuta Piekut-Brodzka (2013) on homelessness in the Mazowsze region. According to her, as many as 60% of the youngest individuals (up to 25 years old) who met the criteria for research subjects did not consider themselves homeless. The strongest correlation of the self-perception of homelessness is related to its duration.

Interesting insights into the (self)definition of young adults in a homeless crisis are provided by the research included in the report of the Stacja Association (Tędziągolska et al., 2015, p. 22). It shows that young people in a homeless crisis identify themselves as individuals who “want help” and “want to change their situation,” in contrast to older homeless individuals who “do not want to do anything with their lives,” “do not see perspectives,” and “do not take advantage of the opportunity for help.” Young adults in a homeless crisis are seen as “normal people for whom something didn’t work out,” unlike older individuals

who are perceived as “down-and-outs” and “dirty company.” The authors of the research emphasize that these constructed definitions show a clear defense against stigmatization.

Institutional Habitus. In the report prepared by Czapnik-Jurak (2019), a clear thread of orientation towards the present is evident among a large group of young adults in a homeless crisis, especially former wards of care and re-socialization institutions, and a focus on meeting immediate needs within the scope of support institutions or living in transitional housing. This conclusion corresponds to the findings of Piotr Chomczyński (2014, p. 125), who, during research involving inmates of correctional facilities, signaled the phenomenon of institutional habitus, writing, among others: “(...) too long a stay in such institutions causes a young person to adopt a certain habitus, with an observational matrix formed in conditions of greater or lesser isolation. The needs of isolated individuals are usually met by the institution (lodging, meals, entertainment, hobbies), which leads to the atrophy or lack of motivation to take care of one’s fate independently.”

This problem concerns individuals who have spent many years in various care or socially isolating institutions. They have experienced a specific institutional career, that is, they have acquired the competence to quickly adapt to the conditions of each institution with features of totality (Szczepanik 2015). Furthermore, they do not cause disciplinary issues in various institutions and ‘find themselves’ in them to such an extent that they are perceived as fully socialized individuals. In the scientific literature, this situation is also characterized as apparent resocialization (Konopczyński, 2014). This phenomenon is also confirmed by research into the difficulties of users of transitional housing – former wards of re-socialization institutions. Prolonged functioning in re-socialization institutions leads to a situation where a young person, after leaving such an institution, “requires a gradual exit from the control and regulation system, and the complete lack of boundaries causes chaos, a lack of stability, and uncertainty in their steps” (Ciślikowska-Ryczko, Dobińska, 2019, pp. 123–124).

After reaching adulthood, individuals leaving various forms of substitute care or institutions are entitled to assistance in achieving independence. Another issue is the assessment of how well the state fulfills its obligations in providing assistance to such young people and how effective this support is (Miłoś, 2015). Not all municipalities offer social housing for former foster care wards, especially re-socialization institutions (Kładoczny, Wolny, 2019). Moreover, finalizing the process of gaining independence, which was initiated while the teenager was still in the institution, by providing social housing and material support after leaving the institution does not automatically guarantee the success of this endeavor when measured by the level of preparedness for independent living in early adulthood. They must also be able to maintain this housing. However, some studies show that over 90% of former wards of various institutions have seriously disrupted or

severed social ties and can count only on formal and institutional support. Almost 70% of those who gained independence struggle with alcohol or drug addiction. Over half of them do not have a stable source of income, and every third young person starting “independent” life suffers from mental disorders (Czapnik-Jurak, 2019). Research demonstrates that the transition to adulthood for individuals from various forms of substitute care is burdened with immense anxiety, and this fear for their future is not unfounded (Kędzierska, 2020; Koprowicz, Gumowska, 2022). This fear is aptly captured by Dobińska and Cieślukowska-Ryczko (2019, p. 114): “In contrast to youth who naturally enter early adulthood, young people from youth care centers are obliged to achieve independence when they turn 18 years old.”

With the above in mind, it is not surprising that the so-called institutional past of young adults in a homeless crisis is a fairly common experience. For example, the vast majority of users of the support offered by the PO DRUGIE Foundation are former wards of various institutions (Czapnik-Jurak, 2019).

