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Family determinants of youth homelessness

Rodzinne uwarunkowania bezdomności młodzieży

Abstract

Introduction. Youth homelessness is an increasingly visible phenomenon on the Polish scene of social problems.

Aim. The purpose of the study was to determine the family conditions leading to the crisis of homelessness, as well as to determine the necessary assistance interventions leading to the restoration of life stability and independence.

Materials and methods. Interviews were conducted with thirty-five adolescents experiencing homelessness. The research tool was an interview questionnaire consisting of 26 questions, some of which concerned the family situation of the respondents. The interviews were recorded on a dictaphone and a transcription was made. Purposive sampling was used; the interviews were conducted on the premises of the *Po Drugie* Foundation, which provides comprehensive assistance to youth in crisis of homelessness.

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Results. On the basis of the collected data, it was established that the family causes of the occurrence of the crisis of homelessness among young people are primarily growing up in a family with dysfunctions: addiction of one or two parents, violence, parental incompetence leading to separation and upbringing outside the biological family (foster care, orphanages, resocialization centres), experience of trauma, harm, a sense of loneliness. These causes, and especially their simultaneous co-occurrence, played an important role in the onset of the crisis.

Conclusion. The needs of youth who have experienced a lot of abuse and neglect from their parents during their adolescence require multidimensional assistance and therapeutic support, including securing a roof over their heads, emotional stabilization, strengthening their sense of worth, restoring mental stability, motivating them to take up education, find employment, preparing them for independent household management and proper performance of social roles. The *Po Drugie* Foundation, where the research was carried out, is an organization that provides fully comprehensive care for that group. Unfortunately, it is the only such place in Poland.

Keywords: dysfunctional family, youth, failure, homelessness, crisis.

Abstrakt

Wprowadzenie. Bezdomność młodzieży jest zjawiskiem coraz bardziej widocznym na polskiej scenie problemów społecznych.

Cel. Celem badań było ustalenie rodzinnych uwarunkowań prowadzących do kryzysu bezdomności, a także określenie niezbędnych oddziaływań pomocowych mających na celu przywrócenie stabilizacji życiowej i usamodzielnienie.

Materialy i metody. Przeprowadzono 35 wywiadów z młodzieżą doświadczającą bezdomności. Narzędziem badań był kwestionariusz wywiadu składający się z 26 pytań, z których część dotyczyła sytuacji rodzinnej respondentów. Wywiady zostały zarejestrowane na dyktafonie i sporządzono ich transkrypcję. Zastosowano celowy dobór próby: wywiady zrealizowano wśród podopiecznych Fundacji Po Drugie, świadczącej kompleksową pomoc na rzecz młodzieży w kryzysie bezdomności.

Wyniki. Na podstawie zgromadzonych danych ustalono, że rodzinne przyczyny wystąpienia kryzysu bezdomności wśród młodzieży to przede wszystkim dorastanie w rodzinie z dysfunkcjami: uzależnieniem jednego lub dwojga rodziców, przemocą, niezaradnością rodziców. Takie sytuacje prowadzą do rozdzielenia i wychowywania się poza rodziną biologiczną (piecza zastępcza, domy dziecka, ośrodki resocjalizacyjne), a ponadto powodują doświadczenie traumy, krzywdy, poczucia osamotnienia. Przyczyny te, a zwłaszcza ich współwystępowanie, pełniły istotną rolę w pojawieniu się kryzysu.

Wnioski. Potrzeby młodzieży, która w okresie dorastania doświadczyła wielu krzywd i zaniedbań ze strony rodziców, wymagają wielowymiarowej pomocy i wsparcia te-

rapeutycznego, w tym zabezpieczenia dachu nad głową, stabilizacji emocjonalnej, wzmocnienia poczucia własnej wartości, przywrócenia stabilizacji psychicznej, zmotywowania do podjęcia edukacji, znalezienia zatrudnienia, przygotowania do samodzielnego prowadzenia gospodarstwa domowego i prawidłowego pełnienia ról społecznych. Fundacja Po Drugie, w której zrealizowano badania, jest organizacją świadczącą w pełni kompleksową opiekę dla tak bardzo potrzebującej grupy. Niestety jest to jedyne takie miejsce w Polsce.

Słowa kluczowe: rodzina z dysfunkcjami, młodzież, niezaradność, bezdomność, kryzys.

Introduction

Homelessness is a social phenomenon that impacts people in different countries and regions of the world. It is a problem that has been frequently researched and described in numerous academic publications and is also a global public health challenge (Frazer, Kroll, 2022). While global estimates identify the number of people who are homeless at around 150 million (Gu et al., 2021), it is pointed out that there are approximately one billion global residents living in an unstable housing situation (Kidd, Greco, & McKenzie, 2021).

