Merit versus Necessity: Housing First and its Forms in Practice

Jan Váně

Department of Sociology, University of West Bohemia, Czech Republic
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5109-505X

> **Abstract_** The aim of the present study is to illustrate the process of putting the Housing First concept into practice in the city of Pilsen in the Czech Republic and the unintended consequences associated with it. The research is based on ethnographic methods and involved not only participatory observations but interviews with the relevant actors—people in hostels for the poor, social workers (NGOs, state/city organisations) and influencers from the political scene.

> **Keywords_** Housing first, social housing, merit, necessity, the Czech Republic

Introduction

The growing phenomenon of homelessness affects an increasingly large number of municipalities in the Czech Republic and appears to be a structural problem that cannot be solved by legal directives or proclamatory and spectacular gestures during political campaigns.[1] The last nationwide data collection, which took place in 2019, estimates the number of homeless people in the Czech Republic (10.6 million inhabitants as of 2019) was 23 800 (Nešporová *et al.*, 2019). Homeless people

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[1]   In most cases, just before the elections, especially in the case of municipal elections. (e.g. https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/ubytovny-a-bezpecnost-to-je-hlavni-tema-kampane-v-plzni-jednoduchy-recept-ale-strany-nemaji-56710 or https://www.plzen.cz/v-plzni-je-rekordni-pocet-bezdomovcu-mesto-nekona-rika-lidr-ano-zarzycky [quoted on 10 August 2019]).

clearly belong among the most socially vulnerable groups, because the loss of one's home, or the threat of this loss, contributes significantly to the threat and loss of one's security (Nemiroff, 2010; Ravenhill, 2014), without which it is difficult to realise the goals and aims of a good life. Certain abbreviations and key words, such as 'social exclusion', accompany homelessness, and all connote separation from mainstream society. Homelessness has also come to be defined as the inability to access 'essential housing', an acknowledgment that housing is fundamental to our basic well-being.

Homelessness is increasingly being paid attention both around the world and in the Czech Republic (e.g. Hradecký, 2008). Homelessness has become an integral part of all major cities, which represent the catchment areas of socio-economic life in the localities. Analyses of the causes of homelessness in the Czech Republic are relatively recent. Prior to 1989, this phenomenon 'did not occur' for ideological reasons and also because the social and structural changes caused by the transformation of industrial society into post-industrial society have become increasingly visible only since the second half of the 1990s.

Long-term risk factors for homelessness, as well as those at risk of homelessness— a fall into homelessness[2] on the basis of a low level of education, as a result of a personal biography associated with deprivation acquired in dysfunctional families, addiction/dependence on alcohol or drugs, unemployment and so on—are the subject of a whole host of studies (e.g. Caton *et al.*, 2005; Keys *et al.*, 2006; Ferguson, 2009; Berg, 2016). Politically, these problems have largely been either downplayed or ignored. Regional elections (regional and municipal councils) are the exception: problems with homelessness are publicised, and 'quick and effective', albeit often repressive, solutions are forwarded. The growth of the homeless population has caused concern in city districts, often to the extent that local politicians have begun to seek a long-term, systematic solution to the situation. This is a positive development; major Czech cities are beginning to address homelessness and are looking for tools and strategies to solve the problem (e.g. Toušek, 2009; Šnajdrová and Holpuch, 2010; Prudký *et al.*, 2011; Váně and Kalvas, 2014; Váně and Kalvas, 2015; Černá *et al.*, 2018; Vágnerová *et al.*, 2018; Váně, 2018a; Váně, 2018b; Sosna and Brunclíková, 2019; Černá, 2019). But more legislative support is needed for these efforts to be successful.[3] The state must also declare its intention to systematically address the issue of homelessness by, for example, increasing political support for an analysis of welfare policy and homelessness (O'Sullivan, 2011; Pleace, 2011; Anderson *et al.*, 2016).

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[2]   The fall into homelessness occurs in several stages, i.e. in the process of decreasing chances of retention and hence reintegration into the majority society (Hutson and Liddiard, 1994).

[3]   About the definition of homelessness in Czech Republic Legislation see Appendix No.1.

The strategy that has begun to gain attention in Czech cities is connected with Housing First[4] (HF), a concept that is increasingly recognised by both experts and political representatives abroad as the most effective model (as opposed to a strategy known as Housing ready[5] [HR]) for helping to integrate homeless people (Sahlin, 2005; Pleace, 2008). Originally created in New York in the 1990s, the model targets primarily the chronically homeless and is expanding gradually to other subgroups of homeless people (cf. FEANTSA typology[6]). The increasing effectiveness of this service (Culhane, 2008; Pleace, 2008; Pleace, 2016; Tsemberis, 2010; Woodhall-Melnik and Dunn, 2015) has led to a turnaround in the approach to and reintegration of homeless people by political representatives in the US and Europe, and the trend is manifesting itself slowly in the Czech Republic. The most advanced phase, 'rapid re-housing', has so far been achieved in the city of Brno (e.g. Černá *et al*., 2018). In addition to Brno and Pilsen, social housing projects influenced by the principles of Housing First are also being implemented in the cities of Ostrava, Prague, Rokycany, Jihlava and others.[7]

In the next section, I will describe how implementation of the Housing First concept is taking place in the Czech regional city of Pilsen, where HF ideas are being applied through a pilot project called 'Social Housing'. My aim is to show how good intentions have given rise to a number of complications for those most concerned: (1) as unintended consequences of efforts to improve the situation and (2) as a result of different value approaches.

