

## POSITIVES AND NEGATIVES OF SOCIAL HOUSING

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### Abstract

The objective of this paper is to analyze the positive and negative experiences of persons living in social housing who have also experienced living in excluded locations.

One of the main goals of social housing in the Czech Republic is to increase the access to stable living conditions for families living in unstable or unsuitable conditions (primarily in socially excluded locations).

Data is interpreted via interviews with people who – before they gained access to social housing – lived in socially excluded locations. The interviews were processed via open coding.

The informants pointed out some positive aspects of social housing, such as the quality of the housing, the price, and the form of paying rent. They also appreciated the existence of a rental agreement, the security of housing, and good relations with their neighbours. The negative aspects of social housing mentioned were primarily issues with the system: the length of the process and lack of social housing apartments.

Housing is an area that needs to be addressed first. There is the issue of the unresolved legislature about social housing and an insufficient number of social housing apartments.

**Keywords:** *Negative factors; Positive factors; Social housing; Socially excluded locations*

## INTRODUCTION

Social housing is not clearly defined within the European Union. Each member state understands it a bit differently. All member states do, however, agree on the following three elements of social housing: (1) public interest, (2) larger offer of financially accessible apartments for socially weak persons via building, managing, or purchasing social housing, and (3) defining the target group based on its socio-economic situation and the potential risk factors (European Parliament, 2013).

Lux and Kostecký (2011) define the target groups for which social housing is intended as households for which market housing is financially inaccessible. Lux et al. (2002) define such housing as costing more than 40% of the household's disposable income. Lux and Kostecký (2011) also add that such target groups are also disadvantaged and endangered by social exclusion due to their social, health, or financial levels, or because they are members of minorities.

The topic of social housing in the Czech Republic generates a lot of questions, especially in connection with the

work on creating the social housing bill. There is an increasingly crucial question of a large group of people in the Czech Republic that need social housing. They are not able to afford a qualitatively and size-wise standard housing at market prices outside of excluded areas (Mikeszová and Boumová, 2017). Currently in the Czech Republic there is no social housing bill; the issue of social housing is being addressed by a number of subjects without a clear definition of their rights and responsibilities (Report on Housing in the Czech Republic).

The topic of social housing in the Czech Republic is currently highly discussed. There is a lack of scientific literature and relevant research on this topic – primarily research that reflects the situation from the perspective of the actors, meaning persons using and living in social housing. That is why we decided to focus on this topic. The objective of the paper is to analyze the positive and negative experiences of persons living in social housing who have also experienced living in excluded locations.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Our research focused on describing the subjective perception of positive and negative aspects of social housing from the perspective of people from socially excluded communities. In-depth interviews were conducted with seven persons (in six cases they were family members – parents with underage children) – two families with five members, three families with four members, and one family with three members, one case was a married couple without children. The interviewees had all lived in socially excluded locations before moving to social housing.

The interviewees were approached based on their availability – they were residents of socially excluded areas in the South Bohemian Region who the researchers previously came into contact with based on previous research projects and who used to or still lived in social housing. In total, ten persons were approached. Seven of them gave permission to be interviewed. Three respondents declined to participate without stating a reason why. The interviews were one to three hours long.

Interviewees (between the ages of 24 and 56) were supposed to describe the positive and negative aspects of social housing. The length of living in social housing was shorter than six months for all interviewees. Their anonymity was guaranteed since, in our opinion, such information was not relevant for the article.

These interviews were then evaluated using the elements from grounded theory and later supplemented with direct quotes from the individual interviewees. Grounded theory is a plastic tool for data analysis that enables us to work with outputs from various techniques (Miovský, 2006). Grounded theory works with three levels of coding – our article makes use of the first two. Open coding separates texts into fundamental semantic units – codes – which it then categorizes. Our approach here was to transcribe the interviews and read them multiple times. We then assigned codes to units of meaning and grouped them into categories based on similar content. We created a list of codes and crucial citations. The second level of coding – axial coding – is aimed at describing the connection and relations between the categories (Strauss and Corbinová, 1999). These relations and connections are shown in Fig. 1 and further described in the text below. In this case, we created logical relations between the codes and categories in the ATLAS.ti program.

## RESULTS

### Positive aspects of social housing

The following text presents the positive aspects that the interviewees mentioned when describing their current living situation – as a counterpoint, they often used the comparison to their former living situation, mostly in rooming houses, or apartments in socially excluded locations. These positive aspects are divided into several categories that arose during data evaluation.

