

Monitoring street homelessness in the Old Town of Bratislava

The number of homeless people in Bratislava is not decreasing, and is an ongoing issue. The latest city count did not provide accurate results - it showed 2,064 homeless people but in reality the figure is around 6,000. As a 'count' it focused on numbers but this does not produce useful information, for social services or the city, on what homeless people really need to leave the cycle of street homelessness.

The [NGO oz STOPA Slovensko](#) are participating in the European End Street Homelessness Campaign co-ordinated by World Habitat¹. As part of this campaign we held a Connections Week from 22-27 June 2018. We conducted a street survey to find out the real needs of homeless people in Bratislava Old Town, and to understand better the type of homelessness in this area. Our main goal was not just to count the number of homeless people, but to have a greater understanding of the needs of the individuals behind the numbers. It is essential that we, as a social service, know what people really need to be able to respond to them rationally and professionally. Our aim is ending homelessness and not keeping people in hopelessness, learned helplessness and apathy towards their environment, and also to themselves.

Our outcomes:

The outcomes have been acknowledged by professional organisations dealing with this issue in Europe. Capital cities can be attractive places to live for people in crisis, with the idea that they bring change, a fresh start, hope, anonymity and refuge. In contrast with many other European capitals and countries, in Bratislava and Slovakia homelessness is ignored. There is no legal definition of homelessness in this country, and this adversely affects the recognition of the problem, the availability of services and the allocation of resources. There is also an issue with the non-existence of some social services such as rapid rehousing. This is a major contributing factor to increasing homelessness despite relatively good economic indicators.

But we are not just aiming to be critical, even if the situation demands our criticism. Our aim is to help with finding and delivering solutions to homelessness. Thanks to some professional workers in social departments, we are able to start working together on this issue. For example, we were actively involved in working with the municipal council to develop a strategy around ending homelessness and they have pro-actively joined us in the campaign.

NGO oz STOPA Slovensko will be working with the Social Department of the city of Bratislava and partners from other countries to prevent street homelessness.

Core information about our Connections Week:

When: 22 – 27 June 2018 (5 days, at different times each day)

Where: Old Town of Bratislava

Partners: NGO oz STOPA Slovensko, Social Department of the city of Bratislava, volunteers

Total number of homeless people identified: 123

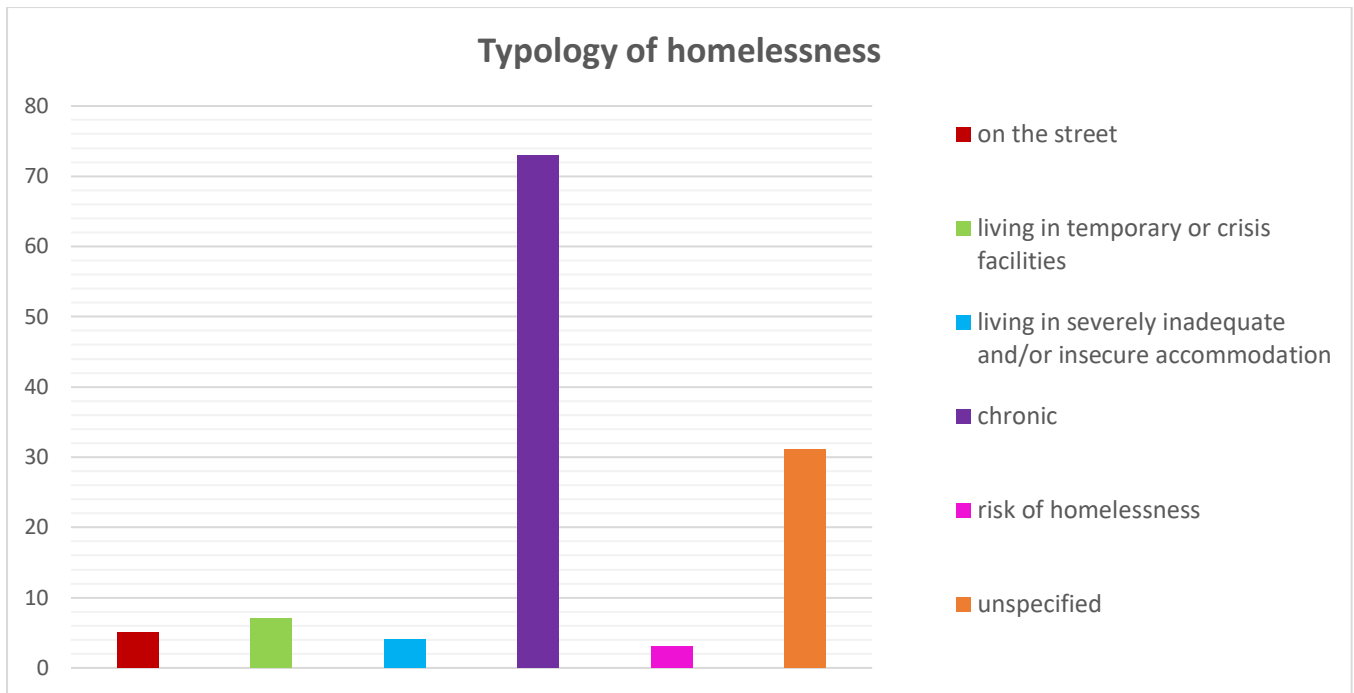
¹ <https://www.world-habitat.org/our-programmes/homelessness/>



