

HOUSING PROBLEMS OF PEOPLE LIVING IN SOCIALLY EXCLUDED LOCALITIES

David Urban

University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, Faculty of Health and Social Sciences, Institute of Social and Special-Paedagogical Sciences, České Budějovice, Czech Republic

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Abstract

The size of housing, its location and quality are factors that have an impact on human health. With regard to the fact that housing situation in socially excluded localities continues to deteriorate, it is important to pay special attention to this issue.

The article deals with the issue of housing of people living in socially excluded localities. The aim is to identify and describe the most common housing problems that the residents of these localities have to face. The first part generally defines the issue of social exclusion and housing. The following section presents the results of our own probe, which was implemented in the region of Southern Bohemia with a group of 12 respondents – residents of socially excluded localities. The interviews show that the most common problems the respondents face are the apartment size, its quality (the most common reported problems in this area was the occurrence of mould, humidity, and the presence of parasitic insects – bugs), common hallways, poor accessibility to services (schools, doctors, shops) or high prices associated with transportation if commuting is necessary to reach these services.

Key words: *housing; socially excluded localities; quality of life; health; social determinants of health*

INTRODUCTION

The environment in which people live is one of the essential phenomena that affect their quality of life and determine their health (Davidová et al. 2010, p. 199). Housing is perceived as one of the social determinants of health (Holtz, 2016). Quality housing, adequate heat, permanent shelter and protection from harmful influences rank among the basic biological needs assessed by social workers in social surveys about family (Kovářík 2003, p. 208).

In the case of housing and social environment Davidová et al. (2010, p. 203) also reported that housing, respectively the place where people live, can be understood

as the basic unit of social environment – microenvironment. The level of housing is one of the indicators of the impact of the environment and quality of life of people. The options that the flat provides affect the lifestyle and health of its inhabitants and indicate living standards as well as the place where the apartment is located (Davidová et al. 2010, p. 203).

The topic of housing is closely related to the issue of the very origin and development of socially excluded localities (GAC 2006a). A large part of these localities grew up in locations that were considered for various reasons not very attractive for housing. Some of the localities incurred as a spare (or emergency) form of accommodation

for individuals and families who lost their previous housing for any reason (GAC 2006a).

The issue of socially excluded localities and spatial exclusion is associated with a number of problematic situations – for example, the transport issues (Lucas 2012, Urban 2012), missing other infrastructure, pipelines, the supply of hot water, no shops in the area or overpriced goods (Poláčková 2008, pp. 415–416). Poláčková (2008, p. 416) also states that such areas often lack elementary schools and job opportunities, which together with poor transport infrastructure can cause a variety of problems. There are often no doctors.

Čada (2015, p. 69) considers housing issues the most acute problems of socially excluded localities – problematic is the age and quality of housing, overcrowding, high costs of the housing (energy leaks, wasting) and the maintenance of housing, occupying dwellings without lease contracts. Most hostels lack private toilets and kitchens and have insufficient hot water supply. Kozubík (2013) describes the issues related to social exclusion or life in a ghetto in a similar way. He enumerates a wide range of problems that the residents of the settlements face such as long-term unemployment, low income, lack of belongings and savings, lack of food, money and materials necessary for life.

Kebza (2005) reported that housing conditions affect the health of people by an increased incidence of transmissible diseases, respiratory problems or allergies. Psychological problems caused by the lack of privacy and the possibility of quality sleep (Kajanová 2009) are indispensable. In examined dormitories we detected the incidence of hepatitis A, bacillary dysentery, bedbugs or scabies (Čada 2015, p. 70). The relatively worst situation is typical for families with small children, who often live in their parents' households, often with no real chance to get their own apartment because they don't have enough resources to rent an apartment (Čada 2015, p. 69). The situation regarding the number of people living in socially excluded localities is constantly getting worse - we recorded an enormous growth in the number of people living there. Moreover, these people live there for a long time, usually several years with short-term contracts (Čada 2015, pp. 69–70).

