

NATIONAL REPORT ON HOMELESSNESS IN LATVIA

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When Latvia regained its independence and moved to a very liberal market economy of a little control, a stratum of well-to-do and even very rich people formed. But a large part of the population got into dearth and poverty. Thus a problem arose (practically non-existent in the Soviet times) – homelessness.

During the last period of the Soviet rule (70-ies - 80ies), the general welfare of the people was relatively low, but a high level of social justice was ensured. Wages and salaries provided the needed subsistence, there was no unemployment, fees for the flats, utility bills were rather symbolic, everyone was entitled to minimal medical care, there were opportunities to obtain free education, pensions ensured subsistence, too.

The ideology of the social rule did not recognize poverty as an existent social problem. There were surveys about the standard of living, which sometimes was lower for certain categories of the population, but such results were considered to be either a transitional or individual problem. The state guaranteed social assistance for groups of varied social risk – large families, one-parent (that is, incomplete) families and so on.

The awareness of the poverty problem in Latvia can be linked to the changes in Latvia in the nineties. It was during that period when many state enterprises were shut down, the unemployment began to form, the financial system was reformed, the banks went through their crisis, - the change in social policy resulted in the groups of population that were subject to the poverty risk due to economic, financial, psychological, the state of health and other factors. Besides, by the mid-90ies the use of the concept of poverty was avoided in Latvia. Mostly, poverty was being spoken of as an individual and not societal problem. It meant that the solution of the problem was upon the individual's responsibility, and it was not supposed to be a purposeful component of the state policy.

Poverty as a social problem in Latvia was referred to more intensively in the mid-90ies when the UNO Development Program and the World Bank put forth this problem on the state level. Many surveys assured that poverty in Latvia is wide-spread, and it is a multi-faceted phenomenon that, among all else, includes not only the *aspect of physical survival of low-income people*, but it is also directly and indirectly connected with the low-income families' (households') *bad health, problematic accessibility to health services, scarce opportunities to get good jobs* (or any job at all), the *worsening or loss of their residential space*, bad opportunities to obtain *education* and thus scarce opportunities to potential jobs on the market, worse opportunities to enjoy cultural events, the impossibility to access latest information about society, social policy, the home and external affairs.

Economists determine the boundary of income – subsistence level – and it is considered that people whose income is below the subsistence level are poor.

Among the poor there many people who cannot readjust their perception in accordance with the demands of the new times – they are inflexible, they do not adapt to the conditions of contemporary market, they are not competitive in the labour market due to their indeterminacy, lack of professional qualifications, alcoholism and other dependencies, they are not fluent in the official language, and there may be other reasons as well. Dependency on the State, the inability to take responsibility, the lack of initiative – all that cultivated by socialism – give rise to causal relationship when, due to unemployment, family problems or other reasons, a person cannot pay the rent being later

evicted and having become homeless. Thus a person loses its social status because he or she is excluded from social contacts. That leads, in many cases, to depression, alcoholism and other dependencies. The person gets optimised in the negative and gets used to the lifestyle of the homeless without trying to get out of such an environment and leading the way of life associated with the so-called *hobo*. The deviant behaviour of the person manifests more intensively. As a result, society feels endangered by such people and they try to dissociate themselves.

The following threats by homelessness to society can be mentioned:

- the spread of infection (phthisis, scabies, infection of intestines and so on);
- the growth of alcoholics and the increasing rate of people with other dependencies leading to the rise of criminality);
- the increase of fire incidents and arson;
- society is exposed to the negative emotional experience when watching those people lying in staircases, grubbing about public litterbins, begging for money in the streets, and other threats.

Thus, referring to the above-mentioned, poverty can be considered as a major risk for a person to be socially excluded from society and a contributing factor to homelessness.

