

Homelessness

Among Young People In Prague



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KAROLINUM

Homelessness among Young People in Prague
A Narrative Analysis of Developmental Trajectories

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FOREWORD TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

The generosity of Karolinum Press has made it possible for an English translation of this book on the lives of young homeless people to be made accessible to a wider readership. The Czech edition of the book came out in 2013 and was the first comprehensive analysis of the psychosocial and developmental psychological context of homelessness in the Czech Republic. As the authors, we feel it incumbent upon ourselves to offer a short foreword to the book for readers living in other countries.

Readers in more advanced economies may well be surprised to discover that the first publication on homelessness was only published in the Czech Republic in 2013. A short historical detour might be useful in this respect. After the Second World War what was then the Czechoslovak Republic, along with other Central and Eastern European countries, found itself within the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union. In 1948 the Communist Party came to power and a period of single-party government began that lasted four decades. One of the basic attributes of the totalitarian regime was the attempt to control the way that people thought by means of communist ideology and the imposition of draconian restrictions on access to information. The way that people behaved was subject to the same control. The right to work was transformed into a statutory duty to work. The farcical nature of this situation was epitomised by practically full employment and the criminal prosecution of those who for whatever reasons avoided this duty. Another instrument for enforcing control over people was the duty to report one's permanent or temporary residence. Needless to say, homeless was not and could not be a social problem under the conditions of the totalitarian social system. The rapid collapse of the totalitarian regimes of Central and Eastern Europe in autumn 1989 revealed not only the internal weaknesses of the system, but above all people's craving for freedom. The turning point in the Czech Republic was the Velvet Revolution, personified by the charismatic figure of Václav Havel. The country immediately set about reintroducing democratic social principles and economic transformation. The quarter of a century that has elapsed since that time has shown how difficult this is. The restoration of freedom was accompanied by both pleasure in the large gains made and anxiety resulting from the necessity to deal with the social problems that accompany freedom and a modern social organization. These problems include unemployment, new forms of criminality, corruption, drug abuse and homelessness. Society was forced to reflect upon these problems and to begin taking various measures to resolve them. Homelessness was never regarded as a priority. From the very start it was

left to charities and NGOs to sort out. It gradually became clear that dealing with homelessness would require greater integration into the system of state-supported social services. The systematic resolution of homelessness is part of the Social Inclusion Strategy 2014–2020 unveiled by the government at the beginning of 2013. Another input was the results of the Census of People, Houses and Apartments 2011, which included a census of homeless people. In terms of homelessness, 11,496 met the criteria of the Czech Statistical Office. However, these results must be regarded as approximate, since they included only persons in contact with an institution at the time the census was taken, and the Czech Statistical Office itself says that the genuine number of homeless people in the Czech Republic may be far higher. Our research, which was conducted from 2010 to 2012, must therefore be regarded in the light of what has been written above.

Why have we focused on young homeless people? The findings of employees working at centres for the homeless indicate that young people comprise a relatively high proportion of the homeless. When defining the objectives of our research project we were aware that our findings regarding the lives of young homeless people could be valuable in respect of the process of their reintegration into society. Our research took in older adolescents and young adults aged 18 to 26. We did not include younger teenagers and minors, i.e. persons below the age of 18. This is because these young people are covered by the Act on the Social and Legal Protection of Children. Under this law and the provisions relating to it, minors cannot practically speaking remain on the street for any longer period of time. Of course, there are cases in which a dysfunctional family is incapable of looking after an underage child or a young person runs away from home and finds themselves on the street. However, in such cases after a certain period of time has elapsed they are returned to their family or placed in institutional care, usually in a children's home or juvenile detention centre.

As far as research methodology is concerned, we combined a qualitative and quantitative approach. We based our work largely on analyses of structured interviews and responses to visual stimuli (selected thematic apperception tests (TAT) and original pictures created especially for this project). During the qualitative part of the research we administered the Eysenck personality questionnaire and the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI), with the aim of supplementing the quantitative analysis with the personality characteristics of those questioned and their psychopathological profile.

We will leave it to our readers to judge to what extent we managed to contribute to the recognition and understanding of the causes and course of homelessness among young people. We believe that this book will be of interest to students and teachers involved in the humanities, professionals working in the caring professions, and those members of the general public interested in the social problems of our time.