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[4] In summary, Housing First provides immediate or near immediate access to housing, alongside support to maintain that housing. For other principles, see Pleace (2016, p.12) or Quilgars and Pleace (2016, p.6).

[5] Housing ready assumes that if temporary accommodation is to be provided to needy (homeless) individuals, they must first change their own behaviour, which is particularly true concerning their active drug or alcohol dependence, or in the debts they have incurred. Of course, there are discussions about which model is more effective (Pleace, 2008; Quilgars and Pleace, 2016). Alongside these two basic models, there are others, for example, a housing-led model (similar but not identical to Housing First) and Treatment As Usual (TAU). For these models, cf. e.g. Gulcur *et al*., 2007.

[6] https://www.feantsa.org/download/ethos2484215748748239888.pdf [quoted on 10 August 2019].

[7] In the years 2016 – 2020, the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs launched a project entitled "Support for Social Housing", which aims to develop social housing in the Czech Republic. A total of 16 municipalities, including Pilsen, have applied to participate in the project, and are trying to implement local social housing concepts.

Background

Pilsen is the fourth largest city in the Czech Republic (158 000 inhabitants as of 2019) and is a natural catchment area for the Pilsen Region (586 000 inhabitants as of 2019) and beyond. It lies just 100km west of the capital city of Prague on a key road to Bavaria, a major business partner of the Czech Republic. Pilsen is an important industrial city that attracts workers from a wide area. Its industrial tradition and geographical location make it a sought-after city for both domestic and foreign companies, including foreign workers. However, these trends have resulted in an increasing number of the noticeably homeless as well as those at risk of latent homelessness. Research from 2014 (census) showed that a total of 241 persons in the City of Pilsen were in the category of overt homelessness (Váně and Kalvas, 2014, p.19). The last nationwide collection, which took place in 2019, estimates the number of homeless people in the Pilsen Region to be 2 524 (Nešporová *et al*., 2019).

The problem of housing for both those at risk of homelessness and those already on the street is exacerbated by the current labour market. Due to a high demand for labour and essentially non-existent unemployment aid, together with a vast, expanding industrial zone at the city's edge (established in the 1990s), the labour market is currently experiencing a lack of staff. Labour demand has opened up unprecedented opportunities for employment agencies to import into Pilsen labour from Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania, Bulgaria and Poland. In addition, many hostels have closed in recent years due to an amendment to the Assistance in Material Need Act (as of June 2017, housing supplements for hostels were reduced), while others have been transformed into hostels for foreign workers.

Increasing numbers of homeless people and the chronisation of this problem as a political topic in Pilsen gradually led to the public view that Housing First (HF) should be implemented Since there were virtually no comprehensive and long-term strategies to tackle homelessness in Pilsen (except repression), the HF concept at least presented a plan. Different management strategies and solutions to address homelessness are still being used in regional capitals. In Pilsen, there are groups with different opinions concerning homelessness. On the one hand, non-profit organisations (NGOs) work with homeless people as their clients. These NGOs have long pointed out the need to address the homeless situation and its associated problems—housing, increasing adult indebtedness and seizures imposed on families and children (most often related to non-payment of public transport fines). The HF concept is ideologically close to this group (NGO), which has been making long-term demands for the implementation of HF principles. On the other hand are the political representatives of the city who work with the problem of homelessness, especially during election campaigns. When they promise or demonstrate decisive-

ness in solving this social problem, their solutions often call for reinforced repression. For example, the spectacular 'visit' to the hostels of foreign workers by the Minister of the Interior or the Mayor to demonstrate that this group of problem citizens is being closely monitored and that the problem will be addressed and resolved vigorously.[8]

But the pressures of reality have gradually led city representatives to seek functional solutions to problems associated with homeless people. Paradoxically, this occurred during a boom period of employment (as of 31 June 2019, the Labour Office, Pilsen Regional Branch reported a 1.9% unemployment rate in the Pilsen Region).[9] That is, previous political unwillingness to 'assist the homeless' changed when it seemed that there was nothing easier than to get a job; that is, when there was plenty of money available to secure housing. The reason for the city leadership's change in attitude is that many homeless hostels were transformed into hostels for foreign workers, a more lucrative option for the hostels' owners. The second reason that changed the attitudes of town hall involved repeated attempts by the government to amend the Act on Assistance in Material Need, [10] the result of which threatened to cast a relatively large number of people onto the streets in a very short period of time. This raised concerns and the need to address the situation, which included the use of expert studies on homelessness in Pilsen (Toušek, 2009; Váně and Kalvas, 2014; Vašát, 2014; Váně and Kalvas, 2015; Vašát *et al*., 2017; Bernard *et al*., 2018; Váně, 2018a; Váně, 2018b; Sosna and Brunclíková, 2019; Simon *et al*., 2019).

