Attitudes towards Homeless Persons in the Czech Republic: A Research Note

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❯ **Abstract**_ *On the basis of a secondary quantitative analysis of Eurobarometer Social Exclusion and Poverty (2007 and 2010) data, the authors analyse and interpret attitudes toward homelessness in the Czech Republic The main goal is to explore public attitudes about the reasons for becoming homeless and the public's willingness or reluctance to help homeless persons.*

❯ **Keywords**_ *homelessness, attitudes toward homeless persons, secondary quantitative analysis, the Czech Republic, Eurobarometer*

Introduction

The issue of homelessness and homeless people is not frequently discussed in Czech public discourse. It usually arises only in times of harsh weather, especially in winter when the people who live on the streets become more vulnerable, or before elections when politicians showcase their ability to act by presenting different ways of tackling homelessness. In all cases, the topic is usually presented in a narrow form, focusing only on so-called visible homelessness. Recently, however, interest in this topic has been increasing and taking a more strategic form. The Czech Government has adopted a strategy for preventing and tackling homelessness, where homelessness is understood as more broadly corresponding to the ETHOS typology, including hidden homelessness (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2013). The current broad discussion about a new social housing law is another example of debate where homeless people are frequently mentioned as an important 'target group'.

In Czech sociology, the issue of homelessness is represented in the form of research on the phenomenon or its actors. Qualitative studies mainly use semi-structured interviews and focus on issues such as housing (Mikeszová and Lux, 2013) or, more generally, life strategies (Vašát, 2012). Quantitative sociology is represented by methodologically problematic attempts to conduct 'regional' censuses of homeless populations in various Czech cities (e.g., Plzeň, Brno, Prague), [1] an official census[2] organized by the Czech Statistical Office in 2011, and a statistical analysis of anonymous client data provided by one of the biggest Czech charity organisations, Naděje/Hope (Prudký and Šmídová, 2010).

Our approach to the topic is to explore public attitudes toward homeless persons. In the Czech Republic, the topic of attitudes towards homeless persons comes up in an irregular and highly simplified way. It typically appears as part of public opinion polls, which are characterized by atheoretical constructions and repetitive use of indicators, and interpretation of the polls is haphazard. Nevertheless, international research on attitudes toward homeless people provides a relatively broad knowledge base for our study, especially when social psychology and sociology are involved. It can be divided into several different approaches, and we can distinguish between two different research streams. The first focuses on the dynamics of attitudes, or 'attitudes as they are possible to change or to influence' (Wessel,

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[1] Homeless people were approached on the streets; interviewers had special instructions on where to go, who to speak with and, of course, who to label/mark as a homeless person. (e.g., Hradecký, 2004; Petřík et al., 2006; Toušek, 2009)

[2] The census determined the number of people using a selected type of social service, namely those staying at an official shelter at a given time. There were about 11,500 such people in May 2011 in the Czech Republic (Czech Statistical Office, 2013).

2009; Hodson, 2011; Pettigrew *et al.,* 2011, etc.) The second is 'static' beliefs, or 'attitudes as they are' in society as a whole or in parts (e.g., Link *et al.*, 1995; Phelan *et al.*, 1997; Tompsett *et al.*, 2006; Carvacho *et al.*, 2013).

Attitude flexibility – the dynamics of attitudes towards homeless people – has been investigated through a neo-behavioural approach and concrete psychological evaluative conditioning (e.g., Balas and Sweklej, 2013), but the verification or development of contact theory seems to be more popular. Researchers are investigating different conditions of contact, such as short-term exposure to homelessness in the form of social work (Knecht and Martinez, 2012), and they usually test this exposure with pre- and post-exposure questionnaires (Loewenson and Hunt, 2011). It is also possible to differentiate international research according to the different actors with these attitudes, especially by investigating perceptions of the general public (Lee *et al.*, 2004; Toro *at al.*, 2007) or professionals who are or could be in frequent contact with homeless people, such as medical staff, social service employees, medical school students (Masson and Lester, 2003), nursing students (Zrinyi and Balogh, 2004), dental students (Habibian *et al.*, 2010) and even interior design students (Dickinson, 2015).

