Homelessness Among Immigrant Youth: Transitions Between Inclusion and Exclusion

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❭ **Abstract_** *The demographic profile of the European homeless population is changing. Societies are now facing new forms of homelessness. Finland is an example of where long-term homeless people made up the 'core' of homelessness in the past. Today, young immigrants have become a growing subgroup of the homeless population. The number of homeless people has decreased in all categories expect people living temporarily with friends and relatives. In recent years, homelessness among immigrants has become more widespread and increasingly complex in multicultural western countries. While the problem has historically affected urban centres, including metropolitan areas like Helsinki, incidences of homelessness in suburban areas are creating a need for new policies, services and resources. Also, the traditional way of conceptualizing homelessness fails to describe homelessness among youths with immigrant backgrounds adequately. In this article, I will discuss the paths and routes that lead to youths with immigrant backgrounds becoming homeless, drawing on first-hand experiences. Learning about homelessness from the youths themselves can facilitate the development of service systems. I use the concepts of social exclusion and inclusion as I analyse the forms and experiences of homelessness among young immigrants.*

❭ **Keywords_** *Homelessness, youth, hidden homelessness, immigration, discrimination, multicultural society*

Introduction: Finland's societal changes towards a multicultural society

Finland is a Nordic welfare state that has experienced rapid changes over the past decade. These developments were triggered by extensive societal changes. The first change related to late but rapid industrialisation together with a relatively rapid growth in wealth. The second change came from the changing economic structure, and the third major change is related to international migration; as most immigrants have tried to settle in the largest cities, like Helsinki, this has influenced the social and spatial differentiation processes within the regions (Vaattovaara *et al.,* 2011). The late urbanization of Finland is reflected in the housing stock of the country. Home-ownership has had a special role in Finland's short urban history and over 60 percent of the housing stock is owner occupied. The share of social housing in Finland is 16.2 percent, close to the EU average. Over half of the rental dwellings in Finland are state-subsidised. These dwellings are owned directly by the municipalities or companies owned by municipalities. In this part of rental housing, tenants are selected according to the national legislation on state-subsidised housing. Priority is given to people in need – to homeless applicants and applicants in urgent need of housing. In Helsinki, 90 percent of immigrants live in apartment buildings and over 80 percent in rental housing.

Within the framework of a programme carried out in Finland to reduce homelessness, long-term homelessness and street homelessness have started to decline. (The Finnish Homelessness Strategy… 2015). In this programme, which is based on long-term research and development, a crucial aspect has been turning shelters into supported living units, as well as increasing the number of small flats and introducing preventive measures against homelessness. Prevention of homelessness has been improved by expanding advisory services, by renewing collaboration practices in eviction situations and by focusing on youth homelessness, among other things (Kaakinen, 2013). What has emerged, replacing street homelessness, is growing youth homelessness and, in particular, the drifting of people of immigrant background into living with no fixed abode. The concept of 'hidden homelessness' is also rising to the forefront of homelessness research. According to the Housing Finance and Development Centre of Finland, the largest group of homeless people in the country are people living temporarily with relatives and acquaintances. In the year 2011, the number of homeless immigrants in Finland rose for the first time above 1 000. In 2013, there were nearly 2 000 homeless immigrants, and these made up more than 25 percent of all homeless people. In terms of geographical distribution, the growth of homelessness among people of immigrant background has been greatest in Helsinki (Katisko, 2013; Kostiainen and Laakso, 2013; Asunnottomat, 2013; 2014). However, collecting statistics on homelessness depends on the use of services by homeless people. This means that there are

individuals who fall outside the statistics, whose homelessness is not visible and who escape the attention of all authorities. Among others, immigrants have been found to fall often into the category of hidden homelessness (Kostiainen and Laakso, 2013). In this article, I define a 'youth of immigrant background' as having parents who were born in a country other than Finland.