One of the authors who warn about the issue of housing in socially excluded localities is Urban (2015). The inhabitants of socially excluded localities most commonly complain about small and overcrowded apartments, the presence of germs, dirt and mess in common areas and washrooms, as well as bugs and their occurrence e.g. in the apartment of neighbours. The respondents feared the transmission of bugs into their housing units. Another significant complication that the residents face is an absence of public transport or high travel costs (Urban 2015). Especially in the case of regular commuting (to work or school), or in case of need of a visit to a physician located off-site. Families with a higher number of children find such commuting burdensome. As a result, such families do not attend preventive examinations (Urban 2015).

Davidová et al. (2010) states that the respondents from socially excluded localities live in tighter conditions than the respondents living outside these locations. In a number of testimonies, the apartments were overcrowded and unsuitable for families with children. Data collection was implemented in Czech and Slovak Roma families living in socially excluded localities and families living outside these locations. Another problematic aspect is the inter-environment such as the immediate vicinity of the apartment. Many respondents mention high incidence of trash and discarded items under the windows of their apartments, but also some cases of destruction of the apartments and the lack of leisure time facilities in their neighbourhood (Davidová et al. 2010). In the macro-environmental context, the above-mentioned authors reported the most problems associated with high concentrations of socially weak people in one area. Moving these people into houses for the underprivileged or homes for defaulters leads to unwanted and involuntary concentrated communities which are difficult to leave (Davidová et al. 2010, p. 207). Particularly problematic is the situation in socially excluded localities in rural areas where nongovernmental, non-profit and low-threshold organizations or social workers are not as active as in urban areas. That's why the inhabitants of such socially excluded localities rely only on themselves (Davidová et al. 2010, p. 207).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Within the realized research probes, was conducted semi-controlled interviews with selected respondents living in socially excluded areas of the region of Southern Bohemia. To identify the socially excluded localities was used the Map of socially excluded and by social exclusion threatened Roma localities in the Czech Republic (GAC 2006b). Madanipour and Weck (2015) reported that the Roma population is one of the most disadvantaged ethnic minority groups in Central and Eastern Europe that struggles with worsening problems of social exclusion. The data were collected in Písek, České Budějovice and Tábor. The respondents were approached on the basis of availability – thanks to the contacts obtained in previous researches. Because of the anonymity of the respondents, no concrete data are provided. The testimonies for the purposes of this article were collected from 12 respondents. The results of the survey are presented in individual areas, semantically related to the issue of housing in socially excluded localities. The problem areas are: available size of housing, quality of living in an apartment/location, facilities in the area, the incidence of problematic phenomena and situations in the area.

Size of available housing and furnishing

This category includes statements of the respondents which relate to the size of the apartment and possible problems associated with a shared bathroom and toilet in the hallway of the house.

The respondents pointed out an insufficient size of the apartment depending on the number of inhabitants. Usually, it was a two-room apartment, where both rooms were used for sleeping overnight. The family spread mattress on the floor and slept on them.

“This apartment is just small. During the day it’s ok, but at night we have to open out everything and spread it everywhere. Children sleep in the other room in beds, but the kid and his girlfriend sleep here on the floor together with us. It’s horrible. And then in the morning we have to take it all away again.”

Another problematic phenomenon was the lack of bathrooms or toilets in the dwelling – it was a shared bathroom facility for more apartments in the hallway.

“It is stupid here. When I need to wash myself or go to the loo at night, it’s terrible. You must go along the corridor to the toilet in this cold. And the kids are afraid of going there in the night, so they use the potty. But when I was sick and I needed, I just had to get up and go. It was terrible.”

Shared toilet and sanitary facilities also represent the issue of hygiene in these areas, which was, according to the inhabitants, completely inadequate.

“Well, mainly the mess and dirt there, but I just won’t clean up there. I can do it all over again, scrub it and then those from next door come, they don’t care, it’s clean, they think I’m the cleaning lady here... So let them learn, too.”

Problematic was also the availability and amount of hot water needed for personal hygiene of the household members.

“Well, after a while the water there is cold. I always warm up water in a kettle or a pot on the stove for children and we do it that way here in the kitchen. But then, imagine the water all around here. And you can’t do anything.”