There is no one universal definition of homelessness, as different cultures, legal systems, standards, or social phenomena may influence how the problem is understood and measured (Frazer, Kroll, 2022; Somerville, 1992). However, it is possible to identify common elements that often appear in defining such crises. These include lack of a permanent or adequate place to live, lack of access to basic services, inability to meet basic material needs, lack of social ties, family and institutional support, lack of self-esteem and identity, and a high risk of violence, illness, exploitation, and discrimination (Tipple, Speak, 2005). It also happens that, despite the satisfaction of the deficits mentioned above, a crisis occurs resulting in homelessness caused by, among other things, relationship conflicts (Chotkowska, 2020), warfare (Ackerman, Porter, & Sullivan, 2020), unexpected natural disasters (Brookfield, Fitzgerald, 2018), or other conditions leading, to a greater or lesser extent, to the loss of housing.

According to a study conducted in 2019 on the initiative of the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, there are more than 30,000 homeless people in Poland, 82 % of whom are men, around 15% women and just over 3% children (*Pokonać bezdomność* [Overcome homelessness], 2022). The authors of the study also point out that this crisis increasingly affects the youngest members of society (Gajda, 2021). Experiencing homelessness in this group

was already observed at the end of the twentieth century (Przyemeński, 2001), but today the scale of this worrying phenomenon is increasing (Granosik, Motyka, & Szczepanik, 2023). The reasons for experiencing homelessness by the young include the inability of families to adapt to dynamic socio-economic changes, which may lead to problems in maintaining the household and the necessity to leave it with the whole family (Dębski, 2010). This may also be the result of a cause-and-effect sequence, which begins with the psychological malaise of the young in the face of the difficulties they face, searching for the simplest evasive solutions (for example running away from home) and, as a result, finding themselves in crisis (Moraczewska, 2013).

In Poland, help for this age group is provided by individual organisations offering harm reduction assistance and foundations that support young people in the process of becoming independent (Granosik et al., 2023). According to data collected in 2019 during a nationwide census of the homeless, 784 young people were homeless, but the *Po Drugie* [Secondly] Foundation in Warsaw alone receives approximately 300 18–25-year-olds seeking shelter each year. It would therefore seem that the number indicated during the nationwide census is at least underestimated (Sikora, 2023).

The invisibility of the youth homelessness crisis

The crisis of youth homelessness has so far been discussed scarcely in Poland. The exceptions are the few publications that can be obtained from the websites of several organisations involved in helping this group, or reports from research conducted as part of projects implemented by these entities.

Even at the end of the second decade of the 21st century, it was assumed that experiencing homelessness by the youngest people was most often associated with Central American, South American, and sometimes Asian countries, where this phenomenon can be observed in the form of street homelessness. In Poland, the lack of a home for this group has usually been considered in the context of the failure of parents who are themselves residents of centres for people in crisis of homelessness (Mikołajczyk, 2018). However, in 2019, during a nationwide seminar aimed at exploring the causes, forms, and tools of support for young people experiencing homelessness, it was signalled that the number of registered people under the age of 26 deprived of a stable place to live had already reached two thousand. At the same time, it was pointed out that, due to measurements conducted only in support facilities directed at people in such crisis, the real scale of the phenomenon may be many times higher (Zaród, 2019).

The reasons for the invisibility in the social space of young people experiencing homelessness are complex and consist of a conglomerate of factors. Firstly, it is the result of deliberate actions by young people intending to hide their situation. These conscious actions, which are often based on shame, are mainly hiding external signs of having no place to live by maintaining cleanliness, exchanging clothes at points that offer such opportunities, avoiding places where homeless people congregate, spending nights in “safe” places (on public transport, at friends’ houses, or in allotment sheds). Secondly, the psychological defence mechanisms activated in people experiencing a crisis play an important role. These are unconscious, automatic processes conducive to distorting perceptions of the situation experienced and struggling to cope with the stress caused by sudden, sometimes unexpected changes. The activity of these mechanisms influences, e.g., the denial of struggling with a difficult situation, minimising its scale or consequences, rationalising the occurrence of such circumstances, colouring, dreaming, etc. (Mrozowicz-Wrońska, 2021). The avoidance of homeless status by people standing on the threshold of adulthood protects them from losing their already weakened sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy because for almost all of them, being homeless is a stigma with which stereotypical characteristics are associated with addictions, criminality, dirtiness, and laziness (Moraczewska, 2013). Thirdly, as can be inferred from the data presented in the 2023 report of the *Po Drogie* Foundation, an important reason for the occurrence of the homelessness crisis in this group is the deficits in the assistance provided to young people coming from dysfunctional families, as well as insufficient support for young people leaving institutions (children’s homes, foster families, re-socialisation centres, or prisons), where they grew up for various reasons (Granosik et al., 2023). Finally, fourthly, the experience of homelessness by young people is still too little visible both in the public space (these young people remain anonymous for a long time and therefore invisible) and in the social space (little is said about this phenomenon, there are hardly any scientific publications, online articles, and interviews conducted with young people or entities undertaking aid activities towards this group are sometimes too little visible) (Granosik et al., 2023).

