
Effective Homelessness Prevention ? Explaining Reductions in Homelessness in Germany and England

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- › **Abstract** *England and Germany are unusual amongst developed economies in reporting declining levels of homelessness. This paper argues that, notwithstanding weaknesses in the available data, there are good grounds for thinking that in recent years there has been a reduction in homelessness in both countries. While a range of factors has contributed to these downward trends (a slackening housing market in Germany; tightened local authority assessment procedures in England), there is evidence to support claims that targeted preventative interventions have had a substantial beneficial effect. Encouragingly, and perhaps surprisingly, it seems that positive outcomes can be achieved even in the face of unhelpful structural trends (rising poverty and unemployment in Germany; worsening housing affordability in England). The experiences of Germany and England suggest that successful prevention policies must be carefully targeted at the key 'triggers' for homelessness, and need to be underpinned by appropriate resources and an effective governance framework for their implementation. The paper also highlights the profound impact that inter-country conceptual and institutional differences have on the understanding of homelessness and its prevention, cautioning against the dangers of international comparisons which pay insufficient attention to national contexts.*
- › **Key Words** *causes of homelessness; eviction; homelessness prevention; homelessness statistics; relationship breakdown; rent arrears*

Introduction

A recent review of homelessness and social housing policy in 12 OECD countries found that only in Germany and England was there reported to be a downward trend in levels of homelessness (Fitzpatrick & Stephens, 2007)¹. In most other reviewed countries, homelessness was said to be either broadly stable (for example Australia and US) or on the rise (as in Sweden, Poland and Canada). Notwithstanding the inconsistent and often poor nature of the trend data available across these countries, England and Germany do appear to stand out as defying the general pattern of increasing levels of homelessness in Europe, and elsewhere in the developed world.

These apparent reductions in homelessness are claimed to be the result of effective preventative measures in both England (Alafat, 2006) and Germany (Busch-Geertsema & Ruhstrat, 2003). However, such claims to the establishment of effective homelessness prevention policies prompt a number of questions which will be pursued in this paper:

- Has homelessness really reduced in Germany and England?
- Are targeted prevention interventions the reason for any such reductions, or are there alternative explanations, such as broader housing market or other demographic trends?
- Insofar as targeted preventative policies have contributed to reductions in homelessness, what have been the most and least effective elements of these interventions?
- What can other countries seeking to reduce homelessness learn from the experiences of England and Germany, and what can they learn from each other?

Before we address these questions, we will first set out the conceptual framework for our argument. The paper will then consider how confident one can be about the claimed reductions in homelessness in England and Germany. The next step in the argument is to consider what is known about the causes of homelessness in both countries, in order to set the context for the specific preventative interventions that are discussed in the subsequent sections of the paper. We finish by reflecting on the lessons of this analysis for Germany, England and other countries across Europe.

¹ There are a small number of other countries, such as Finland and Ireland, that are not included in this review, but which have also reported a decline in homelessness levels in recent years.

Conceptual Framework

Clarity of definitions is especially important in cross-national comparisons, as similar terms can be used to refer to quite different concepts, hampering rigour in debate. The three key concepts relevant to this paper are: 'homelessness'; 'prevention'; and 'effectiveness'.

What do we mean by 'homelessness'?

The concept of homelessness as used in this paper is not restricted to 'rough sleeping' or 'rooflessness', but also encompasses, for example, people living in hostels and other temporary accommodation for homeless people, as well as those sharing temporarily with friends and relatives because they have no home of their own. With respect to the ETHOS-categories proposed by FEANTSA (see Edgar & Meert, 2005), all categories of 'rooflessness' and 'houselessness' are included in our definition, although the present paper does not consider those people in accommodation for immigrants. This relatively wide definition of homelessness is in keeping with research and policy traditions in both Germany and England (Fitzpatrick & Stephens, 2007), although there are important differences between the two countries with respect to where the line is drawn between 'homeless' and 'not homeless'.

In England, the 'statutory' definition of homelessness dominates. This is derived from legislation (Housing Act 1996, Part VII) which entitles certain groups of homeless people to be accommodated by local authorities:

"Broadly speaking, somebody is statutorily homeless if they do not have accommodation that they have a legal right to occupy, which is accessible and physically available to them (and their household) and which it would be reasonable for them to continue to live in. It would not be reasonable for someone to continue to live in their home, for example, if that was likely to lead to violence against them (or a member of their family)." (Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), Department for Education & Science (DfES), Department of Health (DoH), 2006, p.10)

This is a very wide definition of homelessness which does not, for example, require that the persons concerned have actually left their home. In fact, survey evidence indicates that approximately half of all statutorily homeless families in England are accepted as legally 'homeless' whilst still living in their last settled accommoda-

tion². It may also be worth noting that the majority of those accepted as statutorily homeless in England are actually newly forming or splitting households (for example, as a result of relationship breakdown between partners or young people being asked to leave the family home) rather than established households losing their existing tenancy or other accommodation. However, while the statutory definition of homelessness in England is a broad one, the 'main homelessness duty' of local authorities – to ensure that (suitable) temporary accommodation is made available for households until (suitable) settled housing can be secured for them – is owed only to those 'homeless' applicants who are also *eligible* for assistance³, in a *priority need group*⁴ and *not intentionally homeless*⁵. As is the common convention in England, the term 'statutory homelessness' is used in this paper to denote legally homeless households who also fulfil all of these additional statutory criteria.

This idea of still living in the dwelling that was once your home but nevertheless being defined as homeless is incompatible with the German understanding of the concept. In Germany, a person still living in his or her home, even in situations where there is violence between partners or other household members, might be categorised as 'threatened with homelessness'⁶, but not as 'homeless'. Only persons who are not currently living in accommodation which they have a legal right to occupy as tenant or owner-occupier (or have permission to occupy from the

² This reflects not only circumstances (such as domestic violence) where it is not reasonable to expect the person(s) concerned to continue to live in their accommodation, but also where the applicant no longer has a legal right or permission to occupy the current accommodation (typically this would be young people asked to leave the parental home).