Problems in the family. However, attributing the causes of homelessness among young adults solely to their previous stays in care or re-socialization institutions would be an oversimplification. Experiences of organizations dealing with preventing homelessness in this age group show that a significant portion consists of those who grew up in families (biological, foster, adoptive), but had to leave for various reasons. This group of young homeless individuals is often described in the literature as “run-aways” or “throwaways” (Pedersen et al., 2016).

Research by Warsaw organizations indicates that the dominant reasons for youth leaving their homes are as follows: problematic alcohol consumption by parents, drug addiction, the death of caregivers, experiencing physical and sexual violence, and being raised in blended families. Reasons mentioned by young adults experiencing homelessness for being thrown out of their family homes included, among others, the parent starting a new family, lack of financial means, or the belief that the child should support themselves after finishing school (Tędziogolska et al., 2015). The act of being kicked out of the family home evokes associations with poverty and family environment pathology. It turns out that often those “thrown out of a good home wear designer clothes” (Tędziogolska et al., 2015, p. 28) or have addiction issues. Sometimes leaving home is an expression of rebellion against adults and a desire to try independent living. On the other hand, families are not effective in preventing experimenting individuals from leaving home. The difficulties experienced in relationships with family members accumulated, and rebuilding connections creates a tremendous fear of touching “that huge ball of family problems” (Tędziogolska et al., 2015, p. 26) for some young people in a homelessness crisis.

From the perspective of dealing with homelessness, the situation of individuals raised in homes is not necessarily better than those with “institutional careers.” Their problems are sometimes interpreted by social workers as mere whims, and

when they have conflicts with their parents and run away, the proposed solution is often to return home. Granosik (2021) even found that some young people standing on the threshold of adulthood suspect that social assistance centers will tell them to come with their parents and solve the problems together, which is why they avoid such places. Furthermore, research using vignettes (Czapnik-Jurak, 2019) shows that sometimes young people experiencing homelessness who have grown up in institutions look suspiciously at their peers raised in families. They question their status as homeless individuals and define the reasons for their life situation as “plain stupidity” (Czapnik-Jurak, 2019, p. 31).

Loneliness and solitude. What undoubtedly connects young adults experiencing homelessness, whether they grew up in families or had stays in institutions, is a specific lack of direction for “what’s next” when leaving their previous place of living. Leaving home or an institution usually occurs spontaneously or unplanned. It is often a decision made under the influence of strong emotions like anger, fear, or against their will (being thrown out). Therefore, there is usually little preparation or strategic action involved in the process (Granosik, 2021, p. 2).

The crisis of homelessness is deepened by the perceived loneliness, which results from never establishing or completely severing social ties with family or significant others. This not only seriously affects their sense of security but also their sense of social belonging. Even having a formal support figure in the process of transitioning to independence does not necessarily mean the absence of such loneliness when facing the pressure of fulfilling developmental tasks related to early adulthood. The stories of young adults supported by the PO DRUGIE Foundation show that there was a lack of someone in their lives who would accompany their development, and even the most benevolent attitude of a worker “from behind the desk” does not compensate for this absence (Granosik, 2021).

The issue of youth loneliness in homelessness is well recognized by American and Australian researchers, who emphasize various ways of mitigating the consequences of being without anyone. One of the most important methods is forming strong bonds with peers, which not only creates opportunities for closeness and trust but also serves protective functions. These relationships fulfill the role of substitute siblings (sibling-kinship), which usually exist in supportive family environments (e.g., Heerde, Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2021). Another way of mitigating loneliness is through attachment to animals (Lem et al., 2013, Kerman et al., 2019), which, on the other hand, hinders access to most institutional forms of assistance for the homeless (it is difficult to find facilities that accept animals).

In the report of the Warsaw association, the issue of forming specific support groups was the subject of observation by streetworkers. According to their observations, very young adults experiencing homelessness tend to concentrate in specific districts and form relatively stable groups of people who are bound together by shared experiences, the need for closeness, acceptance, and spending

leisure time together. These individuals become substitutes for each other's families and sometimes refer to themselves as "we are like a family" (Tędziągolska et al., 2015, p. 41). Forming such close relationships leads to taking care of each other (e.g., obtaining food, finding work) but also involves joint efforts to help others with similar problems (e.g., lost runaway teenagers).

Sense of insecurity. It must be emphasized that homelessness, especially street homelessness, is a situation of permanent and real threat to one's life or health. This involves not only fear of physical dangers but also the risk of being deceived, beaten, or robbed.

