

Research Paper

The maze of homelessness

An exploration of the system of youth housing in The Netherlands

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Abstract

Young people experiencing homelessness still is a major social problem in the Netherlands. In addition to varying personal circumstances, there are a number of flaws in the housing system that make it more difficult for young people to obtain a roof above their head. Commissioned by SZN (the foundation for homeless youth in the Netherlands) TU/e Urban Labs conducted a quick-scan of the policy and practice of youth housing in The Netherlands. Through a series of interviews with professionals and literature research nine barriers are identified. The research shows that in absence of help young people without personal advantages get stuck in a maze of regulations and institutions. It is concluded that the problem is systemic and that the collaboration between parties and authorities is not only a precondition for good assistance of young people (such as between housing corporations and care institutions), but also for the development of housing for young people and the development of policy and new, more integrated concepts.

Keywords

Homeless youth, youth housing, youth care, housing policy, housing system, housing politics

1. Introduction

Recently more attention is drawn to the growing problems of young people experiencing homelessness in the Netherlands. The national statistics agency (CBS) established that on 1 January 2021 approximately 5,670 young people (aged 18 to 27) in the Netherlands were 'de facto homeless' (CBS, 2021) meaning that they are *registered* as homeless. The numbers are received with suspicion by professionals and it is estimated that the actual number is much higher (Hochstenbach, 2022). There are many invisible homeless people, who live in various places but do not have a roof over their heads. In their daily practice professionals see a constant stream of new homelessness people (Valente, 2021). Furthermore people below 18 (minors) are not included in the statistics.

Homelessness among young people is a major social problem in the Netherlands. The nationwide shortage of affordable housing is a major problem for young people in general, while the importance of a stable housing situation is increasingly recognized as a precondition for development. Young people who have no



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roof over their heads often struggle with a number of characteristic problems (Kelly and Caputo 2007, Volker Busch-Geertsema et al., 2010). In general, they do not know their way around the institutions and are often still unfamiliar with the procedures. Moreover, they have a smaller network to fall back on. Often, young people who experience homeless or are at risk of experiencing homeless do not have the support of their immediate family or friends. In many cases, these young people come from youth welfare and the transition from youth welfare to an independent life is abrupt. In addition to these personal circumstances, there are a number of systematic flaws that make it even more difficult for young people to obtain a roof above their head. Without help many younger people get stuck in this maze of regulations and institutions.

The Dutch government is committed to a broad, programmatic approach to housing problems among young people. Various programs have been rolled out. For example, the government has made a financial incentive of 200 million euros available in combating homelessness for the years 2020 and 2021 (Rijksoverheid, 2020). In addition to paying attention to prevention and guidance, the government aimed to realize 10,000 extra living spaces with the necessary guidance – including so-called 'flex-housing'. The realization of these homes has been delegated to municipalities, corporations and social organisations and should have been completed before the end of 2021. Nevertheless, at the end of 2021, a total of about 6,000 to 7,000 had been realized (Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport, 2021a). In addition to performance agreements on housing production, the government focused on developing a new, innovative approach. For example, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport have commissioned the Creative Industries Fund NL to work on the topic of homelessness based on design research (Creative Industries Fund NL, 2021). The government also runs various programs on homelessness, such as the 'Actieprogramma Dak- en Thuisloze jongeren 2019 – 2021' (Roof and Homeless Youth Action Program 2019–2021) and 'Een (t)huis, een toekomst, de brede aanpak van dak- en thuisloosheid' (A home, a future, the broad approach to homelessness). The ambition of the Action Program was promising: by the end of 2021, the number of homeless young people in the Netherlands should be reduced to zero (Movisie, 2021). The final report of this Action program shows that the ambition has been far from being achieved. It is stated, however, that the services provided to (threatened) homeless young people in the municipalities participating in the action program have improved considerably (Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport, 2021b). Both programs have come to an end, but in the national budget for 2022 it has been stated that cooperation on this theme will be continued in 2023 (Rijksoverheid, 2022a).