Thus, we are confronted with both quantitative invisibility (different ways of defining homelessness, especially in this group, and therefore difficulties in estimation) and qualitative invisibility, resulting, e.g., from the invisibility to the social environment and support system of a specific migration (Szczepanik, 2023). Authors addressing this issue believe that attempts to quantify the number of homeless youth are inconsistent and lead to underestimation of this group (Perlman, Willard, Herbers, Cutuli, & Eyrich-Garg, 2014; Tędziągolska, Gola, Rzanek, & Woźniakowska, 2015).

Differences between adult homelessness and youth homelessness

The authors of some studies conducted among people experiencing homelessness point to age-related variation in both the causes and consequences of experiencing this crisis. Among young people, it is the shortest duration of homelessness, the lowest number of stressors, physical symptoms, and mental health problems and, at the same time, the highest opportunities for social support, less frequent alcohol and psychoactive substance abuse than among adults (Garibaldi, Conde-Martel, & O'Toole, 2005; Tompsett, Fowler, & Toro, 2009). It therefore appears that a shorter duration of homelessness results in less acute consequences. However, it should be noted that young people experiencing homelessness are far less likely to report to support institutions than those who have been in such a crisis for many years (Tędziągolska et al., 2015). They avoid such places to avoid experiencing stigma and stigmatisation. These actions are conscious, making it difficult to estimate the actual number of young people in the crisis of homelessness, as well as unconscious, resulting from the aforementioned psychological defence mechanisms (Granosik et al., 2023). According to streetworkers, it is more and more common to meet “on the street” minors who, for various reasons, experiment with homelessness without experiencing this lifestyle. Their reporting to aid institutions is rather unrealistic due to formal and legal conditions, the consequence of which may be that the child is sent home or to a care institution, which they have abandoned (Granosik et al., 2023).

Young people in crisis of homelessness are exposed to much more severe consequences from their environment than adult homeless people with developed methods of coping with difficult situations. Many of these individuals may become victims of violence, sexual abuse, or perpetrators of crime (Bonakdar et al., 2023; Manoni-Millar et al., 2023). They are much more likely than those growing up in families to be diagnosed with depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, thoughts of resignation, anger, adjustment disorders, and problems building and maintaining relationships (Perlman et al., 2014; Winiarski et al., 2020). In this group, sexually transmitted infections, substance use, and mental disorders are common, which, due to difficulties in accessing appropriate care tailored to the developmental stage, promote the accumulation of health problems in the future (Edidin, Ganim, Hunter, & Karnik, 2012). Avoidance of professional support can also multiply the difficulties in acquiring the skills and resources necessary to properly perform social roles in adulthood.

Reasons why young people experience homelessness

According to the European non-governmental organisation FEANTSA (*Fédération Européenne d'Associations Nationales Travaillant avec les Sans-Abri*), which aims to prevent or alleviate poverty among people at risk of or experiencing a lack of housing, youth homelessness is defined as when a person aged between 13 and 26 years experiences homelessness or lives in insecure or inadequate housing without a parent, family member, or other legal guardian (FEANTSA, 2020).

The causes of homelessness in this group are sometimes varied. Research authors point to poverty making housing unaffordable (Donaldson, McIntyre, & Moore, 2022; Toolis, Hammack, 2015), but also difficulties in partner relationships, problems at school, substance abuse, unplanned pregnancies, conflicts with the law, sometimes peer pressure, and even a desire for adventure leading to experiencing such a crisis (Rosenthal, Mallett, & Myers, 2006). Increasingly, the subpopulation of young people experiencing homelessness is also made up of individuals who identify as having a sexual orientation other than the one most commonly declared and transgender people (Donaldson et al., 2022), who after revealing their orientation or identity experience exclusion from the community, their circle of friends and are even forced to leave their family homes (Keuroghlian, Shtasel, & Bassuk, 2014; Maccio, Ferguson, 2016; Szadura-Urbańska, Wilczek, 2023).

