



Youth Homelessness in Germany

Prevention and Case Studies

By **Petra Schwaiger** and **Johan Grasshoff** (*FEANTSA Youth*)

This article presents two case studies from urban areas in Germany – Hamburg and Berlin – in order to show practical examples of social work with homeless youth. The practical example “Home Support”¹ focuses on how prevention of youth homelessness is implemented, whereas the second example, Berlin’s “Gangway e.V.”², focuses on how, once homeless, youth can be supported in regaining their own living space.

Due to a lack of research, an accurate number of the youth at risk of being homeless or who are currently homeless can only be estimated. According to Diaconia Germany, around 500.000 persons are socially excluded in Germany.³ According to the national board on homelessness, 335.000 people were considered homeless in 2014.⁴ The number of young homeless people has been rising in the past few years,⁵ which shows the need for prevention methods and emergency aid for homeless youth.

In Germany, a key point of reference for providing services to the homeless are articles 67-69 of the Social Security Code Chapter XII and Social Security Code Chapter II – relating to unemployment benefit and social assistance.⁶ To manage the specific challenges of youth homelessness, the German youth welfare system provides housing support services to young people up to the age of 21 (Art. 41 Social Security Code, Ch. VIII). In general, the current disputes between the authorities from three Social Codes (SGB II, SGB VIII and SGB XII) are an obstacle to an early, broad and need-based support for young homeless in Germany. More often again, young people will initially seek informal help from friends and relatives, coming into contact with “official” support only some time after they have lost their homes.

The German constitution states that municipalities are responsible for providing services of general interest and most cities have established a system for homelessness prevention. There are usually central offices for coordinating these services. But because of the complex nature of youth homelessness, many young people fall through the gaps between services for children and those for adults. Adding to state and municipality services, NGOs such as “Home Support” and Gangway offer support for youth at risk.

The following example shows how the homelessness of young people leaving care can be prevented:

“HOME SUPPORT – FOR YOUR OWN FOUR WALLS”⁷

A project example from Hamburg

For young people who cannot rely on a supportive social network, it is truly difficult to find an apartment in Hamburg. This problem even concerns young people who are, or were previously, connected to the youth welfare system. When turning 21 years old, young people have to leave the supported youth accommodation due to legal restrictions. As the young adults leave the system they also lose their usual professional support from a social worker.

Therefore “Home Support – for your own four walls” is a project that helps former residents of supported youth accommodation– or so called care “leavers” - by providing assistance with their first move into independent living. It aims to support young people in coping with their new independent housing situation, to support with multiple problems and for the vocational orientation. Thus it tackles the specific challenges for care leavers in Hamburg. By offering continuous support the project contributes to avoiding homelessness and prevention of housing emergencies among young adults.

“Home Support” offers support to young people who have moved to their own apartment within the last 12 months, are initially not older than 21 years and were connected to the youth welfare system in the past. Young people who were housed via the Youth Office in a supervised youth flat, stayed in a district crisis or guest flat, or who are released from intensive socio-educational individual help, or lived in a foster family.

Many young people, who come to “Home Support”, have to deal with a complex set of problems. For almost all participants of the project, subsistence needs are a priority issue. They have only very limited financial resources and thus often live in poverty or precarious conditions. Social consultations and accompaniments to authorities’ offices (Jobcentre, Youth welfare office) to enforce legal claims are indispensable. Almost half of the participants have debt problems.

1 Contact: Home Support, Reimerstwierte 11, 20457 Hamburg, Tel: 0049 (0)40-22 659 44 00, <http://www.homesupport-hamburg.de/>, info@homesupport-hamburg.de

2 Contact: Gangway e.V.; Team Startpunkt, Matthias Gutjahr; <http://startpunkt.gangway.de>, E-mail: info@startpunkt-berlin.de.

3 http://www.diakonie.de/media/01_2016_Junge_Menschen.pdf p 3

4 <http://www.baqw.de/de/presse/index-81.html>

5 http://www.diakonie.de/media/01_2016_Junge_Menschen.pdf p. 3

6 Sozialrecht (Social Code) Chapter II: Arbeitslosengeld II, Chapter VIII (Jugendhilfe) and XII: Sozialhilfe (Social benefits), § 67, http://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/sgb_12/. Last accessed 25/04/16.

7 The project “Home Support – Support for your home” is funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) and co-financed by the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg. The team consists of social workers and a project manager/leader - Factsheet: http://www.homesupport-hamburg.de/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/hs_english_2-2015.pdf



“Young people will initially seek informal help from friends and relatives, coming into contact with “official” support only some time after they have lost their homes.”