Despite the attention for the problems surrounding the housing of young people at both national and local level, a structural solution is out of sight. *"As long as there is youth who sleep in the streets and in shelters, the current policy is apparently not enough"* (director shelter organisation, personal interview, 2021). The initiatives from the national government do not seem to be delivering what they are aiming for so far. The need to improve and accelerate the development and allocation of housing for this specific target group is recognised by all parties involved, but seems difficult to get off the ground. This research explores the barriers in the system of youth housing in the Netherlands.

Most of the barriers identified in this study are context specific and related to the organisation of the government-, wealth distribution- and housing system of the Netherlands specifically. As a result, the application of the outcomes to other countries is limited. However, it is important to recognise homelessness as an international social problem and to continue to address the topic. The case results may provide a base of support for others to address the problem of youth homelessness and entry points for further local investigation.

The paper is continued in three parts. The *Methodology* describes the approach of the research, the *Barriers* describe the nine most important obstructions for youth housing, and *Towards a solution* discusses the results and sets out plans for further action.

2. Methodology

TU/e Urban Labs was commissioned by SZN (The Foundation for Homeless Youth in The Netherlands) to investigate the housing system for homeless youth in The Netherlands. During the research 11 professionals were interviewed working at advocacy groups, central government, municipalities, housing corporations and health care providers about the barriers and opportunities they encounter within current practice to reduce youth homelessness. These interviews took place from March to June 2021 and were transcribed. Certain interviewees have agreed to participate with the condition of anonymity. For this reason the names of all participants have been anonymized. In support of the interviews and research various relevant policy documents and laws were analysed.

3. Barriers

Within current policy and practice of housing for young people nine obstructions in the youth housing system are identified. These bottlenecks are in the field of (1) income and surcharges, (2) housing stock, (3) housing policies and regulations, (4) social housing allocation, (5) compartmentalisation, (6) relationship with care, (7) financing new housing, (8) housing providers and (9) perception and base of support.

3.1. Income and surcharges

The current national and local government policies on income and benefits that are in place make it almost impossible for young people to afford housing on their own. Due to their limited income the housing market is not accessible to them. The current minimum youth wage starts in 2022 at € 595 (age 16 – the first year in which you can start living independently) and rises to € 1,725 (age 21 and older) (Rijksoverheid, 2022b). In support of equal access to the housing market the government provides rent surcharges for lower incomes. For a young person between the ages of 18 and 23 this is available if the calculation rent (basic rent plus service charges) does not exceed € 442 in 2022. However, independent homes for such a price are hard to be found. For a young person older than 23 years, the calculation rent may not exceed € 763 in 2022 to be able to receive rent surcharge (Belastingdienst, 2022). Municipalities can supplement this income from the Social Support Act (Wmo) if it is clear that the parents or caregivers are not (or cannot) meet their obligations. However, many young people do not report to the municipality, or do so only after they have already built up debts. The limited financial resources that young people have at their disposal as a result of these laws form an obstacle for housing associations in the development of housing for young people.

3.2. Housing stock

The current stock of affordable housing for young people is limited and waiting lists are long. In most cities, the housing stock that is built for this target group is usually exclusively accessible for students. Due to a lack of suitable smaller independent living spaces, young people with an 'emergency declaration' (that will prioritize your position on the social housing waiting list) are sometimes forced to be housed in family homes, at the expense of the corporation and/or the municipality. There is a mismatch in the housing stock. *"There are a relatively large number of single-family homes, but the needs of the target group rather require a smaller home, such as a studio. So there is no match between supply and demand"* (policy advisor Dutch municipality, personal interview, 2021). This puts pressure on the entire housing stock. Also the private sector is unreachable for young people, partly due to the high admission requirements of landlords. Access to the private room rental market is limited by the state imposed 'own front door policy' requirement (that

requires the accommodation to be self-contained) (Section 11 Rent Allowance Act) and by the 'cost-sharing standard' (which reduces surcharges of other residents when living together, like with the parents) (Section 22a Participation Act). In a new legislative proposal that will proceed in 2023, the age for the cost-sharing standard will be raised from 21 to 27 years.