The determinants of youth homelessness are also a consequence of deficits in the support system. This is especially true for the lack of adequate support for young people leaving foster care (Bender, Yang, Ferguson, & Thompson, 2015; Granosik et al., 2023), as well as correctional facilities and substance abuse treatment centres (Tam, Freisthler, Curry, & Abrams, 2016; Tyler, Schmitz, 2013). Youth growing up in juvenile justice institutions and foster care settings are sometimes deprived of opportunities to acquire social, educational, economic and other important resources (social capital) necessary for proper entry into adulthood (Winiarski, Glover, Bounds, & Karnik, 2021). At the same time, they are much more likely than their peers growing up in families to turn to psychoactive drugs, have mental health problems, experience violence, and join criminal environments (Tyler, Melander, 2015). These difficulties may arise from relational deficits that have not been met in this type of institution, as well as from lowered self-esteem and stigma.

However, the most common causes of youth homelessness are due to unfavourable family circumstances: addiction of one or more family members, physical and/or psychological violence, sexual abuse (Bender et al., 2018; Szczepanik, 2023), or expulsion from home caused, for example, by one parent starting

a new family or the belief that after finishing school the child should support himself or herself (Berman et al., 2015; Tędziągolska et al., 2015). Young people also decide to leave home on their own when they become victims of sexual abuse by the partner of the primary caregiver, while at the same time facing rejection by the person closest to them and their questioning of the credibility of their testimony about the traumatic experience (Schmitz, Tyler, 2015). It also happens that leaving home is the young person's initiative and results from rebellion against adults or a desire to live independently and autonomously, but such circumstances are also indicative of a fairly low level of relationships within the family, and with little adult effectiveness in stopping the child from undertaking such experiences (Szczepanik, 2023).

Aim of the study

The data presented in this study comes from interviews collected in 2021–2023 from young people experiencing homelessness, wards of the *Po Drugie* Foundation in Warsaw. The initiative undertaken aimed to find out the reasons for losing homes in this group, to determine the ways of coping with crises, the reasons for applying to the foundation, personal resources, and the determinants of the process of becoming independent or emerging from the crisis of homelessness. Due to the extensive empirical material collected, the discussion of which requires much more space than the content of the research paper, the study presents a description of the familial determinants of the occurrence of the homelessness crisis in this group. The statements regarding the family situation of the respondents are a collection of relevant data that can be used both for a more complete understanding of the family predictors of this crisis and for designing supportive interventions for young people who, due to inadequate care in childhood, require multidimensional support in entering adulthood.

Questions about the family environment constituted one part of the interview. Following the initiative presented in this paper, research problems were formulated that set the direction of exploration:

- What families do respondents come from?
- How do they have memories of their family home?
- What opportunities did they have to develop?
- What family circumstances caused the crisis of homelessness?
- What bonds do they have with their family now?

The questions were open-ended and their aim was to gather information on family structure, dysfunctions present, resources, support options, and level of relationships between members.

Material and methods

In the research, a purposive convenient selection of respondents was applied. It was assumed that information would be collected from the charges of the *Po Drugie* Foundation, which for twelve years has been helping young people experiencing homelessness to solve their problems and become independent. This foundation is a place where young people experiencing homelessness can receive full psychological, legal, economic, and social support, which is why it is approached by young people from all over the country seeking help (Szczepanik, 2023). The research was carried out in several establishments of the foundation located in Warsaw: the headquarters at Smulikowskiego Street, the Home for Youth, and three training flats managed by the foundation.

Permission to conduct research among the wards was granted by Agnieszka Sikora, President of the *Po Drugie* Foundation. The contact between the researcher and the respondents was facilitated by prior participation in a project carried out for the foundation, which consisted of several research meetings with young people, the preparation of a research report, and participation in conferences summarising the project. Mentees were suggested by foundation staff to participate in the interviews. Once they agreed, the researcher was informed, who made contact and conducted the interview.

The research tool used for data collection was an interview script consisting of 26 open-ended questions, the first few of which related directly or indirectly to the family situation. Depending on the openness of the respondents, additional questions were asked to obtain more complete information. Interviews were mainly conducted face to face, but also via Messenger using a camera. A few interviews, due to respondents' request not to disclose their image, were conducted over the foundation's phone. All interviews were carried out and recorded on a dictaphone with the consent of the respondents. The research was conducted by the current Polish *Kodeks etyki socjologa* [Code of Ethics for Sociologists] (2012). The research project and research tool were positively approved by the Ethics Committee of the Institute of Sociological Sciences of the University of Rzeszów.

Data from the study

Between August 2021 and November 2023, a total of 35 interviews were conducted, of which 24 were with men and 11 with women. The duration of the interviews varied and ranged from about half an hour to almost two hours, depending on the openness of the respondent. Due to some of the similar experiences indicated by the respondents, those statements were selected that provide a clear exemplification of the role of the family environment in the crisis experienced. Respondents' information has been completely anonymised and quoted statements are denoted by the letter R (respondent) and the number assigned to the interview, e.g., R 10.