Therefore, the below-mentioned reasons for poverty will be considered as causes for homelessness:

- unemployment;
- low salaries which are often belated, partly paid, or paid in kind;
- the state policy of residential space, including the denationalisation of buildings that is connected with expensive rentals and utility bills incommensurate with salaries;
- the monetary reform, the high inflation in the beginning of the nineties, the collapse of the Bank “Baltija” when many people lost their life savings;
- insufficient family allowances provided by the state;
- low prices for agricultural produce in the market, high prices for equipment and huge investments in production;
- alcoholism and other dependencies that are often either the cause or consequence of unemployment, that all may well be both the consequence and cause for the difficulties of the transitional period;
- the instilled reliance upon the government during the Soviet period that would solve the person’s problems;
- the incompetence and inability to make use of the opportunities offered by the State, and so on.

The major risk groups for poverty, including homelessness, can be the following ones:

- the families which have three or more children;
- one-parent families;
- families of the unemployed, particularly those close to the pension age;
- families where one or more members are seriously ill, disabled, or invalids, lonely persons and orphans;
- families living in rural areas;
- persons released from detention facilities;

- pensioners.

The risk for poverty, including homelessness, increases once the household is subject to more risk factors.

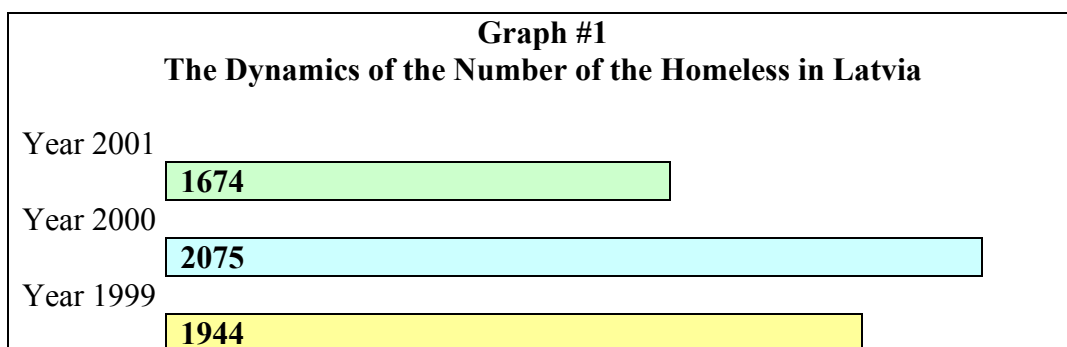
Thus, by summarising the above-mentioned, it is possible to conclude that during the twelve years of independence in Latvia, the stratification of society is crassly observed. Many inhabitants of Latvia have had the lack of knowledge and elasticity to adapt not only to new living conditions, but also to a different form of the State administration. Resocialisation leads to difficulties – the acquisition of new values, roles, skills to replace the old, insufficiently acquired, obsolete ones. Social terminology has included such concepts as **risk group** and **little protected social group** where the former means a social group that due to their welfare or health and living conditions is in a critical situation and can be dangerous to itself and other members of society, and the latter means – a cluster of people that cannot meet their basic needs without the support of society.

A large part of those people find it difficult to understand and acquiesce in the fact that they belong to a social group mentioned above because they have spent half of their lives in the society where equality in income and social provisions existed to a lesser or greater extent.

There was a general opinion under socialism that those who do not want to work were bound to homelessness. Loafers and idlers were prosecuted under the statutory procedure.

Now not everyone in Latvia who is homeless could be counted as idlers or persons with dependency problems. In the beginning of the nineties, the owners of denationalised houses and successful businessmen evicted large families, elderly people, and those in debt for accommodation on a massive scale, or there were houses, which had to be freed because of their convenient geographical position and hampered the development of business.

The Law of the Republic of Latvia in 1995 “About Social Assistance” defines “the homeless person – one that does not have a permanent residence”. So, the social problem – homelessness in our country has been recognized for nine years. The graph Number 1 shows the dynamics of the number of the homeless in Latvia in the past four years based on the statistical data provided by the Welfare Ministry of the Republic of Latvia – the Fund of Social Aid.