### Housing quality

Under the term “housing quality”, the interviewees spoke of several factors, which we categorized in this category. These were: (a) apartment without mold and parasites, (b) cleanliness in joint spaces and the vicinity of the houses (c) upholding night-time peace,

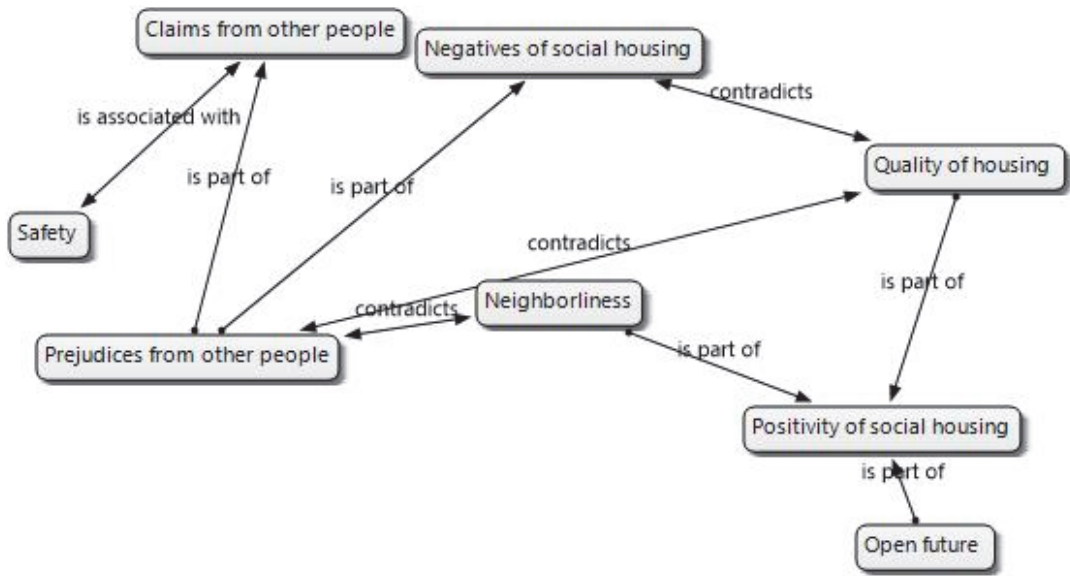


Fig. 1 – Relations between individual categories

(d) living in an apartment of better quality, (e) available shops and services in the living area, and (f) available water and electricity supplies.

#### a) Apartment/housing without mold and parasites

In this aspect, the interviewees stated that their previous housing, which was mostly in rooms rented from private landlords in rooming houses or in unfurnished apartments in socially excluded locations, did not satisfy basic health conditions at all. The apartments were often full of mold. The inhabitants tried to eliminate this with conventional detergents and cleaning supplies, further lowering the living conditions due to the fumes from these supplies: *“Here, the living conditions are great, it is clean here, no mold or dampness. The previous landlord did not take care of such things. Most of all, you cannot reach anyone over the phone, no one is willing to help you.”*

The consequence of such living conditions was that the tenants were often sick with respiratory tract illnesses and that mostly children suffered from allergies: *“The mold made breathing really hard; it was horrible.”*

In the new apartments, the interviewees also positively evaluated the care that the

municipality is taking of the apartments/apartment complexes, which they understand as an important part of maintaining good living standards: *“It is great here, if something breaks, you just report it and they take care of it, change it. Something like that never happened in the previous apartment.”*

Parasites (such as bedbugs) were an often-mentioned and often present issue in the rooming houses; getting rid of them was always a struggle for the inhabitants: *“There were bedbugs in the rooming house, one of the neighbors brought them in. Even though we had our apartment cleaned, it did not help, they always found a way to come back.”*

#### b) Cleanliness in joint spaces and the vicinity of the houses

The interviewees pointed out that in the communal spaces of the new apartments, cleanliness and order were diligently maintained; the communal spaces had certain rules. This situation was positively evaluated by all interviewees: *“It is great that there is no mess in the halls and trash around the house. Back there (the name of the location is anonymous), trash was basically everywhere – in the halls, there were often needles, around the house, there was incredible chaos, you cannot even imagine.”*