Addiction in the family

Substance abuse by one or both parents is a dysfunction repeatedly reported by interviewees, which was often the cause of loss of contact with parents (termination of parental rights, transfer to foster care, or a children's home). Most of the interviewees confirmed the existence of alcohol and drug abuse problems or referred to these abnormal patterns of use as addiction. Talking about their relatives' alcohol problems embarrassed some, and they also spoke about it with a resounding feeling of hurt, sometimes anger, helplessness, and resignation.

Yes, my mother is an alcoholic in a highly advanced stage. She also involved the father at some stage, so that the father also became addicted to alcohol and there was a lot of this dysfunction. Well, the mother is also a drug addict. She is currently on a ten-year prison sentence (R 20).

In some cases, these problems were not regularised, so young people were still entangled in fulfilling the needs of their addicted parents or exposed to endless attempts to support them: "My mum keeps asking me and my sister for money. She's pulling money for housing, for food because she won't earn it herself and if she does earn it, she probably wastes that money, well, on alcohol" (R 12).

Addiction was sometimes such an acute experience that it was associated with insecurity:

As far as my time of childhood is concerned, through my father, this house was never a safe place [...]. I have never seen him sober in my life, I have no relationship with him except that I am his daughter only on paper (R 27).

In a complex, difficult situation, young people make attempts to cope. Unfortunately, they were unsuccessful:

I grew up in a pathological family, my parents abused me, drank alcohol, and took drugs. It was difficult for me, I even reported about it at school [...]. When I was 16, my parents got a criminal sentence for domestic violence. Only it was a suspended sentence, so it didn't do anything, and they got a suspended sentence because I recorded with my phone at some moment what was happening, but my uncle was a lawyer, so they always defended themselves (R 2).

Unsuccessful attempts to change a difficult situation made them feel completely helpless and unsupported. Their distress and determination were such that they made repeated attempts which, in the absence of the necessary resources and external support, again failed:

I already had a job arranged in Warsaw and a room, only I rented this room from the wrong and dishonest man. He held me for three days, on the third day I managed to escape and asked for help at the hospital because I knew I had nowhere else to go because I couldn't go back to my parents (R 2).

Substance abuse by family members – in addition to a lack of care, support, and preparation for emerging into adulthood – resulted in a build-up of family crises. Respondents reported: “My parents divorced fifteen years ago, which is when I was three years old because my father was a junkie and an alcoholic” (R 31); “My mother was a junkie, well that was what mattered most to her” (R 24); “With my mother, we left my father when I was three years old, I don't remember exactly why, but I know he drank, he beat and it was bad” (R 26).

Sometimes in the family, several people suffered from addiction: “My father, generally speaking, was an alcoholic, he used to beat my mother [...]. My father died, and then my brother died at the age of 18. He was also addicted to psychoactive substances, alcohol and different, well, things like that” (R 22).

Furthermore, it happened that addicted parents themselves initiated their child's use of drugs: “I started taking drugs from the age of thirteen, as my mother gave them to me” (R 24).

Violence

Another reason for experiencing homelessness indicated by respondents was the violence most often perpetrated by the partners of their biological parents: “My mum wasn’t so lucky with guys, so since I was a kid I remember being beaten by my stepfather. The hardest thing overall was how I was just defending my mum, and then when my mum was gone to work, he basted me” (R 11); “I found myself in such a crisis especially due to my stepfather because he started to call me names, to raise his hand on me, and started not to let me go home. And I was looking for that kind of shelter so that it would be safe and so that I would have somewhere to go back home” (R 6). They also experienced violence from their biological parents, most often their fathers: “There was physical and psychological violence at home. Physical less often, but psychological violence often, from the father. My mother was ill and died of cancer” (R 15).

At the same time, violence was sometimes the cause of family breakdown. It resulted in an accumulation and succession of difficult experiences: witnessing violence, parents splitting up, or changing to a less comfortable place to live than before: “My father abused my mother both mentally and physically, and that’s why they got a divorce, well because they’ve been divorced since 2014 [...] and then I moved with my mother to a block of flats” (R 7). In this case, moreover, the young man again experienced abuse when trying to return to his father’s care: “I moved back to my father’s place, this happened when I was in the eighth grade and he started abusing me mentally and physically there. Well, and then I ran away to my mother again” (R 7).

Some of them did not have the support of either parent, as abusive behaviour, especially violence, was used against them by both mother and father: “[...] from mum’s side the physical one, and such psychological one is from my dad” (R 21).