In this article, I will discuss the paths and routes that lead to youths of immigrant background becoming homeless, drawing on their own experiences. Especially in the municipalities of the Finnish capital region, homelessness among youths of immigrant background is becoming a serious social issue with long-term consequences, both for the cities and for society as a whole. In addition to Finland, homelessness has been observed to be taking similar forms in other western and multi-cultural countries (Hulchanski *et al.*, 2009; Germain and Leloup 2010; *Report on homeless migrants…* , 2012; Gaetz, 2014; *Hidden in Our Midst…* , 2014).

The Concept of Homelessness

In Finland, as well as in other European countries, homelessness is considered to be a complex social issue. The prevention of homelessness and the rehousing of homeless people require knowledge of the paths and processes that lead to homelessness (Busch-Geertsema *et al.,* 2010). There are different aspects to homelessness. Homelessness can mean living in the streets or it can mean moving between the houses of friends and family members, living in a shelter for the homeless or staying at an emergency shelter or a women's refuge. There are people living in prisons, substance abuse rehabilitation units and psychiatric hospitals who have nowhere to live at the end of their stay at the institution. There has been very little research into homelessness among people of immigrant background in Finland. The increase in homelessness in this section of the population, having started in the early 2000s, has been gradual and has gone largely unnoticed (Rastas, 2002; Katisko, 2014). For youths of immigrant background, homelessness often does not mean living in the street or, for example, a period of homelessness after receiving services related to substance abuse. The great majority of homeless youths of immigrant background live temporarily with friends or relatives.

The Housing Finance and Development Centre of Finland defines a person as long-term homeless if they are or have been at risk of being homeless for over a year due to social or health reasons, or if they have gone through multiple periods of homelessness over the past three years. However, youths of immigrant background are often not classified as long-term homeless, even if they have been staying with friends or relatives for several years. The young person's official

address may be a friend's address, while in reality they may be changing abode weekly or even daily. What was intended to be a temporary stay with friends may over the years become a permanent state.

Homelessness and the Concepts of Social Exclusion and Inclusion

'Social exclusion' is a term that became widely adopted in the social sciences in the early 1990s. It has been associated with research on poverty and displacement and the analysis of relationships between the individual and the state. The general definition of exclusion is often connected to displacement from the educational system or from working life. Compared to native Finnish youth, those whose first language is not Finnish have a much higher risk of failure both inside and outside of working life and education. Among youths who have graduated from high school, social exclusion and the risk of unemployment is almost six times higher for those with a foreign background compared to those with Finnish heritage (Myrskylä, 2011).

In this paper, I use the concepts of social exclusion and inclusion in my analysis of the forms and experiences of homelessness among young immigrants. I use social exclusion and inclusion as umbrella terms, under which *accessing, belonging and being cut out* intertwine and construct each other in a dynamic on-going process. Hence, inclusion and exclusion are shown as gradual, not mutually exclusive phenomena. The starting point in my thinking is that an individual has abilities that allow them to 'become included'*,* even though representatives of official bodies may consider them to have fallen outside the system (Eräsaari 2005; Stichweh 2005). Exclusion is thus not 'the problem', nor is inclusion 'the solution' to it (Eräsaari 2005).

Defining the relationship between social inclusion and exclusion as dialectic means that the phenomenon's are seen as active social and economic events. Exclusion from one group or social category usually leads to inclusion in another group. This can be seen as creating the relationships between in-groups and out-groups. Only rarely does exclusion lead to complete disappearance from the sphere of social relationships (Nieminen and Kostiainen, 2011).

Social exclusion and inclusion are concepts that allow us to analyse different aspects of an individual's daily life in complex, multifaceted, globalized societies (Fangen, 2010). My aim is to analyse experiences connected to homelessness among young immigrants by showing how the youths react to social exclusion and how they cope in their life situation (as homeless youths). It is crucial to study the transitions between exclusion and inclusion in the course of an individual's life, and to analyse the issues, factors and circumstances that contribute to such transitions.

I discuss homelessness among individuals of immigrant background as a dynamic phenomenon, where different forms of, and solutions to, the housing problem alternate and change. The youths end up homeless and shift away from homelessness – for example by moving in with friends – for a period, until they are again forced to survive without a fixed abode. A crucial element is the way other factors connected to integration or inclusion relate to this process of homelessness.