The authors

Prague, 17 September 2013

1. THE LIFE STORIES OF YOUNG HOMELESS PEOPLE

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Chronic homelessness can be perceived as a **syndrome** characterised by **comprehensive social failure**, which is manifest in an inability to accept and deal with everyday social requirements. It is usually accompanied by many other problems caused by the interaction of undesirable personality traits and adverse life experiences, i.e. an accumulation of stressful situations that a person finds difficult to deal with subjectively. Homelessness is a complex phenomenon that is not simply about the lack of shelter. This is now accepted by most specialists in the field. Průdková and Novotný (2008) point out that, along with the loss of accommodation, homelessness is linked with the **loss of a home, social exclusion**, and relegation to the margins of mainstream society. This in turn can lead to a homeless person becoming detached from the system of societal values and norms and to a fundamental change in their lifestyle. Social exclusion is manifest in all spheres of life:

- through job loss and hence legal access to financial resources,
- through the fracturing of close relationships and the collapse of social networks,
- through a drop in the standard of living and increased dependence on the support of charities, begging, scavenging, or criminal activities.

From a psychological standpoint the most significant loss is that of the sanctuary of a home and the people to whom an individual is close and who share his or her life. Mallett et al. (2010) maintain that the lack of a place that an individual feels part of and where he or she is wanted and supported by others is also important (though it is true that very often this does not apply to the home that these young people left or were expelled from). Home is associated with a certain privacy. It is a place that strangers cannot enter and it therefore represents both symbolic and real security. The loss of a home tends to lead to **deracination**, rootlessness, and the lack of a sense of belonging and allegiance to someone or something. This is often accompanied by an inability or unwillingness to act in accordance with generally accepted rules and with consideration for other people (Robinson, 2002).

Homelessness is associated with higher levels of stress brought on by the constant necessity to deal with the hazards that life on the street involves. It is not simply that a homeless person does not have a permanent residence, but

that they lack people to whom they belong (or such people are changing too frequently) and a place where they feel safe and which they are willing to work on. On the one hand homelessness removes the pressure from a person to meet various requirements. On the other it deprives them of the protection that standard social integration provides. Opting for a life on the streets is very often the start of a declining life trajectory that can be irreversible. Homelessness is often linked with a **process of gradual desocialization**.

Homelessness also results in **social stigmatisation**. Mainstream society regards life on the street as an unequivocally negative deviation from the norm. For most people it is undeniable proof of social pathology. Their attitude to homeless individuals is one of disapproval and condemnation (Marek, Strnad and Hotovcová, 2012). Farrington and Robinson (1999) found that, to begin with, homeless people attempt to maintain an acceptable degree of self-respect by denying they belong to the homeless community and emphasising their own dissimilarity from it. The subsequent adoption of a homeless identity, which the authors claim takes place after approximately two years of sleeping rough, signals increased indifference and a continued personal and social decline.

A significant part of the homeless community comprises young people below the age of 26¹. As Darbyshire et al. (2006) point out, approximately half of all homeless people belong to this age category. There may be **many reasons why these young people took to the streets**. One of them is the need for freedom and independence and the desire to experiment. Sometimes sleeping rough is merely a temporary glitch in the course of life. Other times it may signal the start of a gradual decline that the individual is unable to control whatever the reasons for their failure. On the threshold of adulthood, opting to sleep rough can represent a way of searching out new experiences and limits, a kind of variation on the adolescent moratorium, which does not have to last long. However, it may also be the result of serious and often long-term problems, over which a young person has no control and to which they are incapable of reacting otherwise than through escape and resigned acceptance of the lack of a more effective solution. In any event it is a risky decision that leads to further difficulties. These can impact negatively on the personal development of the individual in question, change their approach to life and their conduct, and militate against reintegration into society.

Young people most often belong to the category of the **concealed homeless**. Though living on the street, they cannot at first sight be differentiated from members of mainstream society (Průdková and Novotný, 2008). Most of them adhere to conventional social standards, i.e. they take care of their appearance, they are clean, and their conduct does not mark them out in any particular

1 M. van den Bree et al. (2009) state that homeless people comprise 7.4% of the adult American population. It is not known how many homeless people there are in the Czech Republic since precise data does not exist.

way. Even though they live a homeless lifestyle, for the time being they distance themselves from that community. Their social decline has not yet inured them to the opinions of people around them. They are usually convinced that street life is simply a temporary stage and that they will return to mainstream society at some point in the future. For the moment they do not accept that this is something they may not manage. Young people are in a better position to change their lives, and for this reason it is worthwhile ascertaining how best to work with them so as to ensure that they do not become chronically homeless. This was one of the main objectives of our study, the results of which we will present in the text below.

