
“Neo-homelessness” and the Greek Crisis

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› **Abstract** *This policy review focuses on the impact of the financial crisis and austerity measures on housing exclusion and homelessness in Greece. Despite homeless persons having been recently recognized in legislation as a specific vulnerable social group, the Greek state has not put in place any supportive measures for homeless persons and also has not developed a prevention policy to safeguard its citizens who struggle with the impact of the crisis. A “new generation” of homeless has appeared in Greece; the profile of this “new generation” of homeless is different to that of the “traditional” homeless of the country. The general impact of the crisis in Greece, especially on the most vulnerable groups, cannot yet be measured, but it is clear that new initiatives are required in order to promote the development of social solidarity in Greece.*

› **Keywords** *Austerity, homelessness, neo-homeless*

Introduction: The General Greek Policy Framework

The Greek Constitution provides clauses guaranteeing the right to housing. For example Article 21, paragraph 4 stipulates: “The acquisition of dwelling for those that deprive it or those inadequately sheltered is subject to special care by the State”. Despite the constitutional recognition of a right to housing, efforts to tackle homelessness in Greece have only been initiated relatively recently. This lack of housing results also to the exclusion of other fundamental rights, such as employment (Greek Constitution, article 22 par.1) and education (article 16, par.2). The introduction of social rights in the Greek Constitution does not establish an enforceable juridical claim. Usually, legislation is needed to activate, specify and interpret

the normative content of the constitutional provisions that establish social rights. The enforcement of social rights depends upon the provision by the state of goods or services, or the provision of the cash equivalent of goods and services, and involves the redistribution of resources and income. In this sense, the implementation of a constitutionally guaranteed social right is contingent on the availability of funds to those exercising state power. Consequently, people who lack housing or live in inadequate, inappropriate accommodation cannot demand that the State addresses their housing needs (Papaliou, 2010).

In Greece public policies provisions for the social inclusion of homeless persons are residual. There is no provision for specific income support programs for homeless people or specific measures with regard to the promotion of their employment. The situation is further complicated by the different ministries involved in multiple aspects of the housing issue: Thus responsibility for housing matters lies with the Ministry of Environment; responsibility for social policy lies with the Ministry of Health; the Ministry of Development is responsible for housing market regulation issues; and the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Citizen's Protection (formerly Public Order) share responsibility for migration. Furthermore, there is no social housing stock in the country and the Workers' Housing Association (OEK), the only organization for social housing, which provided houses to its members (workers paying contribution to the organization through their salaries) was abolished last year.

The "definition of homelessness" was set out recently in Law 4052 published on February 28, 2012. In article 29 of the abovementioned Law, there are three provisions, which state:

1st. "The homeless are recognized as a vulnerable social group, which is provided for by social protection. The homeless are defined as all persons legally residing in the country, that have no access, or have unsafe access to sufficient privately owned, rented or bestowed housing that meets the required specification and has basic water services and electricity.

2nd. The homeless include especially those who live on the street, in hostels, are hosted, out of necessity, temporarily in institutions or other closed structures as well as those living in inappropriate accommodation.

3rd. By Decisions of The Minister of Health and Social Solidarity and the respective competent Minister published in the Gazette, are regulated the specific issues for implementation of the present, especially the content, scope and timing for providing social protection, as well as the procedure and the implementers of the homeless' registration."

As it is clearly evident, while the legislation did accede to long-standing demands by providing a legislative definition of homelessness, and the acknowledgement that homeless persons are a specific social vulnerable group, the clauses provided are limited and exclude non-legal residents of the country. Furthermore, due to a lack of specific policy initiatives the law has until now not been called into play.

“Traditional” Homelessness

At the beginning of the 90’s, homelessness in Greece was considered “imported”. This erroneous impression was due to the fact that an increase in the housing problems of Greek citizens coincided with an increase in the number of immigrants and asylum seekers. Naturally, soon enough it became apparent that immigrants and natives alike were faced with housing problems. The Greek State was not prepared and ill-equipped to develop tools for the prevention and management of social problems that stemmed from changes in the last decades in the economic and social structure and in the fabric of family life due to a reduction in employment in the agricultural sector, the rapid urbanization of the population, the entrance of women to the labour market and other shifts in the structure of the labour market.