The Research Data and Analysis of the Data

The data in this study has been collected by interviewing youths, using open thematic interviews and group discussions. In this context, the term 'open thematic interview' is used to describe an interview limited to the experiences connected to housing and homelessness, as well as experiences of applying for a flat and receiving support. In addition, the interviews were guided by issues and themes that the youths themselves brought up. The topics covered in both individual and group discussions were connected to the young person's views and thoughts on themes such as home, housing and their future.

For the purposes of this paper, I conducted 31 individual interviews and three group discussions from January to April 2014. In total, I interviewed 41 young persons of immigrant background. The age range of the interviewees was 18 to 29 years. Most of the interviewees were male (35 persons); six were female. I contacted the interviewees through staff in social work, social advisory and education services of cities in the capital region. Most of the youths interviewed for this study come from a refugee background. In the context of this interview material, 'refugee background' means one of the following: a) the youth has come to Finland as an underage asylum seeker without a guardian; b) the youth has come to Finland with a family of refugee background, having been born in a country other than Finland; or c) the youth has been born to a refugee family in Finland. Only three of the interviewees did not come from refugee background.

A large proportion of the youths interviewed in this study come from families of Somali background (15 interviewees). The rest of the interviewees or their parents had countries of origin elsewhere in Africa (Eritrea, Egypt), in the Middle East (Iran, Iraq), Asia (Burma) or in Europe (Kosovo). The youths differed from each other in terms of relationship status. Most of them were single, three were married and one had children. Due to their poor housing situation, one of them did not live with their spouse and children. One of the families and one married couple with no children were temporarily sub-letting a flat together, living in very cramped conditions.

Using qualitative methods to analyse the research data gave me a better under-standing of the context of the immigrant youths' homelessness. My approach to the data was deductive, as I used my research questions to group the data and look for similarities and differences in the experience of homelessness. Through the thematic analysis I looked across all the data to identify common issues and identify the main themes that summarise all the views that came out of the focus group interviews.

Research questions

This study aims to clarify what routes and circumstances are involved when a youth of immigrant background drifts into homelessness, where homelessness is defined as a process that encompasses both drifting into homelessness and temporary escape from it.

- What dimensions and characteristics of inclusion and exclusion can be found in the lives of these youths during their periods of homelessness?

- What transitions between exclusion and inclusion can be observed in the lives of these youths, and what factors contribute to these transitions?

Routes to Homelessness and Life without a Home

While observing youths of immigrant background, it is important to remember that there is no single homogeneous or clearly demarcated group that could be simply labelled as 'homeless youths of immigrant background'. Each homeless youth has his or her individual path and route that has led them into homelessness. Gaetz (2014), for example, argues that all young people without a stable abode neverthe-less share certain characteristics, such as youth being the life stage they are going through and their lack of experience in independent living.

There are certain issues faced by both homeless youth and homeless people of other age groups, such as a shortage of reasonably priced flats and deficiencies in the service system. However, the consequences of homelessness are different for young people and those at other life stages. When a young person drifts into home-lessness, she or he not only loses their home and housing, but often important social relationships as well, including family, relatives, neighbourhood, school, workplace and hobbies.

There are special characteristics associated with homelessness among youths of immigrant origin as compared to homelessness among native Finnish youth. Young people's relationships with their nuclear or extended family can become strained due to many factors and circumstances. Immigration and the integration process are challenging experiences for the entire family, testing both parenthood and the internal

cohesiveness of the family. A family that is going through integration is subjected to many kinds of pressure to change. For example, the roles, values and childrearing principles of family members may become a target for changes in the new country. Changes in family dynamics may show in inter-generational as well as gender relationships. Families that come to Finland as refugees or asylum seekers are in especially difficult situations, both economically and psychologically.

The situations of interviewees were quite varied. Routes to homelessness variously involved a breakdown in the immediate social circle (primarily family), gaps in the service system or discrimination in the rental flat market. On the other hand, the movement into homelessness did not happen in one direction only, and as one risk was realized, another safety network might save the youth, at least temporarily.

