Homelessness in Poland

A cross cultural comparison by Kat Sliwinska, Homeless Census Intern

Methodology
The majority of information presented in this section has been retrieved from publications titled Social and Institutional Aspects of Homelessness in the Lublin Province by Bielecka-Prus, Rydzewski, Maciejewska and Homelessness in Poland: An Analysis of the Pomeranian Province by Dębski. Unfortunately, due to the low social and political interest the numbers provided in the following article correspond to data from years 2008-2010. Additionally, some information was collected from Główny Urząd Statystyczny.

Context
Although, Poland shares much of its history and culture with Eastern Europe, its diverse characteristics and ties to the West place it in between both regions. For social, cultural, and geopolitical reasons, Poland is often located in Central Europe, among other countries such as Germany or the Czech Republic. While Polish people are predominantly Slavic and share linguistic characteristics with people of Ukraine & Russia, their use of the Latin alphabet over Cyrillic makes Polish distinct from its eastern cousins. Quite possibly the greatest difference between Poland and Eastern European countries is religion. Just as many Western countries, such as Spain or Italy, Polish people practice Catholicism.

However, even the strongest connections with the West are less noticeable than the remnants of communism seen all around Poland: in architecture, in policies, and even in social structures. In the 20th century, during communism, homelessness was concealed. The issue was hidden by the Polish government because it undermined the ideal of socialist prosperity. During that time, homeless assistance was eliminated, and people without a house were placed in dorm-style hostels.

After 1989, homelessness increased due to the transitional process, which unfortunately included mass layoffs and increased unemployment.

The Basics

Poland

Estimated 1 in 637 people are homeless in Poland

• Population: 38.5 million people
• Homeless population (estimate): between 58,000 and 66,000 people
• The Social Welfare Act puts the responsibility of homeless assistance on the municipality
• Most assistance is carried out through NGOs
• Poland has no strategic plan for social reintegration and prevention of homelessness
• Social minimum: $180
• Cost of living per month: $250-470
Demographics

Typical Homeless Person
Homelessness in Poland, affects a wide range of people, who come from various backgrounds and hold diverse characteristics. However, the majority of homeless people were found to be male, over the age of 45, having vocational education, and being chronically homeless. Although, the typical homeless person does not represent, or give voice to the smaller and more diverse populations of those without a home, he does present the general demographics and the scale of the issue of homelessness in Poland.

Causes of Homelessness
The following charts present the main causes of homelessness declared by the sample group (500) of homeless people from Lublin Province.

The primary direct cause of homelessness was eviction (26%), however, the main indirect cause of homelessness was alcoholism (22%). The third cause of homelessness was unemployment (15%), followed by family crisis/break up (12%).

Sources of Income
The top 5 sources of income for the homeless were:

- Temporary, seasonal work (31%)
- Social welfare benefits (28%)*
- Retirement or state pension (13%)*
- Begging (10%)
- Unemployment benefits (6%)*

*Part of social security
Daily Lives

Night accommodations

Homeless people seek shelter in many places that they consider moderately safe or are easily accessible, some of which include:

- Official shelters
- Barracks, garden houses
- Abandoned and substandard buildings
- Stairwells, attics, basements
- Stations, wagons, railway sidings
- Parks, streets

Assistance

Assistance to the homeless is usually in the form of:

- Short-term relief (e.g. food, clothing)
- Shelters
- Getting out of homelessness programs
- Financial resources

Since Poland does not have a long-term approach to combating homelessness, most of the assistance efforts focus on short-term relief. On top of that, cafeterias, clothing drives, and the bulk of shelters are operated by non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Social benefits, which comprise the majority of homeless’ income, are not enough to ensure a stable life.