### **c) Upholding nighttime peace**

Another benefit of their new social housing (in comparison to the previous housing) was the issue of upholding nighttime peace. The interviewees pointed out previous issues in apartments and rooming houses where they were often confronted by noise and loud music that was often played until late in the night. Despite numerous complaints to the landlord, and later to the police, these situations remained unresolved. According to the statement of one communication partner, the police sometimes even refused to come to the location and, even if they did arrive, the police officers did not resolve the situation. As soon as the police left, the parties or music continued: *“It was not even worth calling the police anymore. I stopped doing that, they did not help us at all. And when they came to our location for the third time, their attitude was like ‘why are you even calling us, what do you want from us’...?”*

The interviewees stated that they could not imagine such behavior happening in their new apartment complexes: *“No one dares to misbehave here. I am really grateful for this housing option, the idea that I would turn up the sound of my TV after 10PM is unthinkable. People here look out for each other more here, they accept the rules here. Back there, it was not like this.”*

### **d) Living in an apartment of higher quality**

In this category the interviewees talked about the accessibility of e.g. social facilities. In their previous accommodation, they often did not have their own toilet in their apartment – it was placed in the hall for all the tenants of the floor to use. The situation was the same with the showers; the interviewees often did not have a shower in their own apartment – it was, like the toilets, placed in the joint hallway. Sometimes, the apartments did not have hot water.

### **e) Availability of shops and services in the living area**

The interviewees pointed out the “comfort” of available shops and services that are in the near vicinity of the apartment, which makes daily errands much simpler. These services are primarily kindergarten, elementary school, supermarkets, doctors, or administra-

tive offices. In almost all cases of their previous housing, the interviewees had to commute to these services or stores, which was even more complicated due to the lack of public transport (or not enough connections), or the unsuitable arrival/departure times of buses: *“The store here is amazing; kindergarten for my little girl is very near. I can reach everything by foot. Back there, we only had the bus, we do not own a car. The bus tickets were expensive. And besides, the bus only went a few times a day, it was not enough.”*

### **f) Available water and electricity supplies**

Interviewees stated that in their previous housing in excluded locations, their water supplies, and in some cases also gas or electricity, were often turned off for certain periods of time – even if they paid on time. It was also complicated to communicate with the owners of the apartment buildings. In one case, the tenants had to pay a very high sum for the electricity and water supplies to be renewed. Our interviewees always blamed the owner of the apartments who either intentionally (to punish the tenants) or unintentionally forgot to pay the bills to the providers: *“Sometimes it happened that the water suddenly stopped working. It was horrible for the kids. We were not able to cook, wash clothes, nothing. Even though we paid the bills.”*

### **Prices and paying rent**

Another positive aspect of social housing that the interviewees mentioned is the transparent rent prices and how it is paid. The interviewees stated that in their previous apartments, they were never sure how much rent they were actually paying, mostly for water and electricity. Often, it was the case of there only being one water or electricity meter and the consumption was distributed among the registered tenants. This was evaluated by the interviewees as causing a number of problems – mostly since they were not able to individually influence the amount of consumed water and electricity, thereby saving money. Often, there were more people living in the apartments than the registered tenants – they were “visiting” but actually lived there long-term. Thus they increased the amount of water/electricity but did not count towards the number of paying tenants: *“For example, our neighbors had*

guests for about three months who did not have to pay for water. We all paid for them.”

The interviewees also often mentioned problems when looking for new housing in the case of their agreement ending or them having to (due to any reason) move out of the rooming houses or apartments. It often happened that they were not able to find new housing for a while, or the prices were too high, sometimes incomparably higher than what they are paying now, even though the quality of living in the previous lodgings was significantly worse: *“Finding something after was horrible. I called to ask about several apartments before I found something and the price was just ridiculous. They wanted about 50% more money than I pay here. Plus the apartment was horrible – no toilet, trash everywhere, simply horrible.”*

### **Having a rental agreement and housing security**

Another mentioned benefit is the existence of a rental agreement – the fact that the interviewees have a written statement of how long they can stay in the apartment. They also mentioned that this matter (length of rental agreement) was handled in written form previously as well, but they still did not feel certain the agreement would be respected. From their own (or their neighbors) experiences, they stated several cases in which despite paying the rent and abiding by the rules, they were moved out of the apartment/rooming house: *“Our neighbors had an agreement until the end of the year but they had to leave because the owner told them to do so since he needed someone else to move in. He told them they had until the end of the month to move out. There was no security. Even though it was written on paper, the tenants were not able to stop it.”*