Parental inefficiency

For some respondents, the reason for the difficulties leading to the crisis was the parents’ low social competencies, especially their lack of parenting skills. These deficits manifested themselves, among other things, in insufficient preparation of the children for the fulfilment of developmental responsibilities, tasks and goals, e.g., effective learning, household chores, establishing contacts with peers, etc. “Generally the parents beat us, I don’t know for what, for everything, that we did our homework badly for example. This was often the case” (R 10); “There were various prohibitions in our house [...], well the downside was that there was physical punishment for failure to follow some rules” (R 9).

Some tried to justify inadequate parental care, but a sense of injustice resounded in the statements during the interview: “My parents didn’t fully take care of me, the flat was a terrible mess. [...] My dad, when he was little, he had some kind of retardation and I explained to myself that this is the reason why they couldn’t give me that love too much, especially my mum, there was some violence there too” (R 21); “I was born in quite a rich household [...], my parents didn’t have time for us, because they ran a company, so we were brought up by other people like an aunt or for example a lady who cleaned, she was more often with me than my parents” (R 7); “I generally did not experience any such positive feelings from my parents during my childhood. My father worked all the time and my mother was generally very abusive, especially to me, mentally” (R 4).

In families where neglect was revealed and it seemed impossible to fulfil the basic needs and rights of the child, the child was separated from its parents. These actions, on the one hand, allowed the child to make up for his or her living deficits, but, on the other hand, led to the child’s cumulative experience of rejection, lack of bonds and support, or uprooting from relationships with relatives.

Upbringing outside the biological family

Many of the interview participants grew up in foster families. Some of them spent their adolescence in orphanages, others in foster care: “I was adopted when I was nine months old. As for my biological family, I can say something about them too because I managed to get my roots back with them. But I don’t want to have contact with them because it is an alcoholic family” (R 9); “Mum mainly lived off benefits. They separated us and took us into foster care [...], me and my older sister. And even before that, parents beat us too” (R 10).

Some respondents experienced multiple abandonments resulting from more than one change of legal guardians:

Both parents were drinking. They were stripped of their parental rights and I was moved to a children’s home. I was there from the age of four to six. And then to a foster family, but I had behavioural problems, I mean the family had a problem with me. So they gave me to a support family (R 35).

It also happened that the dysfunctional behaviour of the parents caused the end-less migration of the respondent: “When I was 14, they took us to my grandmother as a foster family. Later they took us to an orphanage for six months, then I ended up in a youth centre for drugs and theft because I was stealing” (R 24).

Trauma

During the interviews about the respondents' family situation, there were repeated statements suggesting the experience of deep trauma related to shocking experiences: "My dad used to drink. He died next to me in bed when I was six years old. I woke up and he was already dead" (R 10); "Mum was ill. Not sure exactly what, she was in the hospital and got sepsis there, but before that, I think they diagnosed her with cancer too late" (R 15); "It started with me being in a car accident in 2017, in which unfortunately mum died. All these years I was somehow managing emotionally and physically. And now I have fallen so mentally" (R 6); "Mum became ill with Huntington's chorea. It runs in the family, every other generation, it can only be helped but it can't be cured" (R 11).

During descriptions of traumatic events, it was noted at the same time to experience strong feelings of guilt: "[...] because if I hadn't slept, I might have saved my dad" (R 10); "[...] it's because of me that mum is dead" (R 6). There was also anxiety related to possibly inheriting the disease or being in a risk group for the disease (R 11). In addition, interview participants felt that the harm experienced directly or indirectly in the family would prevent them from managing their own lives. When asked about their goals, life plans, or dreams, they were unable to define them. One respondent's memory was strongly marked by the attempted sexual abuse he experienced after returning from foster care to his biological mother's home.

When I went back to live with my mum, my stepfather tried to touch me there. I didn't want to and I said I was uncomfortable, but he kept on wanting to and tried a few times. And he said if I told Mum, he would deny it and throw me out of the house (R 10).

These experiences, as could be inferred from the statements, perpetuated in the respondents a negative image of themselves, of being the victim of a bad fate and, in particular, grounded the belief that the attempts made to change this situation were not very effective.

Feelings of loneliness or being an unwanted child

The statements of my interviewees indicated experiencing a painful sense of loneliness, lack of support, hurt, and lack of controllability in their lives. This was true for almost

every interview participant, both those who had grown up in dysfunctional families and those who had been separated from these families for various reasons:

I had a grandmother and when I was in middle school I lived with her, well unfortunately she died and even when I was 14 years old I lived alone in the house. I didn't want to go back to my parents at all. I didn't kind of have anything to do with myself (R 21).

I always thought I was a child by chance. At least my father behaved like that. Whenever he called me names, he called me names so I could hear (R 14).