More specifically, as Greek society evolved the traditional structure of the family changed. Up until now the family in Greece has operated as a redistributive mechanism, i.e. it collects resources for the support of its members in need and delivers social services, for example the care needs of children and old people are met by non-salaried work of women (Bilanakis, 2007). However, the Mediterranean family model is being westernized very rapidly and solidarity among the family members can no longer be relied upon. As a result many persons without family support can find themselves in a situation of poverty and social exclusion (National Centre of Social Research, 2002).

The available data regarding the number and characteristics of homeless people in Greece derive from sketchy estimations of both the public and private organizations which target specific vulnerable groups such as drug users and abused women; no data is available for example on immigrants or people released from prisons. The first systematic attempt to register the homeless population, was started by the NGO “Klimaka” in 2006 in Athens, Thesssaloniki and Larissa (Vlantonis *et al*, 2006). The information collected revealed that one third (33 percent) of the homeless population had received the obligatory education, almost half (46.5 percent) of the respondents had been homeless for more than 3 years while the rate of delinquency within the homeless population (25 percent) was greater than that in the general population. The lack of recognition of the population as well as

the lack of any effort to collect official data on the issue has resulted in the total absence of support measures and public structures that could stem the rise of homelessness in the country.

Crisis and the “Neo-Homeless”

The term “neo-homeless” was introduced by the NGO Klimaka, in order to describe a diversified homeless population, which emerged not long after the outbreak of the fiscal crisis in Greece. The homeless population in Greece can be categorized into three main categories. The first consists of people in homelessness due to a combination of the following factors; unemployment and low income; mental health problems, mostly with dual diagnosis (gambling, drug abuse, alcoholic abuse); and the absence of a supportive network. Persons who fit into this category are mainly Greeks and immigrants suffering from mental health disorders and commonly are long-term homeless. The second category is the new homeless generation. This population consists of homeless people who had until recent years a satisfactory standard of living and have a higher educational level. People in this category have found themselves homeless due to financial difficulties and unemployment. Immigrants in this category are persons with a good level of societal integration. The third category includes immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees in a stage of transition; such persons face intense housing problems (complete rooflessness) for a short time but they mostly live for a long time in inadequate housing and extreme overcrowding (Alamanou *et al*, 2011).

Research on homelessness in the financial crisis (Theodorikakou *et al*, 2012) indicates that 1 out of 5 “neo-homeless” persons has high/higher educational level, while their former occupation was commonly in the technical, construction, or tourism and related sectors, or they were self-employed; economic sectors that seem to have been adversely affected by the crisis. Among the main findings of the survey are also the following:

- Over 6 in every 10 person surveyed (64.8 percent) have been homeless for less than two years, while more than half “reside” in the historic centre of Athens.
- A similar proportion (63.8 percent) of the respondents had been sleeping rough during the last year
- One in ten (10.5 percent) respondents said they sought refuge in a car

- One in seven (14.3 percent) respondents said they have gone at least once to a hospital to spend the night.
- For more than half (52.4 percent) ensuring food is not a daily problem. Just less than half (47.1 percent) indicated that clothing is not a problem but for over 4 in 10 (41 percent) respondents indicated that finding a place to bathe is a problem.
- Half of them live with zero euro or up to 20 euro per month
- Almost 6 out of every 10 (58.1 percent) are not covered by any sort of health insurance
- Among their most important needs they prioritize housing (85.6 percent), health care (83.1 percent), work (76.5 percent) and personal care (75 percent)
- Three in ten (29.8 percent) respondents believe that they became homeless due to financial problems; while one in six (17.3 percent) attribute their homelessness to unemployment
- When asked who is responsible for the crisis in Greece almost half (47.6 percent) answered the politicians and one in four (25.7 percent) answered all Greeks

Compared to the “traditional” homeless population, the “neo-homeless” group does not have severe mental health disorders, or problems of delinquency, and they appear to have a greater potential for rehabilitation and social reintegration than the ‘traditional’ homeless. However, the loss of residence is a particular stressor since the “neo-homeless” had until recently an adequate standard of living and most of them never expected that they would face such extreme survival problems. This is a huge change in their lives, which causes shock, especially in the beginning, and triggers strong expressions of anxiety, sadness, anger, fear, anxiety, etc. Their present situation and their inability to adequately support their families, negatively affects their self-image and their role not only in the immediate family context but also in broader social relations.