### **Good relationships with neighbors**

Statements made about the relationships between the people living in the neighborhood are categorized here. The interviewees most often spoke about the fact that the relations with neighbors at their previous lodgings were often tense; there was very obvious rivalry between persons caused by e.g. trying to get a better apartment (larger, brighter, on a higher floor that was not as affected by the dampness as lower floor apartments, etc.), or cases of

jealousy in the rooming houses, which could be triggered by anything. Interviewees stated that the inhabitants of the apartment complexes more or less knew each other but never had very friendly relationships. At the most, they separated into various groups that then did not have good relations with members of other groups. The situation in their current apartment differs from this. Primarily, it can be explained due to the fact that people “take care of their own business” and do not have time to deal with other people: *“Here, the relationships are definitely much better, everyone minds their own business. In the rooming house, it was horrible. Almost no one there owned anything yet people were still jealous over anything.”*

### **Bright future**

To some extent, all of the interviewees spoke about the benefits in this category. They understand the move to social housing as a positive shift or as a starting point for improving other areas of their lives as well. Our interviewees stated that their prior housing situation was connected to a number of other problematic matters, such as the cumulation of pathologic elements in the area where they lived, no accessible shops or services, and the lack of employment opportunities. In some cases, they were grateful that social housing solved their previously difficult social situation and described “trusting the system more” and believing in the existence of “justice”.

### **Safe environment**

This category features statements made by the interviewees about the problematic (dangerous) environment in which their former apartments were located, and the safeness of the current living situation.

*“I am happy here, you do not have to fear leaving the house to, for example, go to buy cigarettes in the evening, or to let your children play outside.”*

The most common fears in their previous lodgings were the high crime rate and violent crimes that happened in the near vicinity, or even break-ins to their homes.

### **Negative aspects of social housing**

As with the positive aspects, the following text presents the negative aspects of social housing that the interviewees discussed. The number

of negative aspects or statements about them is lower. For all interviewees, it was easier to name positive aspects than to think of negative ones. They needed longer to think of them and partially struggled to do so. The following negative aspects mostly deal with issues with the system: the length of the process, the administrative difficulty, lack of apartments, long waiting times, or the short-term nature of the housing.

### **The length of the process**

One of the mostly discussed negative aspects was the length of the process that securing social housing takes – from the application until receiving an apartment/moving. *“I felt like it was taking forever, the waiting time was very long. We thought it would not happen. And we were in such a hurry to move somewhere else.”*

### **Administrative difficulty**

This category features statements about the administrative aspect of the entire process – the investigation, filling out all the forms, providing all the necessary documents. *“Thankfully a social worker helped me with it, without her I would not have managed. There were so many forms and they kept asking for more documents.”*

### **Misunderstandings or even hostile environment**

Another negative aspect was the “hostile attitude” of some of the people living in the new neighborhood. Interviewees mentioned that they sometimes do not feel welcome in the new neighborhood; they “do not feel like they belong”. They sometimes get looks of contempt from their neighbors. They understand the lack of public information about the apartments/complexes where they live in.

### **Lack of apartments and long waiting times**

The long waiting times were one of the most problematic matters that the interviewees spoke about. They themselves mentioned that there is “probably” a lack of apartments, which is why they had to wait that long. *“Well, it took a long time before I got the apartment, around seven months. There is not enough of these apartments.”*

### **Short leases for social housing**

The interviewees see the option of renting a social housing apartment as a clear benefit. They do however point out the fact that the lease agreement is usually signed only for a year, which is quite a short time. Although it is possible under certain circumstances to extend it, some interviewees fear that it is too short a time to find different suitable housing and thereby solve their social situation: *“It is great, but the fact that it is only for a year – that is too short. They said you can somehow extend it. I understand that they need the apartment for the next people, but a year goes by really quickly. I have been here for almost three months and should probably start looking for something else.”*

## **DISCUSSION**

From the categories, it is clear that the positive aspects of social housing outweigh the negatives. So far, the length of the stay in the social housing has been shorter than six months for all of the interviewees. This fact could partially distort the results due to the stark contrast to the previous living situation and potential insufficient knowledge of all aspects of social housing in their new location. It should also be stated that our interviewees are only one of the potential target groups of social housing, and the research results could be different for other target groups (the elderly, single parents, homeless persons, etc.). Available studies evaluating the benefits of social housing for their clients reveal similar results (Nelson et al., 2014). The negative aspects that are also observed abroad include issues with capacities, lack of workers, and long waiting times (Nelson et al., 2015).

