

06

ROHAN AND LIBEŇ ISLANDS

Homeless people

“Having a place to live, having a job, being healthy mentally and physically, having a family, having friends, being able to have fun, having a good relationship, those are the main things. There it’s about finding something nice, even if it’s just a little thing. When I meet someone I know and see they’re happy, or I go do temp work and buy myself something nice. Just don’t torment yourself or drown in worry.”

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Introduction and method

The special attention given to homelessness stems from two main premises:

- 1)** the area is one of the most important homeless localities in Prague
- 2)** the presence of homeless people in the locality has understandable reasons (proximity to resources, convenient location in the city, etc.).

These factors have powerful inertia over time and so are likely to remain in the area even after the implementation of landscaping associated with revitalization. This text is based on background research (mainly the Analysis of Homelessness in Prague, issued: 2020) and from a series of interviews conducted with social services workers operating in the area (Salvation Army, Caritas of the Archdiocese of Prague, Progressive, Center of Social Services of Prague, Social Welfare Department of Prague 8 MD). As part of our research, we also spoke to several homeless people directly in the area.



Analysis of Homelessness in Prague

The description of the homeless situation in Prague is primarily based on the document Analysis of Homelessness in Prague, which was prepared by Median s.r.o. in 2020. This research found that homelessness and housing needs affect approximately 20,000 inhabitants of Prague.

- **persons without shelter** – i.e. spending the night outside, in temporary shelters and bunkhouses – approx. 3,900–4,900
- **persons without a house** – i.e. staying in various institutions and accommodations – approx. 8,700
- **persons at risk of losing their housing** or with inadequate housing – approx. 7,000

For the majority of people, their homelessness lasts at least a few years, sometimes many years. As the time spent living without permanent housing increases, it usually becomes more difficult to resolve the situation.

The City of Prague has a well-developed system of social services, but both users of social services and their providers face various limits, barriers and problems. While the needs of homeless people are generally similar, they have their own specificities and therefore what may be a solution for one group of people cannot be applied across the board.

Numbers of homeless persons

Determining the number of people without shelter, i.e. homeless people who don't live in any institution, hostel or apartment, but rather spend the night either in public spaces or in various types of makeshift shelters, tents, squats or gardening colonies, huts, shacks or trailers, seems to be the most difficult task (compared to determining the number of people in hostels, shelters and similar facilities). In the survey, it was found that up to 65% of homeless people elect to spend the night outside, in a tent or squat. The reasons that may contribute to such a decision will be described below.

Additional information regarding the distribution of homeless persons by municipal district is also important for the purposes of this report. It should be noted that the figures vary not only according to the method of data collection, but also according to how accurately and completely the individual districts report the data. Even taking into account possible deviations, it is obvious that the Prague 8 Municipal District is a place where the issue of homelessness is very topical. According to various estimates, 13–22% of people without a roof (i.e. sleeping outside any accommodation) residing in Prague are located here.

městská část	údaje z CAWI dotazování MČ	údaje Praha MČ odhady ¹³	údaje z CAPI dotazování pouze lidé bez střechy
Praha 1	2 %	13 %	17 %
Praha 2	1 %	2 %	2 %
Praha 3	4 %	6 %	4 %
Praha 4	7 %	9 %	6 %
Praha 5	12 %	8 %	12 %
Praha 6	6 %	12 %	11 %
Praha 7	4 %	7 %	9 %
Praha 8	22 %	13 %	18 %
Praha 9	7 %	3 %	9 %
Praha 10	15 %	9 %	2 %
Praha 11	1 %	2 %	3 %

městská část	údaje z CAWI dotazování MČ	údaje Praha MČ odhady ¹³	údaje z CAPI dotazování pouze lidé bez střechy
Praha 12	3 %	2 %	0 %
Praha 13	0 %	2 %	2 %
Praha 14	6 %	2 %	1 %
Praha 15	3 %	2 %	0 %
Praha 16	0 %	1 %	0 %
Praha 17	2 %	1 %	1 %
Praha 18	2 %	1 %	0 %
Praha 19	0 %	0 %	0 %
Praha 20	1 %	1 %	0 %
Praha 21	0 %	1 %	0 %
Praha 22	1 %	1 %	0 %

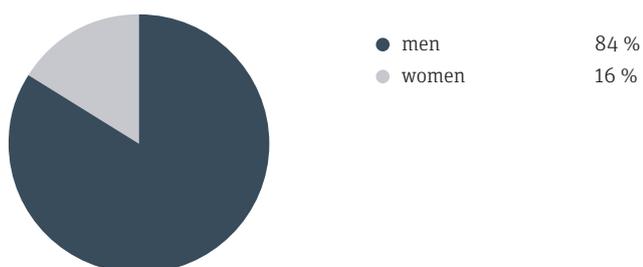
- CAWI – web-based (online) questionnaire survey – a total of 4 versions of the questionnaire were used for municipal districts, social services for homeless people, other institutions where the homeless census was conducted, and civic and other initiatives dealing with support for homeless people
- CAPI – a questionnaire survey among homeless people (in the field)
- The census was conducted in 2019.