Conclusion: A Societal Response to the Impact of the Socioeconomic Crisis

The low quality of the built urban environment, namely the absence of additional social housing sites and servers provided at public expense, and the poor quality of residential extensions, concerns the majority of the Greek population, especially the inhabitants of Attica. Four issues need to be addressed to prevent housing exclusion:

1. The immediate problem of homelessness
2. The problem of tenants with low and/or precarious income
3. The problem of the property costs for both owned and rented properties
4. The lack of public and social infrastructure, which complements housing and the degradation of the urban environment (Portaliou, 2006).

None of these four issues have been addressed by the State while the homelessness situation has worsened due to the austerity measures imposed by the government. The inability of the social system to deal with the problems caused by the economic downturn and the weakness of the market coupled with the rising costs of the welfare state and reductions in benefits has not only failed to resolve the problems, but rather intensified them.

A decade before the global and European crisis, several special analysts, like David Gordon and Peter Townsend, pointed out that in Europe in the last two decades of the 20th century: "the speed of social polarization seems to have been faster in the last two decades of the 20th century than at any other time in recorded history, because wages and the labour market were deregulated, progressive taxation reduced, means testing of benefits extended, social insurance weakened, and publicly owned industries and services substantially privatized" (2000, p.9).

Nowadays the deepening social polarization that Gordon and Townsend warned of is a reality and has continued to develop and worsen with time. However, it is difficult to absolutely evaluate the human cost of the crisis in Greece, as the impact, especially on the most vulnerable population groups, cannot yet be measured. In addition, the catalogue of social challenges remains long, is constantly expanding and includes, among others, an increase in the population at risk of poverty, as well as increases in social discriminations, the long term unemployed, the employed poor, the under pensioned elderly and child poverty. Every new prediction regarding the consequences of the crisis and each new estimate of the indicators of inequality and poverty – however dramatic – is soon surpassed by the new facts, something that reinforces the precariousness and complicates the mapping of the total spectrum of the new polymorphic and complex reality.

It seems that a new socially excluded group has been created in Greek society; a group which experiences all the major and extreme aspects of poverty and social exclusion and whose members are deprived due to financial reasons of most of their civil rights. But, it may be that the profile of the neo-homeless population can create a new social dynamic which demands that basic needs are guaranteed by

the State. The homeless march organized in Athens on April 12th, 2013, where homeless people protested in front of the Greek Parliament requesting nothing more but a house, suggests that this is more than just an idealistic aspiration.

In the financial crisis there is a wide, and, probably, growing gap between the scale of the problem we face and the scale of the solutions we offer. Social solidarity, not as a characteristic of a welfare state, but as a characteristic of a society arises as a reaction to a global sphere where capitalism dominated due to the absence of any alternative. However, this evolutionary process may lead to a society of risk, the risk of isolation, exclusion, poverty, unemployment, and personal insecurity (Katsadoros, 2011).

As actions unfold to cope with the crisis, Greek citizens are engaged in mounting civil unrest while stark inequalities are widening and are linked to many other social ills. The increase in the number of suicides, the emergence of the “neo-homeless”, the increased rate of delinquency, and economic insecurity are not “effects” of a pathogenic state in crisis. They are the logical consequences of a system that is divorced from social reality.

The emergence of social movements driven by social aims arises in Greece primarily as a response to the unsuccessful capitalistic structures but also in response to basic needs that had been inadequately met, or not met at all, by public services or for profit enterprises. Solidarity and innovation become imperative when problems are getting worse, when systems are not working or when institutions reflect past rather than present problems.

However, this kind of solidarity should now be developed by a society, which has to support and, ultimately, integrate, people that seem to be superfluous to the economy. When people are no longer considered necessary for economic development, society can and must find other alternative ways. Social solidarity, however, does not mean charity and philanthropy. Philanthropy operates exclusively as a relief. Securing a decent living, social participation, solidarity and collective development, but also conservation and development of social capital requires an activating social reaction, which will support the building of a social state. This would require a more equal distribution of social goods and opportunities. In light of this, there have been demands that the sterile vision of the state as the sole catalyst of social ventures and political actions on the basis of solidarity must be replaced with a broader vision of the role of the state. Under these crisis conditions, the aim is to enable citizens to take initiatives. These initiatives must be established on the basis of a constructive reflection that allows the emergence and subsequent rejection of all those system distortions that generate inequality, discrimination and collective weaknesses.

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