

# Homelessness in Malta – a problem?

**M**ALTA IS being classified as one of the freer countries of the globe. The paradox for freedom is uncertainly in employment and accommodation.

Ask any Eastern European citizen about his acquired freedom which is veiled in an unsure future. Previously employment and housing were assured. The type of housing provided was at times sub-standard, with water supply or drainage systems not fully functional, but homelessness was unknown.

The economic growth that the Maltese Islands have experienced since independence has the tendency of leaving a greater number of the population marginalised, not being able to cope with the daily necessities.

The affordability problem of housing creates an insurmountable strain on the institutionalised sector, numbering 1,100 of the population, the alcoholics, drug addicts, the increasing number of single-parent families, all create visions of a homeless spectre.

Shelter security is purchased mostly in 30-year mortgage blocks, or by entering into a rental agreement, however the very poor do not have the ability to maintain a permanent address, whereby a loss of control on privacy and residential community occurs. The scarcity of a robust and diverse assortment of rental housing units affordable to people receiving incomes less than 80 per cent of the median makes residential security difficult to obtain.

The infamous rental restrictions are again helping towards this homeless problem. It has been reported that young people return to their car for the night, a single-parent family lives in the stairwell of an apartment block. The extent of the problem has not been fully gauged yet.

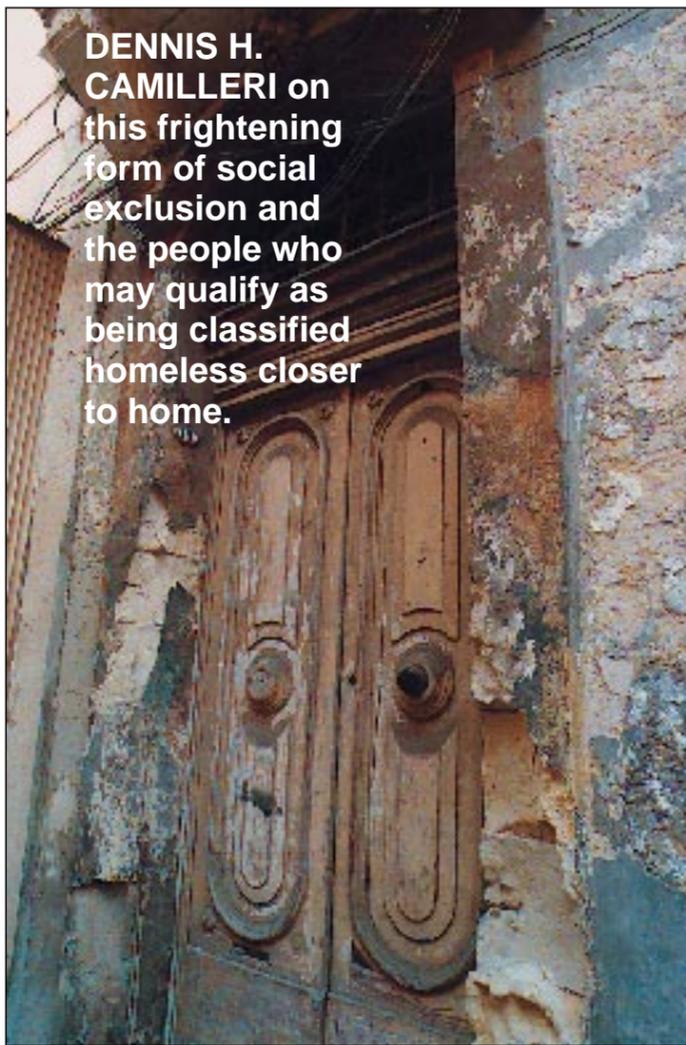
It is encouraging to note Government's aid to NGOs, but it is important that the extent of this homelessness is fully evaluated for Malta not to be burdened with an additional social problem at the dawn of this new millennium.

## Who are the homeless?

The European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) offers the following definition.

1. People who are roofless
2. People who are living in institutions, as they have no other place to go.
3. Those living in insecure accommodation.
4. Those living in entirely substandard or inappropriate accommodation.

Significant numbers of street children and roofless families can be found in Spain, Portugal, Greece and Italy. Shanty towns, constructed by the dwellers themselves of cardboard



**DENNIS H. CAMILLERI** on this frightening form of social exclusion and the people who may qualify as being classified homeless closer to home.

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and corrugated sheeting, are also found in southern Europe. In contrast to these dwellings in the Mediterranean, in northern Europe due to harsher weather conditions, even the most substandard housing would be solidly built, although in such a poor condition that people living there are considered homeless. Most roofless people in the North are single adult males.