Characteristics of homeless persons

In terms of the population structure, it can be said that among the homeless, men significantly predominate (84%), the most represented group is the middle-aged group (84% ages 31–60), reported address of permanent residence tends to be outside Prague (53%) and most homeless people live alone (without a partner or friends 59%). The social network that homeless people can turn to is also typically very small. This in itself is a problem that makes it difficult to improve their situation. They often have not only no family, partner or friends, but also no acquaintances who could help them find jobs, doctors or legal advice in dealing with the debt enforcement that are so often associated with homelessness.

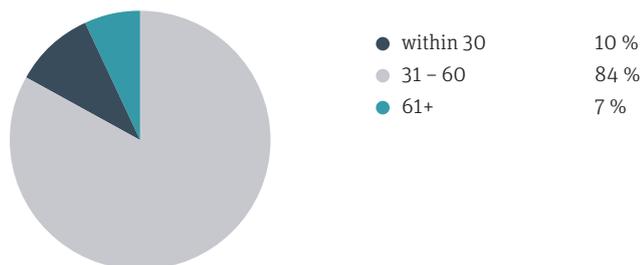
Graph no.13: Proportion of men and women

(N=274)



Graph no.14: Age groups

(N=274)



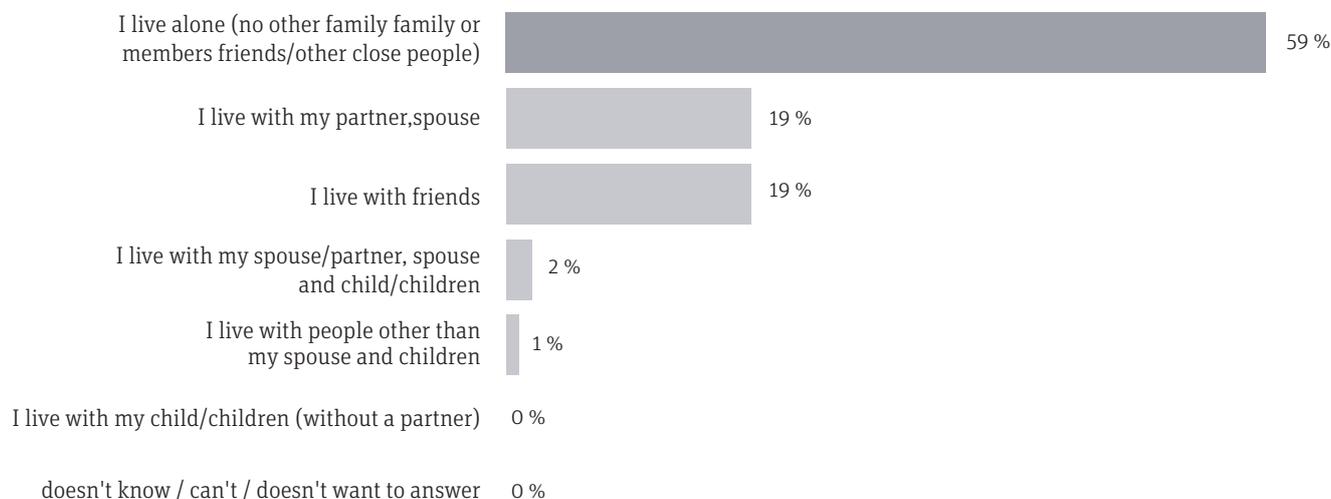
Graph no.15: Permanent residence

(N=274)



Graph no.26: Current way of living

(N=397)

**The needs of people without shelter**

In Analysis of Homelessness in Prague, the needs of homeless people are specified according to the types of accommodation they choose. Respondents were classified as people who sleep outside on the street, in non-residential premises, in bunkhouses, in regular or humanitarian hostels, in shelters. For the locality of Rohan Island, the first group is particularly interesting – people sleeping outdoors.

Forced sleeping on the streets is seen as one of the worst situations a person can get into. However, the needs of homeless people and their decision-making frameworks often do not match the understanding of mainstream society, and so sleeping outside can in some circumstances be preferred to other, more or less accessible options, especially residential social services or hostels.

Based on the in-depth interviews conducted for the Analysis of Homelessness in Prague, it can be said that sleeping outdoors better corresponds to the need for privacy and the need to be able to make one's own decisions (autonomy) than other options. A strongly perceived negative association with sleeping outdoors, one mentioned by the vast majority of respondents, is that they do not feel safe out on the streets. On the other hand, safety concerns are not uncommon in other types of accommodation, such as hostels.

