



Access to homelessness services and housing in Amsterdam

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You would expect housing and homelessness services to be well organised in a prosperous country like the Netherlands, with its longstanding tradition as a welfare state. In reality, however, it's rather disappointing, as demonstrated by research from the Amsterdam audit office. Access to support and housing for homeless people in Amsterdam is not adequate¹ and the facilities that are available are often considered to be quite rigid in their rules of conduct and procedures. Homeless people, who often come from stressful situations, don't always receive much support when requesting housing or shelter.

THE SITUATION IN THE NETHERLANDS

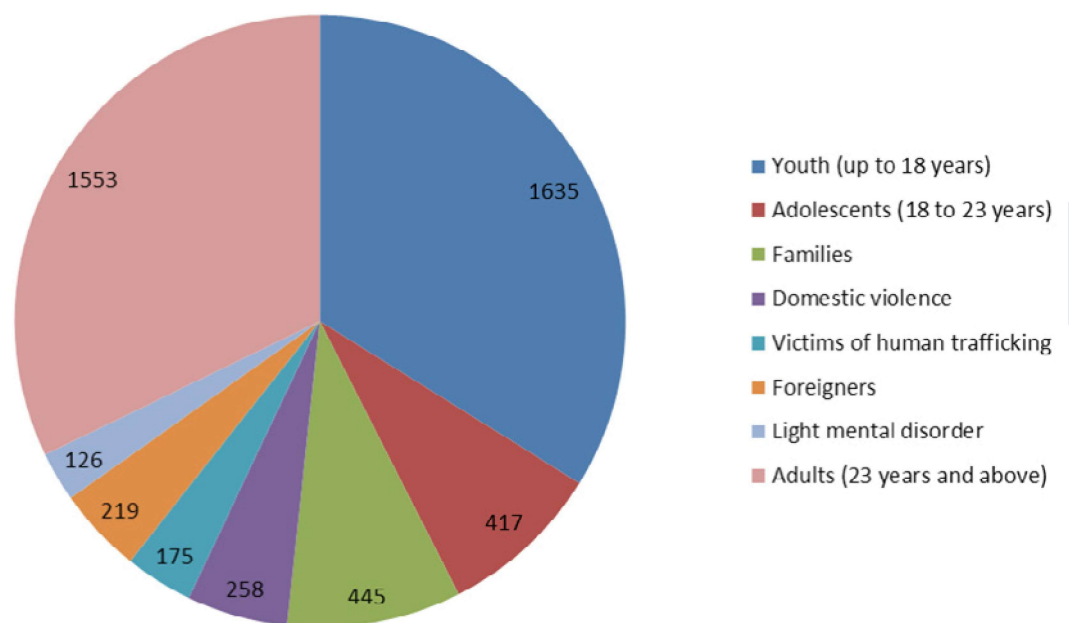
The number of homeless people increased from 17,500 in 2009 to 30,500 in 2016. Approximately 13,000 live in one of the country's four major cities (Amsterdam, the Hague, Rotterdam and Utrecht)². That's why the audit offices³ in these four cities decided to conduct research into shelter for the homeless.

The departure point in terms of Dutch law is that the country's inhabitants who need support must always be given that support.⁴ They can seek housing in any municipality. In December 2017, the State Secretary for Health, Welfare and Sports informed the House of Representatives that a number of local governments were not consistent in their application of this law and were not acting according to the spirit or letter of the law. In addition, he reiterated that it was up to local governments to ensure that the key questions coming from the homeless are examined thoroughly and that adequate support is provided for homeless people with and without mental health or drug addiction issues.⁵

SITUATION IN AMSTERDAM

At the beginning of 2017, Amsterdam provided shelter for approximately 4,800 homeless people (see fig. 1).⁶ The audit office in Amsterdam carried out research into homeless people aged 23 and over. 1,553 of the people in this group were in homeless shelters on January 1st, 2017.

