Libraries and the homeless
Experiences, challenges and opportunities – socio-economic background of homelessness in Croatia

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of the study is to present three models of organising library services for the homeless. The work experience of Zagreb City Libraries in each of the models provides a better insight into the challenges of each model and into the ways of overcoming them. Furthermore, it may indicate to others what to expect during the implementation of such models.

Design/methodology/approach – The study presents first-hand real-life experiences in organising the project for the homeless and its programs. The project of Zagreb City Libraries “A Book for a Roof” was made possible by the grant awarded by the international non-profit organisation EIFL (Electronic Information for Libraries).

Findings – The author’s experience shows that each model poses certain challenges and opportunities for the library and its partners regardless of the location of the library services – whether they were organised in the library or the shelter – and regardless of the necessary attendance – regular or occasional.

Originality/value – The author’s experience from the pioneering project of the Zagreb City Libraries “A Book for a Roof” is particularly valuable in that the project has the goal of empowering the homeless to become actively involved in the labor market. Furthermore, most of the project was implemented at the largest homeless shelter in Zagreb. Librarians in public libraries thus found themselves in front of new and more complex challenges in organising services for the homeless.

Keywords Homelessness, Shelter, Library services, Employment, Croatia

Paper type Research paper

Homelessness in Croatia is a social phenomenon that has only recently come to light. The 2011 Social Welfare Act is the first legal document that acknowledges the existence of homeless people. Prior to it the homeless were factually a non-existent social category, the so-called unrecorded people (Barbarić, 2009). Among the rare works dwelling on this topic is Šikić-Mićanović’s (2011) paper “Homelessness and social exclusion in Croatia” in which homelessness is discussed in a post-transition and post-war context. The ideology of socialist countries included a social policy; however, the transition to a market economy implied the loss or transformation of many advantages (employment, social security, food and flat subsidies, free health care, free education, gender equality).

The transition from a socialist to a market economy was further complicated by the war in Croatia (1991-1995) which had a devastating impact on Croatia’s economic and
social fabric. It was also characterised by hyperinflation and a decline in output, especially industrial output, devaluation of the country’s currency, increase in unemployment rates, higher levels of poverty and the growth of informal economy. In the report of the United Nations Development Programme Poverty, Unemployment and Social Exclusion (UNDP, 2006a) it was concluded that compared to most EU countries Croatia has a somewhat higher poverty rate. The rate of poverty in Southern European countries and in Ireland is almost identical to that in Croatia. On the other hand, poverty rates in Denmark, Germany, The Netherlands, Finland, Sweden, Slovenia, the Czech Republic and Slovakia are lower than Croatia’s by at least half. Šikić-Mićanović found that homelessness is an increasing risk for a significant part of the population in Croatia. Zagreb, capital of Croatia, has the largest population of the unemployed and the homeless. The number of registered homeless people in Zagreb is 400; however, estimates indicate that there are now ten times as many – around 4,000 (Šikić-Mićanović, 2011).

Zagreb City Libraries (ZCL) took all those facts into consideration when it took part in efforts to contribute to resolving and reducing social exclusion of the homeless as well as motivate and empower the homeless to join the job market. Moreover, those facts provide a better understanding of the particularities of organising homeless-oriented library services in Croatia as opposed to those in economically more advanced countries.

When librarians in developed countries address homeless issues, they stress the fact that public libraries have a growing tendency to become asylums for the homeless (Ward, 2007) and persistently mention notions such as unpleasant bodily odour and strange behaviour patterns. ZCL’s experience in organising library services for the homeless has shown that only a negligible number of homeless people had hygiene problems while none exhibited strange behaviour patterns. Regardless of the fact that the origin of homelessness is similar in all parts of the world, the behaviour of the homeless in library settings should be viewed in the light of socio-economic and cultural contexts.