Categories of homelessness:

We used the following categories of homelessness, some adapted from the ETHOS categories (European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion) developed by FEANTSA and used by World Habitat in the European End Street Homelessness Campaign.

- a) **People on the street ("homeless", "without accommodation"):** short-term, people in crisis, without information about support and assistance, avoiding or ignoring the homeless community. They use combined services, especially integration centres. Very difficult to identify by outreach workers and communities.
- b) **People living in temporary or crisis facilities:** different types of shelters, crisis houses, etc.
- c) **People living in severely inadequate and/or insecure accommodation:** chalets, canals, places providing partial/basic protection.
- d) **People with complex needs:** people with psychiatric diagnosis, physical disabilities combined with one of the homeless typologies, a combination of three or more issues, such as addiction, illness and homelessness.
- e) **Chronic street homeless:** refers to those who are long-term street homeless, many of whom choose not to engage with support services.



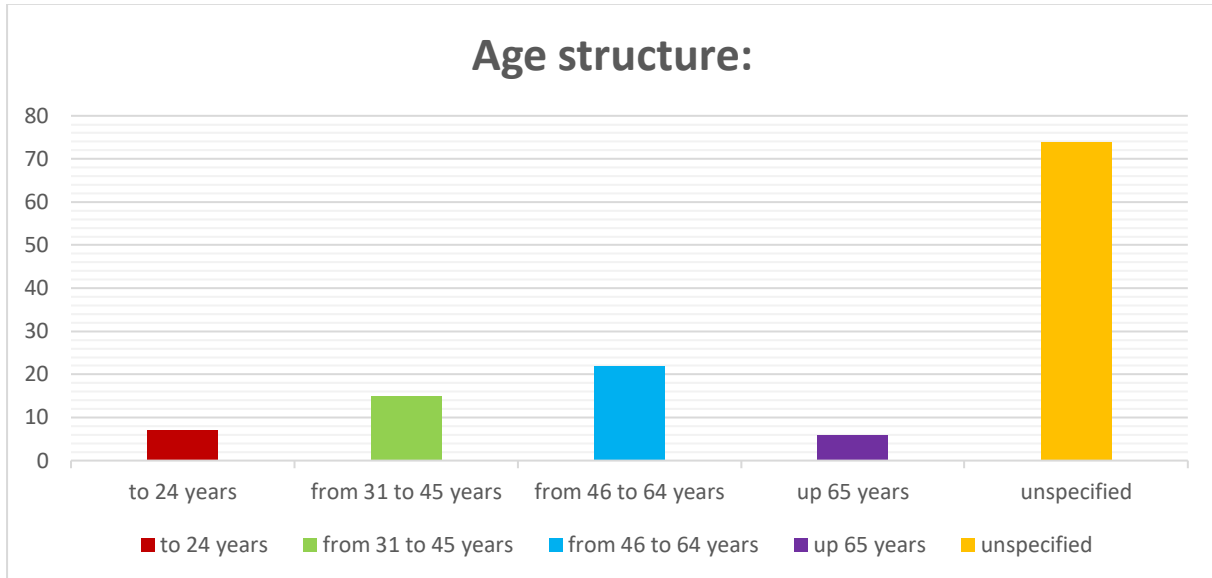
As shown in the graph, chronic street homelessness is dominant in this area. However, this is not true for the entire city of Bratislava. The Old Town, and especially its historical centre, is an area where this group of homeless people actively gather. Some of the individuals there have faced 'chronic homelessness' and do not engage with services in any way. The survey, and our different type of approach, meant that many still chose to speak to us about their situation and needs. The interviews showed that this group had spent between five and 25 years on the street.

To survive, those who are long-term street homeless may build a community together and support each other in situations. They may be offered food and other care by outreach teams, and tourists often give money to those who beg. Those who are on the streets for a long time (chronic street homeless) are not in a realistic position to think about having a different life to what they have become used to over time. So often, when our teams ask someone they say they are 'okay' and their situation is satisfactory. But when we find out more about that person, we know that this is not necessarily the full or real picture.