1.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODS AND A DESCRIPTION OF THE GROUP UNDER EXAMINATION

As D. McAdams (1996, 2001, 2006) shows, one way of understanding a person is via their **life story**, i.e. the method by which they perceive themselves and interpret their life. This is not about the depiction of real events, but how these events are subjectively understood. A personal story provides interesting information, not only about the individual in question, but also about the incidents they recount. In their life story an individual may express their opinion of themselves, other people that were significant to them in some way, and their relationship to the world. What other people an individual chooses to include in their story, how they assess them, and what role they attribute to them in relation to themselves are all important. The events that are included in such a story have some personal significance and can be regarded as landmarks influencing the course of subsequent actions. The subjective principle is also manifest in the way that an individual explains the causes and consequences of various events and what conclusions he or she draws from them in respect of the future. Also of interest is the dynamic of a story linked with a transformation in the understanding of certain events and the evaluation thereof (e.g. an adult might evaluate the conduct of their mother differently than they did as an adolescent, etc.). The information cited does not have to be true. Some information is distorted (either consciously or not), other information might be omitted, etc. A life story is subjective truth and must be viewed in this light. Nevertheless, it represents very important information (Vágnerová, 2010).

Experiences from childhood and adolescence lead to the creation of patterns that actuate certain **ways of perceiving and evaluating other people and ourselves**. (This is how it was explained by G. Kelly, one of the representatives of social cognitive theory.) What is important is how a person understands their surroundings and how they interpret the various actions of other people, which, in light of their personality traits and the experiences they have had, may be very

dissimilar. Not even social patterns must fully correspond to reality. Certain aspects may be accentuated and others repressed or simply overlooked. Someone may, for instance, idealise their mother and see only her positive traits, while evaluating their father in a generally negative way simply because he left his wife and children and started a new family. According to J. Bowlby (and his attachment theory), early experience is important in terms of the development of our opinions and relationships to other people (and ultimately to ourselves). The child acquires this experience on the basis of its emotional bond with its mother or other primary caregivers. Each individual projects their experience with their parents into their self-identity and relationships with other people. **Primary experience with a secure, reliable person** and with clearly differentiated social signals is a good basis for the continued development of social adaptability and the personality as a whole. If such experience is lacking, this development is disturbed and distorted. In the case of certain young homeless people the basis of future social decline may reside in such a lack.

The aim of the research was to **identify the method by which young homeless people understand the course of their own lives** and to determine the landmarks and people that most influence them. If work with the young homeless is to have the desired effect, we need to know what they are like as people, what problems they have, and what led them to a life on the street. Such findings can be acquired by means of **narrative-based, semi-structured interviews** that respect the chronological sequence of their lives. The life story is also a suitable method for grasping even such a complex phenomenon as the process of adaptation to a fundamental change in a person's existence. It can provide information on how the subject perceives and experiences such a change and which events or decisions they regard as crucial. The interviews included the following spheres:

- **The course of childhood and adolescence.** Important here is the subject's opinion of the family they grew up in, their relationships with their biological or foster parents and siblings, their school and scholastic success, and finally their relationships with their peers.
- **The moment they left home for the street** and an explanation of the circumstances that led to this. What is crucial here is the opinion the subject has of their current lifestyle, how they cope with it, and their relationships within the homeless community.
- **The subject's opinion of themselves**, including the changes that have taken place as a consequence of sleeping rough and the degree to which their own identity and self-satisfaction has changed. It is important to ascertain any shift in their moral thinking and current hierarchy of values.
- **Their ideas about the future** and the possibility of reintegration into society. Better understanding in this sphere would be achieved by knowing the opinion of these young people regarding possible assistance and its anticipated effectiveness.

The stories told by young people contain many inaccuracies, especially chronological. Sometimes the information provided is self-contradictory. Only in exceptional cases were we able to access other sources and cross-check the accuracy of the information we received. Certain inaccuracies and memory lapses can be put down to the consequence of long-term use of psychoactive substances, as well as the lifestyle in question, which makes no demands on accuracy.