The quality of living in an apartment/locality

This category represents statements relating to the issue of mould in the apartment; mess around the building or in the corridors of the house. Another category included in this area is the incidence of parasitic insects and other pests in the residential units of the inhabitants, or in the adjacent neighbourhood.

The most frequently mentioned issues associated with housing/apartment were the incidence of mould and moisture. The respondents also saw a relation between mould and the health problems of the children or other inhabitants of the apartment.

“Well, the mould, it is always here. I spray it all the time with bleach, then you cannot

breathe here how irritating it is, and when there's a draft it is very cold here again, so I open at least the hallway door."

"Well, that mould here, it is horrible, those allergies that we all have. Mom really breathes badly here in this. She must take medication for it. And the kids already have that spray for the mouth too."

Another criticized factor was also the mess in the house and its surrounding area. Negative impacts were seen in the riskiness of this environment for children, and also the mess was perceived as "poor showing" for the residents of the site/building.

"Well, the mess around here, it's terrible. There are sometimes those needles outside and I'm afraid that the children will get injured."

"The way it looks here. What will the people say about us? Mess all around the house. How does it look? I tried to clean it up, but in a week, or even the next day it was already littered again and it was pretty much the same."

The respondents also rated negatively the fact that renewed common areas or adjusted exterior of the building were damaged quite quickly. It was e.g. a common hallway painting, which was scribbled all over again very soon, or a repaired door which was shortly after the repair destroyed again, and others.

"The hallway was painted but immediately after that I was passing by and it was already scribbled again. These kids just go and draw on the walls and the parents do not tell them anything, they don't care."

"That door down there, it was just impossible to close, summer, winter, always open, and then the cold came here. Thus fixed, it worked beautifully. And after about a week or so it was broken again. When you hit the door or kick it, it just will not last."

Another problem, which some respondents pointed out, is the presence of parasitic insects and other pests, mainly the bedbugs.

They encounter the problem daily and find it almost unsolvable.

"Those bugs here, it's a real problem. Someone's brought it here. Before they started to tackle it, they started getting into neighbouring apartments and now it's here over and over again. Since then it's not possible to get rid of them."

"Well, it's really disgusting. Those from next door don't dispose of the waste; it kicks about in the corridor. Only when it stinks they sometimes take it away. There must be even rats in it, it's really disgusting."

Civic facilities in the area

The evaluation of the facilities differed with regard to individual cities/localities where the interview was conducted. In some cases, the residential building is in the city centre or closer to the services of civic facilities (shops, doctor, school, etc.), in some cases not. However, where services are available at the site, the respondents pointed to problems related: commuting and its high costs, difficult access to doctors (mainly because of preventive examinations) and complications associated with shopping.

In the case of shopping it was stated that complications are associated with the transport of a larger purchase from the supermarket home. Even if a small shop is available, the prices are higher compared with larger supermarkets. In case the residents forget to buy something, they do not have the possibility to buy quickly the missing items.

"If I forget to buy something and find it out at home, I cannot just go back to the store. This is simply far. Last time I forgot to buy milk, I wanted to bake something, so I simply made nothing."

"In this shop over here, the prices are really expensive. But we don't have a car, and when we go by bus to the big supermarket, we carry the heavy bags home, it's horrible too. Everybody stares at us as if I stole it."

Other problems are caused by high costs of the transportation by public transport from the locality to the city, especially when it is

necessary to commute to school, to a doctor or to work. In such cases the costs for large families can rise rather high.

“We always have to use public transport. It’s a far walk, but where do we get money for it? Children go to school, back from school, you always need tickets. And when I go to the doctor I also have to take the little kids with me. I can’t leave them at home alone; I have to take them with us. Then it is quite expensive. Last time I did not go to that appointment.”

The incidence of problematic phenomena and situations in the locality

The respondents pointed out the problematic phenomena and situations that occur in the localities. These were most commonly a high degree of alcohol or drug abuse. Problematic was also noise in the night, which some respondents complained about. This situation in some localities repeats more or less regularly and is mostly carried out by the same individuals or families.