An important aim of this research is to seek an explanation for the attitudes towards poverty and poor people when homelessness is seen in one specific form. Our research interest is focused on the construction and explanation of homelessness in relation to poverty (Guzewicz and Takooshian, 1992; Toro and McDonnell, 1992, etc.), where it is repeatedly perceived more negatively. In this situation, researchers also emphasize the dynamic substance of such attitudes. For example, Phelan *et al.* (1997) demonstrate that the individual shortcomings of poor people as well as homeless people were viewed differently in the 1980s᾽ compared to the 1990s when opinions became more critical.

Our own focus in examining public attitudes towards homeless persons and homelessness arises primarily from the fact that we are currently witnessing increasing xenophobia[3] (in terms of a general fear of 'the unknown') in Czech society. Stereotypes and prejudices are increasing, and some marginalized communities have become frequent targets of symbolic, verbal and even physical violence.

The main objective of the text will be to analyse public attitudes towards homelessness and homeless people and the ways in which those attitudes are related to selected socio-demographic indicators. We will not address the theoretical defini-

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[3] This claim can be backed up through comparison of data from two waves of European Values Study (1998 and 2008), in which a set of questions on 'unwanted neighbours' is included. This shows that willingness to accept people of different behavioural, ethnic and cultural background as neighbours declined significantly in the Czech Republic in these years.

tion of homelessness, i.e., what is or what can be considered homelessness. Instead, our main goal will be to show how Czech society views homelessness.[4] Within the context of contemporary international research on attitudes, our study is focused on the perceptions of the general public. We present this study as a contribution to the discussion on our stated theme, and it should serve as a base for more focused research in the Czech Republic.

The text is structured as follows: first, we will present the methodology of our study, including our research questions and theoretical framework. Then we will briefly describe the broad context of attitudes towards homelessness and compare the Czech Republic with other European countries. Finally, we will analyse and interpret our quantitative data.

Research Design and Questions, Approach and Data

Research design and questions

The main research goal is to find out how public attitudes towards homeless persons are formed by society in the Czech Republic. We assume that in order to present the Czech situation in a way that is meaningful for readers outside of the Czech Republic, it is necessary to construct a broader comparative framework. We will present, therefore, how Czechs' attitudes toward homeless people compare to several European countries. In addition to the Czech Republic, six countries that represent major European macro-regions were included in the analysis: Scandinavia (Sweden), the Mediterranean (Italy), 'Midwestern' Europe (Germany – old and new *Bundesländer* separately), Western Europe (the Netherlands) and Slovakia, which shares many historical, cultural and social characteristics with the Czech Republic.

Our research design is based on a broad secondary analysis of available data. Consequently, we did a meta-analysis of datasets representative of the Czech population to find out which of these dealt with attitudes towards homelessness and homeless people.[5]

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[4]   The text was written as one of the results of a project on 'Value Background of Attitudes toward Selected Excluded Groups' supported by the Czech Science Foundation (no. P404-12-2072), where homeless persons represented one of the three groups of interest, along with Roma and foreigners.

[5]   For the investigation, we use the Czech Social Science Data Archive (Institute of Sociology; http://archiv.soc.cas.cz/en) and the ZACAT-GESIS online study catalogue (http://zacat.gesis.org/webview/) as the datasets considered most relevant.

Actually, the research areas arose mostly from the focus of available data and they are not connected with a specific concept or theory. The three main thematic areas are as follows:

1. the public perception of homelessness in terms of the number of homeless persons;

2. the perceived reasons that people become homeless; and

3. how the different ways of helping or not helping homeless persons are perceived, as expressed by questionnaire respondents.

All areas are investigated and statistically analysed (correlation analysis) within the context of chosen socio-demographic indicators (i.e., age, gender, education, self-placement in politics and society levels, marital status, size of community) and indicators of attitudes towards society (optimistic vs. pessimistic; feeling left-out; life satisfaction and general trust).