During the course of an interview clients were given sufficient space to say everything they wanted. The outputs were extensive and yielded a wealth of information. Individual interviews lasted 2 to 2.5 hours on average. The interview was recorded and then transcribed. We analysed the information acquired structurally and thematically according to how the respondents described individual events and the conduct of various persons, as well as how they interpreted the assumed causes of a given event and its future consequences. We specified the frequency of individual variants and added this to the qualitative evaluation in order to improve the final overview. We also drew on the experience and knowhow of employees of the organisation Naděje [Hope], who have long been working with young unemployed people and have gathered a lot of information on them.

We used the **short-form revised Eysenck EPQ/S questionnaire**, the validity of which has been confirmed on the Czech population (Kožený, 1999), to acquire a basic typology of the personalities of young homeless people. The questionnaire contains 48 items, with 12 items devoted to the evaluation of each of 4 subscales (extraversion-introversion, neuroticism-emotional stability, psychoticism and social desirability). The psychometric parameters of the short-form test remain relatively stable and can be used without problem for research purposes (Kožený, 1999).

We also used **H. Murray's projective thematic apperception test (TAT)**, specifically three pictures from this test (see the appendix) and two new pictures created especially for this research. This method is intended to obtain information on interpersonal and family relationships, and to address the theme of the future and life orientation. The underlying premise of the method is that the individual processing of a theme will assist in understanding a given personality. The individual under examination has to create a story for each picture that in their opinion best corresponds to their circumstances. They say what they think is happening in the picture and what the person or persons shown are doing. They also have to say what is going to happen, what the people are thinking about, what they would like and what they will do, i.e. what the outcome of the story is. Even though we used this method only on a semi-projective basis, i.e. we prompted responses from clients by posing general questions, we can assume that the clients will identify with a certain figure and project their opinions, needs and feelings into their stories. The aim is to identify how they perceive the surrounding world, other people, and their own position in the world. However, this is not only about what intentions and motives are ascribed to different figures.

What is also interesting is which of these is the most frequent and can therefore be deemed important for the client in question. Impediments and problems that might befall the central character are also examined, as well as the client's suggestions regarding how these might be dealt with and how the story will end, i.e. whether the outcome be positive or negative (Svoboda 1999; Vágnerová, 2010).

The group under examination comprised 90 young homeless people, 60 men and 30 women, aged between 19 and 26 (the mean age of the men was $\bar{x}=22.90$, $SD=2.25$, the mean age of the women was $\bar{x}=22.63$, $SD=2.40$). These people had been homeless for 2.43 years on average ($SD=2.33$). Most were aged between 19 and 22 (73.3 % of the group) when they lost their home, left home, or were expelled. They were individuals who visited the drop-in centre run by the charity Naděje in Prague, where they were offered food, clothing and warmth. All the persons contacted agreed to be interviewed, a fact that was probably influenced by their positive experience with the interviewer (an employee of Naděje) and the small fee (CZK 150/USD 7.50) they received for their participation.

1.3 THE LIFE STORIES OF YOUNG HOMELESS PEOPLE

Getting to know the life story of young homeless people can increase our understanding of their current situation. This situation is characterised by the lack of any direction in life, failure to deal with the demands of adulthood, superficial and unstable relations with people, and an insecurely defined life territory with the minimum of privacy. The end of adolescence and emerging adulthood represents a crucial period of time in terms of a young person's future, even when it does not develop as it should, i.e. if freedom of thought and deed are not harmonised and responsibility not accepted for decisions and actions. As Whitbeck (2009) says, opting for a life on the street shuts down access to many possibilities (in terms of both professional life and relationships) that could contribute to the more effective development of a young person's life, and can fundamentally distort the way their personality matures.

Many foreign studies are devoted to the issue of youth homelessness, e.g. research by Lynn Rew (2003), J. Hyde (2005), L. Whitbeck (2009), S. Mallett et al. (2010), and many others. Czech specialist literature does not yet offer much information. Where such information exists it tends to be in the form of a synopsis of empirical experiences of working with young homeless people. This is so in the case of Hradecký (2007), Průdková and Novotný (2008), and Marek, Strnad and Hotovcová (2012). We can assume that in many respects the results of research conducted under different socio-cultural conditions will correspond to our own, though this may not always be the case or apply to all spheres.