“Some people here drink pretty much, and then they make a mess in the evenings. The music roars, they shout into it, sing... It’s not possible to sleep. Especially children can’t sleep and then I can’t wake them up in the morning to go to school.”

The respondents also negatively assess the environment in which they live and in which they raise their children. They are bothered for instance for instance by criminality of some people and their behaviour. As they say, this may represent a poor model for their children’s behaviour.

“Those from next door; their son was repeatedly in prison for burglary and so on. Now he’s at home and he’s become a star. Well, this is what the children see here. It is not easy to raise them here.”

DISCUSSION

The results of the probe show that residents of socially excluded localities are facing a number of problems that can negatively affect their quality of life – especially problematic is the

situation in the housing sector, as it is evident from the statements of the respondents (see above).

If we compare the results of this probe with completed surveys, it is clear that the situation in socially excluded localities is not getting better and the people inhabiting socially excluded localities are still facing persisting problems. Davidová et al. (2010, p. 203) point in their publication to cramped living conditions in socially excluded localities. The mentioned constraint is often a result of a high number of people living in the housing unit. Davidová et al. (2010, p. 204) also see a big problem in unfurnished flats or apartments for rent-defaulters, which due to a small area of the apartment minimize family housing quality and specifically decreases the comfort of living. According to the Analysis of socially excluded Roma localities and communities... (GAC 2006a), living conditions and quality of housing in monitored locations are in most cases significantly worse than current standard in the Czech Republic. Problematic areas associated with living in socially excluded localities in the aforementioned analysis (GAC 2006a) are the following: inadequate sanitary conditions (e.g. mould and bad heating, which can be combined with risky lifestyle and the neglect of health care resulting in worse health status of the population in the localities), excessive overcrowding of flats (apartments are due to their size inhabited by disproportionately high number of people) unsatisfactory technical condition of the home which progressively deteriorates.

Furthermore, from the perspective of Analyses (GAC 2006), spatial exclusion marked as problematic also by the respondents of the realized probe can be a problem. Localities are often established outside normal residential areas (on the outskirts of villages or urban areas). Even if the locality lies in the inner city, the areas were usually not primarily intended for living (e.g. industrial areas), or are somehow separated from residential buildings (river, rail, busy road). This situation may just complicate the access of socially excluded localities to services of civic facilities (to the store, to the doctor, to school or to work), according to the respondents.

Several mentioned comparisons clearly show that the situation is not improving in

the long term; in some cases there is even deterioration – e.g. the enormous increase in people living in hostels, where the residents usually live long and the housing conditions are quite poor, for instance the absence of private toilets and kitchens, occurrence of diseases etc. (Čada 2015).

CONCLUSION

According to Wilkinson and Marmot (2005), social exclusion brings a range of problematic factors that can negatively affect the health of residents of socially excluded localities. One of these risk factors which this article focuses on is housing and its quality. The respondents consider the most problematic the size of the apartment, which often does not correspond to the requirements regarding the number of people who live in the dwelling unit (the flats were overcrowded in many cases). Furthermore, the quality of housing in connection with frequent occurrence of mould, moisture, or parasitic insects is problematic. Neither common sanitary facilities are very useful. They represent

problems with maintaining cleanliness or problems in winter, e.g. toilets and common corridors are not heated, which can produce a variety of health complications.

The respondents also pointed to the problems associated with the availability of services – in case of need to commute to school, work, shops, to the doctor etc. The costs associated with commuting are too high. In some cases, families reported a lack of funds needed for such transportation, as a result of which they could not even use certain services (e.g. a respondent didn't go to an appointment to her physician because she needed to save that money).

The results of the realized probe show an apparent fact that life and living in socially excluded localities brings a whole range of health, economic, social and other impacts that their residents must solve and that often reduce their quality of life.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author has no conflict of interest to disclose.

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 **Contact:**

David Urban, University of South Bohemia in České Budějovice, Faculty of Health and Social Sciences, Institute of Social and Special-Pedagogical Sciences, J. Boreckého 1167/27, 370 11 České Budějovice, Czech Republic
Email: durban@zsf.jcu.cz