According to several interview participants, having parents and being able to grow up under their care was not conducive to experiencing a sense of a family community. One respondent had a fond memory of this period:

I could almost say I grew up alone. My mother is probably psychopathic and in addition paranoid. Both my parents have narcissistic personality disorder, so my whole growing up wasn't easy. In terms of some kind of mental or emotional support, well there was never really from either parent (R 1).

The feeling of abandonment and lack of care was so acute that the respondent looked for a care facility where she could live. When she reached the age of majority, she decided to move out of her home:

And I just left the house, but I had these fantasies of leaving like that and not coming back, just leaving the house like that, leaving and the contact would stop and the trace of me would disappear. I've had fantasies like that many times before (R 1).

The answers concerning the family situation of the interview participants were always deeply considered. Respondents weighed every word carefully, and in several cases, the questions asked were so distressing for them that they either said themselves that it was too difficult for them. They did not want to talk about it, or – seeing that the questions might evoke traumatic memories – they refrained from exploring in detail topics that were painful for them. It was sometimes surprising how hard they tried to make excuses for their parents, despite experiencing such painful consequences of being raised in environments with deficits of love, safety, care, and support.

Discussion

The statements gathered in the research presented in this paper represent only selected excerpts from the poignant memories that more or less led to the homelessness crisis. Family circumstances leading to homelessness include, above all, growing up in a family with an addiction problem, experiencing violence, sexual abuse, parental death, parenting helplessness, and even abandonment resulting from a change of residence by a parent who has established a relationship with a new life partner. It should also be acknowledged that the deficits in family life reported by research participants did not in every case directly lead them to abandon the family home and choose homelessness as a better alternative.

The circumstances in which young people experience homelessness are complex. There is rarely a simple causal relationship between a single problem/deficit reported by young people and the loss of housing (Mallett, Rosenthal, & Keys, 2005; Edidin et al., 2012). The most significant factors, intertwined and consequently conducive to the transformation of housing stability into a crisis of homelessness, are precisely the complex family conflicts and experience of violence and being raised in single-parent families (Iwundu et al., 2020), in which young people experienced emotional neglect (Hyde, 2005). An important reason for experiencing homelessness in adulthood is precisely the incorrect socialisation process in primary groups (families), resulting, among other things, in poor preparation for independent living, and a lack of skills to adapt to the socio-economic or cultural situation (Moczuk, 2000). These skills can be internalised by the child in the process of imitation of significant others (parents) who implement them correctly (Bandura, 1977).

In the case of the young people involved in the research, this process should be considered as not having been realised to the extent necessary for them. Respondents often reported feelings of injustice, lack of bonds with their families, deficits in establishing relationships with others, lowered self-esteem, and lack of control over their lives. Deficits resulting from unmet needs during adolescence in families with poor coping capacities result in deficits in further important life areas and lead to incomplete education, unstable working life, neglect of health, inability to enter into relationships of an emotional nature and to start a family, joining dysfunctional environments and engaging in risky behaviour to “relieve” traumatic memories and experiences. This has been noted both in the research presented here and in measurements conducted by other researchers (Martijn, Sharpe, 2006; Rosenthal et al., 2006; Tyler, Schmitz, 2013). The authors of the study conducted on an impressive sample of 2348 individuals found that family instability in early childhood was a crucial factor in experiencing homelessness

in adulthood. Indicators of instability in childhood adopted by the researchers include any neglect, living with a substance-abusing adult, witnessing violence in the home, other dysfunctions related to household stability, as well as separations (for example resulting from a family member serving a prison sentence or growing up in foster care) and family displacement. According to the researchers, poor parenting practices, a dysfunctional family environment and violence are the main factors that increase the likelihood of a child running away from home and, consequently, the high probability of a child experiencing a crisis of homelessness (Cohen-Cline, Jones, & Vartanian, 2021).

The experience of homelessness by respondents can be seen as a combination of disordered social processes (trajectories), which consequently lead to the occurrence of suffering (Riemann, Schütze, 1991) and also to a crisis of homelessness. According to Fritz Schütze, there are several stages and mechanisms of the unfolding trajectory, which (in simplified terms) consist of:

- the accumulation of unfavourable potentials;
- the crossing of a barrier that makes it impossible to construct one's life through previous patterns of action;
- the individual's creation of a shaky, unstable equilibrium of coping with everyday life;
- its destabilisation by the accumulation of traumatic problems;
- the total inability to act, alienation and disagreement with the situation experienced (Barłóg, 2015; Schütze, 1997).

Interviews with 39 residents of four centres for homeless youth in Australia identified three trajectories most often conducive to a homelessness crisis:

- experience of trauma and mental health problems without drug or alcohol use;
- drug use and mental health problems;
- family problems and mental health problems, or neither.