Our research outputs show that **youth homelessness is caused by many different circumstances**. It is not usually the result of a sudden change provoked by an isolated event, but is the consequence of the long-term accumulation of

adverse influences. Sometimes there may be a genetic component that prevents these young people from dealing with many burdens in an acceptable way or without assistance. Such assistance is not always available. There are many paths to homelessness and the life stories of our clients differ. The common denominator may well be simply the fact that they have dropped out of mainstream society and been consigned to its margins. They may have come from very different social backgrounds and the extent of their personal failure may differ. They may or may not acknowledge their own culpability in the matter. The descent into homelessness is often associated with an accumulation of problems that the individuals concerned are unable or unwilling to resolve. The **family** plays a pivotal role in their stories, either as a source of support and assistance or, on the contrary, as a source of suffering and stress.

The period of emerging adulthood, during which a young person gradually gains their independence, is critical from the point of view of a possible descent into homelessness. The sources of the problems that Hyde (2005) maintains act as a **trigger for young people to opt for life on the street** tend to involve conflicts between parents and children, failure to respect parents' requests, poor communication, insufficient supervision of a young adult who is allowed to do whatever they want, a lack of interest on the part of their parents, disproportionate corporal punishment, and the use of drugs or alcohol. Whitbeck (2009) points out that people who grew up in a problematic environment, without a feeling of security and safety and without the opportunity to acquire the necessary social skills, are not sufficiently prepared for friendship and partnerships. They behave to other people in the same way as they do to their relatives or friends at home or within their group, and end up being rejected or deemed unacceptable by the rest of the population. This in turn leads to their being further relegated to the margins of society. As Johnson et al. (2005) says, the social network of such people is smaller and is restricted to similarly problematic individuals, and this in turn creates the risk of a downward spiral of social failure.

Even though each young homeless person tells a different story, certain themes reoccur: a less than happy childhood, an unsatisfactory family environment, unhealthy relationships with parents, behavioural problems already apparent at school age, and an incomplete education leading to problems finding work. These young people are not willing or able to meet so much as the basic requirements of life such is their lack of social skills, and often act in an unusual, sometimes antisocial way. They are less resistant to pressure (perhaps only of a certain type) and display various psychological problems, which they attempt to deal with by means of passive escape strategies. Their problems are intensified by the use of psychoactive substances and their relationships with individuals who also use drugs or alcohol. These conclusions have been reached in research carried out by Votta and Manion (2003), Johnson, Whitbeck and Hoyt (2005), Bearsley-Smith et al. (2008), Shelton et al. (2009), Marianne van den Bree et al. (2009), and many others.

2. THE CHILDHOOD AND EMERGING ADULTHOOD OF YOUNG HOMELESS PEOPLE

2.1 FAMILY – THE OPINIONS OF YOUNG HOMELESS PEOPLE REGARDING THEIR HOME LIFE AND THEIR CHILDHOOD

The families of young homeless people are many and varied. They may be intact and functional, or broken and problematic in some way. They may be extended by other members or so changeable that it is not even clear who is and is not part of the family, in which case they cannot operate as an acceptable emotional base. Some young homeless people grew up in foster families or institutional facilities because their parents were not able or willing to look after them. However, in some cases not even the foster family delivered the desired outcomes, sometimes because it was not given the opportunity to intervene in good time.

Work carried out by many researchers (Cauce et al., 2000; Votta and Maniona, 2003; Tyler, 2006; Bearsley-Smith et al., 2008; Coward-Bucher, 2008, and Ferguson, 2009) shows that young homeless people most often come from **families that do not provide a secure, safe background.** Their parents were incapable of dealing in an acceptable way with their partnerships, parenthood, and sometimes their professional responsibilities. They were often involved in substance abuse, and this increased the risk of their failure as parents. Sometimes they suffered mental health issues or personality disorders and were unsuccessful even within the framework of their own socialisation.