General research approach

We understand attitudes conventionally as the expression of an evaluation of a given entity (Bohner and Dickel, 2011). Here we will examine public concepts of homeless people, which are ultimately influenced by the personal values of each individual. A specific focus is on the basic condition for expressing attitudes: an attitude is always expressed with regard to something or somebody. Attitudes have long been understood in close relation to behaviour, but their mutual relationship is not unambiguous. According to a now more accepted negative definition of the relationship, nobody can predict behaviour solely on the basis of expressed attitudes because it is influenced by other factors as well.

The theory of planned behaviour tells us that one can only rigorously evaluate the complexity and multidimensionality of personal attitudes in the context of social norms and social control mechanisms (Ajzen and Fishbein, 2005). In general, it is useful to know that attitudes are dynamic to a certain extent and can be changed through learning (formal as well as informal). This factor also relates to the compliance of attitudes with situations; attitudes can be changed in line with changed conditions – they are somehow flexible (Fishbein and Ajzen, 1975). On the other hand, some attitudes linked to the central or identity-forming values of a person cannot be changed without significant physical and mental stress because such change threatens his or her identity or integrity (Eaves *et al.*, 1989; Millar and Tesser, 1992).

Attitudes are not only considered a reflection of personal values but also a reflection of personal lifestyles, conceptions and images about these lifestyles. As Moore and Asay (2013, p.11) note: "Sherif and Sherif (1967) believed that attitudes are expressions of how individuals conceive '*their ways of life, their ways of doing*

things, their stands on the family and on social, religious, economic, and political issues, and how they conceive the ways and stands of others' (ibid: 1). Thus, the focus is on how they expect their expressed beliefs will be judged by others." If we translate this sentence into the language of sociological research, we are talking about 'social desirability' – i.e., the tendency to respond to questions in a socially acceptable direction or choosing not to respond (Spector, 2004). This social desirability might also influence attitudes towards homeless people. It has repeatedly been shown that people have a tendency to adapt their answers to perceived social norms. Consequently, data on declared attitudes and behaviour could be biased. Even more serious is that this effect is frequently not equally strong among various groups in society. In some studies (Jackman, 1978), it was revealed that highly educated people have a stronger tendency to declare attitudes seen as socially desirable, regardless of their real attitudes. For example, if we found a positive association between humanities education and more tolerant attitudes towards homeless persons, it could be the effect of differences in social desirability.

Of course, social desirability is relevant in research methods such as quantitative interviewing,[6] where respondents' behaviours are strongly influenced by these kinds of expectations. In spite of these doubts, attitudes continue to be measured through sociological research, only with the limitations that we have indicated.

It is possible that attitudes may have formed out of prejudices. Prejudices are positive or negative attitudes towards some groups ('out-groups') but they are usually perceived in negative contexts. Prejudice is considered to be the result of generalization, which is directed both against the entire 'out-group' and against its individual members. A set of 'typical' characteristics is usually related to prejudice. If any members of the group do not have those characteristics, the prejudiced individual usually ignores these 'error' cases or argues that they are exceptional (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew *et al.*, 1982). The important attributes of prejudices are that: 1) they are shared by the whole or a significant part of society; and 2) they are relatively persistent.

Quantitative data on Czech attitudes towards homeless people and homelessness

Representative Czech data on attitudes toward homeless people and homelessness are very rare in the last number of years. That is why we focused mainly on Eurobarometer surveys, and more specifically, on two special surveys from the years 2007 and 2010, in which the following questions about homelessness were included:

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6   This is relevant for both quantitative and qualitative interviewing – both types are, in substance, face-to-face interactions.

1. In the area where you live, please tell me if there are people who are homeless? Would you say there are many people, some people, a few people or none who are homeless? (2010)

2. Generally speaking, would you say that the number of homeless people has strongly increased, somewhat increased, somewhat decreased or strongly decreased in the last 3 years in a) the area where you live; b) your country? (2010)

3. How likely is it that you could ever become homeless, yourself? (2007; 2010)

4. In your opinion, which three of the following reasons best explain why people become homeless? (10 answer choices) (2007; 2010)

5. Do you ever help homeless people by doing any of the following? (9 answer choices) (2007)

6. In your opinion, which of the following groups should be prioritised in receiving social assistance? (2010)

Table 1: Technical Information on Analysed Datasets – Eurobarometer

	Done by	Number of CZ respondents	Date	Population
Eurobarometer 74.1	TNS AISA	1001	27/08/2010 – 12/09/2010	15 +
Eurobarometer 67.1	TNS AISA	1060	17/02/2007 – 11/03/2007	15 +

Additionally, we used a question that is not directly oriented towards attitudes to homelessness but more generally to poverty ("Why are there people in this country who live in need?" – Eurobarometer 2010). We consider homelessness as a highly extreme form of poverty (see Introduction) and that is the rationale for including the question in our analysis.

