

Research into Homelessness among East European Migrants in London

Summary Report

Aims on the research

Following the accession of A8 East European countries, the EEAC set out to carry out the research of the incidence of and causes of homelessness among migrants from Eastern Europe.

The research project was carried out between March and April 2008.

Methodology

The project was divided into three parts:

- An investigation of factors contributing to the homelessness of East Europeans and of their support needs
- Interviews with staff in agencies involved in the various stages of helping homeless people
- Survey of homeless or threatened with homelessness people from Eastern Europe

Fifty three homeless or potentially homeless people from Eastern Europe were interviewed face-to-face around the areas of Victoria Green Line and Coach Station - the main point of arrival for many from the EU countries (bus travel, no matter how long, is far cheaper than air fares) and London Boroughs of Hammersmith and Fulham and Ealing – two boroughs with substantial communities of older immigrants from Eastern Europe.

Control groups

Fifty three East European homeless people were chosen at random - 38 were Poles and 2 Czechs, 6 Slovaks and 7 Latvians. 48 of them were men and 5 women, indicating that the vast number of East European homeless people in London are men. The age range of people surveyed was:

- 4 aged between 16 and 25
- 32 aged between 26 and 35
- 5 aged between 36 and 45
- 2 aged between 46 and 55
- 5 aged between 56 and 65
- 5 aged over 66

28 were in possession of at least one legal document. Most often it was a passport, a driving licence or some form of national ID. 10 were in possession of a CIS card.

The participants in the age groups between 16 to 45 came to Britain quite recently - between 1 and 5 weeks ago, 5 came between 8 weeks and 3 months ago; 23 came soon after the 1st May 2004 (**Group A**). Participants in the older age-range, from 46 to over 66, were in the UK for many years (**Group B**).

Key Findings

In Group A, 80% of participants stated that the reason for coming to England was purely economic, with others coming for a variety of personal reasons.

Participants described their situation in native countries with reference to employment, housing and family life. There were students who broke off their studies, young people who couldn't find work after finishing their education, unemployed people, some of whom had lost their jobs in mass lay-offs and bankruptcies. Two were coal miners who retired early. All had difficulties in finding employment. Periods of employment ranged from one day through a few weeks to five years in one exceptional case.

When asked "What is preventing you from finding work in the UK?" four answers were given:

- Lack of knowledge of the English language
- Being taken advantage of by the employer
- Not understanding how the system works in the UK
- Not knowing the rights
- Poor health

All attributed their homelessness to loss or lack of work. Among those who arrived in the UK after May 2004, there were people who never rented a place to live. 27 people stayed in squats, 2 men slept in a car with a friend and, when there was no 'accommodation', most slept rough on the streets.

Three respondents had been involved in a violent incident, harassment or assault. Two thirds had been a victim of crime and abuse (including robbery, deception, physical injury resulting from attack, rape or slavery). Half had been taken advantage of by their employers by not being paid a fair wage, being paid late and often not the agreed sum, not being paid at all, having to do work not agreed before, being sacked for no specific reason.

All admitted they did not have anyone to support or help them in the UK. Nor did they know where to seek help. Expected sources of help and support included homelessness centres and the UK government but none of these bore tangible and meaningful, long-term support.

In Group B, 10 of the interviewees had serious health problems. Centres for homeless people expressed worries about the increasingly deteriorating health of older Polish homeless people, older men in particular.

All 12 respondents had experienced periods of depression and loss of esteem and self-respect. Among the Poles, drinking (rather than drugs) is becoming a serious problem – as confessed to by the participants themselves and confirmed by the agency staff. All had alcohol problems. Agencies supporting homeless people notice that Poles drink much more than other East European clients.

The practical knowledge of how help could be sought was severely limited by lack of knowledge of the systems in the UK, including welfare support, medical advice, housing or employment advice.

4. Feedback from agencies

The following agencies were contacted:

- The Passage at Victoria
- The Salvation Army at Rochester Row, Victoria
- The Broadway Centre at Shepherds Bush
- The Connection at St Martin's in Charring Cross
- The Barons Court Project in West Kensington
- Polish AA groups

Because the East European homeless are not entitled to benefits, the centres cannot help them with finding accommodation, regardless of age or routes into the UK. Those who are homeless use the primary services of showers, clothing and cheap or free food. Amongst the post – enlargement groups (Group A), there is a poor uptake of training opportunities mainly attributable to lack of knowledge of the English language. There are centres that offer classes; centres also offer space, hire tools and work and interview clothes; most provide c/o postal addresses, but the uptake of those services by East Europeans is extremely poor. This, in turn, does nothing for their employability prospects and therefore getting out of the homelessness cycle.

Some of these centres have specialist services such as nurse, doctor, optician, podiatrist, drug and alcohol services, mental health services or one-to-one with clients, but East European use is sporadic due to the language barrier.

People attending Polish Alcoholics Anonymous groups do not admit to being homeless.

Recommendations

The following recommendations arose from discussions with the clients and agencies:

- Develop a strategy for prevention of homelessness and the provision of support for East European migrants
- Provide more information about services available to homeless migrants in the form of leaflets translated into East European languages
- Set up an outreach service that would seek out and provide support to those who are at risk of becoming homeless
- Work with the police and the Home Office to prevent abuse (including rape) and exploitation of most vulnerable (young, inexperienced and lacking knowledge of the English language)
- Strengthen advocacy and advice services and make them more accessible for East European people
- Set up a website targeted at those considering migrating to the UK **before** they make a final decision; as majority of homeless East European migrants come from Poland, this should be the priority target audience for the website
- Develop links and partnerships with agencies helping East European homeless people and the Councils; offer outreach support for agencies as and where relevant
- Establish links with a reputable and ethical job agency
- Develop links with Jobcentre Plus
- Provide tailored English as a Second Language classes
- Monitor the situation of East European homeless people

This research was carried out by the EEAC ex-service user