Age structure:

In terms of our survey findings, the majority of homeless people were found to be of working age. This is important information for social services that work to build independence and support integration into society. We identified that finding a stable job is often not the main problem in this area. The problem is the absence of adequate transitional accommodation, such as rapid rehousing or temporary/supported housing, which aims to stabilise a person and prepare them for an independent life beyond social services.

Another indicator is the growing number of young people and people who have left orphan houses. This issue is alarming, not only in our country but also across Europe. These young people (including those who in other countries may be referred to as 'care leavers') are over-represented in homelessness figures and should be a priority target for early intervention. We are looking at and discussing these challenges together with the Social Department of the city of Bratislava. This includes looking at the experience of other countries that have created models to prevent crisis and the subsequent homelessness of young people leaving 'the care system'.

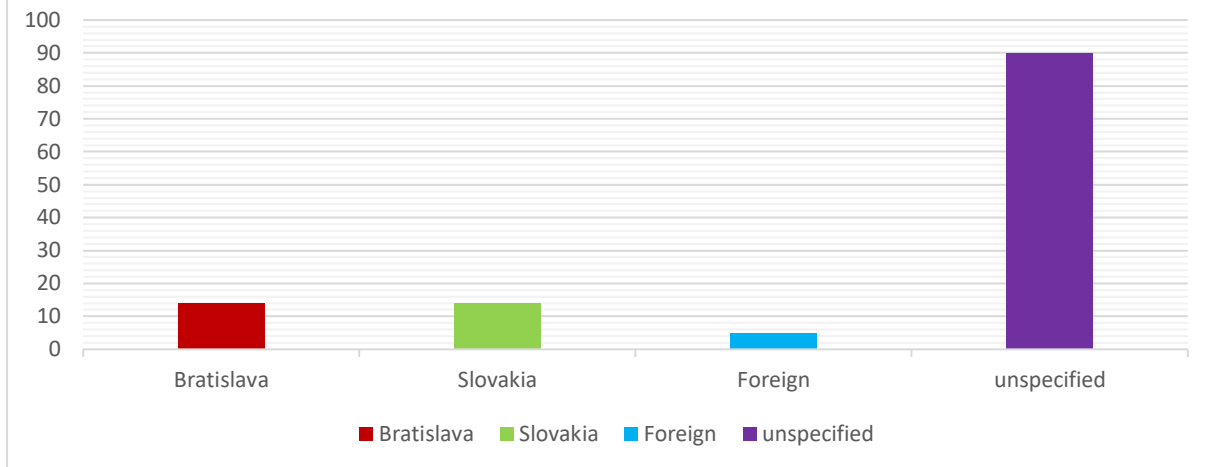


Homelessness and migration:

Bratislava and the wider region have the highest migration in the country – which includes people in crisis, those who are homeless, and travellers. Cities with a high concentration of people can give a feeling of anonymity, but also hope – for a new start for example. But Bratislava has become a place where many people's hopes have disappeared. Our survey showed that a large percentage of people do not have a permanent - or any kind of - residence in the city of Bratislava, and they also do not have access to social support from the city, local districts, state institutions or social services. Many of these people have no ID for various reasons, including loss or theft of these documents. A home, the support of others, and our own identity are all things which give our lives meaning and structure – and a base on which to build for the future. Without these things, it is hard for any of us to have hopes and dreams or to plan ahead.

As the capital city, people from many other towns and municipalities migrate to Bratislava. For this reason, we encourage these municipalities outside of Bratislava to actively consider and address this issue. The number of new people in crisis and homelessness coming to the capital city is constantly growing and social services have been unable to address the situation due to a lack of resources. Despite their efforts, the number of successfully integrated people is very small.

Homelessness and migration:



Conclusion:

This was the first time we have conducted surveys, gathered evidence and monitored homelessness in this way in this area. In the next few months we will be replicating the Connections Week approach in other parts of the city with the same goal. The aim is to map the whole city to speak with people who are homeless, ascertain the real situation and identify possible solutions. Based on the results, we will be able to more effectively deliver services, and also help find solutions to this issue at the legislative and state level.

The situation is alarming and we believe it is time to start listening to and addressing the needs of homeless people in Slovakia. We all have responsibility for this.

The track record in Slovakia, including in Bratislava and other towns and municipalities, has not been good enough in the past with regards to recognising, preventing and ending homelessness. While the State has ultimate responsibility for this, no-one has done enough or been able to do enough. Sometimes when the State or services have offered support the approach has mistakenly created a dependency in the very people we have tried to help towards independent, fulfilling and stable lives.

But things are beginning to change. NGOs and some government departments and services are starting to work together. We are speaking with those who are homeless and building the evidence of what is needed to help them out of homelessness. And we are sharing with and learning from other European countries and cities who, like us, want to lead the way in finding sustainable solutions. We invite you to join us in working together to end homelessness.