3.3. Housing policy and regulations

The current laws and regulations do not adequately meet the housing needs and rights of young people. Only recently have all municipalities been obliged to draw up a residential care policy in which they include specific (vulnerable) target groups. In this document agreements are made about the required number of homes assigned for special target groups. However, the specific housing needs of young people are in many cases not part of the policy of housing corporations and municipalities. There is a growing awareness that more must be done for this target group and that there is a need for an integral vision in which, in addition to the quantitative task, attention is also paid to the social living environment and the relationship with care.

Current municipal regulations can unintentionally complicate the development of youth housing. In an increasing number of municipalities there are (impending) rules that prohibit the splitting of homes into separate units, or making existing homes available for room occupancy. This anti-splitting policy does not only affects the intended investors, who are interested in maximum rental yields, but sometimes also foundations or private care initiatives that want to develop youth housing.

There is a discrepancy between the housing policy for students and young people who do not study, but sometimes also towards different students. Some housing associations with a department for students apply a minimum limit for the 'study load' of their tenants. In this calculation they do not count practical hours of the vocational schools. As a result, it may not be possible for vocational students to register for a student residence.

3.4. Social housing allocation

Only with an emergency declaration from the municipality young people have an accelerated right to a home. Municipalities determine in their housing ordinance which categories are entitled to urgency (Section 12 Housing Act). Some municipalities have put young people at the top of the urgency list, whether or not next to status holders (recognized refugees) and always behind the victims of domestic violence. Municipalities generally set strict conditions for an emergency declaration, which means that young people can usually only appeal to it when they are already in deep trouble. It is therefore important that the municipality has the right knowledge available to properly assess every situation. The process to request an urgency statement is complex. In general, one only receives an urgency statement with a care indication. *"You may actually be homeless, but otherwise perfectly healthy. Then you still won't get access to the shelter system, because our shelter system chain is fully equipped with care resources, care deployment and guidance. If you are considered to be sufficiently self-reliant, then you must come to a solution yourself."* (Policy advisor Dutch municipality, personal interview, 2021). The strict relation with care makes it almost impossible for the (imminently) homeless without a need of care to urgently find a home in the social housing system.

3.5. Compartmentalisation

Local authorities are tasked to provide general social (emergency) shelter and tailor-made care for its residents (Section 1.2.1 WMO). They coordinate this task through various sectoral departments - care, housing, employment, finance. With the arrival of central service desks in most major cities, a start has been made with an integrated approach of practice. The individual needs of care recipients can thus be recognized at an earlier stage. Within the municipality, the care sector is the first to be confronted with the problem of homelessness, because people often report when it is already too late and other problems have arisen in addition to the need for accommodation. This late recognition is the result of the compartmentalised government structure: *"Part of the underlying problem is that it is also organized in such a fragmented way across different portfolios. The problem is most visible among colleagues who work for 'care', because the young people become homeless, report to the neighbourhood team, get into debt, or develop psychological problems. But the solution is not in their (the care department) hands."* (Policy advisor Dutch municipality, personal interview, 2021). As a result, organisations and departments working within the care domain have the most insight into the problem and the issue is often regarded as a 'care issue' by other (policy) domains, while a large part of the problem lies with the housing market and surcharge policy.