After a series of discussions and political negotiations amongst non-profit organisations, political representatives and relevant departments of the municipality, the Department of Social Security (DSS) launched a pilot project called "Social

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[8]   https://www.idnes.cz/plzen/zpravy/bezdomovci-plzen-ubytovna-pracovni-agentura. A161017_141828_plzen-zpravy_pp [quoted on 22 August 2019].

[9]   https://portal.mpsv.cz/upcr/kp/plk/statistiky/trh_prace_pk.pdf [quoted on 22 August 2019].

[10] One of the dangers facing large cities was the amendment to the Act on Assistance in Material Need (No. 252/2014 Coll.), which came into effect on 1 January 2015. The aim of amending the legislation was to change the most problematic and most frequently abused social security benefit in the Czech Republic, which is the housing supplement. The proposed change to the law was set so that the housing supplement would be provided for the space, rather than being assigned based on the number of people. Until 2015, social benefits (especially housing allowances) were sent to a person who applied for and had been granted a claim. However, it was never taken into account how many people actually reside in the area. This opened the way to the operation of apartments or hostels, where a large number of people accumulated in a small space. The new law foresees that the maximum rent will be set according to the usual amount in the given place. In reality, there is a risk that with a fall in income for "human misery traders", which will not pay for the operation of hostels, there will be a group of people who will have nowhere to go and who will end up on the street.

Housing" in March 2017. The project, which is scheduled to run until February 2020, aims to: (a) accelerate the pace of assistance, (b) start tackling the situations of those most in need—families with children and those who are at risk of losing the roof over their heads.[11] In other words, the project targeted primarily those who were not yet chronically homeless—those who were close to losing their housing and those living in extremely disadvantageous housing conditions in hostels, sometimes with children.

Implementation of the Social Housing project reflected a dispute over who should be eligible for assistance, the criteria used to determine eligibility and what form the actual process of housing allocation should take. This is a common issue in any city that is even willing to address the issue of homeless inclusion (e.g. Hansen Löfstrand and Juhila, 2012). The impacts of this pilot project, as well as a closer look at its first phase, are discussed later.

Research Design

Approach, strategy and methods

To address this research, a qualitative method and case study strategy were used (Yin, 2013). The study employs a multi-method design, including participant observation, narrative interviews with residents of the homeless hostels and semi-structured interviews. Data were obtained in the following steps: (1) Unstructured and subsequently semi-structured interviews with service clients, random selection with practitioners via snowball sampling (Bryman, 2012); (2) In-depth interviews with clients (24 interviews), interviews with practitioners: with social workers from non-profit organisations (NGOs) and organisations linked to the city (5 interviews) who have been working long term in the field and interviews with politicians (3 interviews).

A total of 24 interviews were conducted in cooperation with field workers from the organisation Ponton and twenty selected hostels were visited. All residents in each homeless hostel were asked what caused them to be homeless (this question served as a filter). Only respondents who selected 'other' as their response to this question (i.e. they did not select any of the pre-formulated reasons: high rent, easier to find money to live in a hostel, being in rent arrears, divorce, separation, widowhood, the housing provider lost their housing, retirement) were asked whether they would participate in an in-depth interview. The aim was to find respondents whose main reason for dwelling in hostels was not due to debt. As I will show later, this factor significantly complicates one's chances of acquiring social housing.

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[11] For exact conditions regarding the selection of tenants for vacant social housing owned by the city, see https://soubor.plzen.eu/situace/default/546 [quoted on 8 September 2019].

Overall, 105 respondents from 16 hostels (4 of which were shelters) were approached. Of the 105 respondents approached, 40 had selected 'other' as their reason for homelessness. Of these, 24 were willing to participate in an in-depth interview, the purpose of which was to determine why they had lost their housing, thereby discovering how much they knew about the Social Housing project started by the municipality of Pilsen.

The data gathered were analysed according to the principles of thematic analysis (Ezzy, 2002) and grounded theory (Alasuutari, 1995; Charmaz, 2006). All interviews were recorded with the informed consent of the interviewees and served as the basis for a separate analysis. The recruiting of respondents began in December 2017. The first interviews with respondents were conducted in January 2018 and continued until April 2018. All interviews were conducted in private at hours and in places recommended by the participants, who were given pseudonyms to protect their identities. The research followed ethical codes and guidelines (Punch, 2014).

Findings

Need versus merit

The problem of launching the Housing First pilot project is expected to be multi-layered. Conflicts between DSS and the Housing Department (HD) appear to arise due to disputes concerning the criteria for merit and necessity. While the DSS emphasised *necessity* (as implied by HF principles) when implementing the project, the HD, despite all possible efforts and discussions with its representatives and political superiors, strictly applied the principle of *merit*.

On the one hand, there were proclamatory statements that seemed unambiguous in their intentions, and even came from the mouths of those political representatives who have an impact on the progress of the implementation: *"The pilot project is to help show that we care about these people and who needs the most help [i.e. the allocation of a flat in a social housing project]"(Politician).* In practice, however, it turned out that even the so-called most needy (without a clear consensus as to who they are and how to differentiate them) must go through a selection process that complicated the original practice (merit) because the criteria used to define need and merit became muddled, leading to a confusing situation for all stakeholders.