Why Do People Become Homeless?
The Reasons for Homelessness as seen through Survey Data

Czech experience of/exposure to homelessness within the international context

The perceived trends of homelessness in the Czech Republic were, in certain aspects, more pronounced than the European average. As for a perceived growth of homelessness, 52 percent of respondents in the Czech Republic believed that homelessness had increased in their neighbourhood in the last three years (i.e., 2007–2010), which was about 20 percent more than the average value for all the

countries analysed. This suggests that the majority of Czech citizens perceived homelessness as a growing problem; the results were similar for Slovak respondents. In Sweden, the Netherlands, both parts of Germany and Italy, most respondents indicated that the size of the phenomenon had not changed. This different perception of homelessness in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, in comparison with western countries, may be caused by the relative novelty of homelessness[7] and higher sensitivity to it among people in these countries. Also, concerns about becoming homeless were high among Czech respondents, with 12 percent seeing this situation as very likely or fairly likely. This is above the average of analysed countries; only in Italy is the proportion on the same level and in Slovakia it is slightly lower (8.8 percent). In the other countries analysed, becoming homeless was perceived as likely by up to 4 percent of the sample.

Table 2. Perceptions of the Prevalence of Homelessness (percent)

	Czech Republic	Germany (new *Bundesländer*)	Germany (old *Bundesländer*)	Italy	The Netherlands	Sweden	Slovakia
Many homeless persons in area	**5.8**	2.8	0.6	2.0	1.0	1.0	4.3
Homelessness in neighbourhood increased	**52.3**	22.6	21.7	30.8	19.4	18.4	57.3
Homelessness in country increased	80.4	68,6	71.1	67.1	75.2	77.6	84.0
Becoming homeless is likely (very + fairly)	11.8	3.0	1.1	12.1	0.8	0.7	8.8

Source: Eurobarometer, 2010

As for a close encounter with homelessness in the neighbourhood, only 21 percent of Czech respondents said that there were no homeless people close to their residence. The results were similar for Slovak respondents but in the other countries analysed, the most common answer was that "no homeless people live in my area" (38 percent in Italy and over 60 percent in the remaining countries). Simultaneously, there is a strong correlation between the presence of homeless persons (many persons in a given area) and a trend of increasing homelessness in one's country and in one's neighbourhood. It appears that the size of a community also plays an important role, while other socio-demographic indicators do not, including gender, age, education, marital status, political affiliation and one's level in society (self-

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7   Communist regimes in Central Europe suppressed homelessness through both 'policy work' and 'police work'.

placement). On the other hand, the perceived prevalence of homeless persons grows subjectively, especially for respondents who tend to be pessimistic about society, dissatisfied with life and feel left out of society (see Table 3).

Table 3. Correlations: The Perceived Prevalence of Homelessness and Select Indicators in the Czech Republic

	Homeless persons in area	Homelessness in country	Homelessness in neighbourhood
Age, gender, education, marital status, left-right self-placement, level in society self-placement; general trust in people	-	-	-
Size of community	-0.375	-0.087	0.260
General life satisfaction	0.156	0.202	0.150
Optimistic attitude toward society	-0.143	-0.273	-0.178
Feel left out	0.176	0.229	0.205

Source: Eurobarometer, 2010 – Note: Spearman correlation or x^2 correlation

We can assume that homelessness in the Czech Republic is seen as a growing social problem, which seems to be confirmed by the relative level of close personal experience.

