

# Report notes dramatic increase in homelessness in Germany

By Marianne Arens  
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“Whoever has no house now will not build one anymore.” As beautiful as the Rilke poem about the approaching end of the year may sound—for the homeless, the onset of winter is the worst punishment. The Federal Working Group for Homelessness (BAG W) reported this week that the homeless now number almost 1 million in Germany, approximately 860,000.

The latest figures mean that in “rich” Germany, one in a hundred inhabitants is without a place to live. So much for the ubiquitous media commentary about how well things are going in Germany: “The Germans live well” (*FAZ*), “Germany is experiencing the strongest economic recovery in a long time” (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*), and the *Frankfurter Rundschau*: “Is the German economy really too good?”

In reality, it is only going well for a narrow layer of the population. The bottom of society confronts a catastrophic social situation that has enormously explosive implications.

The number of homeless is increasing from month to month. Last year it literally exploded. Although there are no definitive statistics, in December 2016, the federal government put the number at 335,000. The BAG W, which calculates its figures from reports produced by support services and social institutions, assumes that homeless population has increased two and a half times since 2014.

Not all homeless people sleep permanently outdoors, beneath a bridge or underpass. Most find refuge in shelters, sleep in public facilities such as a women’s shelter or homeless shelter, or temporarily stay with friends. But the number of those who are living permanently or predominantly on the street has increased massively and is estimated to be more than 50,000 people today.

Most homeless are adult men, but the number of women is growing and the number of children and adolescents on the street is steadily increasing. According to the survey, about 30 percent of those affected are living together with partners and/or children. The percentage of children and adolescents among the homeless is estimated at 8 percent, that of women at 27 percent, and 20 percent young people under the age of 25. The proportion of women among the latter is

considerably larger than the total.

Many newspaper reports point out that about half of those affected today are homeless refugees. That may be the case, but, as the authors of the study emphasise, it has little to do with the causes of the misery. Although immigration intensifies the effect, it is by no means the “sole cause of the new housing shortage”, as Thomas Specht, managing director of BAG W, emphasised. The “main causes of housing shortage and homelessness lie in a housing policy in Germany that has failed for decades, in conjunction with an insufficient fight against poverty,” the BAG W press release states.

The widespread lack of affordable housing is the result of systematic deregulation and privatisation over the last 25 years by the politicians responsible at federal, state and local level.

Since 1990, the stock of social housing in Germany has shrunk by almost two thirds, and it continues to shrink. Two parallel processes are responsible for this. The municipal and state housing stock is being systematically sold off and handed over to private interests. And at the same time, the commitment to provide social housing is diminishing, as the authorities cancel any further funding.

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1991, the sale of local authority and cooperative housing stock began on a large scale towards the end of the 1990s. The city of Dresden was one of the first to sell its entire housing stock to pay off its debts. This example was followed by Berlin and many other cities. Four years ago, Bavaria sold 33,000 social housing units, 8,000 of them in Munich.

Those responsible were politicians of all stripes, from the Christian Democratic CDU/CSU to the Free Democratic FDP to the Social Democratic SPD, the Greens and the Left Party. In Berlin, the SPD-Left Party city government sold over 200,000 apartments to financial sharks such as Cerberus Capital Management. While speculation in land was being powerfully fuelled, Social Affairs Senator (state minister) Harald Wolf (Left Party) simultaneously ended subsidies for social housing. Today, Berlin lacks 150,000

apartments for low-income earners.

Recently in Frankfurt am Main, the desperate situation of thousands of students at the beginning of the semester has once again shed light on the housing shortage, which has been rife for a long time. There are officially only 2,900 dorm rooms for over 60,000 students. Students are thus put in competition for affordable housing with those on low incomes, or they sleep in tents, in the car, or far away in the surrounding area.

In Frankfurt, a massive process of displacement from affordable housing has been taking place for years, driven by gentrification and luxury refurbishment on the one hand, and rising rents and homelessness on the other. Again, responsibility lies with the SPD Mayor Peter Feldmann and the former planning department head Olaf Cunitz (Green Party), and his successor Mike Josef (SPD).

Nationwide, speculation in housing construction is on the rise. Freehold apartments and new housing estates are listed on the stock exchange for speculative purposes. So-called premium real estate in Berlin, Düsseldorf, Hamburg, Cologne, Frankfurt, Munich or even Heidelberg and Potsdam is highly regarded as capital investment. Many empty apartments are intended solely for speculation and are completely unavailable as living space.

The lack of affordable housing is compounded by growing poverty. Here, too, the SPD and Greens have set the course. It is precisely the conditions that were created with the Hartz IV laws and Agenda 2010 policies of welfare and labour “reforms” that make the housing situation even more difficult for those affected.

Job centres can sanction unemployed under-25s by withdrawing their accommodation and heating allowance. This leads to many young jobless not being accepted as tenants for an apartment, because landlords fear the rent will not be paid if a young person is sanctioned by the authorities. As a result, many young people without permanent work are unable to find housing from the outset.

The ALG II benefit regulations can also cause problems for older welfare recipients. Often, the job centre will not cover the full cost of housing. Local governments impose certain upper limits for housing costs, forcing people to give up their long-familiar home. But many will not easily find a new apartment, which would be sufficiently small and cheap. The consequences can be high levels of debt, eviction and homelessness.

The situation of the homeless is also becoming increasingly difficult as municipal social services themselves suffer cutbacks due to austerity measures and are increasingly reaching their limits. For example, in Munich, the head of a women’s refuge told regional broadcaster BR, “Unfortunately, it is increasingly the case that we have to

send women away. This is completely new and terrible, and we are suffering a lot from it. That just shouldn’t be happening in Munich!”

The level of social polarisation is especially striking in Munich. Homelessness no longer affects just down-and-out alcoholic men. It is often ordinary people on middle-incomes who are threatened and affected. Living in Munich has become very expensive, and once you land on the street, it is increasingly difficult to get back up.

A report from February 2017 by broadcaster ZDF makes clear that by no means all homeless people are perceived as such. Many are not counted in the numbers of homeless, since they do everything humanly possible to not attract public attention. Many homeless people go to work every day, take a shower at public facilities and have their hair cut regularly. They have put all their belongings into storage and their mail is collected from a post office box or goes to the address of acquaintances.

The ZDF report highlighted the situation of people who are homeless despite having work, including a dentist from Slovenia and a 61-year-old nurse.

The programme accompanied a former retail salesman. His “home” is now under a bridge, even though he still pursues a regular job de-cluttering. His income is insufficient to rent a flat in Munich; it is just enough for a monthly public transport ticket. He takes a shower every day and shaves regularly. “You don’t see it. Nobody has spoken to me yet.” But in the evenings, when he rolls out his bedding under the bridge, he often thinks, “You used to have a flat, a car, a roof over your head. ... During the day, I block that out quite well.”

By the end of 2018, according to the BAG W report, the number of homeless people is expected to have increased by another 350,000 to about 1.2 million people.

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