³ Some persons from abroad, including asylum seekers, are ineligible for assistance under the homelessness legislation.

⁴ The priority need groups include households which contain a pregnant women, dependent children, 16 & 17 year olds (or 18-20 year olds previously in local authority care), and adults who are vulnerable because of age, disability, an institutional care background, fleeing violence, or some other particular reason. They also include any person who has lost his/her accommodation as a result of an emergency, such as flood or fire.

⁵ That is, they have not brought about their homelessness through their own actions or inaction.

⁶ In England too there is the concept of being 'threatened with homelessness'. Where households are likely to become statutorily homeless within 28 days, the local authority has a duty to take 'reasonable steps' to avoid the loss of the households' current accommodation. However, the distinction between actual homelessness and the threat of homelessness is, in practice, blurred; local authorities are encouraged to arrange alternative accommodation for households threatened with homelessness (i.e. treat them as though they are owed the main homelessness duty) as soon as it becomes clear that it is not possible to avert the loss of their current home (DCLG, DfES & DoH, 2006).

householder) are defined as homeless. Persons threatened with homelessness are (administratively) clearly separated from those who have become homeless through eviction or by leaving their last settled home⁷.

For legal purposes, the definition of homelessness in Germany is very narrow. There is a strict duty for local authorities – under the police laws of the regional states – to provide temporary (not permanent) accommodation for those persons who would otherwise be *roofless*. However, municipal preventative services tend to concentrate on households *threatened with eviction* because of rent arrears (discussed in detail below).

What do we mean by 'prevention' ?

A range of classifications of homelessness prevention has been suggested (see, for example, Shinn, 2004 ; Pawson & Davidson, 2008). The classification employed in this paper draws on conceptualisations from the fields of medicine and criminology (see also Hansbauer, 1998 ; Heinz, 1998), and distinguishes between :

- *Primary prevention* measures – activities that reduce the risk of homelessness among the general population or large parts of the population. It is at this level of prevention that general housing policy (supply, access and affordability), and the overall 'welfare settlement' (such as the availability of income benefits, housing benefits, employment protection and so on), are most relevant.
- *Secondary prevention* – interventions focused on people at high potential risk of homelessness because of their characteristics (for example, those with an institutional care background), or in crisis situations which are likely to lead to homelessness in the near future (such as eviction or relationship breakdown).
- *Tertiary prevention* – measures targeted at people who have already been affected by homelessness. From the analogy with medicine and criminology, it would make sense to subsume here 'harm reduction' measures such as rapid re-housing, so that homelessness is ended as quickly as possible. However, in England and Germany such measures would be described as 'resettlement' and not prevention. The preventative emphasis at this level is more often focused on minimising 'repeat homelessness', that is, avoiding the occurrence of entirely new homelessness episodes.

⁷ There is just one exception. Households which have received an eviction order can be re-assigned into their former home by the municipality as a measure to prevent their rooflessness. In this case they have lost their legal status as tenants and are categorised as homeless households in temporary accommodation. In some cities this measure is used frequently, but in others (the majority) it is never used because it can only be employed with the consent of the landlord concerned or as a last resort if there is absolutely no other temporary accommodation available.

Ongoing debates regarding the relationship between welfare regimes and homelessness could be construed as focusing on the primary level of prevention, examining as they do the relationship between macro structures such as labour market regulation and social security arrangements with overall levels of homelessness (Stephens & Fitzpatrick, 2007). We are also mindful of Shinn's (2004) point that individual-level preventative interventions cannot substitute for policy measures to ensure an adequate supply of affordable housing. However, in this paper we will concentrate mainly on secondary and, to a lesser extent, tertiary levels of prevention, in line with the types of measures usually labelled as 'homelessness prevention interventions' in both England (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM), 2003) and Germany (Ministerium für Arbeit, Soziales und Stadtentwicklung, Kultur und Sport des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen (MASSKS), Kommunale Gemeinschaftsstelle für Verwaltungsvereinfachung (KGSt) & Landesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Öffentlichen und Freien Wohlfahrtspflege in Nordrhein-Westfalen (LAG Ö/F), 1999; Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2005).

What is effectiveness ?

At one level, the answer to this question may seem obvious. Effective measures are those which avert episodes of homelessness that would otherwise have occurred. However, such a definition immediately confronts us with a profound methodological challenge:

“By definition, assessing the effectiveness of action to prevent a hypothetical outcome is difficult. There is always a degree of uncertainty about the counterfactual scenario – what would have happened in the absence of the intervention ?” (Pawson *et al.*, 2007, p.159)

Some evaluations, especially those involving cost benefit analyses, assume that up to 100 per cent of households in receipt of preventative support would otherwise have become homeless (see Shinn *et al.*, 2001), but the fact is that we often do not know whether a household would have managed to avoid homelessness, either through their own actions or with informal help from friends or family (see, for example, Pawson *et al.*, 2007).