Perceived reasons for homelessness

Significant differences between countries were also evident when respondents chose the reasons why people become homeless. Across all analysed countries, including the Czech Republic, unemployment, debts and addictions are perceived as the most likely causes of homelessness. Poor access to housing ranks fourth.[8] The least frequently stated reasons are shown at the bottom of Table 4. Aside from 'don't know' and 'other reasons', they include not having access to social benefits or services, illness or disability, destruction of home by a catastrophe, and missing identification papers. Similarly, Czech respondents mostly focused on those options: unemployment (46 percent), indebtedness (45 percent) and different types of addictions (44 percent).[9] It is important to pay attention to the 'choose to live this way' response. Czech respondents chose it most frequently out of all the analysed countries; [10] with more than one-quarter of the sample seeing it as a reason for homelessness, it ranks as the fifth most prevalent perceived reason for homelessness**.**

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[8] This is in contrast with the position of Czech homeless persons themselves. They indicate loss of housing (and inability to obtain alternative housing) as the single most important reason for their situation (Prudký and Šmídová, 2010).

[9] The factor analysis did not show any interpretable results; no explicable link between the options appeared.

[10] The Netherlands and Slovakia were close to the Czech position.

Again, we can see that perceptions of homelessness (we took into account only the five most cited reasons) are not connected with the most basic socio-demographic indicators, with one exception. It is evident that 'long-term unemployment' is the sole reason that correlates with the indicators of a subjective position in society (i.e., rather higher level in society, satisfaction with life, optimistic attitude toward society and not feeling left out) and political affiliation (rather to the right side of the scale). Other correlations are either weak or not present at all (see Table 5).

Table 4: Perceived Reasons for Homelessness: International comparison (percent)

	Czech Republic	Germany (new Bun-desländer)	Germany (old Bun-desländer)	Italy	The Neth-erlands	Sweden	Slovakia
Addictions	**43.6**	49.3	47.5	16.8	70.9	77.9	44.6
Long-term unemployment	**45.9**	50.0	51.9	50.6	15.5	32.1	48.9
Over-indebted	**44.8**	45.2	43.2	27.7	56.5	35.9	40.9
Cannot afford to pay rent	**34.5**	37.6	40.7	50.9	18.0	36.3	31.2
Mental health problems	9.4	14.0	13.8	7.3	52.7	38.5	8.1
Choose to live this way	**28.7**	18.0	14.9	14.9	24.4	6.8	25.4
Break-up and/or personal loss	19.7	16.2	19.7	14.2	17.4	12.8	22.9
No access to social benefits or services	15.7	20.8	20.3	17.0	11.7	12.1	17.6
Illness or disability	14.8	12.0	14.5	8.3	2.9	11.7	14.8
Home destroyed by a catastrophe	17.4	9.4	8.5	15.2	2.7	2.6	22.5
No identification papers	4.3	5.3	10.7	18.0	14.7	16.9	1.7
Don't know + Other + None	0.8	1.8	0.6	5.4	1.0	1.4	0.8

Source: Eurobarometer, 2010 – Note: The respondents could choose up to three reasons.

Table 5: The Most Represented Reasons for Homelessness in the Czech Republic and Correlations with Select Indicators

	Long unemployment	Addictions	Cannot afford to pay rent	Over-indebted	Choose this way
Size of community; gender; education, marital status; age general trust in people	-	-	-	-	-
Level in society	-0.116	-	-	-	-
Left-right political self-placement	-0.100	0.102	-	-	0.106
General life satisfaction	-0.108	-	-	-	-
Optimistic attitude toward society	0.149	-	-	-	-0.093
Feel left out	-0.083	0.084	-	-	0.125

Source: Eurobarometer, 2010 – Note: Spearman correlation or x^2 correlation

According to a cluster analysis of data from Czech respondents, all of these reasons represent one common thread. But we cannot determine if the respondents perceive these reasons as a consequence of the individual characteristics and behaviour of the homeless people or as a result of external conditions from this kind of analysis.