The majority of the homeless population of Zagreb does not have a registered permanent residence and consequently cannot get identity documents which are needed for a library membership. Moreover, lack of registered permanent residence poses a barrier for the realisation of social rights. Therefore, the homeless are denied access to books and magazines even though ZCL grants free membership to social welfare users. The Residence Act is inconsistent and should soon be replaced by a new one. Due to this Act the homeless are faced with the problem of realizing their rights since they do not possess identification documents. The main prerequisite for acquiring these documents is a permanent residence. The core of the homeless problem is not having a home, i.e. a registered permanent residence. The paradox is that the main prerequisite for registering a permanent residence is an identification document.

Two of Zagreb’s three homeless shelters are open to the homeless all day long. They are also located on the city outskirts so the vast majority of the homeless do not linger in the city centre nor use library services. A small percentage of the homeless are active users of ZCL’s 42 branches and ZCL’s mobile library service covering 72 stops. An accurate percentage of the homeless who are users of ZCL’s services is difficult to determine. However, it can be assumed that it is low since only five of the 70 users of ZCL’s services for the homeless were active ZCL members. When the homeless do visit libraries, they cannot be distinguished from other users.
In the course of our two years’ work with the homeless, three homeless-oriented library service models have emerged. All three models have brought new opportunities for the library and its partner organisations.

**Model 1: library services for the homeless which have no clear structure, and which the homeless occasionally attend**

Homeless support programmes were launched on April 23, 2010 on World Book Day. It started with Zagreb Volunteer Centre’s (VCZ) idea of selling bookmarks and the *Street Lamps* magazine in the central City Library. Over time, as the partnership between ZCL and VCZ took new forms, new programmes were created and some of them took root. It should also be noted that we established a partnership with *Street Lamps* magazine, the first Croatian magazine about homelessness and similar social issues. The magazine is sold and distributed exclusively by the homeless. The price is meant to cover press costs. Any extra money that the homeless receive for the magazine is theirs to keep. Most articles are written by the homeless themselves. During the partnership with these two organisations the following seven programmes were developed:

- information literacy workshops for the homeless;
- homeless people volunteering in libraries;
- creative workshops for homeless people;
- occasional sales of items made by the homeless and the sale of the *Street Lamps* magazine;
- assisted article writing for the *Street Lamps* magazine;
- promotions of programmes that include the homeless; and
- gatherings entitled Bring Along a Friend which were organised socialising of volunteers, librarians, library users and the homeless.

ZCL’s volunteer coordinator came up with the idea of organising information literacy workshops for homeless people after she participated in VCZ’s programmes where she got the opportunity to get to know several homeless people. Personal contact with them broke down prejudices that she had about that social group. She also got to know a homeless person who expressed a desire to attend computer and information literacy workshops. After having completed the information literacy course for the elderly (although he does not fit the category), he spontaneously started to teach other homeless people how to search the OPAC. The project coordinator invited him to spend two hours a week running information literacy workshops for the homeless in the central City Library. Prior to that he received additional training and was granted workshop assistance and supervision. Over the past year and a half (November 2010-May 2012) Mr Drago Rendulić has been doing his job impeccably.

Meanwhile, Mr Rendulić has become a symbol of successful re-socialization helping to promote the programme on various occasions – in the media and at conferences of social workers and librarians. It is worth noting that ZCL regularly participated in all of the above mentioned services thus contributing to Drago’s re-socialization and the fact that over the past ten months or so he has been able to pay his rent costs. He earns his own money by doing occasional physical jobs and selling the magazine *Street Lamps*. The rest of the homeless participants attended some of the offered programmes
only occasionally. The attendance depended on their needs, interests as well as joint VCZ and Street Lamps activities that they took part in.

The least amount of effort and investment is required for the first model as far as libraries are concerned. Partner organisations and the homeless volunteers constitute a link between libraries and the homeless. Library services within this model depend on partners’ programmes and activities which meant that some of those had to be cancelled along the way, namely assisted article writing for the Street Lamps magazine since that was organised by the Street Companion Association on their own premises. Furthermore, creative workshops for the homeless and occasional sales of items made by homeless people, including the Street Lamps newspaper, were also terminated because in the meantime VCZ terminated the homeless support programmes. Those services were modified into Social games and socialising of independent volunteers and homeless people, an event taking place every Monday at the Multimedia Hall of the central City Library. The experiences gathered in the first model contributed to the development of the second model and the project within it: A Book for a Roof: The Network of Libraries to Empower the Homeless.