Another key conceptual challenge relates to the objectives set for preventative action on homelessness. Is the sole criterion for success based on the target groups' success in avoiding the loss of their accommodation, or their managing to move to other accommodation without experiencing homelessness? Or are such policies only to be considered effective if they achieve (or preserve) a person's wider 'social integration'? While we have some sympathy with this broader view of the objectives of homelessness policy, it is important to maintain a clear focus on a measurable set of objectives in assessing the effectiveness of a policy, especially

when attempting cross-national comparisons. This paper therefore focuses on housing outcomes only. We also need to be realistic here. At least for some risk groups, only 'relative integration' may be achieved, so they will still be poor and unemployed but not homeless, after preventative interventions (Tosi, 2002; Busch-Geertsema, 2005). As Shinn and Baumhohl (1998) put it, in the context of homelessness prevention in the United States:

“Practitioners and policy makers should keep their goals clearly in mind. More specifically, they should remember that preventing homelessness is not identical with ending poverty, curing mental illness, promoting economic self-sufficiency, or making needy people healthy, wealthy and wise. These are worthy goals, to be sure, but we believe that when attached to the objective of preventing homelessness or rehousing homeless people, these diffuse goals take on lives of their own and raise troubling questions of equity in the distribution of resources available to poor people.” (p.1)

That said, the effectiveness of homelessness prevention also depends on its sustainability (such as the minimising of repeat homelessness). Some of these wider social integration objectives – in particular the avoidance of social isolation, the management of substance dependencies, and the securing of an adequate income – may be critical here and thus legitimately viewed as central to homelessness prevention.

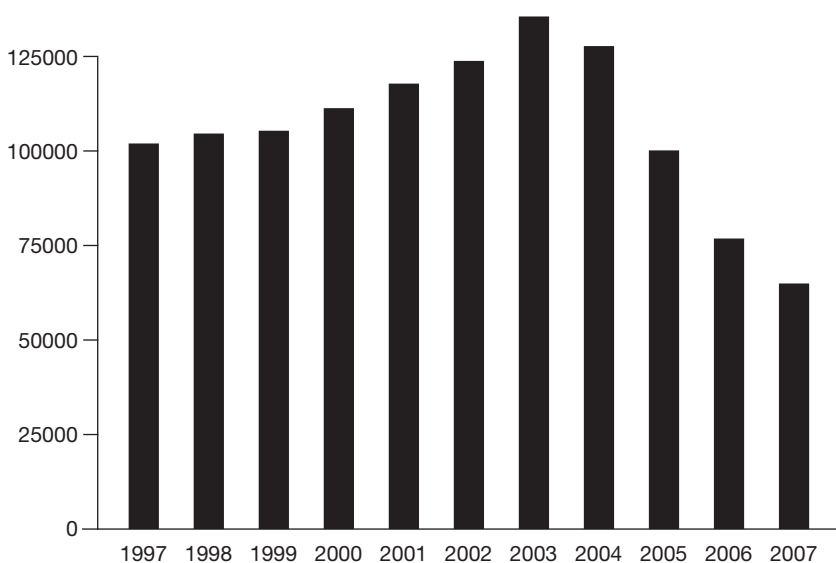
Has Homelessness Really Declined in England and Germany?

In England, official 'snapshot' street counts indicate a two thirds reduction in the scale of rough sleeping since 1998 (Randall & Brown, 2002). As with all street counts, the actual estimates provided cannot be assumed to be comprehensive, but as the counts have been conducted on a reasonably consistent basis, it seems likely that the downward trend (in visible rough sleeping at least) is broadly reliable. That said, there are indications in London that the numbers on the streets may be beginning to rise again (Broadway, 2007), and there is mounting criticism of particular aspects of the methodology used in England (for instance the 'rounding down' to zero of any local authority street counts of less than ten (Shapps, 2007)).

The other, and main source of data on homelessness in England, is the 'official' homelessness statistics which record households 'accepted' by local authorities as being owed the main homelessness duty (as 'statutorily homeless'). Therefore these figures exclude all homeless households which do not present to local authorities or which are not accepted as fulfilling all of the statutory criteria. The number of households accepted as homeless rose steeply in England in the early 2000s, but there has been a subsequent sharp reduction, amounting to a 52% drop

in homelessness acceptances in just four years (see Figure 1). It should be noted that these are annual 'inflow' figures (as they include all those accepted over the course of a year), in contrast to the rough sleeper counts, and the German statistics given below, which are 'stock' figures relating to those homeless on a given night. There are stock figures available for the number of statutorily homeless households in temporary accommodation in England at the end of each quarter; these too have declined in recent years, but more slowly than acceptances.

Figure 1: Changes in statutory homelessness acceptances in England 1997-2007



Source: P1E statistics

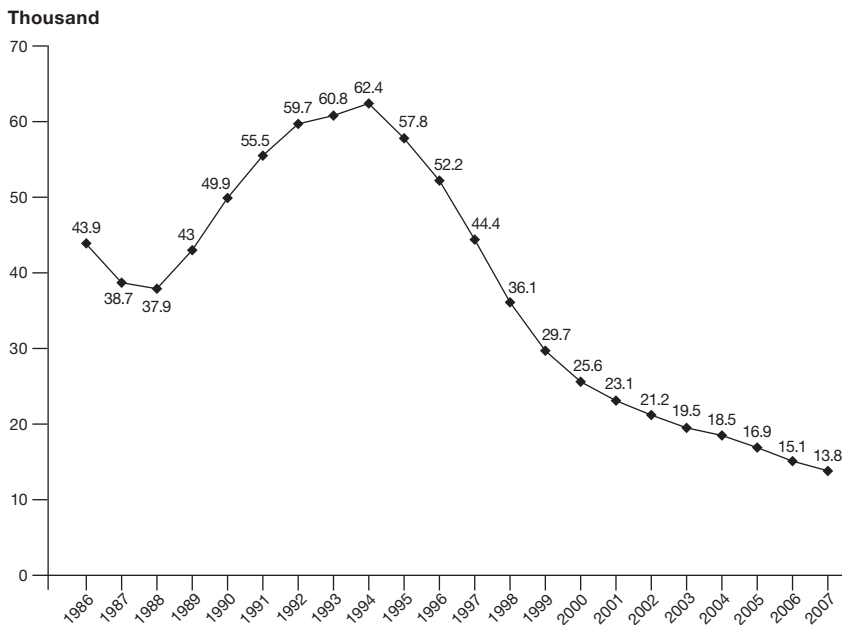
There is considerable controversy over whether the dramatic post-2003 reductions in statutory homelessness depicted in Figure 1 are attributable to the 'prevention of homelessness' or to the 'prevention of homelessness acceptances' (Rashleigh, 2005; Pawson & Davidson, 2007). Critical here is the 'housing options' approach, strongly promoted by Central Government (DCLG, 2006), under which all households approaching a local authority for assistance with housing are given a formal interview offering advice on their housing options, which may include services such as family mediation or landlord liaison which are designed to prevent the need to make a homelessness application. There are concerns that, in some areas, these housing options interviews can represent a barrier to making an official homelessness application (Shelter, 2007), with certain local authorities (unlawfully) requiring

