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## Youth Homelessness is on the rise: some urgent measures are required

It is commonly acknowledged that young people continue to be strongly hit by the economic crisis. While youth exclusion and youth unemployment are high on the European Union agenda, there is concern that EU measures do not target sufficiently the most vulnerable. As the economic context remains challenging, youth homelessness is increasing in many EU member states<sup>1</sup>.

Unemployment is a major underlying cause of youth homelessness; with limited access to jobs the transition to adulthood and independence becomes increasingly difficult. In many countries, young people under a certain age have no or limited rights to unemployment benefits. Moreover access to housing benefits is increasingly being further restricted for young people making some of them more vulnerable to homelessness.

FEANTSA wants to point out that some measures taken by governments may have a dramatic long term impact on the exclusion of young people. Previous double-dip crises have caused sharp increases in youth homelessness. We know that a substantial number of these young homeless people have become the chronic homeless people of today. A combination of economic hardship, rising unemployment, and cuts in the social welfare system are usually at the origin of such increases in youth homelessness<sup>2</sup>. We should avoid pushing young people into homelessness and creating a new cohort of chronic homeless people as a result of the current crisis. Therefore we call upon the EU and member states to take the following measures.

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<sup>1</sup> *No excuses, Preventing homelessness for the next generation*, Homeless Link (2013); *Zahl der Wohnungslosen in Deutschland weiter gestiegen*, Dr. Thomas Specht (2013); *Hjemløshed i Danmark 2013. National kortlægning*, Det nationale forskningscenter for velfærd (2013); *Third of February Homeless Survey* (2013); *young, hidden and homeless*, Crisis (2012)

<sup>2</sup> *Annual Homeless Stats Published*, Scottish Government (2013); *Mehr junge Wohnungslose durch Hartz IV*, Diakonie (2013); *Jeunes en transition, adultes en devenir*, Observatoire de la Santé et du Social Bruxelles (2012); *Jeunes, une génération précaire*, Secours Catholique (2010)



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## **More housing option for young homeless people**

Young people are facing more barriers than ever to accessing housing. Eurostat figures for 2012 show that around 50% of young people between 18 and 29 who experience poverty (income less than 60% of median) are paying more than 40% of their income on housing. This is an increase of 10% in five years. Young people especially in the Euro area have been hit with over 15% increase during the crisis years.

Some factors that contribute to their increasing vulnerability on the housing market are: low income, rising unemployment, limited access to benefits, inaccessible mortgage finance and unaffordable rental market.

Investment in social housing is urgently required. Even where affordability problems exist in social housing (about 12% of the tenants experience housing cost overburden<sup>3</sup>), it is often the best/only sustainable option for young homeless people. There is a general consensus that emergency accommodation is not a solution to the problems experienced by young homeless people and in fact can actually make their situation worse, and therefore the use of short-stay shelters should be minimised. There is growing evidence that young people who exit homelessness early are more likely to remain out of homelessness<sup>4</sup>.

Housing allowance systems often restrict access for young people under a certain age. Allowances might not be available at all, or only available for shared accommodation. Several governments have taken further measures to reduce access for young people to housing benefits as a means of saving public money. This is based on the assumption that young people can simply stay longer with their parents. But for vulnerable young people, a difficult family situation (e.g. family violence for instance) can be part of the trigger that pushes them into homelessness. Therefore, staying in the family is often not an option.

The European Union should encourage member states to use the Structural Funds (ESF and ERDF) to ensure there is access to stable housing for young homeless people for whom a solution within the family is temporarily or never possible. This can be done by using ESF to cover rent as well as support, or ERDF for renovating and/or constructing housing for young homeless people thereby avoiding prolonged stays in shelters or other institutions.

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<sup>3</sup> *EU Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC)*, Eurostat

<sup>4</sup> *From Youth to Adult Homelessness*, G.Johnon & C.Chamberlain (2008); *Young People's Homeless Pathways*, P.Mayock, M.L.Corr & E.O'Sullivan (2008)



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## **Proper supported housing solutions need to be available BEFORE young people are released from youth care**

Too often a history of institutionalisation in youth care is a direct route into homelessness – especially in Eastern Europe. Better cooperation the youth care sector, the homelessness and social housing sectors could prevent most homelessness after release from youth care.

The European Union should promote best practice on how to ensure successful transition for vulnerable young people leaving youth care to independent living and how to prevent homelessness. This could be done in the framework of the implementation of the European Commission recommendation “Investing in children: breaking the cycle of disadvantage” (2013).