The issue of trust

The Social Housing project was born out of great complication, and the DSS encoun-tered distrust from several sides—primarily the NGO and political representatives—during its implementation. The distrust of NGOs stemmed from long-standing tensions between them and the DSS. However, this distrust was lessened during the preparation and launch of the project, and at least some of the NGOs granted the DSS a degree of legitimacy and merit. As one of the NGO's workers put it:

We knew that the Social Services Department had an 'in the drawer' project that they didn't want to tell anyone about. This was the amendment (and change in the payment of social benefits), and we didn't know how the city would approach it. And we were very afraid of the attitude of the housing department, because we had the experience we have. (…) But then, we saw that the department knows what it is doing, understands those people, understands the stories, understands how individual, fickle it is, how difficult dealing with the employment office is, how unreliable the benefits are, and actually how problematic are the performance, debt, and so on, (…) There was a bit of confusion at the beginning of the project, the criteria of admission to the project were not quite clear, and so on, but I judged that we couldn't do better either, because actually there couldn't be justice in the allocation. (NGO)

Deservingness

NGO officials recognized, albeit with repeated reservations, the meaningfulness of the DSS's intention. The project was perceived even less favourably by the city's political representatives. The intention of helping homeless people was questioned by the public and elements of the city's management. In their view, because they do not want to work and they have accumulated debt, homeless people are solely responsible for their situation. This seemed especially true considering the economic boom. They refused to argue that if one does not have a roof over one's head or faces ending up on the street, one's need to repay one's debts is zero.

In addition, politicians expressed fear of losing support for homeless people by losing the support of the majority of the city's population, because the electorate could (and still do) conclude that politicians betray them: someone undeserving, without the necessary merits, is being helped. The neoliberal discourse that dominates the Czech environment (Krčál, 2017) ignores/conceals the fact that social, cultural and economic capital is distributed and reproduced asymmetrically among population groups. People who get stuck in the lowest social levels find it increasingly difficult, even in the strongly egalitarian Czech Republic, to escape the lowest social levels, a goal which is strongly correlated with educational aspirations and the very few opportunities that exist (Hamplová and Katrňák, 2018).

The reserved attitudes of the city's political representatives towards solving the problem of homelessness translate into terminological disputes or grow into discursive fights. The town hall management, represented in this case by housing, considers and identifies practically all flats offered by the city as social housing. This attitude is the result of economic considerations. Representatives of the HD, and politicians associated with it, pointed out that private sector flats in the city are rented for 100 to 200 CZK (€3.80 to €7.60) per square metre, while the city rented its best flats for 82 CZK (€3.10) per square metre. For dwellings which are catego-

rized with a coefficient of 1.0 or lower—in which the coefficient reflects the quality of the house/flat—rental prices are even lower. In comparison with the private sector, the representatives of the city and the HD consider virtually all three thousand flats owned and rented by the city to be social housing.

Decision making

Implementation of the DSS social housing project was begun in this context. However, the HD continued to have a decisive influence on the process of allocating flats to selected candidates. As the DSS does not itself have any flats that it could offer at its discretion, no decision could be made without the participation of the HD.

This fact has significantly influenced the attitudes of both NGOs and hostels for the poor, who viewed the HD with extreme suspicion.. Resentment towards the HD results from a lack of clarity in assigning points when assessing whether a flat applicant (standard/social) meets the set conditions (such as proof of income, indebtedness, number of potential household members, etc.).

Until now, any de facto citizen of the city seeking a city flat applied to the HD, which assessed the applicant on the basis of the set criteria.[12] The applicant was subsequently informed in writing of the number of points he had earned and whether or not he was entitled to the flat. Alternatively, he would be told how many people are ahead of him on the waiting list for a city flat. Key criteria included lack of debt, criminal integrity and proof of income.

The main problem, however, is that the overwhelming majority of people staying in hostels do not have sufficient education to understand all of the administrative and legal requirements of the application process. In many cases, they did not even understand the meaning of the score they had been assigned. As a result, the only information that was comprehensible to them was that they had not been allocated their flat, and that there were a number of people on the waiting list ahead of them. Mostly, their next step was to wait passively, comforted perhaps by the fact that 'there are only 42 waiting, and the city has a lot of flats, so I think it will work out in time' (Respondent from the hostel). Another reason why respondents did not consider submitting a new application, even when their circumstances had changed (getting a job, birth of another child, etc.) was because they were not able to deduce from the written notification what they could do to improve their chances. If they did not ask for help from social workers, their chances of changing the office's decision or appeal would be lost.

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[12] https://www.plzen.eu/urad/vyridte-si-na-uradu/o_9/skupina_mmp/oblast-bytova-9.aspx [quoted on 10 September 2019].