potential homeless applicants to exhaust all potential preventative avenues before any formal consideration of their statutory homelessness status takes place (Pawson, 2007). However, while there can be little doubt that increased 'gate-keeping' on the part of local authorities has contributed to the shrinkage in statutory homelessness in recent years, it seems highly unlikely that the entire recorded reduction can be accounted for in this way. Thus it appears that there has been at least some genuine reduction, albeit that the precise scale of that reduction is open to debate (Pawson *et al.*, 2007).

Unfortunately, there is no reliable trend data available at national level on other homeless groups in England, for example single homeless people living in hostels or 'sofa-surfing' around the houses of friends and relatives. However, data on 'non-statutory' homeless young people who access social housing and/or support services, for example, does not suggest a contraction in these other forms of homelessness in recent years (Quilgars *et al.*, 2008).

In Germany, there is no national system of homelessness data collection. However, the National Coalition of Service Providers for the Homeless (*BAGW*) produces broad national estimates which indicate a drop from 590,000 people experiencing homelessness in 1996/1997, to only 345,000 in 2006 (see *BAGW*, 2007). More reliable data is available from the regional state of North-Rhine Westphalia (NRW). This is Germany's largest regional state, home to more than eighteen million people (22% of the entire German population). In NRW all municipalities are obliged to report a 'stock' figure every year for the number of homeless persons temporarily accommodated under the police laws. This number rose in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but since 1995 there has been a steady decline, with the number of homeless persons accommodated under the police laws reaching a historic low in June 2007 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Homeless persons who are temporarily accommodated under the police law (Ordnungsbehördengesetz) in North Rhine-Westphalia, as at 30 June each year



Source: Landesamt für Datenverarbeitung und Statistik Nordrhein-Westfalen (LDS)

There has also been a sharp reduction in the proportion of homeless families amongst households in municipal temporary accommodation – from 65% in June 1994 to 31% in June 2007 (LDS, various years). Indeed, in some cities throughout Germany it is now claimed that there are no homeless families at all (Busch-Geertsema & Ruhstrat, 2003). This is linked to the closure of temporary accommodation for homeless families, such that municipalities have to find immediate long-term solutions, even in acute crisis situations. However, it is important to note that provision for victims of domestic violence (refuges for women and their children) exist in those cities but, unlike in England, they are not classified by municipalities as temporary accommodation for homeless persons. There remain hostels and other institutions for single homeless people throughout Germany.

In 2006 it was calculated that the total estimate of homeless persons derived from NRW municipalities would increase by approximately 43% if the clients of NGO services for single homeless persons (who are excluded from the municipal statistics) were taken into account (MGFFI, 2007). However, it should be emphasised that

there is no indication that the sharp drop in the number of homeless persons in municipal temporary accommodation over the past decade has been compensated for by an increase in the number of clients of NGO services.

Drawing this section to a close, it is clear that trend data in Germany and England are measuring somewhat different things in evidencing a reduction in homelessness in recent years, which affects how one can draw comparisons between them. There are also weaknesses in both sets of data. However, it seems implausible to suggest that there has been *no* decline in homelessness in these two Western European countries in recent years. The next section of this paper begins the (challenging) task of reflecting on the explanation for these apparent reductions in homelessness by considering the key causes of homelessness in both countries.

The Key Causes of Homelessness in England and Germany

In England, there now seems to be a consensus that structural factors, especially a shortage of affordable housing, are the *underlying drivers* of the overall scale of homelessness (albeit that personal problems, such as mental ill-health or substance misuse, increase an individual's vulnerability to homelessness (Pleace, 2000)). Certainly, at least until the recent dramatic drop in levels of homelessness acceptances, statutory homelessness figures tended to move in parallel with affordability trends in the home-ownership sector (Jones, 2006; Pawson, 2007). This seems to be linked to the fact that not only does worsening affordability make house purchase more difficult for low income households, but there are also 'second-order' effects which reduce the number of new social lettings available to those at risk of homelessness, because fewer social tenants are able to exit to home ownership (Pawson, 2007).

In Germany too, the housing market is seen as crucial to the overall scale of homelessness. The reduction in recorded homelessness reported above occurred in parallel with rising levels of poverty and unemployment, indicating that a slackening (rental) housing market in most regions⁸, as well as targeted municipal efforts to prevent homelessness (see below), have been the key factors underpinning this positive trend. Access to housing (rather than housing supply or affordability *per se*) is now viewed as the key structural issue associated with homelessness in Germany; with the scope for municipalities to influence allocations of social housing in the direction of 'need' substantially reduced in recent years as this sector contracts (Busch-Geertsema, 2004; Kirchner, 2007).

⁸ Germany has the lowest proportion of owner-occupied dwellings in the EU at 45% of the total housing stock, (Federcasa, 2006, Table 3.5). Thus, owner occupation is very rarely a housing option for households with low incomes.