Figure 1. Number of homeless people in 2017 split into different categories



Source: <https://www.rekenkamer.amsterdam.nl/onderzoeksopzet-opvang-dak-en-thuislozen/>

1 Access to support is judged according to the five dimensions of access to care for the elderly.(availability, accessibility, accommodation, affordability, and acceptability). See Schipper, E. C. C., Challenges of access: Client and provider perspectives on the access process to long-term care for older people, 2016

2 <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2016/51/dakloos-vaker-jong-en-niet-westers>

3 These local audit offices are responsible for making independent audits on effectiveness and efficiency (performance). With public reports including findings and recommendations, the local audit offices not only support the city council but try to strengthen the city administration and are the watchdog for public and tax-payer interests. The audit offices are independent, choose their subjects for audits without consent of the city council, have access rights to all information and places in local government, and have the authority to present audit reports to the city council and publish them at the same time.

4 Artikel 1.2.1 van de Wet maatschappelijke ondersteuning 2015 (Article 1.2.1 of the Social Support Act 2015)

5 Letter to chairman of House of Representatives, 18th January 2018

6 Statistics in the categories "youth" and "domestic violence" relate to homeless support in 2016. Remaining statistics relate to the situation as per 1 January 2017.



In 2016, 1,612 homeless people (age of 23 and above) applied for support in Amsterdam. In 2016, 1,076 homeless people were not eligible for support on the basis of the screening and 307 were eligible.⁷ For those who were granted access, the wait for housing or shelter starts and they are given the support they need. The average waiting time in January 2017 was 1.2 years. In April, that number fell to 0.9 years. The availability of 24-hour homeless shelters is limited for this group. Other homeless people seek shelter with friends and family, in overnight shelters, or on the street.

THE APPLICATION PROCESS FOR SHELTER IS INADEQUATE

Despite Amsterdam's continuous efforts at the local government level, access to shelter and support remains insufficient. Firstly, the public office where shelter can be requested is only open four mornings a week (every weekday except Wednesday). Online applications are being increasingly encouraged. This potentially offers better opportunities for a section of the target group. Secondly, applicants are often ill informed. They are provided with no explanation regarding the application process and its duration or the questions they can expect to be asked. According to client support organisations, homeless people don't know what to expect during a first intake interview, as demonstrated by the quote below:

"Homeless people often feel as though they are going for a job interview. They will emphasise the things that are going well, which means they will be judged as being self sufficient, reducing their chances being given shelter or housing. Because they don't know what lies ahead, they are less open, which does not serve the effectiveness of the services well".

Thirdly, the process of applying for shelter includes multiple steps in which a number of different officials play a role, and not enough information is provided to the applicant. Just to get on a waiting list, a homeless person will already have to deal with three, or often up to six officials. Fourthly, the legal position of the applicant is often jeopardised. The legally required steps (such as an official proof of application, writing a research report, or dealing with a negative outcome) that must be taken during the application process are often not followed. The homeless person then often does not get what he or she is legally entitled to. Lastly, for half of the applications that are received, the entire application process takes longer than eight weeks. In these cases, the local government is in breach of the legally required norm for the

time needed to reach an outcome. For the applicant, this means that it will often take a long time just to get on the waiting list for shelter or support, much less be granted long-term housing.

THE PROCESS IS VIEWED AS STRICT

When considering whether or not someone is eligible, an important question is the extent to which the person in question is self-reliant. During this process, local government professionals use the Dutch variant of the self-sufficiency matrix. Psychiatric and psychosocial problems are often crucial for determining self-sufficiency. For example, if the professional decides that a homeless person is not self sufficient when it comes to 'daily activities' and 'societal participation' and is not fully self sufficient in terms of 'finance' and 'social network', the professional will still conclude that the applicant is self sufficient enough and not eligible for the support.⁸ This was the case for 867 of the 1,076 clients that applied in 2016. Experts and client support organisations are of the opinion that the high percentage of rejected applications is linked to excessively strict selection criteria.