Role of indebtedness

The reasons for not doing so can often be linked to the existence of a debt to the city. It is this debt that represents a key point of controversy in the introduction/ rejection of the HF concept, or its modified form in the social housing pilot project. When introducing the social housing project, the city decided to reduce the strict requirements for indebtedness. As of 1 June 2018, the rule that stipulated complete indebtedness as a condition for application was removed. The applicant, plus possible roommates or family, can owe up to 30 000 CZK (€1 154). However, the applicant must acknowledge the debt, make arrangements for a repayment schedule and receive the support of a social worker to help the family in debt management and social inclusion.

The problem is that this rule of acceptance of 'acceptable debt' was not yet in force at the time of data collection, and was only shared among a narrow circle of those 'in the know'. In addition, although the tolerance of 30 000 CZK (€1 154) debt can be seen as a shift in the right direction, representing the first penetration of HF principles into the homelessness agenda, it is still very difficult to overcome this limit in the examined environment. Two social workers described why potential applicants for social housing (affordable housing in general) do not bother trying:

> Why are they afraid to try it [submit another request]? We know it from the ground. X times we came with the client to the transport companies, that we wanted to get the client out of debt, that he wants to start repaying for one of those times he was caught by an inspector, and that he can pay 200 CZK (€7.60) per month. But it began to happen that they [bailiffs] noticed the man by starting to repay one of his debts, and then they just went ahead with the execution of the bailiff's order. I am convinced that there is a long-term business with the city's receivables, with the debt being sold to friendly lawyers and then to bailiffs. This concerns many millions, even hundreds of millions in business. It is an economic leverage; the city should recover the debt, and not resell it. We dealt with some of these debts x times. That is, they don't actually ask, because they're going to report to bailiffs, and that would tell them. (Social worker)

Because as soon as he finds out how big the enemy is, suddenly the fear will be justified. They poke their heads in the sand. And he knows he has debts, but yesterday nobody confronted them, not today either, so tomorrow probably not either. What about me, what can they take? Nothing, why would I deal with it? (Social worker)

The anticipated debt to the city, along with the ignorance of its size (in view of the continuously increasing penalties), leads to the adoption of passive tactics to solve life's problems. The debts and the 'enforcement policy' of the city, which sells debts to bailiffs linked to them, are de facto an insurmountable obstacle for applicants for

urban flats. Respondents expressed fear and desperation of such a situation and reported the bailiff's harshness and stubbornness in recovering the debts.

Lack of information

In addition to debt, which is the biggest obstacle, the complicated disclosure of information about the project in progress has proven to be another barrier to improving the situation. Information about the project among those to whom it was primarily addressed received only fragmentary information indirectly through several filters (non-profit, roommates, relatives, etc.). The information was contaminated with a number of 'side-effects'. This unclear and incomplete disclosure of information led to respondents from hostels being unable to distinguish between an application for a city flat and an application for a social flat. The inability to distinguish is quite understandable: the standard rhetoric of both politicians and the HD included the claim that all flats are actually social housing.

The answer to the question as to why information about the project 'leaked' gradually and was not declared adequately and comprehensibly from the beginning, has a rather trivial explanation. It turns out that DSS was given space to carry out the project under preparation, but with a very limited number of 35 flats. DSS did not know how large a number it would have to accommodate, or even when. Only over a year after the start of the project did it become known that the dwellings allocated to the 'project fund' would number at most fifty, but it has never been made clear when and how they will be ready for habitation. There was, therefore, a concern on the DSS side that direct disclosure would lead to an overwhelming number of applications for the flats, a reference to the necessity criterion that accompanies allocation of a social flat. The intention was therefore not to generate demand that could not be met from the outset. The DSS wanted to prevent any initial complications from jeopardising the implementation of the project, and not provide excuses for critics of the project.

This led to another unintended effect. The gradual leakage of project information among homeless hostels and shelters resulted in the interviewees becoming convinced that the flats were now ready, which increased their chances of getting them. This created a false hope, albeit unintentionally, that prompted an even greater degree of disappointment in an already frustrated environment.

> Yeah, I have an income, so we have something to pay it with. So I hope it works out. And as I hear, there are people who have a flat in a few months and get a flat. Well, now, as if I were interested in getting a flat, we would arrange it. So maybe it will work out quickly, when the flats are for us, what we need it. (Respondent from a homeless hostel)

The increased expectations of hostel respondents were further fuelled by the 'whisper' that getting a flat would only be a matter of time—flats would be given to all who ask, it was claimed, including foreigners (especially Slovaks). This fiction was rooted in another misunderstanding of the situation, itself a result of mixed messaging from various sources. It was based on the experiences of clients who had received information from their relatives in the town of Rokycany, who, according to their testimonies, were supposed to easily obtain social flats. Two facts demonstrate the transmission of this information between related families and friendly individuals.

A large number of the people in hostels are of the Roma ethnic group, which is broadly linked by family ties, regardless of nationality to Czechs or Slovaks, and the town of Rokycany, with a large Roma group, is less than 20km from Pilsen. The inhabitants of this city commute to Pilsen for work. However, the social policy of the city of Rokycany is distinct from that of the City of Pilsen. This fact was unknown to the respondents, who assumed that when a small town such as Rokycany (15 000 inhabitants) operates social housing, then a similar process must be operating in Pilsen.