With regard to the *immediate 'triggers'* for homelessness, data from a nationally representative survey of statutorily homeless families in England indicated that by far the most important factor (affecting 38% of all homeless families) was relationship breakdown (Pleace *et al.*, 2008). Relationships had most commonly broken down between partners (with around half of these relationship breakdowns involving violence), or between parents and their (adult) children. The other major reason given by families applying as homeless was eviction or threatened eviction (accounting for 26% of all homeless families). This was usually reported as arising from the termination of a fixed-term tenancy, rather than being consequent on rent arrears or other 'behavioural' issues (but see discussion below). Triggers for homelessness which related to individual 'personal' problems, such as drug, alcohol or mental health problems, were reported by only a very small proportion of families (2% in total). Young people accepted as statutorily homeless 16 & 17 year-olds were also surveyed by Pleace *et al.* (2008) and for this group, relationship breakdown with parents or step-parents was the overwhelming trigger for applying as homeless (affecting 70% of these young people).

With respect to 'non-statutory' homeless people in England, the available (mainly qualitative) research evidence again suggests that relationship breakdown is the predominant factor (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2000). Moreover, the last major survey of single homeless people in England (conducted in 1991) found that family/relationship difficulties was the most common reason given by respondents for leaving their last settled home (Anderson *et al.*, 1993).

The information available in Germany about the most important triggers for homelessness is divided between two quite distinct sources, reflecting the deep-rooted division of tasks between municipalities and NGOs in the field of homelessness.

First, there is data from municipalities on the reasons for homelessness amongst households provided with temporary accommodation under the police laws. Most municipalities report that eviction because of rent arrears is overwhelmingly the most important reason why families and single people have to be provided with temporary accommodation. Moreover, a survey of 3,630 households in contact with forty-three municipal homelessness prevention services across Germany indicated that eviction because of rent arrears was the main trigger for being imminently faced with homelessness in 86% of cases (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2005)⁹; the second most important reason, separation from a partner, accounted for only 7%

⁹ Around half (52%) of the households covered by the prevention survey were single men or women without children; 10 per cent were childless couples; 18% were single parents (mainly mothers); and 20% were two-parent families. Therefore, even among prevention cases, families are in a minority. Compared with the general population, single men and single mothers were over-represented.

of all households. It should be acknowledged, however, that as municipal prevention services explicitly focus on support for people in rent arrears, this is likely to affect the (self-) selection of people seeking help from these services. Prevention services can also arrange further support if households need it (for example, with addiction, mental health problems or other social difficulties, see further below). According to the same survey, about 40% of all households threatened with homelessness were judged by workers within these prevention services to be in need of such additional support.

The second source of data is the electronic 'client register' systems of NGO service providers for single homeless people (see Edgar *et al.*, 2007). The robustness of this data is affected by the fact that only a minority of relevant NGOs participate in the annual national collation exercise. However, it is the only dataset on homelessness available at a national level. The most recent data available are from 2003 (Schröder, 2005). With respect to the 'causes' of homelessness, there are two sets of variables. First there is a variable on 'reason for loss of last home', which summarises the formal (legal) circumstances under which the home was lost. This indicates that only half of NGO clients left their last settled home after a *notice to quit* served by the landlord (21%) or an eviction (29%); about half of these evictions were based on rent arrears. The other half left their last home without any action by the landlord. We don't know what proportion of *notices to quit* were based on rent arrears, nor how many more single people would be homeless because of rent arrears if municipal prevention services had not intervened. Nevertheless this data does suggest that, for single homeless people helped by NGOs, rent arrears are not the most important trigger for loss of settled accommodation.

This is confirmed by the variable on the 'trigger for homelessness' (Schröder, 2005). The most important triggers are 'separation/divorce' (affecting 21% of all clients) and 'moving city' (also 21%). In 16% of cases a 'high rent level' was given as trigger for homelessness, in 12% 'leaving parent's home', while in 10% 'commencement of prison sentence' was the reason. All other triggers (loss of job, violence from partner, violence from other person, hospital stay, bereavement, *force majeure*, household expansion) accounted for less than 5% each.

At first sight, relationship breakdown seems to play a more important role in the generation of homelessness in England, and rent arrears/eviction seems to be more important in Germany (notwithstanding the data on NGO clients from the latter); but to some extent the differences might be more apparent than real. The Housing Benefit system in England – whereby up to 100% of the rent of low income households is paid directly to landlords by the state – probably does mean that homelessness arising from rent arrears is somewhat less common than it is in other countries,

including Germany¹⁰. However, it must also be borne in mind that households evicted because of rent arrears in England would normally be considered 'intentionally homeless', and thus would be excluded from the statutory statistics. It is also probable that some evictions in England that are prompted by rent arrears are 'disguised' as terminations of fixed-term tenancies because this is a more straightforward course of action from the landlord's perspective. In Germany, time-limited tenancies are only possible in very special cases, such as the accommodation being needed by the owner after a defined period or if reconstruction work is planned after such a period. The general position is that of indefinite tenancy contracts with quite a high degree of security of tenure.

Likewise, relationship breakdown and domestic violence might be more prominent as a reason for homelessness in Germany than they first appear, because in most (not all) municipalities, provision for victims of domestic violence (such as women's advice centres and women's refuges) are separated from services for homeless people and are therefore not included in homelessness statistics. Also relevant here is that *prospective* household formation or dissolution (where young people are asked to leave the family home or couples are breaking up) may be considered to constitute statutory homelessness in England, whereas in Germany households experiencing such relationship breakdown would not be considered homeless until they had actually left their accommodation. Thus, in both countries, statistics on the causes of homelessness are shaped to a great extent by their respective institutional and legal frameworks, making direct comparisons between them very difficult.