Life in a dysfunctional family often entails young people feeling overlooked and underappreciated. They are convinced that they do not matter to anyone. The family does not represent sanctuary: sometimes, indeed, the opposite. A lack of support and a sense of belonging, compounded by the accumulation of traumatic experiences, **means these young people look to leave home as soon as possible and head anywhere,** even the street. The breakup of the family incites them to seek independence earlier and to leave the environment which, from their subjective perspective, is not providing them anything positive (Mallett et al., 2010). Issues linked with the mother acquiring a new partner who is unwilling to tolerate the problematic conduct of his partner's adolescent children are a frequent cause of stress. If these replacement fathers are themselves not completely well balanced – if, for instance, they regularly consume alcohol and are of a violent nature – then they merely exacerbate conflicts.

A dysfunctional family background represents a serious burden. However, other children have to deal with similar problems and do not become homeless. The reason may be greater resistance, a more favourable genetic disposition, or the support of a particular person (e.g. their grandmother), etc. Those who fail may have **less propitious hereditary characteristics** acquired from their problematic parents. This may involve, for instance, a tendency to be impulsive, to lack empathy, to display overly emotional or aggressive reactions, etc. Such adverse traits are clearly the reason why these young people cannot profit from the positive incentives they have at their disposal.

Negative experience and a feeling of insufficient support increases overall insecurity and reinforces any tendency to risky behaviour. In these cases the course of the life story is quite similar: an emotionally unsatisfying and stressful life in a non-functioning family leads to a flattening out of emotional development and the reinforcement of undesirable habits and forms of conduct. In later childhood and emerging adulthood this may be manifest in various ways, e.g. through an individual's tendency to compensate for their problems by using psychoactive substances, joining a group or gang with an antisocial profile, making a living in non-standard ways, lazing around and sponging off others, through aggression and insensitivity to other people, and sometimes through criminal activities. Desirable forms of conduct are not created, or at least not to the necessary extent. These young people lack positive experiences, and under these circumstances they have no chance to assert themselves in society in an acceptable way. Their problematic behaviour may represent an **imitation of their parents' behaviour** and be the consequence of neglect, emotional poverty and traumas experienced. The negative experiences they have suffered with their own parents are reflected in their relationships with other people. The conditions are created for inappropriate forms of reaction (individuals who are tyrannised and abused as children often regard inconsiderate behaviour as something completely normal) and the creation of defensive barriers in the presence of other people. Leaving home for the street represents simply another stage on the path to deeper and often irreversible social decline.

The same conclusion was reached by L. Rew (2002), who drew attention to the significance of feelings of loneliness, alienation and rejection within the family. According to Marie Robert et al. (2005), almost 70% of homeless adolescents come from dysfunctional families and in 60% of cases the relationship between parents and child was seriously disturbed. Similar conclusions were reached by K. Tyler (2006) and M. Taylor-Seehafer et al. (2007). Kristin Ferguson (2009) regards an unstable family environment, the departure of one or both parents from the home, and the lack of support from any member of the family as negative factors preventing the creation of a feeling of security and safety in a young person. This is compounded by the parents' inability to look after their children because they have to deal with their own problems. Addictions of various kinds, whether to alcohol or drugs, represent a serious burden that undermines more

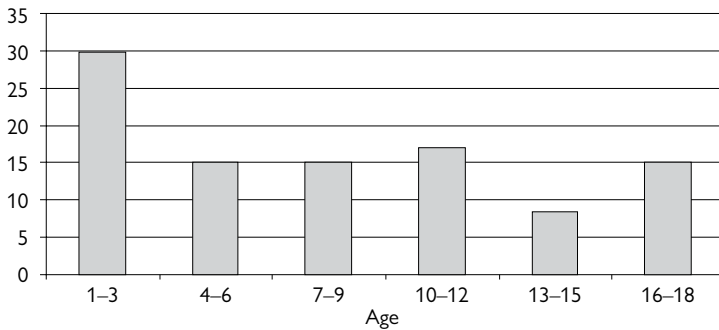
than just parental capabilities. The results of research conducted by A. Nesmith (2006) show that frequent and fundamental changes of people and environment, including a later placement in foster care, can also be risk factors.