3.6. Relationship to care

The hard transition from youth care to independence, or to a new care system, brings many young people into trouble. After years of others being in control of their lives, they often want to try to live independently. Without guidance or support, however, they run the risk of quickly building up debts, which can also worsen their living situation. Young people who sleep on the sofa with friends - or even those who spend nights outdoor - usually do not identify with the term 'homeless', and often do not report to the authorities and miss out on certain benefits. From the age of 18, young people who need support to live independently and participate in society are eligible for care and support under the Social Support Act (Wmo). This support is arranged through the Wmo-office within the municipality. During the decentralization of care from the state to the municipalities backlogs have arisen. There are also insufficient suitable youth homes with care, and because there are insufficient outflow opportunities, these homes are often also occupied by young people who could actually live independently. The system has become clogged. This situation has partly arisen because the demand for care and the target group has changed over the years, while the care system and the associated housing have only been developed to a limited extent.

3.7. Financing new housing

The development of housing for young people does not cover costs. As a result, the financial gap often has to be made up by housing associations and in some cases by municipalities and care organisations. In order to be able to obtain financing, homes for (vulnerable) young people are often financed from various sources. Compartmentalization (also see paragraph 3.5) of financing hinders an adequate development process. *"It is totally unprofitable to build for this category of young people. You have to put a lot of effort into that. So if a corporation is not instructed by the municipality to build for that specific target group – and the municipality does not want to spend money on it – then they will not do so."* (Policy advisor Dutch municipality, personal interview, 2021).

Under certain conditions, municipalities can issue a (temporary) environmental permit for temporary occupancy for a location that has a different zoning function. However, some municipalities and housing

associations indicate that the permit period is often too short, usually no longer than 10-15 years, to complete the financing of temporary 'flex-housing'. They would like to be sure that the house can be moved elsewhere after the 10-15 year period. In addition, some municipalities do not have (suitable) land themselves. For commercial parties, flex-housing for young people is often financially not interesting, because of the low income of young people and the complexity of the permit process, which is further aggravated by the regulations for temporary housing that do not always match between national and local level. Research by the Environmental Assessment Agency (PBL) found that when flex-housing is developed the amount work to maintain it is often bigger than expected, especially when the turnover rate is high and/or when vulnerable target groups are accommodated (Groot et al., 2022).

3.8. Housing providers

The pressure on housing associations continues to increase, while their investment scope has been drastically reduced since 2013 due to the 'landlord levy' (verhuurdersheffing, a state imposed tax on rental houses). With the abolition of the levy in 2023, the housing associations themselves will have more financial strength to build homes, but this will not completely solve the problem. All vulnerable target groups with urgency must be accommodated through the housing associations. The housing stock of most housing associations is not geared towards this target group; out of necessity they sometimes have to place individuals in family homes and drastically reduce the rent. *"The biggest obstacle to realizing affordable small homes is that they are not profitable. In the current market it is cheaper to lower the rent of an existing home than to build a new home."* (Director housing corporation, personal interview, 2021).

For commercial developers it is not attractive to build for young home seekers. The legislator plays a role in this process; the complex and locally very different rules that have been imposed at the bottom of the housing market make it unattractive for commercial parties, but also for foundations and care institutions, to invest in youth housing or new housing concepts. Certainly when at the same time relatively easy money can be made at the top of the market – subsidized through tax-free donations, investments and rental income – commercial parties will prefer this to uncertain projects with a low return.

3.9. Perception and base of support

An important obstacle to the development of new homes is the resistance from the neighbourhood. As a group, homeless people carry an unjustified stigma. Because of this there is often little support from the neighbourhood for housing for young people 'in their backyard'. The fact that the waiting time for regular social housing seekers in many municipalities has now risen to more than 10 years also affects the support for the placement of some groups of 'urgents', including unaccompanied minor asylum seekers, and young people who come from a situation of homelessness. For housing associations, support in the neighbourhood is often a major concern.

The current perception of homeless people is incorrect: *"Homeless young people are ordinary young people who have had a little less opportunities and a little more bad luck than other young people."* (Board member shelter organisation, personal interview, 2021). Also within organisations and municipalities there is often a wrong image of today's homeless youth: *"The stigma is not only about acceptance of the neighbourhood where young people will live, but about how internally within organisations is thought about these young people."* (Director housing corporation, personal interview, 2021). There is a major task within society and the (care) organisations to work towards a realistic picture.