The Development of Homelessness Prevention Measures in England and Germany

Even though local authorities in England have a longstanding legislative duty to take 'reasonable steps' to prevent those 'threatened with homelessness' from losing their current accommodation, the statutory system in England has traditionally been focused more on resolving homelessness than on preventing it. However, in response to the rapidly rising levels of statutory homelessness discussed above, and especially the acute pressures experienced within London, Central Government significantly increased the emphasis placed on preventative approaches from 2002 onwards. The Homeless Act (2002) placed a statutory duty on local authorities to produce a strategy

¹⁰ However, this might start to change in England with the national roll-out (across the UK) of a fixed 'Local Housing Allowance' for private rented tenants, normally paid to the tenants rather than to the landlords. Things seem to be moving in the opposite direction in Germany in that it is now easier, with respect to former recipients of *Arbeitslosenhilfe* (a wage-related benefit for the long-term unemployed abolished since 2005), to transfer the housing-related part of their benefits to landlords directly.

for preventing and alleviating homelessness in their areas, and substantial Central Government funding was provided to support local preventative activities. Receipt of this funding was dependent on local authorities committing to goals such as lowering their rates of repeat homelessness or reducing levels of homelessness against main causes. There is also an over-arching national target to halve the number of statutorily homeless households in temporary accommodation, from the December 2004 level of just over 100,000, by the year 2010 (ODPM, 2005).

Research has indicated that this new emphasis on homelessness prevention was widely welcomed by local authorities, partly because of their own concerns about the growing number of statutorily homeless households in temporary accommodation, and partly because of anxieties that lettings of secure social tenancies to statutorily homeless households were crowding out lettings to other households in housing need (Pawson, 2007). An evaluation of homelessness prevention in England found that the most common preventative measures taken by local authorities and their partner agencies were as follows (Pawson *et al.*, 2007):

- ‘Enhanced’ housing advice – aimed at helping households to gain access to, or to retain private or social rented tenancies. Housing advice work often includes liaison with private landlords, and may also have an ‘outreach’ dimension targeted at vulnerable groups.
- Rent deposit and related schemes – to facilitate access to private rented tenancies.
- Family mediation – this tends to focus on preventing youth homelessness, with attempts made to reconcile parents and young people in order to prevent eviction from the parental home, or to facilitate young people’s access to family support to assist them with independent living.
- Domestic violence victim support – this includes a range of interventions such as ‘sanctuary schemes’ (security measures to enable victims to remain in their own homes after exclusion of the violent partner), supporting planned moves, crisis intervention services and resettlement support.
- Tenancy sustainment – support to help vulnerable tenants to retain their tenancies. These services are often provided on a ‘floating’ basis to people living in mainstream accommodation, but are very diverse with respect to the intensity and duration of support they offer, and the client groups targeted. Typically, help is provided with claiming benefits, budgeting, furnishing accommodation, accessing health and other services in addition to seeking ‘purposeful activity’.

These services are funded from various sources, but the establishment of the national *Supporting People* funding stream in 2003 allowed for a major expansion in tenancy sustainment services¹¹.

It is clear that the recent expansion in homelessness prevention in England is focused mainly on those 'priority need' groups who could potentially be accepted as owed the main homelessness duty (Pawson, 2007). Most of these prevention activities could be characterised as secondary prevention aimed at addressing the key crisis points which may trigger statutory homelessness, such as relationship breakdown with parents, violent relationship breakdown with partners and the end of fixed term tenancies (see Alafat, 2006)¹². In fact, given the wide statutory definition of homelessness outlined earlier, in many instances households subject to such interventions will already be legally homeless, so these activities are not, strictly speaking, 'preventative'; they may even be in conflict with the local authorities' legal duties unless the household voluntarily withdraws (or desists from) making a formal homelessness application (Pawson, 2007). Nonetheless, as noted above, the 'housing options' process promoted by Central Government formalises the offer of these 'preventative' interventions to potential homeless applicants and others approaching local authorities for assistance. Attention has also been paid to tertiary homelessness prevention, with tenancy sustainment services typically focused on assisting newly re-housed households to avoid repeat homelessness, albeit that such services should, in principle, target help on all those defined as at high risk of homelessness, regardless of whether they have in fact been homeless before.

In Germany, an increased emphasis on homelessness prevention started earlier than in England. As far back as 1987, the German Standing Committee of Municipalities (*Deutscher Städtetag (DST)*) published a report recommending improvements to prevention services and arguing that responsibility for addressing and preventing homelessness was, at that time, too diffuse and fragmented within local administrations. In traditional municipalities, the department of public order was responsible for temporary accommodation; the housing department was responsible for re-housing measures; the social department assumed responsibility for rent arrears; and so on. DST (1987) recommended that responsibilities and resources (for prevention, temporary accommodation, administration of shelters etc., and for the reintegration of homeless people into permanent tenancies) should be concentrated in one central department (*Zentrale Fachstelle*) and that prevention

¹¹ It is likely that this ring-fenced funding stream will in future be absorbed into local authorities' mainstream budgets.

¹² Moreover, alongside all of these crisis-focused preventative interventions, there has been an increased emphasis on pro-active rent arrears management by social landlords in recent years, with the specific aim of reducing rent arrears-based evictions (see Pawson et al, 2005).

should be the top priority of this department. This meant that if preventative efforts failed, the same staff had to solve the difficult task of finding temporary accommodation, providing a powerful incentive to effective preventative interventions.

The push towards homelessness prevention was thus closely linked to more effective administrative structures, and to promoting earlier, more pro-active preventative interventions. Financial arguments also played an important role. A calculation was published for the City of Cologne in 1987 which showed that preventing homelessness was seven times cheaper than placing the same households in temporary accommodation (see DST, 1987). In 1996, following research into municipal prevention practices (Busch-Geertsema & Ruhstrat, 1994), Social Code provisions on the assumption of rent arrears were converted from powers into duties in cases where households were at imminent risk of becoming homeless¹³. A revised handbook on making administrative prevention efforts more effective was published in 1999 (MASSKS, KGSt & LAG Ö/F, 1999), while programmes to reorganise and improve preventative services were developed in many municipalities all over Germany (Busch-Geertsema & Ruhstrat, 2003).