Model 2: services provided by the library but organised in a homeless shelter according to a firmly structured programme which the participants are expected to attend on a regular basis

ZCL’s model won a US$15,000 Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL) Public Library Innovation Programme (PLIP) replication grant[1]. The project A Book for a Roof: The Network of Libraries to Empower the Homeless[2] received a grant in the category “Improving people’s employment prospects”. The project was launched on November 1, 2011 and is bound to end on October 30, 2012. Goals of the project are to support the homeless to become more involved in the labour market and to overcome the prejudices and preconceptions about the homeless in libraries.

According to the 2006 UN social development report, the first comprehensive analysis of social exclusion in Croatia (UNDP, 2006b), the shelter focus groups showed that the homeless stay in shelters that function solely as sleeping facilities and have no IT equipment. The homeless are therefore deprived of internet access in their search for jobs, as well as in getting updates on their legal status and opportunities for additional education. Furthermore, the majority of the homeless have lost their former social network. All the research participants confirmed that they felt excluded and looked down upon and that the society imposed on them a feeling of lesser value.

Because of these facts, the grant money was used to obtain four PCs and a printer for the biggest homeless shelter in Zagreb, the Red Cross Shelter Velika Kosnica, which presently hosts 120 beneficiaries under the care of a single social worker. To gain job-seeking and job application skills the homeless were expected to attend on a regular basis information technology and information literacy workshops as well as workshops providing psychosocial support. The librarian’s venture from the safety of bookshelves into unfamiliar surroundings of the shelter with round-the-clock working hours, and without any substantial occupational daily activity, has proven to be a big challenge. The library-confined work experience with the homeless needed to be adjusted to different situations and goals.

Starting a completely new service in brand new surroundings presented a great challenge due to the mistrust of homeless people towards new people in their lives – the
The project manager – librarian and the IT trainer. The project manager used to spend longer hours at the shelter than was intended by the workshop schedule because she realised that she needed to build trust and establish a social network with the homeless in order to achieve regular workshop attendance which would enable the homeless to acquire new skills and would fulfil the project’s aims. It took several months to establish mutual trust.

What the project team in the shelter originally lacked was additional education in the fields of social work and psychiatry, as well as a better insight into legal barriers preventing the homeless from having equal chances on the job market. These factors are relevant for a better understanding of their extremely poor motivation levels and their incapability of finding and holding down a job during the grave economic crisis that has befallen Croatia. Sessions with social workers in the shelter most certainly helped; however, all those working with the homeless agree that their behaviour is rather unpredictable and requires an intuitive approach, persistency, and understanding. After initial difficulties and refusals six homeless people attended the activities on a regular basis, while others participated depending on their needs at that time.

Job-seeking support workshops were rejected by the beneficiaries as soon as they heard they were run by psychologists. Anything related to psychology scares away the homeless because they feel jeered at by others, and unable to share traumatic experiences in an honest and sincere way. They feel relieved when they can express their rage and bitterness towards society. In most cases their reactions are justified.

In order to make the employment support workshops possible in spite of poor motivation levels it was decided to merge them with computer and information literacy workshops. The person who came up with the idea was homeless at one point in his life and spent several months at the shelter while volunteering at the central City Library’s IT workshops a year ago. It was him and Mr Rendulić that provided the project team with useful advice on the likes and dislikes of the homeless. The workshop participants are also included in decision-making where workshop operating modes and hours are concerned.

Workshop operating modes, approaches and concepts were modified on a daily basis and accordingly adjusted to individual needs because all other approaches did not produce any results. Each and every person presents a case of its own. There are a lot of abused children, people who spent their childhood in orphanages, drug abusers, alcoholics, psychiatric cases, ex-convicts as well as mentally challenged people. All of them have different abilities and needs which ought to be acknowledged if any progress is desired. They mostly attend the workshops not because they believe in getting a job, but out of a sheer need to bare their souls to someone ready to listen.