Young adults strongly feel shame and fear of being ridiculed (e.g., due to worn-out shoes) or treated disrespectfully (Tędziągolska et al., 2015). They are also afraid of their future and whether they will be able to overcome the crisis.

They lack self-confidence, feel lost, and are unable to plan their further education or career path. All of this makes it difficult for them to pursue education and find satisfying (not just financially) work. Meanwhile, employment and occupational activity are presented in the literature as key factors in preventing social exclusion (Tędziągolska et al., 2015).

However, it must be noted that while shame and fear of the future are important characteristics accompanying young people in the homelessness crisis, researchers agree that the youngest age groups show the highest level of belief in the possibility of improving their situation. Halting the process of "becoming homeless" is real (Piekut-Brodzka, 2013; Tędziągolska et al., 2015; Granosik, 2021).

Mental and physical health disorders. Sometimes, the bonds with family are severed due to mental health disorders and imagined problems with the surroundings or escape from unwanted forms of assistance (e.g., pressure to be admitted to a psychiatric hospital). Experiences of the PO DRUGIE foundation also show that many young adults in the homelessness crisis struggle with anxiety and depression, which are consequences of traumatic experiences related to abuse or addictions (Czapnik-Jurak, 2019).

It seems that the problem of mental health disorders (whether due to traumatic experiences or illnesses) is one of the most pressing challenges faced by organizations assisting young people in homelessness crisis, regardless of the time, place, or forms of this aid. As early as 2011, a Krakow streetworker wrote about the issue as follows: "Despite their health condition, they do not have disability certificates. Episodes of past treatment for drug addiction or psychiatric treatment are also characteristic. The matter of providing assistance is complicated by the fact that they are a population of undiagnosed individuals, although specific symptoms of certain illnesses, mainly personality disorders, addictions, and characteristics typical of psychotic disorders and schizophrenia, can be observed in them (...) most of the symptoms of illnesses or diagnosed diseases in their case do not result from homelessness, and often have neurological and psychological origins" (Surmaj, 2011, pp. 92–93).

The image of homeless youth differs from older individuals because their bodies regenerate faster, and they have relatively shorter periods of time spent on the streets. Although they take care of their clothes and hairstyles, the use of random places to sleep often leads to struggles with lice or skin problems. A problem highlighted by street workers is sleep deprivation and its impact on their quality of life. Maintaining hygiene is a particular challenge. Sometimes they feel constant fatigue, have difficulty concentrating, and even hallucinate (Tędziągolska et al., 2015). Weakened immunity and visible signs of various illnesses make it difficult for young people to function daily and navigate various social situations.

Addictions. Determining the scale of addictions among young adults is not possible. One indicator of the extent of the problem is that over 65% of workers in educational and resocialization institutions believe that alcohol or drug addiction is the dominant issue among individuals leaving these facilities (Czapnik-Jurak, 2019). Problems related to addiction and the inability or reluctance to seek treatment and therapy are an inseparable element of the work carried out by support providers in organizations, regardless of the forms of assistance (Tędziągolska et al., 2015).

A few remarks on early adolescence in the crisis of homelessness in the context of gender and sexuality

Women. Experiences of organizations show that young women in homelessness crisis more often than men choose accommodation offers combined with specialized support (e.g., psychological assistance). This is related to coexisting problems such as violence from partners or parenthood (Czapnik-Jurak, 2019). They are also more determined to overcome their reluctance to use shelters or hostels due to sexual violence. This theme resounds very clearly in the report of Warsaw organizations. The experience, sometimes repeated, of street or squat rape causes young women in homelessness crisis to live in a tremendous sense of real danger (Tędziągolska et al., 2015).

This issue is also described by Australian researchers (Watson, 2011) in terms of survival sex strategies or the apparent exit from homelessness. From in-depth interviews with women aged 18–25, it was found that they got involved with people who were “selflessly” helping them. Sex and engaging in intimate relationships were among the few resources they had “for sale.” It was the only effective way to obtain not only material support and a “roof over their heads” but also protection and safety.