All of the positive aspects that our interviewees stated were in contrast to the characteristics of living in socially excluded locations (as stated in the literature). Social exclusion is defined as a multidimensional phenomenon that consists of the following aspects: economic, social, cultural, special, and symbolic (Mareš, 2000). We find it interesting that the benefits of social housing de facto solves all of these aspects. From the economic aspect, living in an excluded location often means paying rent that is too high for apartments that do

not meet living standards. A specific problem is water and electricity, for which individual apartments do not have their own meters. The energy used is counted and distributed between everyone in the apartment complex, which can lead to big expenses and the inability to cut the costs (Růžička and Lupták, 2013). That is also one of the sources of debt for the excluded households (Davidová et al., 2010).

The issue of the socially excluded was discussed in the survey by Walach et al. (2018) and his team. They focused on victimization in socially excluded locations in the Czech Republic. Thanks to their large and well-trained team, they were able to gain information from almost 300 locations in the Czech Republic.

The social element of exclusion means that persons living in excluded locations only have social networks with other excluded persons (Barnes et al., 2002). That then leads to limited information sources and to the inability to understand others (Bauman, 2001). A pilot project by Vašát (2012) was aimed at the excluded location of squats of homeless people in Pilsen. The project describes a similar occurrence – mobility in socially excluded locations. The author not only observed the subjects but also spent time with the homeless, thereby gaining access to observations about their daily schedules – both in the squats and outside. His project showed that despite living in a socially excluded location, the homeless people spend the majority of their time among the majority population and only spend a fraction of their time in the squat (Vašát, 2012).

Černá et al. (2019) also studied homelessness as one of the groups of people who lack sufficient income for living – this time in Brno. They focused on the financial situation as a risk factor for returning to homelessness. Via a questionnaire survey, they gained information from respondents when they moved into a home, six months after moving in, and a year after moving in. The questionnaire consisted of several parts that focused on the form of homelessness and the structure of their new household.

One of the prerequisites for social housing is that these apartments are spread around the area and not centered – so that the chance of integration is increased (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2015). According to the interviewees, good relations with the neighbors and abiding by the rules of joint coexistence

are some of the benefits of social housing. The cultural aspect is in close connection with the social aspect. Not participating in mainstream culture is based on the unavailability of this culture. Building neighborly relations and participating in local communities can help to develop cultural awareness of the formerly excluded persons.

The key mechanisms of the inhabitants of excluded locations having disadvantages are according to Růžička (2011) based on spatial exclusion of the locations where there is a lack of fundamental civic skills. The fact that the social housing of our interviewees is located in places with standard infrastructure is a step towards lowering their exclusion and increasing their satisfaction – and this is something that showed in their answers.

The symbolic aspect includes the excluded locations being called derogatory names such as “house of horrors”, “ghetto”, etc. Being a member of an excluded location then stigmatizes its inhabitants (Keller, 2014). According to the researches, municipalities often understand the term “social housing” as stigmatizing, which is why they do not use this term in practice and use their own unspecified terminology.

When it comes to the negative aspects, these could be partially solved by increasing the information level of applicants for social housing. This would include understandable information about the length and difficulty of the process, as well as the waiting times. On the other hand, there is the issue (also touched upon by the interviewees) of a lack of apartment fund and long waiting times, or even the suitability of the apartments for the given target group. This issue has also been pointed out by all analyses implemented in this area (comp. Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, 2015).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

When we consider the issue of social housing (primarily from the aspect of apartment availability, quality of housing, and housing costs), it is clear that it is an issue that concerns a number of target groups in society – e.g. homeless persons, persons in a difficult financial situation, the mentally or physically disabled, etc. It is also clear that the current

capacities of social housing cannot meet the local demand.

The results of our own research show that at the lowest level of permeable housing, there are often unsuitable conditions, such as mold, bad neighborly relations (rivalries, lower security, jealousy, trash in joint spaces, not respecting nighttime peace, or cutting off water and electricity supplies if one of the neighbors does not pay on time). The research also confirms the issue of unsuitable locations of housing for the socially weak. For persons living in these locations, the access to shops or services, access to schools/jobs/offices is often limited. Other negative aspect of such housing is the lack of standard written rent agreements.

The higher level housing also features better conditions. Getting such an apartment

can however be very difficult as the capacities are often insufficient. Families have to therefore wait too long for their housing, and the length of the rent agreement (one year) is too short.

Social housing is therefore in many aspects a suitable solution to the housing issue. However, it is crucial to assign the apartments according to the needs of the target groups/individual applicants, as well as to respect the location of the social housing. Cooperation with the individual participating parties is also needed – e.g. the municipality, Labor Office, social unions, NGOs, etc.

### **Conflict of interests**

The authors have no conflict of interests to declare.

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