When a young person leaves their family, they are not generally running away from home to have an adventure; there are many different reasons for leaving. Most of the interviewees described flats too small for their families and cramped living conditions, siblings sharing rooms and tensions developing between family members.

> he (stepfather) moved into our flat and the flat was too small. Everyone couldn't fit in the same room and we started having arguments. That's why I moved out. Many times I had to move back there (home) and then he (stepfather) throws me out. But that time in the fall it was the last time for sure. Two years I could take it at home and after school I went straight to work. If I went straight home from school, he (stepfather) asked me why I'm home. Eight hours I spent at school and then eight hours at work too, how can I manage that.

However, the issue is not always a breach between the youth and their parents or guardians but the young person's genuine desire to become independent and start their own life. Many of the youths interviewed for this study emphasized that without a place to live, life cannot begin. They wish to have a normal home, a place where they can rest, cook or meet friends. Many of them emphasized security and permanence, as well as having their own private space.

> Stress all the time. If I had a place of my own, I could live freely, cook my own food. Do basic human things.

Those in the most difficult situations are youths who have arrived in Finland alone as underage asylum seekers. They have often been placed in small family group homes outside the capital region. As the youth turns 18, the family group home is replaced by independent living. Many of these youths wish to move to the capital region from the family group homes situated elsewhere in the country. Some of the interviewees have moved in with families of their relatives belonging to the same ethnic group.

As the families tend to be large and the flats small, the youths easily start feeling like outsiders while living with their relatives. Feelings of insecurity and lack of long-term stability drive them to move away from their relatives' families.

> when you get into an argument (in the relatives' family) you have to leave, they say you can find your own flat and move out.

At the time of the interviews, most of the interviewees were living with a friend. However, life at their friends' places is hard. The interviewees have had to shift to a different place to sleep almost daily. The circle of friends and acquaintants provides a sense of security and functions as an important factor promoting inclusion. However, some youths worry that their friends' 'tolerance' as providers of accommodation may be nearing its limits.

> I'm staying with a friend. Every night I sleep at a different friend's place, because one of my friends has a child and I don't feel comfortable there; then there's another friend who has a boyfriend, on Saturdays and Sundays she says to me go away because my boyfriend is coming. Even at night I go to another friend. It's a big problem. Life is hard. I can't study, I'd like to go to school. I have a lot of homework. I have stuff. What will I do? (cries)

Most of the interviewees had an official address at the home of a friend, family member or a family of relatives, though they did not actually live at that address permanently or even on a weekly basis. A few of them had an address as sub-tenants at a friend's address. In the latter case, however, they were doing so-called 'couch surfing', which means literally just sleeping on a friend's sofa at night. Five of the youths had taken a *poste restante* address in the hope of getting a city rental flat faster. However, having a *poste restante* address had no effect on their chances of receiving a flat.

These youths kept their personal items and clothes variously in the storage rooms of friends, family members or relatives. One youth describes having divided clothing into the closets of several friends and sometimes finding it hard to remember where each item or piece of clothing was.

The Roles of the Social Welfare Office and the Adult Education System in Promoting Exclusion and Inclusion

The service system run by the municipal social welfare office was sometimes referred to in the interviews, having occasionally played a significant role in solving the problem of homelessness. In the stories, distrust of the social welfare office ability and willingness to help in applying for flat alternates with experiences of having received indispensable help in actually finding one.

> but luckily I had a good person from the social, one who has tried to arrange
> things and help. If I hadn't found help I would have gone crazy, life would have
> been too hard, not having any space of my own, having no flat.

Many of the interviewees had received financial aid from the social welfare office,
but no actual support in finding a flat..