Men. Young men in homelessness crisis are exposed to physical violence, both as perpetrators and victims. The source of injuries also includes experiences of witnessing violence against other individuals labeled as “homeless.” Such a

situation constitutes a specific type of stress in the context of personal experiences of childhood abuse (Heerde, Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2021).

Non-heteronormative people. Homelessness among non-heteronormative people is analyzed by American researchers mainly through the prism of the consequences of revealing one's psychosexual orientation in the family home (Gutman et al., 2022). In Poland, overcoming homelessness by LGBT+ individuals has not yet been the subject of separate studies. Some information on this topic is provided by data compiled by Magdalena Świder (2021) for a report on the social situation of non-heteronormative people in Poland. According to this data, as a consequence of the lack of acceptance of their gender identity or orientation by family members, 20% of the respondents ran away, and one in ten individuals was kicked out of their home. The majority of them experienced at least one episode of homelessness. Analyses of demographic variables show that the experience of homelessness is negatively associated with age, educational level, and place of residence. This means that non-heteronormative individuals who experienced homelessness are very young, less educated, and live in smaller towns. Many of these individuals migrate to large urban centers in the hope of finding acceptance and assistance.

Becoming "homeless"

Experiencing a lack of a place for oneself. The first period of being without a "roof over their head" for young adults is characterized by quite effective coping with organizing their present circumstances. I previously mentioned places where such young people tend to concentrate, which do not label them as homeless and allow them to find shelter from the cold. Granosik (2021, p. 2–3) establishes that the beginning of being "roofless" is almost "counted in hours," and young people use various coping strategies. After a short time spent on the streets, young individuals seek help from family and friends. Depending on the available resources, such support can usually be relied upon for 2–3 weeks, but sometimes only for a few days. Over time, the youth acquires specific competencies that enable them to survive the night and find places for rest or longer sleep. They gain knowledge about the length of night bus routes (the longer, the more sleep) and search for abandoned sheds or empty buildings (Czapnik-Jurak, 2019).

Turning point. Only after several months of such functioning, gradually and slowly, do they come to accept that they are individuals experiencing homelessness. For many people, a specific turning point in this process of realizing their homelessness is when they find themselves in a shelter. For some young adults, this situation is described through the prism of ambivalent feelings. Shame and fear dominate, along with concerns about being accepted. At the same time, there is a sense of relief that comes with the opportunity to meet basic needs such

as a warm meal, the ability to wash up, and having a place to sleep (Czapnik-Jurak, 2019).

Mismatch in facilities for the homeless. The relief accompanying admission to a shelter can be short-lived. Young adults keenly feel the mismatch of conditions in such places with their needs. Older residents expect peace and quiet. The young are noisy. They struggle with sharing space, sometimes in small, multi-person rooms with individuals who could be their parents or even grandparents. Very young people are a rarity when it comes to the average age of shelter residents. They demand more attention and have difficulty coping with the monotony of such places, which, according to Granosik (2021), contrasts sharply with the active lives of young individuals. He writes about this as follows (Granosik, 2021, p. 3):

Usually, they had not previously been involved in meeting basic needs or did so marginally. They are also more susceptible to psychological crises, partly due to the concentration of “developmental periods” abundant in various dilemmas and crises. They need social acceptance and positive emotions. Their lives are generally more active and filled with life energy compared to mature individuals; hence, stagnation, lack of prospects, and developmental opportunities are considerably more severe for them.

Separation of the phenomenon in the context of the need for new forms and methods of assistance

Do the characteristics described above of young adult “homelessness” justify considering it as a phenomenon that deserves separate attention compared to the well-recognized phenomenon of homelessness in general? In my opinion, yes, and in the following part, I will list the most important arguments in favor of my position.

An analysis of available data allows us to infer that the primary factor distinguishing the phenomenon of young adults in a homelessness crisis is that they do not seek help from institutional aid organizations. Furthermore, Iwona Sumraj (2011, p. 92) defined the specificity of this group precisely through the prism of this characteristic, stating: “Young homeless individuals, i.e., people not using institutional help despite their difficult life situation.” The most important argument, then, is the **need to create institutional assistance that meets the specific developmental needs of young adults in crisis of homelessness.**

In Poland, there is an extensive network of institutions for individuals with many years of homelessness experience, and young people significantly distance themselves from this problem, not perceiving themselves as homeless individuals. The residents of homeless shelters are middle-aged and older individuals, indicating a serious generational gap. Furthermore, “traditional” assistance institutions for individuals with homelessness experience lack offerings tailored to the needs of

young people. This pertains primarily to the methods and forms of assistance, as well as the priority goal, which is to aid in halting processes of social alienation and preventing the entrenchment of stigmatization and a homeless identity.

