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## **Bezdomovectví a bezdomovci z pohledu kriminologie**

### **Homelessness and the homeless from a criminological perspective**

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#### ***Summary***

The publication “Homelessness and the homeless from a criminological perspective” is the concluding report from research conducted between 2005 and 2007, which focused on a broad spectrum of socio-pathological phenomena related to homelessness. It sought to examine these problems in greater detail and from a criminological perspective, an area of work which, until then, had been absent in the Czech Republic.

The first chapter offers an analysis of the legislation (both current and past) relating to homelessness. Other chapters draw on the relatively broadly conceived recent Czech literature that has dealt with this subject in relation to socio-pathological phenomena, crime and victimisation of the homeless. A selection of foreign literature has been included, in particular of English and French provenance. The work also encompasses an empirical survey aimed at an initial mapping of specific facts from the current population of Prague homeless who have temporary accommodation in shelters. The second part of the empirical survey comprises a presentation of casuistries of a selection of the homeless; its main aim was to determine the possibility of paths (and if they exist, what sort of paths) which lead back from total social exclusion to society, and therefore the possibility of the resocialisation of the homeless.

Empirical findings from the Czech environment show that problems with the homeless in the Czech Republic have become more pressing over the years and that the prospects for the immediate future are not particularly optimistic. (Despite this, legislation on the homeless is scarce. Although Act No. 108/2006 Coll., on Social Services, came into effect as of 1 January 2007, it does not define homelessness. Instead, it refers to “persons in an adverse social situation connected to the loss of housing”.)

The survey also found that the factors determined and described abroad, including the mechanisms that trigger homelessness, are comparable in character to the situation in the Czech Republic. The consequences are similar, too: the occurrence of the grave problems that accompany homelessness: socio-pathological phenomena, higher incidence of illness and the risk of spreading diseases, crime and the victimisation of the actual person. Differences between the Czech Republic and the countries of Western Europe are apparent in the relatively undeveloped system that exists in the Czech Republic to support the homeless and to prevent this phenomenon. Its shortcomings can be attributed to a lack of experience and the fact that there are fewer financial resources to draw upon in the Czech Republic for this problem. Recent years have seen intensive cooperation develop between the Czech Republic and the European Union in this field.

The homeless are described as having a higher incidence of personality traits that may be both the cause and the effect of their specific way of life. Most commonly mentioned are psychological lability, exaggerated emotional reactions and general psychological disturbance, over-sensitiveness, timidity, lack of responsibility towards their surroundings and themselves, progressive loss of volitive qualities, loss of work habits and skills, inability to

control themselves, inability to learn from experience or give up dysfunctional forms of behaviour.

Such individuals also frequently have psychiatric disorders. Compared with the general population, they register a significantly higher prevalence of mental disorders. Co-morbidity is also common, particularly psychoses combined with a disorder caused by the abuse of psychotropic substances, or with depressive disorders. Common diagnoses repeatedly found to have a higher prevalence among the homeless were psychoses, what is termed borderline personality, increased suicide rates and various phobias. One of the most serious negative phenomena occurring among the homeless is a dependency on tobacco, alcohol and other addictive substances.

The homeless are more at risk of crime, both as perpetrators and as victims. Those among them who have not yet been sentenced face a greater risk that they will commit a crime, or that they will become the victim of a crime. This is chiefly the result of real destitution, but also the fact that they move in a criminogenic environment. Results from the survey conducted in shelters showed that 40% of our respondents had been sentenced by a court, some of them several times, and many of them had experienced imprisonment. Of the individuals surveyed, 39% admitted to experiencing victimisation of their own person (according to information from the *Bílý kruh bezpečí* [White Ring of Safety], high latency is typical for crimes perpetrated on the homeless). It should be pointed out that what is termed roughsleepers are victims of various attacks more frequently than the surveyed inhabitants of shelters.

Reducing homelessness is part of the system for the prevention of crime, which, in the Czech Republic (especially in recent years) has looked at possibilities for remedying the causes of crime among socially-excluded and handicapped communities, which also include the homeless and where there is an increased risk of the spread of criminal infection. An important element in preventing crime is the relationship between the homeless and the police. In the Czech Republic it is highly probable (similar to abroad) that these relations are tense and often at breaking point.

The empirical part of the research also confirmed that socially-excluded individuals (which include the homeless) are generally not able to cater for their needs in a socially-approved fashion. They violate written and unwritten norms which society expects to be adhered to and whose non-adherence it punishes in various ways. A failure to adhere to society's norms poses a threat to its identity and as a result it usually punishes these individuals. Punishment, however, is usually not an appropriate solution and the homeless find themselves in a vicious circle, caught between prison, shelters, the street and the Labour Office. The past history of research also shows that to return from the street is possible if there is a correlation of several favourable circumstances, of which the most important are the will and motivation of the person to get out of this situation. Outside assistance in this case is an absolute necessity: organisations should provide this person with effective help in finding employment and housing, but most of all in remedying those factors that very often caused them to find themselves on the street in the first place: the results of various trauma from childhood, a lower ability to communicate adequately with society and individuals, lack of qualifications, a past history of crime etc.

Translated by: Marvel s.r.o.