That is why we complemented the analysis of attitudes with responses to the question 'In your opinion, why are there people who live in poverty?' Among Czech respondents, the second most frequent answer was 'laziness and lack of willpower' (see Table 6). They chose it more frequently when compared to other European countries. The 'laziness and lack of willpower' option expresses strict individual responsibility for the poor living conditions in which some people live. On the contrary, homelessness as being the responsibility of society or the state (the 'injustice in society' option) was chosen less by Czech respondents when compared to other countries analysed, but this answer was still the most frequent response.[11]

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[11] In the European Values Survey 2008, the position of individual responsibility was much stronger; some shift of blame to the societal level could be attributed to the 2008 world economic crisis. This assumption can be supported by the already cited Phelan *et al.* (1997) in relation to the dynamics of attitudes toward poverty and homelessness.

Table 6: Why are there People who live in Poverty? (percent)

	Czech Republic	Germany (new *Bundesländer*)	Germany (old *Bundesländer*)	Italy	The Netherlands	Sweden	Slovakia
Much injustice in our society	31.9	69.7	55.8	45.9	39.2	51.5	44.8
Inevitable part of progress	18.0	9.7	14.1	15.2	24.5	29.5	11.6
Have been unlucky	19.5	5.4	10.0	21.3	15.0	10.3	16.9
Laziness and lack of willpower	**24.8**	13.0	15.5	9.7	11.5	5.1	18.9
None (spontaneous)	5.8	2.2	4.6	7.9	9.8	3.6	7.8

Source: Eurobarometer, 2010

There are significant differences in perceptions of why people became homeless, especially between the options 'much injustice in our society' and 'laziness and lack of willpower'. These differences are shown with 'long-term unemployment' at one extreme and 'addictions' and 'choose this way' at the other in Table 7.

Table 7: Correlation Causes of Poverty and Perceived Reasons for Homelessness in the Czech Republic (adjusted residuals)

	Long-term unemployment	Can't afford rent	Over-indebted	Addictions	Choose this way
Much injustice in our society	**+3.6**	+1.6	-0.7	**-4.3**	**-3.0**
Inevitable part of progress	-0.3	-1.3	-0.1	+0.7	+1.0
Have been unlucky	+1.5	+2.8	-1.3	-0.4	-1.6
Laziness and lack of willpower	**-5.7**	-2.8	+1.5	**+5.5**	**+3.5**
None (spontaneous)	+1.2	-0.6	-1.9	-2.0	+0.8

Source: Eurobarometer, 2010

The relationship of attitudes toward homelessness and poverty had been discussed in Phelan *et al.* (1997). These authors say, with references to past research and theories of ideology, that public opinion towards people at the bottom of society are influenced by an effort to justify existing social order and to shift responsibility from a structural to an individual level. People with a strong belief that the social world is basically fair "not only think the economy distributes resources fairly, but they also have negative attitudes toward social groups who receive the smallest allocation – for example, the poor, unemployed and homeless" (Ng and Allen 2005, p.438). To be labelled homeless is, according to their research, worse than being labelled poor. Another mechanism influencing opinions on homeless people could be seen as a general cognitive inclination to underestimate the influence of a situation and to overestimate personal and individual attributes.

This socio-psychological phenomenon – known as fundamental attribution error – leads to blaming homeless people for their situation, regardless of the espoused ideology (Phelan *et al.*, 1997).

However, neither explanation is entirely sufficient if we take into account differences between countries and the overall high rate of 'much injustice in society' as a general reason for poverty.

To help or not to help, and who should be responsible?

A very important dimension of attitudes towards homeless people is the willingness and readiness of 'ordinary people' to help.[12] This dimension of attitudes can be explained through an ideologically conditioned reasoning of the conditions behind being poor or a homeless person as was discussed above.

Table 8: Helping Homeless People: International Comparison (percent)

	Czech Republic	Germany (new *Bundesländer*)	Germany (old *Bundesländer*)	Italy	The Netherlands	Sweden	Slovakia
Giving money to charities	25.3	49.8	35.0	23.3	27.9	59.9	33.4
Buying papers sold by homeless people	11.8	23.9	20.5	6.8	42.1	37.3	29.7
Giving money to people living on the streets	8.5	33.5	22.9	24.3	14.5	16.50	24.5
You do not help homeless people	**35.8**	13.9	17.8	14.0	16.5	11.0	18.4
You are not concerned	18.0	7.8	15.3	20.1	7.3	5.2	9.8
Directing them to appropriate services/ institutions	4.3	6.7	6.3	5.8	4.6	5.7	9.7
Don't know	2.8	3.3	2.7	6.9	1.2	2.2	2.5
Helping them find a job	1.1	3.1	4.0	5.7	0.9	2.7	3.7
Helping them to access emergency shelters	1.6	3.1	2.8	5.5	2.1	3.1	2.7
Other	1.3	2.8	2.1	5.2	1.4	2.3	3.0