Most municipalities now run their own prevention services. Before paying rent arrears out of municipal funds (often provided as a loan which has to be repaid), attempts are made to establish an arrangement for the tenant to pay back the arrears in instalments directly to the landlord. As noted above, additional support can be provided where appropriate, but mostly clients will be referred to other services in such cases. Social 'support in housing' for formerly homeless people and for those who have faced a housing crisis at some stage has also been extended in recent years (see Busch-Geertsema & Evers, 2004). Some – but not all – municipal prevention services can influence the allocation of housing to households in urgent need of an alternative to their existing tenancy.

While municipal prevention services can provide support for households who are threatened with homelessness for reasons other than eviction, people affected by relationship breakdown and those leaving institutions, for example, are more likely to contact other social services (such as advice centres for women, youth welfare services or the housing department responsible for allocating social housing¹⁴). More often again, such groups will initially seek informal help from friends and relatives, coming into contact with 'official' support only some time after they have lost their

¹³ Section 22.5 of SGB II and Section 34 of SGB XII. The latter contains the 'homelessness sections', Sections 67 and 68, which regulate support for people in 'special social difficulties'.

¹⁴ Fewer and fewer municipalities have such a department. In many localities social landlords, while obliged to accept only tenants whose incomes are below a certain ceiling, are entirely free to decide whom amongst these low-income households they will select as their tenants (see Busch-Geertsema, 2001, 2004).

homes (Ruhstrat *et al.*, 1991). Often at this point, if they are single, they will contact NGO advice centres for single homeless people and in many cases will be provided with temporary accommodation or a place in a hostel by these organisations.

Two interventions identified as important in the English context – family mediation and support for victims of domestic violence – are not found in the direct domain of homelessness prevention services in Germany. Both services exist, but are accommodated within other pillars of the system of social support in Germany. Family mediation in Germany is mainly the responsibility of youth welfare agencies. The prevention of homelessness is but one part of their tasks, and often a minor one, which focuses on helping the families concerned to improve their capacities for solving family conflicts, stabilising their economic situations and so on. As noted earlier, services for victims of domestic violence are also viewed as a quite separate part of the support system. In recent years, these services have increasingly concentrated on developing provisions to exclude violent household members so that victims do not have to leave their homes.

Assessing the Contribution of Targeted Preventative Interventions in Reducing Homelessness in England and Germany

Encouragingly, there is evidence in both countries that targeted preventative interventions have made a significant contribution to reductions in homelessness.

In Germany, part of the decrease in homelessness is clearly caused by the relaxation of housing markets in most regions, which is in turn related to a recent decline in inward migration into Germany, especially from repatriates. Repatriation greatly increased the demand for housing in Germany in the late 1980s and early 1990s; in the peak years, almost 400,000 repatriates of German origin entered Germany from former Soviet Union regions carrying German passports and therefore priority rights in the allocation of social housing. By 2005, the annual number of repatriates coming to Germany had decreased to less than 36,000 and is expected to decline further. As most of these repatriates required family dwellings, the drop in demand from this group has led to a particular easing in the pressure on family housing. The steady increase of one-person households in the general population, together with a housing policy which has focused on the production of family homes, has further contributed to the disproportionate ‘slackening’ in the market for larger dwellings as compared with that for small, low cost apartments. The especially sharp drop in family homelessness may then, in part, be attributable to these broader housing market trends.

Creditable successes directly attributable to specific prevention interventions can also be identified, being associated with the targeted efforts of municipalities to reduce their facilities for temporary accommodation and to re-house homeless households. Given the high number of households in debt and with rent arrears, as well as the fact that large landlords (including social landlords) are more and more reluctant to accept new tenants with a history of debts, these efforts could not have been effective without a great improvement in preventative services. Moreover, both the small proportion of single homeless clients of NGO services who have become homeless because of rent arrears, and the declining proportion of homeless families amongst homeless households in recent years, serve to support the effectiveness of municipal prevention services focused on rent arrears. On the other hand, there clearly is scope for further improvements in preventative interventions with respect to the main triggers for homelessness reported for single people helped by NGOs, which include: separation and divorce; leaving the parental home; domestic violence; and commencing a prison sentence (including the preparation for release after serving a prison sentence)¹⁵.

A large national survey in 2003/2004 showed that households threatened with homelessness more than once during a five year period accounted for around a third (37%) of all registered prevention cases, while households which had faced a housing crisis more than twice accounted for only around one in ten cases (11%) (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2005). This relatively low level of 'repeat' prevention cases suggests that initial preventative interventions are usually successful and that households which run into trouble repeatedly constitute a small minority. There was evidence in the repeat cases that the initial support offered had been insufficient and that the need for more than a short-term crisis intervention had been ignored.

Some evidence is also available in Germany with respect to the potential savings associated with preventative interventions if they reduce the need for temporary accommodation. The relatively high cost of providing temporary accommodation was confirmed by an exercise conducted for the *Independent Commission on Housing in Germany* (Busch-Geertsema & Ruhstrat, 1994). However, this exercise also indicated that it was often difficult for municipalities to calculate the total costs for building, operating and supervising temporary accommodation or for providing support for homeless people. Also, as with so much cost-effectiveness analysis, this work faced the counterfactual problem that the proportion of households which, in the absence of preventative interventions, would have become homeless,

¹⁵ In Germany there are specialised services for people being released from prison and for ex-prisoners in almost all large cities, most of them run by NGOs and paid for by the municipality. Sometimes they are part of the services for homeless people but often they operate separately from them.

or for how long, was not clear. Nevertheless, qualitative studies have indicated that a pro-active approach, including home visits to households with rent arrears, is effective (see, for example, the intensive evaluation of client records of a prevention service in Berlin by Gerull, 2003).

