

# Trapped in Barcelona: The links between rising rent and homelessness

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In most peoples' minds, homelessness is rarely linked to rising rental prices. It is well-established in the social sciences that evictions rarely lead someone directly to sleeping on a park bench or in an ATM building. If this were the case, in a city like Barcelona where evictions have grown dramatically in recent years, there would not be 950 people sleeping in the streets, but many, many more.

But this does not mean that increasing rental prices have no direct or indirect effect on the scale and persistence of homelessness in all its forms. In the last two decades, several studies have shown that difficulties in accessing stable housing increase the risk of poverty and social exclusion. In this sense, high rent substantially increases social vulnerability. As a result, the new housing bubble affecting Spain, and Barcelona in particular, is condemning the city's most impoverished people to a situation of chronic residential exclusion.

Ricardo is in his fifties. After a year and a half sleeping in the street, a team of social workers convinced him to enter a municipal homeless shelter. Eight months later, he entered a residential center, where he received support for another year and a half. This gave him time to look for a job and begin a new life as a night watchman, earning roughly 450 euros per month. After gathering up some savings, he began to look for a place he could call home. It's been seven months and he is still looking. Ricardo is one of the many formerly homeless people receiving social assistance for whom employment is not enough to allow for an autonomous life and distance from the support provided by social services and non-profit organizations.

Maria, 47, ended up living in the street after spending two years with no income at all. After two weeks in her hometown, she left to try her luck in Barcelona. The anonymity of the big city made it easier for her to approach social services, NGOs and churches for help. She entered a shelter where they helped her apply for welfare, and she now receives just under 500 euros a month. Though she has been unable to find another source of income, administrative barriers prevent Maria from extending her stay in the shelter. With what she has managed to save, she is trying to find stable accommodation. Meanwhile, she is living in the cheapest bed she has found in the city, a youth hostel that costs 15 euros a night. She relies on soup kitchens every day to reach the end of the month.

At age 64, Francisco is counting the days until he can receive a minimum non-

contributory pension of 480 euros per month. Thankfully, he has never had to sleep in the street. When he lost his home, social services found him a homeless shelter to stay in until he reaches the retirement age. He spends his time trying to find a room for when he has to leave the shelter, but even though he never expected any luxury, he has grown increasingly discouraged as he has seen rental prices rise on the most common rental sites. If he stays in the city, he knows that all of his income will be spent on avoiding life on the streets.

One of the objectives of social work is to help people achieve personal autonomy. The three people described above are perfectly capable of managing their daily lives without the need for professional support. They are in good health, they have rebuilt a network of social relationships and they have achieved some emotional stability. But despite having relatively stable sources of income, the amount they receive is absolutely insufficient to survive in Barcelona, where decent housing has a minimum price of 800 euros a month, a room costs 350 euros and a bed in a hostel costs at least 20 euros a day.

The absence of affordable housing forces Ricardo, María and Francisco to depend on social services. To eat every day, they must go to soup kitchens. To stretch their income, they continue to rely on non-profits and NGOs providing economic aid and services that they cannot access through the market. This includes everything from personal care to transportation and leisure.

Given their residential instability, the most appropriate institutional response to these situations would seem to be to either prolong their stays in residential centers or provide a permanent home. But resources are limited. A constant inflow of people into situations of severe residential exclusion is overwhelming services that were designed to provide temporary support and the stability necessary to regain autonomy. Centers that were designed for temporary stays are becoming centers for long-term stays, with many residents living in them for over a year and a half. As homeless people prolong their stays, entry into the residential centers becomes increasingly difficult.

One might think that economic rationality would lead people facing residential exclusion to leave Barcelona. But leaving the city involves a number of costs that many simply cannot afford. Leaving the big city may make it easier to access cheaper housing, but this doesn't necessarily compensate for the added costs involved in living far away from the meager employment opportunities the city provides with its more diverse economy. How much of his 450 euro a month salary would Francisco have to spend to commute to his job as a night watchman if he moves to a municipality with more affordable rent? How far would he have to travel?

For those living on non-contributory pensions or minimum incomes, staying in the city also allows them to benefit from the services offered there exclusively, such as

soup kitchens, day centers, libraries, civic centers and social services that can prevent a possible relapse. When María went to the social services in her hometown, she was told that the municipality had no resources for her and that it was best to look for support through Barcelona's social services or one of the many NGOs and non-profits based in the city.

So even in terms of economic rationality, leaving Barcelona is not as viable as one might expect for the city's most impoverished people. Beyond these monetary calculations, there are other powerful reasons for why a homeless person would not want to leave their city or neighborhood. For instance, homelessness is often characterized by extreme loneliness. If the city's streets are precisely where people in this situation build their fragile support networks, leaving that environment for a new and unknown set of streets can also be risky.

Rising rent prices and legislation that puts tenants at a severe disadvantage produce of several kinds of evictions. A growing part of Barcelona's population is being forced to leave the city as a result of accelerating gentrification and population substitution. A growing number of people with very precarious jobs in the services and tourism sectors can neither afford a decent home nor live outside the city as a result of the costs associated with the commute. This increases the number of people in substandard housing situations. In the most extreme cases, these situations turn into homelessness, thus feeding the circuit of social services oriented towards homeless people and the vicious cycle of long-term stays in residential centers and shelters. As a result of prolonged social exclusion, many of our neighbors find themselves in a sort of limbo between expulsion from the housing market and the scraps from Barcelona's economic dynamism.

According to data from the City of Barcelona and the Network of Attention to Homeless People, an estimated 900 people sleep in the streets every night. Around 2,000 stay at either municipal shelters or residential centers provided by NGOs and non-profits, and roughly 400 live in abandoned warehouses or plots. While it is difficult to quantify in precise terms, municipal sources estimate that some 12,000 people live in substandard or unhealthy conditions, overcrowded flats, housing under imminent threat of eviction or squats.

When the right to decent housing is not protected and access to affordable housing is not guaranteed, the system of services providing care for the homeless becomes a dead end. The people served never stops growing, as people transit endlessly from the street to the shelters and back, unable to live with autonomy and dignity.