After Zagreb’s Mobile Library (Bookmobile) donated books to the shelter (some 300, mostly popular fiction titles), the beneficiaries had not immediately taken to the habit of borrowing books. The turning point occurred when one of the most regular workshop attendants started running the library. There was an increase in the number of library users and books issued.

The homeless are characterised by animosity against all kinds of structures and their behaviour in the shelter differs from their behaviour in the library. Therefore, implementing the second model poses the greatest challenge. This model requires the largest amount of financial investment. Moreover, it requires librarians to devote a large amount of their time to assess the situation in the shelter in order to provide
a service tailored to the real needs and peculiarities of the users. The model has provided us with a lot of useful experiences, beginners’ mistakes and new perspectives. The project *A Book for a Roof* is innovative not only in library circles but on a more general level as well. The model has inspired librarians and libraries to be proactive, to push boundaries and to become aware of new horizons along with means of reaching them. Cooperation with social workers and psychologists from partner organisations confirmed Ward’s (2007) claim from his famous essay “What they didn’t teach us in library school: the public library as an asylum for the homeless”:

The inadequacy of existing resources and the absurdity of the conditions they endure are just part of the landscape, a given for social workers. Public librarians can cooperate with (and learn from) them, but we understand that they are overwhelmed and often unavailable.

Libraries involved in developing this model should have prior work experience with the homeless and additional education. Moreover, they should be provided, if possible, with supervision by social workers or psychologists in order to avoid the risk of the burnout syndrome.

**Model 3: services organised in the library according to a firmly structured program which the homeless are expected to attend on a regular basis**

Two additional shelters, namely the Monastery “Missionaries of Charity – Sisters of Mother Teresa’s, and Caritas of the Archdiocese of Zagreb”, expressed an interest in including their own beneficiaries in the workshop programme. To meet their initiative, computer literacy and job-seeking support workshops assisted by nine volunteers were organised at the central City Library.

The lessons learned from our experience at the homeless shelter in Kosnica were applied in modifying library services at the central City Library. Despite the fact that the computer literacy workshops were primarily designed as a set of skills essential for job seeking, there was a need to tailor them to the users’ needs so that, for example, someone spending the night on a park bench or riding in a tram, without energy or desire to study, could rely on somebody in the workshop to go through job adverts and keep them company over a cup of coffee or a glass of juice.

Job-seeking support workshops were additionally modified. Owing to frequent cases of fluctuation and resentment towards group-work methodology, a considerable amount of attention was devoted to acquiring skills in composing job applications and CVs through the individual approach. All those asking for help were guaranteed individual assistance and tutoring. In addition, there has been a practice of writing recommendation letters for beneficiaries who had also been granted special treatment by the State Employment Institute.

The City Library workshops soon became popular with the homeless, partly owing to the young volunteers and a one-to-one approach and partly to the cosy atmosphere in the dome of the central City Library. Refreshments and conversation with the homeless contributed to the fact that users often recommended our services to other homeless people.