Year 1998

1375

It should be noted that the information has been obtained from centres of social services, asylums where the homeless have been registered and applied for assistance; namely, the graph does not show the number of those who have not applied to the institutions providing aid. Thus suspicion is confirmed that the given statistics does not illustrate the factual data because the number of the homeless tends to sharply grow. So far there is no database about the homeless and no organization that would be responsible for following and checking the number of the homeless and providing correct statistics.

The homeless person in Latvia has been defined according to the definition provided by the dictionary of the terminology of social work, that is, the homeless person is one who due to social conditions cannot obtain a permanent and adequate accommodation or retain a permanent living space. Such a situation arises due to different social barriers, the financial pressure that a person is not capable of overcoming. The homeless spend their nights in the streets, hostels, asylums - shelters, deserted houses, attics, basements, and friends' flats.

The homeless in Latvia are divided into 5 categories:

1. persons for whom homelessness is a way of life;
2. persons who have been evicted from their flats under the law due to indebtedness, or persons who have been cheated out of their flats by agents;
3. persons after custody;
4. orphans and children left without the parents' guardianship who receive the living space according to the law after leaving boarding schools, but due to the lack of social skills, unemployment etc. lose the living space soon;
5. persons who arrive in Riga from other local authorities and try to find jobs.

As it was mentioned before, the homeless are persons under the threat of social exclusion and the exclusion from society, and that contributes to homelessness as the exacerbation of the social problem in Latvia. It is beyond doubt that the marginalization process of the homeless, that is, the transition from one cultural environment to another, is psychologically grave. If a person has grown in other conditions and has learned the values, norms and traditions of this environment that were fully absorbed within him or her from birth, the person, when entering upon a totally alien social environment, either adapts to it or tries to escape it. The longer the person has spend the life in the environment of homelessness, the more difficult it is for this person to return to society (see the chart #1)

Chart#1 The Succession of Causal Relationship of Homelessness

Environmental Impact
(unemployment, state-housing policy etc. → poverty)



Changes in personality
(depression, alcoholism, dependence on social aid etc.)

A person loses his/her home – the homeless



The loss of one's social status



Deviance increases



Society feels threatened and rejects the person even more



Homelessness as a way of life

Social Aid to the Homeless

In Latvia local authorities within their possibilities grant social aid to the homeless.

Taking into consideration that a large proportion of the homeless are in need of not only housing facilities but also they have no income, the Social Aid Services of the Latvian Local Authorities provide the information on social aid and services, the homeless also receive the support and consultations of social workers.

Local authorities grant material aid with an aim to support materially people in need in order to ensure a minimum qualitative way of life until these people are able to get some income from a paid job or social insurance.

Kinds of allowances and benefits in Latvia:

1. Basic allowance whose amount variable and is determined by the Regulations No.95 by the Cabinet of the Ministers of the Republic of Latvia dated 25/02/2003.
2. Housing allowance
3. Care allowances
4. Family allowances
5. Transportation allowance

The above-mentioned social benefits bespeak the care for individuals, families without a permanent residence by providing them with the needed subsistence that is the major precondition to a positive solution of the situation. Of course, many homeless people do not make use of the benefits to improve their social situation but for other

purposes, for example, to buy alcohol. They may also get dependent on monthly benefits by not trying to change anything in their lives. Therefore there exist obligatory conditions to be met to get benefits – the person’s co-participation in being under responsibilities, namely, treatment for dependencies and addictions, participating in the events promoting employment.

Social Services for the Homeless

Taking into consideration that such concepts as “the homeless”, “homelessness” after regaining independence were introduced in Latvia only in 1995, rendering services to such people is not still appropriate, - so far the services have been rendered only by local authorities (and not even in all the regions of Latvia) setting up and financially supporting shelters which amount to 9 at all in Latvia. Asylums (or shelters) can house 555 homeless persons. The largest asylum is the Riga Shelter, which can house up to 200 homeless people after the last reorganization, and it has five wards or divisions:

- night home for males
- day and night home for males
- day and night home for families
- night home for females
- day and night home for females and mothers’ and their children
- the isolation ward

The Riga Shelter provides the homeless with a shelter of short duration (up to 6 months), services of hygiene, breakfast and dinner, consultations by a doctor and a social worker, mental care, free examination for tuberculosis and STDs.