Despite being homeless, many of the interviewees study within the adult education
system in the capital region. From the interview material it can be seen that the
teachers, student counsellors and welfare officers working in the adult education
system are often the only real providers of help and support for these youths. The
youths feel that these professionals are an important source of emotional support in
a difficult life situation. Educational institutions have become important places for
receiving information and support, with staff helping students – in addition to their
teaching duties – by, for example, assisting them in applying for a flat and by writing
letters of recommendation to help in finding one. In a sense, the tasks of flat-finding
and emotional support have landed in the sphere of adult education. Teachers and
welfare officers may begin to be seen as somewhat heroic characters who will
accompany their students to flat viewings and call landlords on their students' behalf.

The homeless youths' daily rhythms may be different from those of their friends in
regular employment. Cramped living spaces and sleeping on friends' sofas can
make studying and working practically impossible.

> I don't go to school very regularly. Because my sister has children and they want
> to play games in the living room. I can't sleep well, or read, or write. I don't have
> a place where I can wake up in the mornings.

> I can say it straight, if you don't have a place of your own, you can't live, how
> could I put it, you have no peace. It's on your mind all the time that you're a
> visitor, because it's not your own home. Also, you can't act any way you like.
> Sometimes you can't cook because you don't live there. You can't watch TV or
> something. You can't do schoolwork. If you live with your cousin or friend for
> example, and that friend isn't working tomorrow and wants to stay up all night,
> you just have to stay up, even if you have school tomorrow….

Symbolic and Institutional Exclusion
in the Rental Flat Market and in Integration Practices

In seeking to find a home and their place in society, the youths had experienced various methods, practices and forms of exclusion. The rental companies run by the cities in the capital region are unable to offer the rental housing for youth. All interviewees had also sought flats elsewhere, for example from private owners, foundations, associations and pension insurance companies. All interviewees describe having applied for numerous flats, attended flat viewings and called landlords in the hope of finding a flat. Most of them describe situations where they feel that they have failed to get a flat because of their foreign background. This may have happened even when the applicant was born in Finland and speaks Finnish. One young woman interviewed for this study had received a text message to let her know that the landlord would not rent the flat to a foreigner, but wanted a Finnish tenant.

In interpersonal social interaction and communication, it is possible to identify many forms and practices used to exclude someone. In addition to a text message, the landlord can indirectly indicate through expressions, looks or the refusal to start a conversation that they will not even consider an applicant of immigrant background. We can talk about a symbolic form of exclusion, meaning that the person is defined as 'different' or 'other' (Vestel, 2004). Different forms of exclusion can thus be expressed as a *sense* of exclusion or as observable acts of exclusion (for example closing a door). One of the interviewees analyses their frustration and despair at realising that in reality their origin and skin colour affect their chances of getting a flat more than other factors:

> yeah I suppose I've known it somehow, but I haven't understood. That it has really been my identity, what I am, rather than me having a job, regular employment for the past ten years. Everything that's required has been fine, but that you're foreign. I've always thought it somehow personal, I didn't want to accept, I couldn't believe that it can be like this. But it is the cold truth somehow that it (discrimination) exists…..//…. well I suppose I understand in some way, that it's difficult for you Finns to understand that someone is foreign, but what I can't understand is what is so damn hard about checking a person's background, what they've done and if they have a job and if they have regular income. Like the basics that are usually required.

Because of the shortage of flats, an unofficial rental flat market has developed in the capital region. Some parties try to make a profit from the difficult situations of youths of immigrant background in the general rental flat market. Youths may be charged excessive rent or the flats offered to them may be in poor repair. Flat seekers may also hire someone to apply for flats, write letters of recommendation or coach them for flat viewings.

some friend of mine said that if you want a flat, you have to first pay for someone to find one for you. Like a commission in a way, but it's not a legal company. But on top of that you have to pay the rent deposit of course.

In addition to open discrimination, there is institutional discrimination, meaning, for example, that flat-seekers are classified in the rental flat market on the basis of their background as a matter of course. Some forms of institutional discrimination can be cited as being beneficial to the applicants – for example, where it is claimed that too many people from the same ethnic group should not be housed in the same block of flats.

Of the youths interviewed for this study, many had a Somali background. In both Finnish and international research concerning segregation in residential areas, it has been found that populations of Somali origin face both institutional and general discrimination in the rental flat market (Dhalmann and Vilkama, 2009; Huisman, 2011; van Liempt, 2011; Skovgaard *et al.,* 2014).