## **Access to employment is an essential factor in reintegration processes, but for young homeless people this may mean adapted employment schemes. However, it might be necessary to address more urgent priorities such as housing and support first**

Young homeless people often have a complex variety of problems which may not allow them to fully exploit existing public employment and training schemes developed for unemployed youth. The route towards mainstream employment or even supported employment in social economy enterprises will often be longer and might not be possible at all for some homeless young people. Intensive support might be required and a stable housing is often a precondition for successful take up of employment opportunities.

There are a variety of special employment schemes for young homeless throughout Europe. Making information about these schemes available and promoting transnational exchanges around some of the most successful schemes would be welcome. The apparent positive outcomes of the Foyer model (originally created in France) which encourages young homeless people to live together in temporary group housing and which focuses on training (including basic life skills development) and employment should be further investigated, and if confirmed should be promoted EU-wide. There is increasing evidence that Housing First also works for young people (see



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recent research in Denmark<sup>5</sup>). If further evidence is equally positive, Housing First solutions for young homeless people should be promoted EU-wide.

In 2013, the EU launched the EU Youth Guarantee. All Member States have committed in June of this year to ensuring that all young people up to the age of 25 receive a high-quality offer of a job, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within four months after becoming unemployed. It is clear ( Eurofound research in 2012<sup>6</sup>) that the youth guarantee schemes which served as a model for the EU scheme (Finland, and Denmark) do not work for young people with complex needs, including homeless people. The European Union should urgently develop alternatives to the EU Youth Guarantee if it is serious about getting ALL under 25's into a job, training, or education.

## **EU Member States should ensure that reforms in welfare systems do not disproportionately affect young vulnerable people**

People should not be penalized on basis of age. When such discrimination happens, possibilities for a safety net should be developed. Welfare reforms in an austerity context often happen on the basis of hasty assumptions. One of them is that existing welfare systems are too generous for young people and that it is the responsibility of the parents to secure the transition of their children into adulthood. In times of crisis the age until which young people are supposed to turn to their parents for help and support is pushed ever further up. As argued above, for homeless young people difficult/violent family relationships are often one of the key causes of their destitution. We have evidence that changes in access to welfare benefits and government support<sup>7</sup> are already generating higher levels of homelessness amongst young people. For instance, reducing the support for accessing rental housing is one of these harmful changes.

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<sup>5</sup> *Hjemløsestrategien. Afsluttende rapport*, Rambøll & SFI (2013)

<sup>6</sup> *Youth Guarantee: Experiences from Finland and Sweden*, Eurofound (2012)

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.ekd.de/aktuell\\_presse/88791.html](http://www.ekd.de/aktuell_presse/88791.html)



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The European Union should make sure that in its macro-economic surveillance and financial assistance programmes (especially for the programme countries), it is not promoting changes to the social security and social assistance model that drive some young people into destitution and homelessness.

Another issue of concern is that the public funding cuts are also felt by the homelessness service sector in many countries. Cuts are imposed by national and local governments on a variety of homeless and support services. Especially the services specialised in housing solutions and prevention of homelessness are hit by the cuts. Homeless shelters are less affected by budget cuts, but (as stated above) they represent the least preferred option/solution (even temporarily) for young people who are homeless.

### **Do not criminalise homelessness, especially when it concerns young homeless people**

Street homelessness is on the rise in many countries and young people are increasingly part of the rough sleeper population – especially in big urban areas. In several countries local/national authorities reach for repressive means to make homelessness less visible. There is abundant evidence that criminalisation (fines, displacement and imprisonment) does not bring a solution to homelessness any closer, especially for young homeless people and can jeopardise their chances to integrate back into society.

The European Union should encourage member states to stop the criminalisation of homelessness in line with the guidance annexed to the Social Investment Package and as requested repeatedly by the European Parliament.

In many countries very poor and homeless families are considered unable to raise their children<sup>8</sup>. Separation of parents and children and placement of children in foster families is often the preferred solution. There is however successful practice that shows that very poor/homeless families can be supported in such a way that enforced removal of children can be avoided. There is increasing evidence that contacts with youth care services combined with bad housing conditions are a very good indication of potential future family homelessness, which allows for effective early intervention and prevents unnecessary separation of children from their parents. Prevention and early intervention are key when working with low income and families at risk of homelessness.

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<sup>8</sup> *Valuing children, valuing parents*, ATD Fourth World (2004)