Analyzing the situation of young adults, Granosik (2021) concluded that the primary weakness in the actions taken by social assistance centers is the reduction of their homelessness problem to merely a lack of shelter and the consequent provision of fragmented assistance. From the perspective of such institutions, providing a young person with any form of shelter seems to solve the problem because they can take care of the rest on their own (they are young, healthy, and strong). However, as Granosik puts it:

The age-specificity excludes calm vegetating in the shelter; on the contrary, such an atmosphere becomes a cause of frustration and disappointment and, in effect, discourages engagement with the whole system. A young person also expects individual understanding and acceptance to a much greater extent than an older person. Despite general differences in assessing the functionality of the social assistance system, all respondents were exceptionally unanimous in stating that this system offers nothing to a young person without shelter (Granosik, 2021, p. 5).

Ultimately, young people in a homelessness crisis not only avoid shelters but also dissuade each other from using assistance provided by homeless centers. Safe lodging or places for social activation are important, but young people first need **to work through yet-to-be-fixed trauma, diagnose and stop the development of physical and mental health disorders, and addiction treatment**. At the same time, experiences of non-governmental organizations indicate that the offer for young adults in homelessness crisis should also include a network of low-threshold institutions (Tędziągolska et al., 2015). The phenomenon of homelessness among young adults necessitates the development of drop-in/access centers that embody the approach of “come as you are,” without the need to provide appropriate documents or proofs of sobriety. There are individuals who, even if they make efforts, may have serious difficulties in maintaining abstinence or are from outside the local area. Studies show that young people prefer drop-in centers over other types of services because of their flexibility, confidentiality, reduced bureaucracy, lack of requirement to disclose personal data, detailed information, and fewer rules/restrictions (Thompson et al., 2006). These factors are particularly important for young people due to the reduced risk of experiencing the stigma of homelessness.

Research on support provided by non-governmental organizations shows that young adults in homelessness crisis seek a place where they can find **comprehensive help** —one that will not redirect them to another institution and where they will not feel intimidated, and where the distance between them and the staff will not hinder communication (Tędziągolska et al., 2015, Granosik, 2021). It is extremely important for them to believe that the staff of the assistance institutions understand street culture and do not categorize young people's

problems. Another factor that must be taken into account in programs oriented towards young adults in homelessness crisis is the respect for developmental rights, such as the need for spending time with peers, play, and understanding the need for gaining new experiences and independence (Toolis, Hammack, 2015, Dyck et al., 2022).

Due to growing up in unfavorable family or institutional environments, these are young people with distinct deficits in the areas of upbringing and socialization. Hence, there arises the need for individualized help, closeness, attention, having someone who supports their development, helps them navigate through the maze of regulations, appreciates and praises them, and provides discipline. **Upbringing, socialization, support in development**, including learning how to use cultural assets, creating spaces for education and pursuing interests – these are precisely the most important characteristics that differentiate the needs of young adults in homelessness crisis from other age groups and place this phenomenon more firmly within the domain of pedagogy (social, resocialization), rather than social work.

Summary

Young adults in homelessness crisis escape the widely known portrayals of homelessness. When analyzing available data on their problems, the first conclusions that come to mind can be summed up in two words: invisibility and inadequacy. Moreover, there is a strong and direct link between this invisibility and inadequacy. The problem of young adults in homelessness crisis is invisible because the existing system in Poland for preventing social problems and risks offers an inadequate response to their experiences, needs, and developmental rights due to their age. They are in the initial phase of homelessness, which provides the potential to counteract the development of (self)stigmatization and institutional segregation. They are invisible because they fiercely defend themselves against the stigma of homelessness and avoid traditional institutions “for the homeless,” as if they were afraid that once they enter, they will be stuck there forever.

I am convinced that there is a need to understand the situation of young adults in homelessness crisis in Poland and to give this group of problems the status of a distinct phenomenon. Additionally, there is a need to develop forms of support and methods of assistance specifically dedicated to them.

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