Source: Eurobarometer, 2007

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[12] Here we used data from the 2007 Eurobarometer because the 2010 EB only asked about helping poor people and not homeless people specifically. However, the 2007 results are structurally similar to those of 2010.

Internationally, giving money to charities was the most widely used form of help. Note that it does not require direct contact with homeless people. Once again, we can see that Czech public attitudes are unique. Of all the populations analysed, Czechs were the least willing to help: 'you do not help homeless people' was the answer of more than one third of respondents (36 percent). Men and people who lived in rural areas gave this answer significantly more often, but there are no other differences, even with the question on causes of poverty.[13]

Less than 10 percent of Czechs – which is the smallest proportion among the countries analysed – were willing to give money directly to homeless people.

This strict position could be partly explained as a consequence of compassion or donor fatigue, which would be relatively surprising, considering that homelessness is a relatively new phenomenon in the Czech Republic.

Based on the survey data, we cannot determine conclusively whether the negative attitude towards helping homeless people is a one-time deviation or a long-term feature. However, taking into account data on the perceived reasons for homelessness and poverty as analysed above, we hypothesize that one of the important reasons behind the unwillingness of Czech people to help lies in the widespread belief that homeless or poor people are responsible for their own situation. According to respondent opinions, their situation is actually 'undeserving poverty': they got themselves into poverty and therefore do not deserve help (Handler, 2004).

The data (see Table 8) show that even those who are willing to help do so most frequently indirectly through charitable organizations. We cannot determine from the Eurobarometer data who people feel would *ideally* be responsible for providing such help.

According to the Czech respondents, that homeless people do not deserve help very much falls within the context of other marginalized groups. More precisely, homeless people do not belong to the most prioritised groups. Only slightly more than 20 percent of Czech respondents think they should be prioritised. Help for people with addictions, immigrants and young offenders is also not seen as a priority almost at all in the Czech Republic, while the groups seen as most deserving of help are abandoned and neglected children and single parents (74 percent and 70 percent, respectively).

[13] Unfortunately, indicators on attitudes toward society (optimistic, feel left-out, general trust, etc.) were not included in this edition of Eurobarometer.

The low status of homelessness (or homeless people) is even more visible when the attitudes of the Czechs are compared to the European average (48 percent). Again we can assume that homeless people are perceived as responsible for their own situation and as not deserving institutional support or interest (and people with addictions, immigrants and young offenders much more so!).

Table 9: In your opinion, which of the following groups should be prioritised in receiving social assistance? (Czech Republic and European extremes)

	CZ	EU average	Min./ max.
Abandoned and neglected children	74 percent	65 percent	58 percent Great Britain, Portugal/ 80 percent Netherlands
Single parents	70 percent	51 percent	14 percent Portugal / 76 percent Germany
Disabled people	65 percent	58 percent	46 percent Luxemburg/ 72 percent Austria
Elderly people	60 percent	57 percent	40 percent Luxemburg / 64 percent Bulgaria
Unemployed	55 percent	49 percent	25 percent Netherlands / 74 percent Greece
Homeless people	**22 percent**	**48 percent**	**22 percent CZ / 77 percent Greece**
People suffering from addictions	4 percent	21 percent	4 percent CZ, Bulgaria / 52 percent Sweden
Immigrants	2 percent	15 percent	2 percent CZ / 33 percent Sweden
Young offenders	2 percent	16 percent	2 percent CZ / 35 percent Italy

Source: Eurobarometer, 2010 – Note: Multiple choices possible.

People who considered homelessness as a priority for helping (respectively for social assistance) were more probably those who see 'much injustice in society' as a cause of poverty. Socio-demographic indicators are again not significant.[14]

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[14] The following indicators were investigated: gender, age, marital status, education, life satisfaction, general trust, left-right self placement, feel left out and optimistic attitude toward society.