The growth of the Boarding House attendees:

| | |
|-----------|-----|
| Year 2002 | 939 |
|-----------|-----|

| | |
|-----------|-----|
| Year 2001 | 636 |
|-----------|-----|

| | |
|-----------|-----|
| Year 2000 | 597 |
|-----------|-----|

The total occupancy of the Riga Shelter was:

| | |
|-----------|--------|
| Year 2002 | 50 166 |
| Year 2001 | 29 541 |
| Year 2000 | 27 334 |
| Year 1999 | 20 688 |
| Year 1998 | 17 869 |

As the number of the clients has soared, the Riga Shelter cannot render services to all the homeless who are in need.

A public organization “Societal Centre for Integration “Light on the Road” “ has been established as an adjunct whose main goals are:

- educating risk groups, providing information and integrating in society (the homeless, the substance-dependent, the invalids, the people of the pension age);
- to find out and survey the problems and needs of the risk groups;
- to promote the acquisition of social skills and social integration with goal-oriented projects.

A small support to the homeless is the so-called soup kitchens (for free), that have been established by churches of different confessions (Riga has 5 such ones), they may also receive second-hand clothes, shoes given away by churches of different confessions, the Salvation Army, the Red Cross. Unfortunately, the demand for these services is much higher than it is possible to supply. NGOs take no interest in the work with the homeless. It is also difficult to attract volunteers for this work and the help to solve such problems.

Although the legislation of the Republic of Latvia clearly defines the principles of social responsibility, still the social problems and needs of the homeless have not been fully identified. And that shows the drawbacks in tying up the resources and professional social aid for these persons. There is no one in Latvia responsible for the employment policy. Thus being aware of the situation of homelessness in Latvia, the suggestions to solve the issue of homelessness would be the following:

1. The social policy of the state has to be directed towards the improvement in the welfare of the people, and that would limit the spread of poverty and homelessness. The solution of these social problems should be linked to the policies of housing, employment, education, health care, and also to economy and demography etc.
2. To raise society's understanding about social risk groups, including the homeless in order to decrease the social isolation of these persons and to help them integrate in society.
3. To conduct surveys about the situation of homelessness in the country and to set up the database of the homeless in order to plan and provide aid and services for these persons.
4. To promote the development of professional social work in Latvia in order to render a timely aid and support to the homeless and to prevent the growth of the number of those people for whom homelessness is a way of life.
5. To involve public organizations, religious denominations, private persons, volunteers in rendering social services to the homeless.
6. By involving the support of international institutions, we will promote the international cooperation in the solution of the problems of poverty, unemployment, homelessness etc.
7. The conception of the long-term, balanced state housing policy should be developed and elaborated which includes:
 - the state support program for local authorities to renew the housing funds;
 - the state program providing the people with long-term credits of commensurate percentage to obtain the living space.
8. To improve the legal provisions of the housing policy by also determining the top level of the rent – the so-called “rent ceiling”.

9. To include the state's responsibility in the budget of the Republic of Latvia in order to promote the state's co-participation in providing the employment for the population, social aid and social services.
10. Legislation should provide tax relieves for newly established social enterprises aiming to employ the persons who practically cannot compete in the labour market, like those who are just about to enter the age of pension.
11. To promote the development of small and medium enterprises and thus creating new work places in the country.
12. To render timely help in solving the housing issue for the population, to ensure rational and efficient use of the housing funds and the renewal of housing funds (by establishing social homes, by renovating existing buildings, commencing the construction of new buildings, by purchasing local authorities' buildings and flats both in Riga and other municipalities). And that should be ensured through the allocation of finances as part of the Riga City fixed budget.
13. There is a need to launch a department by the Riga City Council that coordinates the solution of employment problems.
14. To increase the finance for social aid and services in the fixed budget of the Riga City.
15. To simplify the decision-making processes in the Riga City Council to provide the homeless with social aid more expediently and timely.
16. To develop preventive work with potential homeless people, so that they do not appear without any living place.
17. To set up and improve special programs for those persons who are in particularly unfavourable situations, for example – those with mental disorders, and thus to avoid the encounter with homelessness in the groups of these people.
18. To continue undertaken activities regarding the set-up of the unified information system and the improvement of cooperation among the institutions of local authorities in order to timely prevent the eviction risk of persons and individuals from their homes.
19. Social workers should motivate the homeless to get involved into the activities promoting employment and to give necessary information concerning the solution of employment problems.
20. To activate the co-participation of the inhabitants of municipalities and public organizations in decision-taking and thus increasing the availability of social aid and services in the Riga Municipality.
21. To inform regularly the inhabitants of Riga about the availability of social aid and services.
22. To establish an auditing department that would evaluate the operational efficiency and quality of the institutions rendering social services.
23. To develop interinstitutional cooperation with state and local authorities' institutions in order to improve social services with the homeless.
24. To develop social street work with an aim to find out the number of the homeless in Riga and to give these persons the information about the availability of social aid and services.
25. To make use of the project management methods in order to solve the problem of homelessness.