Compared to USA

Counting the homeless

The first major difference between homelessness in Poland and homelessness in the United States is governmental involvement in the social issue. As mentioned previously, Poland has no strategic plan to combat and prevent homelessness, but most of all it lacks data to even begin working on a plan. While in the US every county is responsible for conducting the annual PIT homeless census, in Poland, it seems that the government does not take as much interest in the issue. Data on homelessness is predominantly collected by NGOs, which work locally. Because of that the methodologies and focus of these studies vary considerably, making it almost impossible to accurately estimate the homeless population in Poland.

Demographics

Homeless men constitute the majority of homeless population both in Poland and the US. Additionally, in both countries, the typical homeless person is between 30 and 55 years old.

In Thurston County, the number of chronically homeless people fluctuates between 10%-60%. In Poland, however, this percentage is higher reaching around 70%. Most often, the duration of homelessness in Poland ranges between 1 and 5 years.
The reason for the difference in the demographics of the homeless in Poland and the US might simply lie in methodology or the support network in place. For example, Polish NGOs almost exclusively interview homeless people who are in shelters. These people might have been homeless for long enough to fully benefit from the services. Also, people who have been homeless for less than a year are often able to find accommodations at friends’ or family, making them invisible to the researchers. On the other hand, the chronically homeless in Thurston County can often be found in the woods and not taking advantage from assistance programs. For that reason it is especially difficult to include them in the Homeless Census.

**Causes of Homelessness**

Grouping causes of homelessness according to their typology reveals five categories: housing, financial, addiction, family, and health, from which housing is the primary cause of homelessness in Poland. This is not the case in the US, where homeless respondents reported financial hardships as the primary reason for loss of housing. The third most significant cause of homelessness listed by Polish respondents was addiction (specifically alcoholism), while substance abuse (addiction) was the fifth cause of homelessness in Thurston County.

**Cost of Living**

The official social minimum in Poland is $180 per month. Income of $180 or below allows the individual to seek social benefits. The amount of income required for housing, and nutrition was unofficially determined to be around $250 per month. This sum consisted of:

- Municipal housing rent ($32)
- 3 homemade meals per day ($111)
- Monthly bus pass ($30)
- Utilities ($78)

Municipal apartments in Poland are similar to low-income housing in the US. Unfortunately, these apartments are often unavailable and difficult to obtain. Municipal housing consists of low standard apartments, with high utility costs compared to rent. A huge issue with these types of apartments is their limited number and long waitlists. Taking that into consideration, the lowest rent for a regular apartment is around $250, almost eight times more than the subsidized rent, raising the cost of living to around $470 per month.

In the US, the estimated cost of living was about $925 per month:

- Low income housing ($600)
- 3 homemade meals per day ($188)
- Monthly bus pass ($36)
- Utilities ($100)

Considering these numbers, there seems to be a huge difference between the cost of living in Poland and in the US (specifically, US being almost twice as costly). However, this perception changes when the median incomes are compared.

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the median income in 2010 was $29,056 per year in the United States and $11,983 in Poland. Assuming that a person will earn the median income and spend only the minimum amount of money on living expenses, then:

- **Poland**: 47% income spent on basic living expenses
- **USA**: 38% income spent on basic living expenses
At first glance living costs in Poland are much lower than living costs in the US. However, when comparing the costs of living while accounting for median incomes, Poland’s basic needs are more expensive.

A similar trend is present when taking into account minimum wage incomes (40hr/week x 48 weeks):

- Poland
  - $2.97 per hour
- USA:
  - $9.32 per hour - Washington (WAm)
  - $7.25 per hour - Federal (Fm)

Living expenses turn out to be much lower in Poland, only when the cost of housing is calculated with municipal housing (MH), dropping the cost of living significantly.

For both the Poles and Americans the highest expense every month is rent.

When comparing living costs and income from minimum wage jobs, in Poland it is nearly impossible to afford housing without help from the government, which might explain why housing issues are the most common cause of homelessness in Poland.
Conclusion
Homelessness in Poland is a rising issue, hidden from the public view. Similarly homelessness in the US is a large problem that often goes unnoticed.

The characteristics of homelessness in each country depend on many factors including culture, economic development, and governmental involvement in the issue.

References