THE SUPPORT FOR HOMELESS PEOPLE IS INSUFFICIENT

There is no active support from local government for the largest group of homeless people that don't qualify for shelter to help improve their situation. Homeless people are given insufficient information with regard to their rights, including the right to independent client support, and they are not actively referred to other opportunities for support like temporary shelter, social services, debt support groups, or assistance in seeking employment. On a national scale, the perception persists that homeless people who do not suffer from psychological disorders or addiction are not given enough help.⁹ Homeless people who are taken in and waiting for shelter are not much better off in Amsterdam. They have a right to support from the local government, but at 2.5 hours per month per client, it's rather limited. They are often referred for support or shelter that is general in nature and doesn't suit their specific needs.

CONCLUSIONS

A variety of national studies have recently been published that further support the findings of research carried out by the audit office in Amsterdam. This research shows that these findings don't only apply to Amsterdam, but are playing out on a larger scale in the Netherlands. 'Mystery shopper' research carried out by the Trimbos Institute showed that homeless people are often unable to seek shelter or housing in 43 different municipalities because local government and housing and shelter services are too strict when it comes to the criteria in connection to the region.¹⁰

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7 For some of the homeless people who were in the screening in 2016, → 2016 above was still ongoing. Another part has decided not to fully screen.

8 ECLI:NL:RBAMS:2017:3835

9 <https://www.platform-investico.nl/artikel/geen-plek-meer-de-opvang-voor-daklozen-zonder-stoornis-verslaving/> 54% of those asked indicated that they 'disagree' with the statement that there is enough help for homeless people without a mental disorder or addiction.

10 Trimbos Instituut, *Praktijkttest maatschappelijke opvang 2017*, December 2017. Connection to the region is established in Amsterdam by determining whether or not the applicant has spent at least two of the last three years in Amsterdam



There's a good chance that, during this time, the situation for the person concerned will have worsened, even though research shows that initial support is important to prevent applicants from slipping into worse circumstances.¹¹

National research revealed that homeless people who don't suffer from addiction or mental illness, but who have lost their home through bad luck or bad finances, are being rejected in large numbers by homeless services.¹² Local governments have indicated that they simply do not have the resources to help this group of 'self-sufficient homeless' people. The available research shows that the way homelessness services are currently organised, in many cases, can cause the situation to deteriorate further. This is partly due to restructuring in the Netherlands, which has left local government with the overall responsibility for this target group. Many processes have yet to be sufficiently established. But it also involves a certain reluctance towards the people knocking at the door for help. The conviction in the public and government debate surrounding homelessness is that the people themselves must take responsibility. In this scenario, government must not be too hasty when it comes to taking responsibility. Furthermore, becoming part of the group of homeless people who cannot fend for themselves is considered detrimental to the mental wellbeing and resourcefulness of the (relatively) self-sufficient group of homeless people.

We think it would be good to be less supply oriented and put the client's needs first. People who report themselves as homeless at the council are there for a reason. This is a stressful situation for those concerned and people are often not entirely rational under these circumstances. Stress, regardless of intelligence or knowledge, can often lead to reduced comprehension, bad choices and an escalation of the issues, which negatively impacts the way in which they handle the situation.¹³ At this point, in other words, support is required for someone to be able to regain control of the situation.

During the initial screening at the door, it is important not to make assumptions with regard to whether or not a homeless person is eligible for support, but what is needed to help improve the situation of the person in front of the counter must be established. This can vary from a nudge in the right direction to more long-term support aimed at recovery and becoming self-sufficient, in order to provide a more structural and permanent solution. Governments that make bad choices at this point create more problems than they solve. A lot of ground can be gained at the start of this process. By investing quickly in early, suitable support, deteriorating circumstances and the need for more intensive and costly support can be prevented. This is not only good for the client, it is more effective.

11 Trimbos instituut, *Factsheet Dakloze personen zonder OGGZ-problematiek en hun ondersteuning*, 2015.

12 Revealed in research carried out by investigative journalism platform *Investico* in collaboration with current events programme *Nieuwsuur* and the magazine *De Groene Amsterdammer*.

13 WRR (Wetenschappelijke Raad voor Regeringsbeleid), *Weten is nog geen doen. Een realistisch perspectief op redzaamheid*, 24th April 2017