In this context Malta's situation is more akin to northern Europe as permanent shanty towns and roofless dwellings are not in existence, while on the other hand the number of substandard occupied dwellings totals 22 per cent.

However, how substandard must a dwelling be to create homelessness must be defined. The amount of shared accommodation in the Maltese Islands totals 1.5 per cent of occupied dwellings, while 360 separated persons still share the same dwelling with their separated partner.

## The extent of homelessness

In the EU, on an average day 1.1 million have to sleep rough. Over the course of the year 1.8 million homeless people are dependent on public or voluntary services for temporary shelter, while an additional 0.9 million rotate between staying with friends and relatives. A further 15 million badly housed people are living in severely substandard and overcrowded dwellings.

The EU countries may be clustered into four groups of incidence of homelessness. The highest rate of homelessness at 10 per 1,000 inhabitants is found in the three largest countries: France, Germany and the UK.

The second group includes Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands at two per 1,000. The Nordic countries have a rate of one per 1,000, while the

lowest end of the spectrum is in Portugal, Greece and Spain. A similar figure for the US works out at 2.5 per 1,000. The available evidence suggests that homelessness is increasing in the EU at around eight per cent per annum.

It would appear that homelessness is most prevalent in the northern and larger countries, although it may be the case that homelessness is a newer phenomenon in southern Europe, due to the recent individualisation of society being responsible for the weakening of familial and social networks, which previously provided the main source of social welfare.

Where is Malta's standing in comparison to these statistics?

**T**he demographics of the homeless have the male predominating, with women accounting for a fifth. Single people are estimated at having a four times greater risk of being homeless than couples, while lone parents have a 17 times greater risk.

The homeless tend to be younger in southern Europe than in the north. As homelessness is strongly associated with poverty and unemployment, this is explained by the large proportion of the unemployed youth in the south, reaching 45 per cent in Spain. The elderly represent a smaller fraction, however this may reflect high death rates among the homeless.

In Germany the homeless have a 10-year lower life expectancy. Socially they possess few relationships, only a small portion have spouses, most are separated, divorced or never married. Compared to other poor people, the homeless possess fewer social ties and 50 per cent have had institutional experience, whether as foster children, prisoners or patients.

## Services for the homeless

Most services in the EU are provided by voluntary organisations rather than the state. The ratio averages out at 2:1, with private organisations providing double the state's, this however climbs up to 90 per cent in Luxembourg, Belgium and Ireland.

In Germany, Spain, Italy and Ireland the main source is from religious organisations. The predominance of private rather than public provision of homelessness services highlights the failure of the state to care for the homeless, with an attitude that these belong to the sphere of charity rather than entitlement.

Much of the service provision for Europe's homeless is aimed at meeting basic needs such as shelter, food and clothing. Services intended to promote the long term reintegration of the homeless into the labour market and a more settled way of life are less widespread. These reintegration services are more common in

Denmark, Luxembourg, France and Belgium, and least common in Spain, Greece and Ireland.

It is true that no matter how effectively, a housing market operates, there will always be a proportion of the population who cannot sustain housing for personal reason.

Put crudely, if homelessness stems from personal problems then more social support should be the priority, while if homelessness is mostly a housing problem then more housing to those in need has to be supplied.

A programme being carried out in the US, is based on the conception that as the poor and socially deprived receive more income, they do not escape poverty if local affordable housing choices remain few and costs high. Together with fostering social improvement, housing policy increases also shelter security.

'The Group' provides single room occupancy housing, as it was recognised that this type of housing provides a more important rental option for the single poor. The Group solicits tenants to keep their rooms in good shape, use public spaces with care and pay their rent. They want current residents to obtain a job and enough income to leave and rent a larger accommodation.

The Group works hard to help the tenants travel from addiction to sobriety, from welfare to work and the ultimate challenge is to move people from the streets and shelters into their own dwelling.

## Whither Malta?

Homelessness, denying the fundamental right of adequate shelter, is perhaps the extreme manifestation of social exclusion. In Malta as pressures exist on the affordability of the housing market, it is likely that the most vulnerable members of our society will be squeezed out of the housing market, including those who simply need accommodation and have no additional problems.

It appears that the US experience is more applicable than the EU's, where projects seek to build affordable residential settlements that offer a mix of rentals for households with diverse incomes say from 30 per cent to 60 per cent of the median wage. These alternatives reduce shelter uncertainty by expanding the range of affordable rental choices near the bottom of the market.

## Sources

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