The officials and functionaries in charge of distributing rental flats can either strengthen or weaken the position of persons from various ethnic minorities in the rental flat market. Information can be dispensed in a selective manner or it may be generally hard to access. Housing companies, real estate agents and landlords can, for example, steer potential applicants in their search for a flat by filtering the information they make available regarding free flats (Dhalmann and Vilkama, 2009; Vilkama, 2011). Flats can be distributed in such a way that ethnic stereotypes are reinforced. Families and individuals from certain ethnic or religious minorities can be directed to areas where there are already more of them than in other areas. Alternatively, members of certain minorities can be restricted from moving into some areas by referring to various kinds of quotas, or by excluding them completely from a certain type of housing (Vilkama, 2011).

Among the youths interviewed for this study there were some who had arrived in Finland alone as underage asylum seekers. As minors, they had been placed either in the municipalities surrounding the capital region or in other parts of Finland. As they reached adulthood, they all wished to move to the capital region. State authorities have started developing post-custodial services for these youths. Youths who arrive in the country alone as minors need special support and help even after reaching adulthood (*Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriön…* , [Publications of the Ministry of Employment…], 2014).

In countries that receive immigrants, newcomers have generally wished to settle in urban centres, preferably cities. According to Vilkama (2011), the ethnic and social differentiation of the urban structure is typical in the development of cities that are becoming increasingly multicultural. In Finland, like elsewhere, social and

ethnic differentiation has become a current issue; people moving to Finland want to settle in the largest cities. Hence, immigration policies should also be urban development policies.

Conclusions

Although the routes and paths to homelessness are often seen on the individual level and as involving economic and relationship problems, there are often underlying factors related to societal structures and service systems that lead to homelessness among people of immigrant background. Homelessness among families and individuals of refugee background is linked to causes related to integration policies and practices. Cramped and poor living conditions, unemployment, parents' lack of language skills, lack of information and economic factors are reflected in relationships between family members. Homelessness is a serious social issue. However, the hardest thing about homelessness is the personal, human side. The feeling that they are not considered worthy of having a flat of their own because of their origin instils a sense of powerlessness and exclusion in these youth.

The traditional way of conceptualizing homelessness does not describe homelessness among youths of immigrant background adequately. This homelessness does not show up in statistics. Even though homelessness as a life situation is extremely difficult, it was not hard to persuade the youths to be interviewed. They want the issue to be brought up in public discourse. Many of the youths I interviewed also had friends in similar situations in their social circle.

According to their interview responses, none of the interviewees had spent nights on the streets, nor are they completely excluded from society. Youths of immigrant background are supported by networks of friends and acquaintances. In a similar way, extended family and relatives, as well as the ethnic community, are important sources of support and providers of temporary accommodation. These resources are quite effective at compensating for a blind spot related to homelessness in the public service system. The adult education system has also become an important source of both emotional and concrete support for youths of immigrant background. The intertwining and dialectic qualities of exclusion and inclusion can be considered in relation to the public-private axis.

Homelessness affects the daily lives of these youths in several different ways. Uncertainty about where they will spend the next night or week means they have no foundation to build on. Their ability to study and work are compromised. The idea of having their own lives and families seem to become more and more distant. Friends and acquaintances are an indispensable source of help and support, yet at the same time the youths are tormented by uncertainty about how long the

network of friends can cope with supporting a homeless person. Considering their situation, the youths interviewed for this study were managing relatively well. They all had systems that held on and included them to some extent.

Several of the interviewees still had family members or relatives "out there", or ones who had left Finland at a later point. It emerged in interviews that the diaspora of the Somali community in particular had relatives living in Somalia or having later moved to the United States, Denmark or United Kingdom. In the course of their journey from Somalia, some had stayed for example in Italy, along the route that most refugees of African origin take on their way towards Central and Northern Europe. Thus, the situations of these interviewees also have to be considered in the global context. Even though homelessness is a concrete issue right here and now, its roots and causes are often international.

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