

Wien, 9.7.04

Prevention of Homelessness in AUSTRIA

Introduction – the common concept of Homelessness in Austria

As even BAWOs members still use the term „obdachlos“ (roofless) instead of „wohnungslos“ (homeless) the general public, policy makers, and the media in general think of rough sleepers when they think of homelessness - there is little thought of prevention – that is the reason why BAWO has been lobbying for eviction prevention over the past 3 years. As evictions can happen to anyone on „the way down the social ladder“ (long-term unemployment, debts, illness,...) so we want to make clear that homelessness is to be understood much broader than just rough sleeping.

Homeless persons face a strong social stigma in Austria. To label a person as homeless means to socially exclude him / her – groups of people living in hostels in Graz we interviewed in the course of our project for the City of Graz clearly said that homeless people often did not turn to homeless services for fear to be labelled as homeless by doing so. This particularly is true for young persons and women. Thus some services try to avoid that labelling as much they can

1. Concept of Prevention

- What do governments – local, regional or national – understand in terms of prevention of homelessness?

Local level: § 33A of MRG – Mietrechtsgesetz 2000 (Tenancy Legislation) stipulates that the courts have to inform the municipality of all individual cases of eviction so that the municipality can react e.g. its youth office can intervene or to commission social agencies to intervene. Some regions / municipalities have decided to fund social services for social intervention to prevent

evictions (including often but not always: financial support for the settlement of rent arrears) – this is being done in Vienna (FAWOS), Salzburg (FGH - Fachstelle für Gefährdetenhilfe), Linz (KOMPASS) and some other smaller cities. FGH is responsible for the region of Salzburg (which is the name of a city and a region), thus they are the only ones who do prevention work in a rural context, too.

On federal and regional levels prevention is understood as done via rather low housing cost in Austria achieved by a rather – in comparison to other EU member states – generous system of public funding of housing, primarily of the construction of new housing / urban renewal with additional housing allowances for low income groups. The idea is that by having a good supply of housing, homelessness would be prevented. Political priority has been given to construction, but not to allowances to support low income households. This concept has been clearly visible in the Austrian NAP Inclusion 2001, just in 2003 the concept of eviction prevention was at least mentioned to be „nice to have“ (the Austrian NAP Incl. 2003 lacks clear measures).

- Discuss the perspective of organisations working with the homeless on prevention strategies or policies.

BAWO and its members have been lobbying for nationwide systematic eviction prevention since 2001. The publication of regional data of eviction procedures supported political initiatives in several regions (Länder) to start prevention. In some places new projects were started (e.g. city of Innsbruck), and BAWO hopes and is optimistic there will be more projects with regional and local funding – at least we heard some political announcements.

Important to note however is that some non-profit housing associations – we know at least of Neue Heimat – GEWOG in Vienna and Lower Austria that they send letters to tenants with rent arrears to inform them a) about social services and allowances in general and b) a social worker offering information and advice on behalf of and paid for by the housing association – which is outstanding at least for Austria!

BAWO aims at advertising this instrument among housing associations.

2. Existing Strategies, Policies and Legislation

- Legislation

See above. We do see other legislation being used AGAINST rough sleepers – e.g. the Vienna police used an article in the STVO – Strassenverkehrsordnung (traffic code) which forbids anybody to block the street (with a vehicle) and prevent others (other vehicles) to pass against rough sleepers or poor persons which were begging on the street. Some people were fined or threatened with arrest if they couldn't pay the fine. AUGUSTIN, the Vienna Streetpaper and others protested against this practice which reminds of the tradition of putting homeless people in jail – not so long ago (1970s) homelessness was eliminated from the Austrian penal code!

We assume that the general public would think of such action when being asked about „legislation on preventing homelessness“, but this is clearly not our concept, of course.

- Effectiveness of legislation/strategies

To make this clear once again: There is no strategy against homelessness in Austria apart from trying to have a relaxed housing market.

The §33A in MRG 2000 (see above) is a precondition for intervention once a case has been filed at court.

Rent arrears alone (before a case was filed at court) can only be dealt with if either the person concerned or the landlord seek contact with social services. In some cases the persons concerned turn to social services themselves or the threat of homelessness comes up during social intervention in general (e.g. the youth office intervenes with a family and the social worker finds out that there are rent arrears, too). However, there is no explicit prevention strategy, but we do know of many very competent individual social workers doing very well in case of threatening homelessness / eviction, but they do lack systematic support we cannot give them.

There are even cases of lawyers working on behalf of landlords who phone up social services, too, but this is exceptional.

- Housing Allowances are being paid to households in need and vary from region to region – they certainly do play a decisive role in preventing homelessness. The Vienna model takes into account the a) household composition, b) the incomes combined, c) the size of the apartment and d) the rent to be paid – not relevant is the legal form of

housing (what kind of apartment it is legally) – detail that was very moderne when introduced in 2001

- Other Approaches

Debts Advice Centres deal a lot with housing problems, including persons who cannot pay mortgages / loans any more, but they do not compute relevant data on that.

- Education

We do not know of initiatives to inform e.g. at school about housing rights / prevention ... this would be a new idea we would be happy to take up like this is common e.g. in drug abuse prevention. Some colleagues of homeless centres (like of Caritas Vienna – Die Gruft a day centre and emergency shelter) do go to schools but rather to work against social prejudices against rough sleepers than to inform on prevention, but we do not know this very well.

- Information and Advice

There is a lot of information on where to find a nice new apartment, also done by municipalities, but we never heard of advice on what to do if in trouble with paying your housing cost etc.

Faculties of Social Work say they have taken up Homelessness as a subject but I am not sure whether the teachers deal more on the specialities of the target group or take a broader angle on housing troubles of all kind of target groups (both would be necessary).

- Community Services (Gebietsbetreuungen)

- The city of Vienna started urban renewal 30 years ago and commissioned local offices in those neighbourhoods concerned to support tenants in their tenancy rights (and to fight gentrification). Some years ago these services – which formally are no social services they funded by the City Councillor for Housing – were extended to new offices offering solutions to conflicts among neighbours in municipal housing (Vienna has a housing stock of 220.000 apartments) – social conflicts among neighbours is a problem. We clearly see a preventive/integrative element in this concept.

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