The extremely limited financial resources often lead to problems with paying the rent. Rent arrears and threats of forced removal are the result. “Home Support” attempts to secure rented flats by rapid intervention. The social workers contact landlords and regulatory bodies, and accompany clients to the coordinating offices for housing needs. During the last year “Home Support” supported 61 participants, 12 participants (20%) were at significant risk of housing loss. In all cases so far, the apartments could be secured by intensive emergency measures.

Furthermore, vocational guidance as a perspective for the young people’s future development and independence is also an important topic for participants. Approximately 33% of the participants have health problems, including physical illness, psychosomatic stress disorders and depression, anxiety or borderline disorders. Participants barely have any resources to manage their daily lives due to problems such as debt and mental health difficulties. The social workers have to concentrate on providing and finding further support to meet these basic needs.

The project “Home Support – Support for your home”⁸ is funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) and co-financed by the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg. The team consists of social workers and a project manager/leader.

GANGWAY E.V.

A project example from Berlin

This case study points out the importance of professional support for young people leaving care. If this support mechanism is not applied at all, or fails, many young people end up homeless and then become clients of low-threshold services for homeless, such as “Gangway” – an outreach program supporting youngsters and young adults in Berlin, Germany. Gangway was founded in 1990, and is financed by the city senate, municipalities, and individual donations. Gangway employs approximately 75 social workers who are divided into 21 teams; 14 of these teams work specifically with homeless youth under the age of 18. These teams focusing on young people visit different locations where homeless people gather, such as public squares and streets. Their working methodology can be described as the following: Gangway offers client-orientated support for young people who are homeless. They help youth regain responsibility for their lives, offer support in working with public authorities, assist in finding education or work opportunities, and conflicts with parents and relatives, schools or places of work. The organization also offers leisure activities and various training on topics like anti-violence training, social competence, etc. Gangway is engaged in community work, committee work, networking and public relations.⁹

Gangway’s analysis of the problems youth face today:

At the moment, there is a lack of affordable housing in metropolitan areas in Germany, such as Berlin. Single room options are especially rare in Berlin’s housing market and, if available, are often located in the outskirts of the city.

Berlin’s local housing policy is adapting to this reality too slowly to meet the growing demand for social housing.¹⁰

Even institutions that offer support for homeless people are facing difficulties in finding adequate apartments for their clients. Consequently, public homeless shelters that only offer emergency help are overrun; many people have no options but to move into a public shelter.¹¹

Against this background, there is strong competition between single persons, social welfare recipients, and students for the few available and affordable social housing options in Berlin. Youth and young adults hoping to lead an independent life have few opportunities considering the competition.

This is why Gangway focuses on young people in finding their own living space and apartments: youth who have atypical backgrounds face particular difficulties. They often come from difficult family situations that make it impossible for them to live at home, or they have left shelter housing. They do not have regular income and often have debts, which results in a negative credit rating and not being credit-worthy. It is especially difficult for young people who are in prison and close to being released. Often, a housing solution remains vague even on the day of their release. After their release, they often move from one place to the next, becoming “couch hoppers” who have no option but to stay with friends and acquaintances. This situation makes planning to find work or educational opportunities nearly impossible, as they instead must focus on finding nightly accommodations. This can lead to becoming involved in “street” life (again) and prevents their full reintegration into, and participation in, society. When asked about the most important issues young homeless people have to face in Germany, Matthias Gutjahr, a social worker at “Gangway” points out, that there is a severe danger that young people will fall through gaps between services for children and those for adults. Therefore, besides emergency aid, a focus on prevention is absolutely necessary. Nevertheless, Gutjahr points out as well, that prevention and emergency help can only be effective if there is a sufficient market of affordable housing.¹²

8 Home support – support for your home“ is under the roof of the Evangelische Stiftung der Bodel-schwingh-Gemeinde.

9 cf.: Gangway e.V.: who we are: www.gangway.de, <http://gangway.de/ueber-uns/selbstdarstellung/> last accessed 24/04/2016.

10 cf.: BAGW (Federal board on homelessness Germany, press release 15/10/2015. <http://www.bagw.de/de/presse/index-81.html>) (accessed on 21/04/2016)

11 Public shelters operate on the legal basis of ASOG (Allgemeines Gesetz zur Sicherheit und Ordnung), a Berlin police law stating that homelessness is seen as an issue of public order and safety. Police therefore have a duty to find accommodation for homeless people. See also: https://www.berlin.de/imperia/md/content/seninn/abteilungiii/vorschriften/081103_asog.pdf?start&ts=1252489038&file=081103_asog.pdf (last accessed on 16/04/2016).

12 Interview, Mathias Gutjahr, „Gangway“, E-mail from 25/4/2016.