Application process

The shift in the introduction of social housing has now (September 2019) taken on the following form. As in the case of an application for any city flat, the applicant for a social flat must continue to submit a written application in accordance with the rules laid down by the city's HD. This application is scored, and based on the data provided it is determined whether or not there is a housing shortage. A DSS social worker examines the facts for those applicants assessed as a risk group— that is, the level of need of the person seeking housing and if that person has been excluded from housing. If the social worker finds that the applicant is in compliance with the intentions and rules laid down for social housing, then his/her application is again submitted to the HD for processing.

However, the unintended consequence is that the process of selection (assistance) has been significantly complicated. If the applicant had previously demonstrated his 'merit' (no debts, city citizen, etc.), which was quantified on a point-by-point basis, a combination of 'merit' and 'necessity' has now taken place. The social worker is supposed to determine the veracity of the data during the first round, but also assess the need for this information to be communicated to homeless people or people at risk of homelessness.

In summary, the one-round process (request → result) has become a three-round process: (1) The submission of a written application, which is assessed according to the set criteria, is therefore based on the principle of merit (point system). At the time of the research, it was planned to include a box on the form where the applicant

would describe and identify his/her difficult situation; (2) The HD then assesses the application and, if it is determined that the applicant meets the necessary criteria, submits the relevant applications to the Social Services Department to assess the situation. In the course of the research, the applicant's declared difficulties were verified on the basis of the necessity principle. Applications assessed as relevant and needing an urgent solution are recommended to the HD; (3) at this point, the HD is supposed to assess and respond to the applicant's situation. However, this application goes through yet another assessment which, on the basis of the testimony of people from the HD, is again assessed through the prism of merit.

Role of partronage

This obstacle course found the applicants unable to comprehend the rules; the necessity criteria were similarly confusing. This is in addition to seeking out a patron who would support their criteria of need. Without the patronage of 'influential' characters, they had no chance of success.

> Just when the project started. And then when the first flats were distributed [author's note: within the project of social housing], I asked the other colleagues to send me their most urgent cases. We created more like a story itinerary, and actually I went to a personal meeting with Mrs. XXX, I asked her for a meeting, and there I introduced her to the individual families, and she somehow checked the facts, found out the information, together their social workers made a social investigation of those families. (Social worker)

> Patronage? Of course it works; we are walking proof, we social workers. I see it both in my former work and in the present day. For example, it still happens to me, and my colleagues do not like me in quotes, like, "Yeah, you are XXX", and that's a guarantee, and it's like a good one. On the contrary, it happens that the patronage in fact works also towards the authorities. That actually the longer the person is there, the more it works. (Social worker)

During implementation of the social housing project, patrons were primarily members of non-profit organisations working in the field. They intervened in favour of their client in the DSS, which checks the criteria of necessity. Other times, they tried to directly address the deputy responsible for the construction department. He then turned to the DSS in an effort to solve the situation, but not through 'his' building department, which insisted on the point system of housing allocation (merit). This gave rise to non-system solutions. And while the whole system appeared to implement the HF principles to weaken the principle of merit in favour of the necessity principle, the building department's key influence in addressing the emergency situations of homeless people and people at risk of homelessness continued.

One of the solutions considered was to set up a team of assessors (two for the DSS, two for the HD) who were to assess applications for social housing and decide the level of necessity. In the event of a tie, it was assumed that the councillor responsible for the building department would decide.

The process relied not only on the applicant's own situation, but above all the role of 'his' patron. After the resolution of disputes between the DSS and NGOs as to the implicit and explicit merits of a social housing project, there are still NGOs whose reputation and influence on the town hall is greater than that of other NGOs. This is reflected in the strategies used by applicants when submitting their applications for social housing. As the strength of a patron (whether a particular individual, such as a social worker, or a particular organisation) and his reputation gradually became part of the shared knowledge among groups living in hostels, they adopted a number of strategies. With social housing applications in hand, they turned to multiple organisations at the same time, believing that this would increase their chances of success. On the contrary, such actions have led to a slowdown, if not a blockage, because the authorities (NGOs, but also the Social Department, OSPOD, Employment Office, etc.) considered this to be a scheme or an unnecessary burden on the system.

The patronage system exists not only in the minds of those clients seeking a strong patron, but also in the strategies of the NGOs. In the second quotation (above), the social worker implies that they are aware of patronage strategies, and seek to strengthen their role as patrons among the socially excluded. Since some non-profit organisations also depend on contributions from the city, which are redistributed by the DSS, the need to prove their indispensability becomes latent. This became apparent at the moment when NGO respondents emphasized their importance and appealed to the DSS for justice, who must see that their activities (concerning children, people with disabilities or the elderly, all at risk of losing their homes) are key, and should be given priority and guaranteed by the city (Váně, 2018b).

Homeless people's perception of need and merit
So far, I have described the implications of implementing the project for those managing the change. However, the unintended consequences of introducing social housing—that is, the process of allocating social housing—also manifested among applicants, whose statements included rationalisations for the criterion of need. A social housing project built primarily on the need-to-do principle leads everyone to believe that they are the neediest. At the same time, they advocate for their need based on confusion between the necessity and merit criteria (for example, whether they are staying in a hostel, or if someone has already had a hostel).