Limitations of Research Design, Data and Analysis

There were certain specific limitations associated with the process used in our research. We did not perform an analysis of our own data but rather secondary data analysis of existing quantitative surveys.[15] We used quantitative data to describe and interpret the distribution of attitudes in the population. We realize that this can be a problematic strategy, mainly because of a relative lack of quantitative data on attitudes towards homeless persons. The data gathered from these surveys is not based on a conceptual framework; questions are only situational and, consequently, it is not rich enough to analyse all of the dimensions of homelessness–related research problems. That is why we cautiously limited our analysis to two questions, which could be answered using available data:

1. What are the perceived reasons for becoming homeless?

2. According to public opinion, should homeless persons be helped or not and, if yes, in what way?

Other questions on the probability of becoming homeless and the presence of homeless people in the respondent's neighbourhood and country provide auxiliary indicators. As a result, we can only use individual questions about homelessness and homeless people asked within research studies or surveys with a broader focus on social exclusion or poverty.

In addition, we had to use an international survey, in which the Czech Republic is only one of more than 25 European countries, as no specifically Czech survey on poverty and homelessness has been done recently. The demand for doing such a survey seems to be justified and our analysis could serve as the first input into the issue.

Another problem with investigating attitudes and the above-mentioned questions using quantitative data relates to the substance of questionnaires and closed questions. Firstly, respondents are asked only to choose one or more of the options offered; they can't usually give their 'own' answer. If an additional, alternative approach to getting a response had been used – for example, using an open question as to the reasons for persons becoming homeless – different reasons might have been given. Secondly, respondents do not have to explain their answer or give a reason for their choice. This interpretational gap is especially evident when investigating subjective, 'soft' variables such as attitudes. However, there are some existing, well-used alternative methods, which seem to be more appropriate – for example, the Likert scale or semantic differential (e.g., Gardner, 1996; Fishbein and Ajzen, 1974, and many more).

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[15] Nevertheless, in the near future we intend to prepare our own survey that will focus directly on attitudes towards marginalized groups. This study serves as the first step in building that survey.

Conclusion

This picture of attitudes towards homeless people in the Czech Republic seems to have relatively clear contours, though missing important details as discussed above on the limitations of the research.

With regard to our research questions, we found that homelessness and homeless people are becoming an increasingly common phenomenon within the Czech population and that most people have had some experience of it. However, commonality of the phenomenon does not imply that people assign homelessness corresponding importance in terms of a social problem that should be tackled as a priority.[16]

Although there is a significant part of Czech society that sees homelessness as a consequence of growing social inequality following social change in 1989, the view of poverty in the form of homelessness being a result of individual failure or an individual's decision to live this way is frequent too. The Czech preference for attitudes that frame situations of homelessness as consequences of individual failure is present (for Czech comparison, see Pakosta and Rabušic, 2010) and according to the general public it is, rather, 'undeserving poverty' (Handler, 2004). This is different position when compared to what research in some other countries shows (see Agans *et al.*, 2011).

It seems many Czech respondents see homelessness as an individual deviance, rather than as a social problem that should be solved collectively, and what is more, as an individual deviance that is not caused by a malfunction of society. This finding can be linked with the strong position of individualism within the transition society of the Czech Republic, along with low religiosity (Prudký *et al.*, 2009). However, we do not currently have strong empirical evidence, though this could be a relevant research direction in the near future.

The role of chosen socio-demographic indicators seems to be rather haphazard, and even indicators on subjective positions on, or feelings about, society are inconclusive. There remain important questions on variables that are more influential in the context of attitudes towards homeless people. So, for future research in the Czech Republic, we suggest a focus on knowledge and contact questions – i.e., the investigation of sources and types of information about homelessness (media, personal experience, political or social authorities) and/or the types of situation in which individuals meet somebody who is (subjectively) declared homeless.

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[16] For example, in March 2013, a regular survey of the Public Opinion Research Centre (PORC) showed that unemployment and corruption were seen as the problem requiring prioritised solutions (80 percent of respondents) (PORC, 2013).

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