According to Patterson et al. (in Whitbeck, 2009), children acquire the basis of asocial conduct in dysfunctional families in which they are physically abused and neglected. Their reactions are derived from their experiences with their parents. They become convinced that inconsiderate, aggressive reactions are desirable because the person who acts in this way is usually successful. During childhood and above all adolescence they mix with similarly inclined people and act in accordance with the same rules. The tendency to be inconsiderate creates problems with adaptation at school and results in a split with their more conventional peers and failure in their professional training and actual employment. Ryan et al. (2000) draw attention to the possible negative consequences of an undesirable model of conduct in the sphere of social cognition. Such individuals lack empathy, are unable to orientate themselves in the behaviour of other people, possess a hostile attributional style (i.e. they see malicious intent in every action), and tend to resolve anything and everything aggressively. There is no doubt that the conduct of the parents, not only to their children but to each other and other members of the family, influences the development of the child's personality, sometimes more than an occasional beating.

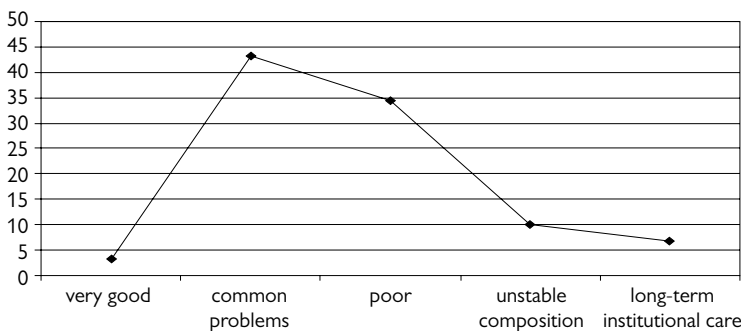
An important part of any life story is the method by which the subject **perceives and evaluates their own home**. Young homeless people often describe the families they grew up in as being very problematic and subjectively unsatisfactory from the start and as not improving over time. Sometimes this involves broken homes, new partnerships formed (often undesirable for the subject), or families that were in the process of breaking up at various times in the subject's life. The reaction to family breakdown was often explosive. There are many reasons why as children they reacted in this way. It might have been the result of an accumulation of stressful experiences or the manifestation of a more complex disadvantage entailing an inability to deal with the loss of a certain security (albeit only symbolic at this time). These explosive reactions may have been a signal of the fact that there was nobody around who could offer any security. The stories told also feature families that, though regarded by the client as the source of their problems, were not so dysfunctional as to be the sole cause of the client's social failure. A young homeless person's subjective perception of their home life does not have to correspond to reality or even match the opinions of other family members. However, for the person concerned it has this significance and their subsequent actions derive from it.

In order to understand young homeless people better, we have to ascertain where they believe the negative influence of the family or parents resides.

- One possibility is that the parents **did not look after the children, neglected them**, and displayed no interest in them.



Graph 1. Family break-ups classified by the age of the child (the graph shows relative frequency).



Graph 2. The clients' evaluation of their family (the graph shows relative frequency).

NB. Certain clients were in institutional care from birth and never lived in a family.

- Another category involves parents who are **less well off, with a poor education and often addicted to alcohol**, who represented an **undesirable role model** that the child imitated. The child logically began to experience similar problems. Forms of undesirable conduct imitated by the child include unreliability, irresponsibility (debts, unemployment, sponging off people), unscrupulous and violent behaviour, and a tendency to substance abuse.
- The third variant involves parents who were **unable to deal with their child during adolescence**, even though they tried to and did not condone its behaviour. What is important here is the reason why the family ceased (or never started) functioning and whose fault this was, or rather whom the subject (narrator) regards as the main culprit. If the cause of family dysfunction is the problematic personality of one of the parents and their tendency to inappropriate conduct, then this cannot be resolved through changing partners. This parent's idiosyncrasies will continue to influence the child who lives with them.

As is clear from graph 2, a **third of clients (34.4%) describe their family environment as being very unsatisfactory**. Their stories feature families that were

unable to provide the children almost anything – an emotional background, basic upbringing, or even the bare material necessities. Under these circumstances it is practically impossible to learn everything necessary to master the basic demands of socialisation, and so these children stood no chance of success at school, among their peers, or in later life.