26. To promote the employment of the low-income able-bodied persons thus reducing their dependence on social benefits.

Taking into consideration the socio-economic situation in Latvia after the renewal of the state independence, the fundamental human rights are being implemented gradually as the implementation of these rights requires big finances. And due to these circumstances, the problem of homelessness has become topical; thereto the situation is very similar to all newly independent countries.

Being introduced to the work schedule of the FEANTSA, we see a very good example how to work both on national and international levels. That all could be adopted in our country. But concluding from the above-mentioned, it can all be commenced step by step in achieving the state's cooperation with local authorities and the NGO sectors in the area of homelessness.

We hope that by Latvia's entering the EU and fulfilling its obligations, successful housing and employment policies will be implemented as being crucial to decreasing the issue of homelessness in our country.

Information about nightshelters in Latvia

| No | City | Name of shelter | Number of inmates | Address | Indekss | Director | Mob. tel. | Tel. | e-mail |
|----|-----------------|--|-------------------|---|--------------------|-------------------|-----------|--------------------|------------------|
| 1 | Daugavpils | Daugavpil social shelter | 150 | Saura str. 23, Daugavpils | LV-5410 | Ludmila Sapala | | 5442696 | |
| 2 | Jelgava | Jelgava city nightshelter (for man and woman) | 30 | Pulkv. O. Kalpaka str.9, Jelgava | LV-3001 | Andrejs Lieknins | | 3082446 | |
| 3 | Jurmala | Jurmala city nightshelter (for man and woman) | 30 | Diku str.30, Jurmala | LV-2016 | Norberts Snarskis | | 722753 | |
| 4 | Liepaja | Liepaja city nightshelter | 77 | Flotes str. 7, Liepaja | LV-3401 | Ilze Ozola | | 3485270 | |
| 5 | Rezekne | Rezekne city nightshelter | 30 | Raina str. 9b, Rezekne | LV-4600 | Maija Ceseiko | | 4621721 | |
| 6 | Riga | Riga Shelter : Riga Shelter for man Riga Shelter for woman | 200 | Maskavas str. 208, Riga Barddzinu str. 2, Riga | LV-1003 LV-1003 | Sigita Lapina | 9416683 | 7249116 7204463 | slapina@tvnet.lv |
| 7 | Ventspils | Ventspil city nightshelter for teenegers | 10 | Petera str. 11, Ventspils | LV-3601 | Mara Sneidera | | 3626729 | |
| 8 | Kraslava region | Skeltova parish shelter for homeless | 4 | Alksniena, Skeltova parish, Kraslava region | LV-5653 | I. Maluhina | | 5641332 | |
| 9 | Tukums region | Tukums nightshelter | 24 | Darza str. 11/13, Tukums, Tukums region | LV-3101 | Ilars Talle | | 3181005 | |

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Centre of Social Integration „Light on the Way” Ms. Sigita Lapina ; Prusu str. 21-6; LV 1057; Tel.: 7249116; 9416683; e-mail: lotw@tvnet.lv

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