Respondents were repeatedly reminded that need was assessed on the basis of their life situation, which further reinforced their belief that they were the ones in need of the greatest help. Their own situation was always worse, even when compared to other respondents from the same hostel. Therefore, in order to be able to put forward a sufficient number of 'arguments', they legitimised their arguments by rationalising or re-assessing their situation through the lens of merit. Let's take a look at the following example:

> So, I believe it will work. Certainly, if they can get those. Maybe my mum lives on XXX Street, and I was there yesterday. And there my dad was just saying that one woman with a guy and a baby got a flat. And they have one child. So why, when we have 3, no. And this is how I hear they get the flats, so it's not right now. And we've been here for a year, and nothing. The woman comes and gets one in a week. (Respondent from a hostel)

Another respondent said, "Hey, we've never had such a flat, so we're waiting now, yeah, and there's a family, a week or so. And she said she already had one, yeah sure, so now us again, right?"

Insufficiently comprehensible rules applied to the granting of social housing thereby created tensions within the group at risk of losing housing. As they perceived the need and merit criteria—they did not know the actual criteria used to make decisions—their rivals were primarily those who were in a similar situation and could be preferred ahead of them. Therefore, in order to understand the principle of necessity, they transformed it into the criterion of merit; when they applied it, they perceived the resulting situation as particularly unfair.

By combining two criteria (merit, need), the applicant had to combine at least two adaptation strategies. Since they did not understand how the criterion of necessity was applied, they continued to rationalise it according to the principle of merit. That is, they had proven their economic inadequacy to receive social benefits (e.g. by actively seeking work but failing or that their debt is manageable and they are therefore 'socially viable'). Merit is therefore connected to a demonstration of insufficiency that is still accepted by the assessors. At the same time, however, they noticed that the queue was falling apart and that waiting for a flat was no longer working. There were individuals/families who could "overtake" them in the queue. Necessity is a criterion to which they were unable to assign comprehensible parameters. Therefore, they had to create them according to their own cognitive maps. The necessity criterion was therefore re-translated into merit (waiting time, length of stay at the hostel, number of children, number of individuals ahead of them on the waiting list—although none of these was in any way related to the chance of obtaining social housing). The result was an increase in anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation.

Demonstrating the merit of "insufficiency" itself has been reinforced by the discovery that the story needs to be adequately retold. Due to lower levels of education, they required outside help (patron). After all, ticking boxes on the form (number of children, married/unmarried, etc.) is quite different from creating a convincing story of their destiny that will not be too similar to the narratives told by their fellows, who have now become their main rivals in the fight for a better position in the pursuit of social housing. In many situations, the authors of a correctly mediated story become patrons. Their ability to adequately recount the client's story and get him in front of the right people significantly influences the chances of 'overtaking' others in the queue.

Other complications associated with the launch of the project (at the time of carrying out the research) were due to the fact that its implementation depended on two municipal departments, each applying different evaluation criteria. Attitudes about the (lack of) success concerning implementation were strongly influenced by the opinions of deputies from different political groupings. At the time of the research, the launch of the project was helped by a shift in the position of the councillor to the position for economic, housing and property management (under the HD), as well as the impulses of the Ministry of Social Affairs. This unblocked the situation and launched the Social Housing project. The question now is what the situation will look like after the pilot project expires, or in the event of a new councillor.

It is not surprising that all the actors concerned provided a solution to the situation of homelessness in relation to their housing situation or to the city's housing policy. HF emphasises ordinary housing, which is scattered across ordinary neighbourhoods, as the means by which social integration is achieved. Implementation of the Social Housing pilot project could not come about without the co-operation of the housing department (HD), which controls the supply and availability of flats owned by the city. The project that was developed and implemented by DSS was, and is, unconditionally dependent on the decisions of the HD. Efforts to ensure that social integration takes place—including a sense of security and belonging fully to the community (Padgett, 2007)—have been influenced in the course of implementation by two completely different intentions. The result, when put into practice, was a more complicated social housing project.

Conclusion

The implementation of the pilot project had a number of consequences, the most important of which were: (a) Clients/homeless people who could not distinguish between a social housing project and a standard application submitted to a HD; (b) When pursuing their goal (a flat for the client), the influence of the "patron" is a significant deciding factor; (c) The role of the patron leads to indirect competition for merit among non-profit organisations. The necessity criterion to ensure the chances of homeless people or those at risk of homelessness has led to an even stronger emphasis on the merit of non-profit organisations. They covertly seek to promote their client in acquiring a social housing project flat, thereby demonstrating their need and influence, as the chances of obtaining social housing without their support is minimal.

The situation surrounding the launch of the 2017 social housing project undoubtedly involved the best intentions. But the DSS delivered as much as possible in the existing milieu, and put them among the Scylla (political unwillingness to solve the situation or demonstrative visits to hostels and the pursuit of political points, the fight against the weakest) and the Charybdis (the pressure of non-profit organisations demanding solutions to the situation, of course best according to the principles and values of each non-profit organisation).