2.1.1 THE PROBLEMS OF ALCOHOLIC, VIOLENT, OR MENTALLY ILL PARENTS

Stories involving genuinely problematic families very often featured the **consequences of excessive alcohol consumption**.² *“All I know about the time I was born was that my parents were always quarrelling. My father stole from my mother and vice versa, so there were always court cases going on. My three siblings lived with mum and only I lived with dad. And then everything took a turn for the worse and my father turned into an alcoholic. The truth is that **for 13 years I never saw him sober**. I was put into various children’s homes, a psychiatric hospital and a youth detention centre. To tell you the truth, I had a better life in a children’s home. My father used to beat me and I couldn’t deal with it. He blew everything out of proportion and was always after me for something. Everything was caused by alcohol. I never saw him sober enough to talk things through with me. Mum found herself a boyfriend and became different. She was subservient to him and **I realised that they’d given up on me** and that mum didn’t want to see me anymore.”* (PV, male) An alcoholic father and a mother with no interest in her son cannot be good parents and cannot offer their child a secure background. In addition, they offer them an undesirable model of conduct that reinforces the idea that drinking alcohol and acting aggressively is normal in life. At present their adult son is a homeless drug addict who is serving a prison sentence.

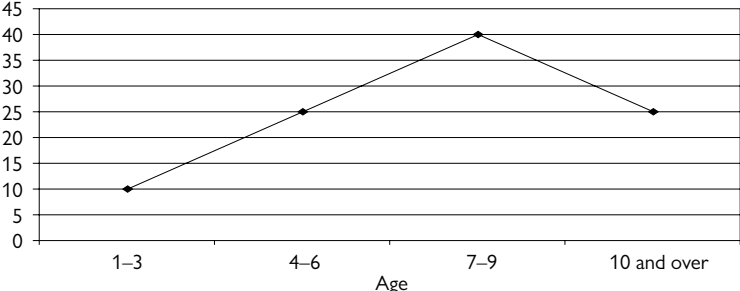
It is not always an alcoholic father who is the cause of family breakdown. **A mother who drinks excessively may be unable as a result to look after her children.** *“To begin with we were a decent, respectable family that functioned normally. When I was five dad started to drink a lot. Mum didn’t, she carried on as usual, but **because he was drinking he started to beat us**, and then things went from bad to worse. Mum stuck it out for about a year and a half and then they both started to booze. We lived in that apartment about six years. For 18 months it was fully furnished, but then my parents started to sell things in order to buy drink and the whole place began to look like a squat. Me and my brother started to play truant and nobody knew where we were. And then **dad was put in prison** for five years and the apartment owner evicted us. For a week or two we slept with mum in the laundry room in the cellar, but then the social services arrived and took me and my brother out of school and put us in a youth*

2 Young homeless people in other countries also have alcoholic parents. Thompson et al. (2007) state that more than half the homeless have one parent who was an alcoholic, with both parents alcoholic in the case of 20%.

detention centre in Krč.” (MT, male) The basic problem in the case of this family was alcohol and the domestic violence ensuing therefrom. This eventually led to the breakdown of the family. The client is also an alcoholic and has been living on the street for eight years.

Domestic violence represents a specific form of negative experience. Whether the victim is the mother, grandmother, sibling or the child itself, it always **diminishes feelings of security and safety.** As various studies have shown, young homeless people often come from families where violence is commonplace, and they are both victims of and witnesses to this violence. Many of them have seen their parents abusing each other and rowing and often resorting to physical attacks. The mother is most often the victim, though the children can be too. At least half of them were repeatedly and disproportionately beaten, mainly by their biological or substitute father. Though fathers tend to be more violent than mothers, a third of young homeless people stated that their mothers also hit them. The experience of domestic violence can be so traumatic that it results in the child running away from home as soon as possible. It can lead to a change in the way a child experiences and thinks about the world (and in certain cases to post-traumatic stress disorder). There is no doubt that such experiences will impact negatively on an individual and distort their conduct. They may become anxious and withdrawn or belligerent and aggressive.

Tyler and Cauce (2002) state that 47% of homeless youth were subject to excessive physical punishment as children for more than five years. The Spanish paediatrician Oliván (2002) discovered that 48% of homeless youth were severely beaten. Stewart et al. state that 44% of homeless youth had to ensure disproportionate capital punishment. According to J. Hyde (2005), 59% of homeless youth were subject to physical abuse as children and 50% were repeatedly witness to various conflicts and domestic violence. Ferguson (2008) discovered that 39% of homeless youth had witnessed domestic violence and 50% had been physically abused by the parents. Taylor-Seehafer et al. (2008) quote even higher figures, according to which 74% of youth homeless had been emo-



Graph 3. The age at which clients first encountered domestic violence, i.e. when they first became aware of it (the graph shows relative frequencies).