The research team who carried out the key empirical evaluation in England, while acknowledging the probable contribution of increased gate-keeping by local authorities, have argued that it is “highly likely” that a “substantial part” of the dramatic fall in homelessness acceptances since 2003 is “attributable to homelessness prevention activities” (Pawson *et al.*, 2007, p.8). Their conclusion is linked to the observation that the sharp reduction in statutory homelessness in England has taken place in the context of a continued deterioration in housing affordability post 2003 (notwithstanding the very recent fall in house prices associated with the ‘credit crunch’). They also note that there are no other obvious structural explanations for the collapse in homelessness acceptances, such as dramatic changes in unemployment rates.

Another positive finding by Pawson *et al.* (2007), echoing similar findings in Germany, was that homelessness prevention interventions could result in reduced public expenditure, particularly in the case of preventative interventions aimed at households likely to be owed the main homelessness duty:

“Most of the homelessness prevention initiatives that could be assessed appeared to be cost-effective, in that savings in the costs of temporary accommodation and administration associated with homelessness exceeded the operating costs of services. Especially in areas such as Greater London, the unit costs associated with a homelessness acceptance far outweigh unit homelessness prevention costs.” (p.8)

However, they were critical of the lack of direct monitoring of the outcomes of preventative interventions. For example, although family mediation was often found to be effective in reconciling relationships for young adults facing eviction by parents, few local authorities monitored whether these mediation-assisted reconciliations were sustained. Likewise, while the number of households rehoused into private tenancies was often substantial, there was little data available on the duration of these tenancies. There was also little direct evidence to demonstrate the service effectiveness of tenancy sustainment provision – with the counterfactual problem (*would recipients actually have become homeless in the absence of this help?*) particularly acute with respect to assessing the impact of these services.

Possibly in response to some of these concerns, Government introduced an official indicator of ‘effective homelessness prevention activity’. This measure counts “households who considered themselves as homeless, who approached the local

authority's housing advice service(s) and for whom housing advice casework intervention resolved their situation" (ODPM, 2005). Guidance has emphasised that 'housing advice' is to be broadly defined for this purpose to include all homelessness prevention interventions. While there are significant limitations in this official indicator (Pawson & Davidson, 2007), it does at least include all people who view themselves as homeless, rather than being limited to the statutorily homeless. It also represents an attempt to measure the effectiveness of homelessness prevention directly, rather than through reductions in statutory homelessness figures, thus helping to address the point about 'incentivising' local authority gate-keeping. In addition, the Government has introduced an official indicator to capture repeat homelessness (households found to be owed the main homelessness duty on successive occasions within two years).

To summarise, while there are other important factors likely to be influencing the evident downward trends in homelessness in both Germany and England (increased local authority gate-keeping in England; housing market slackening in Germany), it does seem that these reductions can, at least to some extent, be attributed to targeted (and cost-saving) preventative interventions. In both countries there are significant evidential gaps with regard to directly demonstrating the effectiveness of particular preventative measures. This means that a key question posed at the beginning of this paper – *which are the most and least effective elements of these preventative strategies?* – cannot readily be answered at present. Nonetheless, it does appear that, in combination, these preventative interventions are having a substantial beneficial effect.

Conclusions – the Lessons for England, Germany and Other Countries

What can Germany and England learn from each other, and what might other countries learn from their experience? A cautionary point amply illustrated by this paper is the profound impact of inter-country conceptual and institutional differences on understandings of homelessness and on the construction of measures to address it. Thus what might be labelled 'homelessness prevention' in one country may be labelled entirely differently in another. This distinctive institutional framework can affect the robustness of international comparisons; it also means that policy transfer between countries must be undertaken with great care. Indeed, a key purpose of this paper was to flush out these institutional differences between Germany and England in order to demonstrate the dangers of too readily drawing comparisons between countries, without sufficiently careful attention to context.

That said, the paper presents a fundamentally upbeat message that homelessness can be significantly reduced by targeted policy action. Encouragingly, and perhaps surprisingly, it seems that positive outcomes can be achieved even in the face of unhelpful structural trends (worsening housing affordability in England; rising unemployment and poverty in Germany). Successful prevention policies (at the secondary and tertiary levels) must be carefully targeted at the key 'triggers' for homelessness, which may differ to some extent between countries, although relationship breakdown and eviction often seem to be prominent (see Fitzpatrick & Stephens, 2007). Such policies also need to be backed by appropriate resources (see in particular, England) and have an effective governance framework for implementation (see in particular, Germany). A strong steer from Central Government/umbrella organisations is likely to be helpful, and there is evidence from both England and Germany that local administrations may well embrace enthusiastically the opportunities for positive change that prevention programmes can offer. However, one lesson from England in particular is that attention must be paid to any perverse incentives generated by prevention programmes, such that there can be some confidence that homelessness is genuinely being prevented rather than being disguised by changes in recording or assessment practices.

One key lesson to be drawn from the experience of both Germany and England is that legal duties to provide temporary accommodation for homeless households can be a crucial policy driver for improved preventative interventions. The expense and political embarrassment of having a large number of households, particularly families with children, in temporary accommodation, acted in both cases as an important prompt to find more pro-active ways to prevent homelessness. This may be an (additional) argument in favour of rights-based approaches to tackling homelessness. Further, preferably comparative, research is needed in both Germany and England as to the outcomes of specific preventative interventions in order to assess their relative effectiveness (and sustainability) and, by extension, their potential value in other national contexts. In addition, research into the effectiveness of different models of governance of homelessness prevention would be of great interest to a broad range of European countries, given their diverse arrangements (Fitzpatrick & Stephens, 2007) yet current lack of comparable information on outcomes.

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