When staying outdoors, you need to secure certain equipment. This usually involves warm clothing, insulation from cold from the ground, or more advanced equipment such as a tent, sleeping bags, etc. With this equipment, people without a roof can achieve a partial increase in sleeping comfort, but they also often lose or have their equipment stolen. This is also related to the inability to maintain sufficient personal items of daily use in the long term.

Possible reasons for preferring to spend the night outdoors

Here are some of the disadvantages that were mentioned by respondents when describing other ways of spending the night than outdoors. These may be the reasons that lead people to decide to sleep without a roof. In the case of bunkhouses, this was the set arrival and departure times that did not coincide with their need to be away from the bunkhouse, for example due to work commitments. For bunkhouses and hostels, a frequently mentioned issue was dissatisfaction with the state of cleanliness of the environment and inadequate sanitary conditions (including the presence of parasites). At first glance, this may seem paradoxical compared to sleeping outdoors, but given the high concentration of people in small spaces with different hygiene habits and an often insufficient cleaning frequency, this is a relevant comment. Being made to share space with a large number of people is a problem not only for hygiene but also for the aforementioned need for privacy. For many homeless people, this need is so great that they prefer to spend the night outside, where they can retain greater autonomy and freedom of choice. These findings suggest that the solution to the issue of homelessness and the situation of the homeless would not be simply to increase the capacity of different types of public accommodation. At least not under the current conditions.

Circles of needs for houseless people (not just groups without shelter)

- Finding housing, accommodation or suitable residential services
- Work and finances
- Health
- Dealing with bureaucracy
- Debt resolution
- Improving competences

Finance

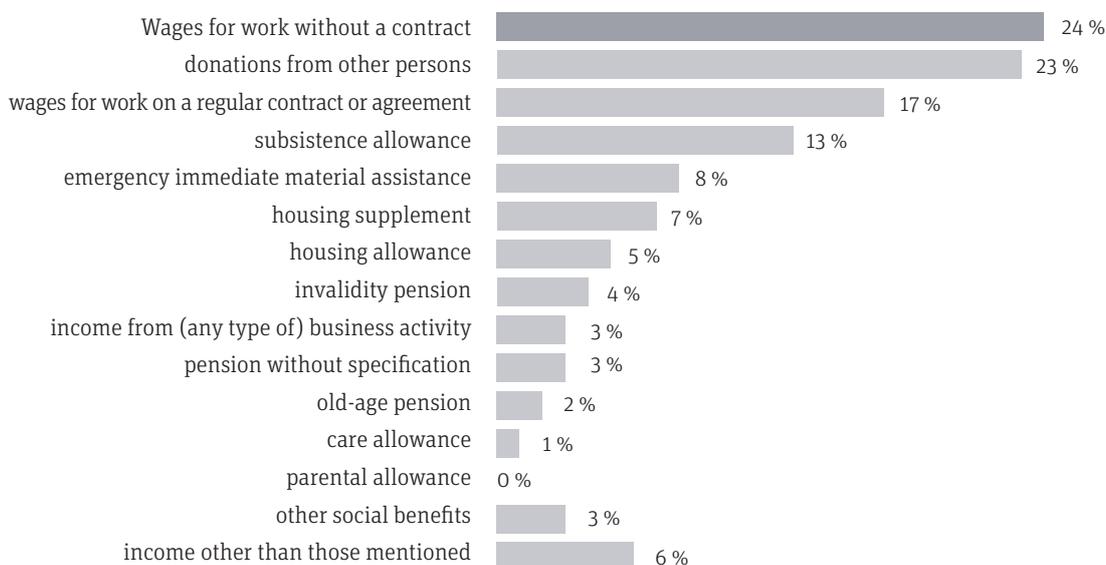
One of the most pressing problems homeless people face is, of course, their finances, or lack thereof. It is the reason they find themselves without permanent housing in the first place, and one of the main reasons why it is so difficult for them to deal with their situation. Research shows that up to 80% of homeless people are struggling due to debt and distraint. This is a secondary complication to their earning potential. If they find a job with a contract, a significant part of their income may be confiscated, they may lose any right to social security payments and may therefore paradoxically be better off financially not having a job with a legal contract. This is also the reason why undeclared work (24%) is more often cited as a source of income than contract or agreement work (17%). People without a roof over their head are thus doubly marginalized in this respect, disadvantaged, vulnerable and easily exploited in the labor market.

As many as 15% of homeless people responded that they have no income at all, and 41% of them have an income of less than CZK 2,000, which is below the subsistence minimum, while a third (32%) have an income of CZK 2,001–5,000, which is around the subsistence minimum. 24% have a higher income, most often up to CZK 12,000, while only 5% have incomes over CZK 12,000.