4. Towards a solution

In current legislation and regulations, there are still many obstacles that make it difficult for young people to find a home. Revising housing policies and legislation for young people can shorten the search for a home, but this is not enough. The *maze of homelessness* gives insight into the coherence of the problems and gives an overview of the whole system, without being complete. The system is intertwined and connected: The institutions of youth welfare, shelters, social housing allocation and housing development are compartmentalised and still function largely independently of each other. Responsibilities and funding in the hands of many different parties. This is why the task of housing (vulnerable) young people should be regarded as a system issue. The collaboration between parties and authorities is not only a precondition for good supervision of young people (such as between corporations and care institutions), but also for the development of housing for young people and the development of policy and new, more integrated concepts.

Solving homelessness is not only a moral imperative, but prevention also saves social costs. It was calculated that every person without a home costs society € 36,000 to € 100,000 per year. In total, this amounts to 2.4 billion euros per year (Oxenaar et al., 2018). Prevention therefor provides financial advantages in the long term. Homelessness remains partly an invisible problem, so the scope of the task is not always clear. If the target group is mapped more carefully, the social urgency of the problem will become more visible and local organisations can also better reach the group. Also the stigma surrounding homelessness must be broken. The unfamiliarity regularly leads to resistance from local residents where housing initiatives are planned. For the young people themselves it is especially important to have a stable base. In order for them to settle down, the basics must be in order. That is the starting point for tackling other issues and is recognized in many countries as the 'housing-first' policy.

Housing first focuses on the immediate housing of homeless people. People experiencing homelessness receive housing without any preconditions and, in addition, intensive and integral support in their further recovery. The best known and most successful example of Housing first comes from Finland. Here, the government has been pursuing a policy of right to housing for some time. The country has successfully lowered the numbers of homeless people and remains the only country in Europe where homelessness rates are in decline (Revelli & Paidakaki, 2022). A case study from the US context shows that the chance of ending up on the street again is low and found a reduction in crime and healthcare costs (Cohen, 2020). After advice from the Council of Public Health & Society (RVS, 2020), the ambition has been formulated to integrate Housing first in policy in the Netherlands (Van Ooien, et al., 2022).

To successfully adopt the Housing first principle, it is crucial that there is a sufficient supply of affordable housing. Flex-housing has earlier been highlighted as a part of the Dutch solution to speed up the housing supply. This form of housing is however not an alternative to 'normal' housing, but an emergency solution for young people who have no housing. There are, for example, many other short-term solutions to create more houses such as transforming office buildings and vacant property management. Flex-housing must make the difference between being on the street and having a roof over your head. It must also not hinder housing policy in the longer term, because the structural underlying issues are not solved but passed on to the future (Groot et al., 2022). Also, the focus on quantity should not structurally lower the quality of living. And finally a prospect must be provided after a temporary contract comes to an end: *"If someone is forced to move continuously because of temporary solutions, then they cannot keep their network stable. However, this stability is essential for preventing relapse"*. (Policy advisor Dutch municipality, personal interview, 2021).

There is a need for a systematic change that puts the right to a home at the heart of the matter. Eliminating homelessness can be seen as the basic result of a fair housing policy. It must be housing that puts individual and collective well-being first and promotes mutual care and solidarity (Hochstenbach, 2022). The right to

a home is however not only about the house itself. It is also an environment that provides peace, stability and security. Municipalities, housing corporations and care providers must not only cooperate better in preventing homelessness, in housing distribution, performance agreements and care support, but also in how the living environment should look like. This environment can only be healthy when it includes social aspects (meeting places, community services, ...) and local facilities (neighbourhood amenities, high quality public space, ...). The congress topic healthy and wealthy in this sense is about creating complete and high value neighbourhoods.

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