At present (September 2019), after taking into account feedback provided by NGOs and research reports (Váně, 2018b), the DSS has tried to clarify and make more transparent exactly who is entitled to a social flat and under what conditions. The system remains three-wheeled, aiming to introduce elements associated with Housing First, thereby maintaining the principle of necessity. Nevertheless, it is clear that this second step (necessity) has been defined with more precise quantifying criteria.[13]

Apart from the social situation and climate, the result of introducing the initial phase of the social housing project was reminiscent of the untapped Hardin experiment.[14] However, there is still the threat that widespread public resentment concerning

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[13] 'A person in need of housing is also a person who lives alone or together with the persons with whom he is assessed, spends more than 40% of eligible income on housing, 1.6 times the subsistence minimum under the subsistence minimum subsistence law, and at the same time is/are not able to solve this difficult situation on the housing market themselves. The social worker shall assess whether the applicant is indeed in a housing shortage on the basis of a social investigation with the applicant for social housing, and on the basis of an analysis of the application for a flat.' https://soubor.plzen.eu/situace/default/546 [quoted on 10 September 2019].

[14] Thought Experiment: 60 people on a lifeboat, 150 people (castaways) asking for help. If they take them all aboard, they all perish; that is, rescuing all the needy (helping everyone) will lead to the total extinction of the ship/aid collapse (Hardin, 1974, pp. 562).

helping homeless people, who are regarded by most as predominantly 'trouble-makers', and the difficulty of a good citizen (referring to Hardin's experiment), only reinforces the feeling that the 'life raft is full' attitude will grow stronger. This is despite the fact that the Czech Republic is doing extremely well, economically. The moment an economic downturn occurs and poverty strikes again, these weakest groups will see a resurgence of attacks. At the same time, any further failures or conflicts regarding the allocation of housing to the needy (both among clients and among NGOs as patrons and the DSS) will, given the persistent multi-level 'needy' selection procedure, increase the chances of failure. Given the short duration of the project, an evaluation of the success of the inclusion of selected individuals/families has not yet been the subject of investigation.

The clash between two groups of people who attempt to help people in social need—whether in the media or represented by specific political groups—is a clash between supporters of those who call for unconditional help for people in social need and supporters of those who have worked and contributed to health and social security, but have always been on the edge of poverty. Whether they are from the working class or because they are connected to some type of disadvantage (spatial, economic, educational) that reduces their chances of better life. In addition, they feel deceived: no one is helping them and their lives continue to be evaluated through the lens of merit.

Successful introduction of social housing in Pilsen will not be possible without significant political support and appropriate legislation. In the vast majority of cases, however, the state (albeit influenced by national legislation) leaves this burden on the shoulders of the cities. However, it is the cities that influence the design and size of localities at risk of attracting concentrations of individuals living in or at risk of social exclusion (Brizolit, 2019). In addition, it is impossible to achieve a shift in tackling the general homelessness problem without changing societal perceptions and attitudes. Attempts to tackle homelessness without relying on the effectiveness of Housing First and the enforcement of social housing law will remain dependent on the enthusiasm and perseverance of small groups such as non-profit organisations and competent local authorities.

Appendix No. 1. The Definition of Homelessness in Czech Republic Legislation

In Czech legislation, the issue of homelessness is generally closely tied to the issue of housing provision. However, this is not a coherent general definition of the term homelessness. While there are several laws that deal with homelessness, they do so only tangentially and without an obvious definition of the term. When the issue is viewed through the lens of Czech legislation, there are several perspectives on who can be defined as a homeless person and what homelessness is, but there is no single unifying line.

According to *Act No. 40/1993 Coll. on acquiring and losing state citizenship of the Czech Republic, as amended*, a person without state citizenship is defined as a homeless person (§ 3). In conformity with *Act No. 133/2000 Coll., on the registration of inhabitants and identification numbers, as amended* (§ 10), from the perspective of an individual's permanent place of residence on the territory of the state, a homeless person is someone whose permanent place of residence is the registration office in the district in which the person was born. From the perspective of considering a person's domicile or dwelling, homeless persons are also mentioned in *Act No. 108/2006 Coll. on Social Services, as amended,* which works with the expressions 'persons without shelter' (§ 61, 63, 69) or 'persons in difficult social circumstances in connection with having lost their housing' (§ 57).

From the perspective of Czech legislation, it is also possible to group homeless persons into different categories: (a) socially maladjusted, physical persons, in conformity with *Act No. 435/2004 Coll. on employment, as amended* (§ 33); (b) persons who find themselves in material need, in conformity with *Act No. 111/2006 Coll. on assistance in material need, as amended*; and (c) persons who have difficulties in terms of being able to attain the living and subsistence minimum, in conformity with *Act No. 110/2006 Coll. on living and subsistence minimum, as amended* (Hruška, 2012: 6).

From the examples presented above, it is clear that Czech legislation does not work with a satisfactory definition that specifies how the term should be used and what it denotes. It is for this reason that the ETHOS typology, prepared by the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA), seems to be the most appropriate option.

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