These confluences of adverse circumstances were present in most respondents surveyed (Martijn, Sharpe, 2006).

Also during the interview gathering for this paper, circumstances were noted that can be tentatively considered as trajectories leading to a crisis of homelessness. Examples of overlapping adverse circumstances triggering a breakdown in life stability can be seen in many respondents. In the case of the participants described in the interviews, the parents' incompetence – resulting from various conditions – in addition to the inability to provide the child with proper role models, influenced the child's educational deficits, which after reaching adulthood

limited or excluded them from the labour market. The lack of feelings shown to them in the family home or the emotionality conditioned by the unstable psychological state of the parents in many interviewees led to relational deficits, a lack of ability to establish and maintain contact, resignation when minor, everyday problems appeared, excessive openness, sometimes submissiveness, entering into risky relationships. In addition, reaching for psychoactive substances or engaging in self-aggressive behaviour – as observed or “proven” methods to reduce any suffering – exacerbated their loneliness, stigmatised them and fostered the accumulation of physical and mental health problems. Overconfidence in strangers, who gave them the illusion of being in a relationship, in several cases – especially in women – ended up severely harming them, requiring long-term psychological help. This was not undertaken, which also exacerbated their experience of crisis.

Research conducted between 2022 and 2023 among the wards of the *Po Drugie* Foundation draws attention to the multifaceted and multidimensional nature of the determinants of this phenomenon, where apart from the causes identified in families and also in the individual predispositions of young people, attention was also drawn to the need to revise the existing care and systemic support for this group. However, this research has been presented extensively, so it is only noted here that much deeper explorations have been carried out with this group, which are available to those concerned (Granosik et al., 2023).

Conclusion

According to FEANTSA, youth homelessness “is primarily the result of social injustice and inequality manifested in structural barriers and systemic failures, rather than the result of individual circumstances or personal failures” (FEANTSA, 2020). This injustice is primarily treating people who have crossed the “magic” age of majority as adults, while offering them a system of assistance aimed at adults, such as referral to adult night shelters, offering a place in a shelter or conditioning the use of the assistance system on compliance with the requirements for permanently homeless adults. Reaching the age of 18 is not a cut-off point that will make a young person with broken family ties, trauma, little social support, education at a level that allows for a low-stable job, poor mental health and often addictions suddenly mature and ready to fulfil the social roles ascribed to adults. Cognitively, emotionally and psychologically, people develop until the age of 23, but even this time – when experiencing difficulties that often have a childhood history – should in many cases be covered by psychological and social support different from the adult support system. The creation of cut-off points (25

or 26 years) should also be considered on a case-by-case basis, as some individuals may require such support up to 30 (FEANTSA, 2020). Some of these young people continue to be dependent on support from their carers until they have acquired the skills, experience and resources necessary to be self-sufficient (Fingerman et al., 2012; Tyler, Schmitz, 2013).

The activities of the *Po Drugie* Foundation, where the research was conducted, are an exemplary practice of multifaceted support leading to the gradual independence of its charges. Of course, this happens only with the cooperation of the person in crisis, “giving in” and being guided by the people employed by the foundation: psychologists, addiction therapists, lawyers, social workers, caretakers of the training flats and the Youth House, all the people coordinating the activities of the foundation, headed by President A. Sikora, who in their work are guided by knowledge and many years of experience, but above all by empathy, patience and cordiality towards young people experiencing homelessness. The *Po Drugie* Foundation is probably the only organisation providing fully comprehensive care for such a highly deprived group, which young adults from all over Poland benefit from. Based on research carried out among the foundation’s charges and representatives of aid institutions, it has been established that in working with young people in the crisis of homelessness it is essential:

- securing a shelter in decent conditions;
- bringing about emotional stability;
- rebuilding or building self-esteem;
- restoring mental stability (therapies for trauma, addictions, mental disorders, etc.);
- motivating for education, finding employment;
- preparing for the proper performance of social roles;
- preparing for independent running of the household (for this purpose, the so-called “training flats,” in which young people have the opportunity to train independence – here still monitored and supported are proving useful) (Granosik et al., 2023).

These are just some of the interventions implemented by the *Po Drugie* Foundation. Their effectiveness is confirmed by people who are graduates of the process of becoming independent, currently pursuing their careers, continuing their education, getting married, training and working as streetworkers assisting people experiencing homelessness, having skills and performing roles they could not acquire due to growing up in families that prevented them from acquiring such role models. The familial determinants of homelessness are an acute problem for those experiencing homelessness, but also for the society in which these

people are forced into a breakneck existence. Adequate and appropriately guided interventions can, however, foster the achievement of mental balance and the restoration or acquisition of the skills necessary for life tasks.

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