One of the service’s new partners, the Legal Clinic of the Zagreb Law Faculty, hosts a workshop for the homeless about their rights and provides them with free legal assistance. They also held a workshop about the rights of the homeless intended for librarians, social workers, psychologists, volunteers and potential new partners. The workshops were held at the central City Library.
The third model has also shown that the homeless as a social group dislike rigidly structured programmes, which consequently ought to be adjusted to their needs along the way. The library-hosted programmes are mostly attended by highly motivated homeless people who are more likely to attend on a regular basis. Motivation for regular attendance was further increased due to the individual work with volunteers, since the homeless developed an affinity with, and sense of responsibility towards, their mentoring volunteer. As for the fluctuations, some have been detected within this model too, but to a lesser extent than in earlier cases. The comfortable library surroundings where the homeless gather and work, somewhat separated from the rest of the building, provides a relaxed atmosphere, enables a friendly talk over a cup of coffee and makes the entire library a kind of safe place where the homeless feel accepted and treated as human beings. The social element is an important aspect of the workshops. The homeless, whose social network is among the least developed ones (UNDP, 2006b), are given a chance to expand it in the library. To make this happen, however, volunteer work is of vital importance. The volunteers are granted supervision by VCZ experts. The supervision showed that the volunteers were very satisfied with their own contribution and the relationship with the beneficiaries. They pointed out that the education period prior to volunteering, when they heard about the real experiences from the project manager herself, had helped them a lot. The librarian who organises activities within this model feels much more at ease in safe library surroundings, relying on the help and support of his or her fellow colleagues. Also, the library space makes it much easier to create a cosy atmosphere and set up various activities intended not only for the homeless but also for volunteers and partner organisations.

Conclusion
Comparing all three models, one can quite easily realize that ZCL has not yet tested a fourth model: that is, services provided by the library but organised in a homeless shelter without clear structure which the homeless occasionally attend. It will be carried out in the future, particularly because VCZ’s attempts to organise creative workshops in the shelter Kosnica proved unsuccessful. Volunteers were unable to deal with the participants’ lack of motivation and the poor traffic connection between the shelter and the city centre.

People able to work successfully with this social group, need to be well equipped with persistency, strong motivation, sincerity, tolerance, flexibility and a fine balance between formal and informal approaches. Should a library set out to organise a homeless-oriented service, it should first found out whether it has such a person at its disposal, or there may be a great danger of librarians suffering from the burnout syndrome, unless, of course, the services provided fall into the first model.

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The question is how many librarians are actually ready to trade their everyday tasks for work not requiring knowledge and skills acquired through librarian training and education. Another issue posed here is whether a library can set aside means for further training and supervision of librarians working with the homeless. That appears to be a very serious problem in times of big budget cuts. Unfortunately, much of the organisational strategy is left in the hands of enthusiastic individuals.

Relying upon partner organisations is possible within the first model. Conversely, experiences with the other two models clearly shows that the partners are often too busy with their own tasks to be freely available every time the librarian cannot answer
the beneficiaries’ needs and requests, or have long-term problems which require additional time and involvement.

Nevertheless, all of the above mentioned difficulties and problems are no reason to overlook this underserved group of users when it comes to organising and planning library services and fulfilling the public library’s basic mission, that of providing equal access to knowledge, skills, and cultural achievements.

Working with a group without a social network means that libraries have to make an effort in creating a social network that includes an ever growing number of individuals, volunteers, organisations, and professions, in order to create a systematic, well-organised approach to providing homeless-oriented services, which will in turn lead to some serious improvements in their status. A great advantage of libraries is that they possess special, expert and infrastructural predispositions to become centres for setting up social networks.

A well designed promotional strategy for the project has resulted in great media attention. Information about the project has been published on various relevant news portals; there have been numerous newspaper articles, and radio stations broadcasted the news about the project, with local and national television also recording reports. All this contributed to one of the goals of the project, that is, to overcome the prejudices and preconceptions about the homeless in libraries.

Making their own contribution to coping with the homelessness issue, libraries and librarians increasingly not only flirt with, but also engage in, activism. In the words of former librarian, writer and activist Chip Ward:

Although one might not suspect so, the role of the librarian and the role of the activist share much in common. Effective activists provoke public dialog. Effective librarians invite such dialogue. Although they employ different methods, the ends are the same[3].

We are all well aware of the fact that the role of the librarian is subject to constant change owing to the modern means of communication but there is yet another thing we must never forget. We live in times when natural calamities, wars and financial crises are completely unpredictable and of global proportions. All of us are potentially homeless people so raising awareness of the problem on both professional and general levels is a guarantee of a better future.

Notes
1. PLIP: www.eifl.net/plip
2. http://beskucnik.kgz.hr

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**Further reading**


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