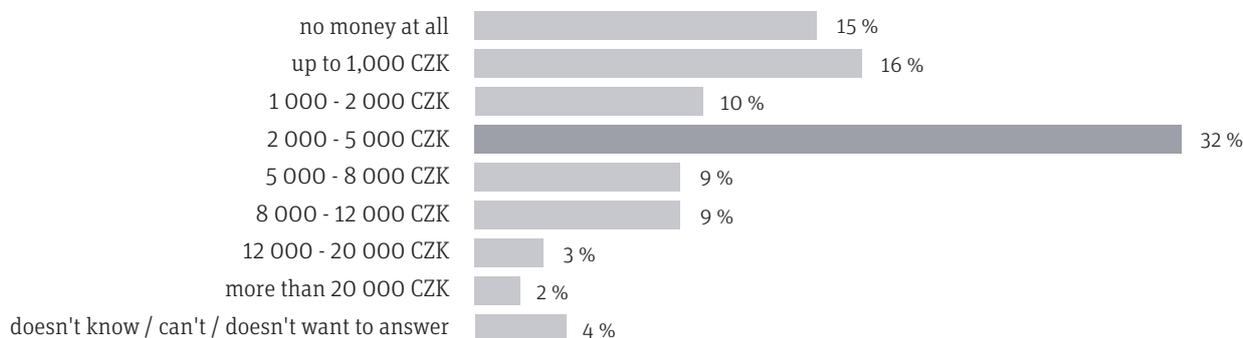
■ Although the Chamber of Executors states that the number of distraints in the Czech Republic is decreasing year-on-year despite the coronavirus situation, the total number of distraints and persons affected by distraint is alarming. In 2019, 775,000 people were registered as in distraint for a total of 4,460,000 distraints (source mapexekuci.cz). It is thus evident that while the issue of homelessness may seem peripheral to most of society, it is a much larger problem in terms of the number of people who are at risk of homelessness or in need of housing. The national data are relevant to this overview of the situation on Rohan Island and in Prague, among other reasons, because up to 53% of homeless persons report their address of permanent residence outside of Prague.

Graph no.35: Income of homeless people

(N=397)

**Graph no.36: Amount of income**

(N=397)

**Municipal districts in Prague and their possibilities**

In terms of total full time jobs, the city districts reported a total of 64 staff dedicated (not exclusively) to supporting homeless people. These fewer than seventy employees of the municipal districts are thus responsible for dealing with the issues of homeless persons or those in social need totaling 20,000 inhabitants of Prague. Insufficient staff capacity is cited as an obstacle to more intensive support for homeless people by a third of the city districts. More than two-thirds cite the lack of apartments available to be allocated as social housing as a problem, and 86% cite high rent prices and the poor availability of housing in general as obstacles.

Several districts also pointed to the resistance of citizens of the city district to initiate activities in support of the target group of homeless people and problems/obstacles to the establishment of new social services in the territory of the municipality. Nobody responded that they considered support for the target group to be sufficient or that they saw the problem being an insufficient survey of the homeless population in their municipal district.

The Rohan Island Territory

For Prague, Rohan Island is currently the largest homeless area in the city. Rohan Island is one of the last locations with so-called homeless settlements. A location in the city center – such as Anděl – can be used for comparison. In that area, there are a lot of people who are living entirely without facilities – on benches, at bus stops. On Rohan Island, conversely, there are settlements – tents, shelters. There used to be more similar locations in Prague (around Kolbenova Street, Klíčov, around the Hostivař Depot). (Desenský; Drozd, Salvation Army). The presence of homeless people in the locality is based on a combination of several factors:

- **Peace and quiet and the possibility of building a shelter or just spending the night.** The location is relatively tolerated. “Homeless people who live in RI are less of a problem for the police compared to people directly on the street, public transport stations and the like.” (Holíková, Prague 8). “The cops are sometimes annoying, but mostly they’re ok. They’re just doing their jobs.” (tent settlement inhabitant) It’s not a regular thing, but we’ve also heard a story about a local resident being fined by a patrolling policeman for scooping up river water into a bucket.
- **The presence of water** (utility water from the Vltava, but sometimes also for tea). “The Vltava is absolutely essential. We call it ‘Hotel Vltava’” (tent settlement inhabitant)
- **Possibility to build a small fire** and firewood. In the words of a local resident, “You’re not allowed to burn things here, but the cops usually understand having a small fire (to make tea, etc.)”
- **Good accessibility to the city center**, public transport, but also on foot
- **Availability of social services in the locality.** “We go to the MTS(mobile outreach service) , but it’s not essential. That won’t keep us on our feet.” (tent settlement inhabitant)

The locations where homeless people (without shelter) are found can be mapped during a thorough walk through the area in question. Ascertaining the precise number of people is more complicated. Here, it is more important to take into account longer-term indicators – such as regular reports from the police or social service workers. For example, here are the data from the census conducted at the request of the Prague 8 city district in 2019. From this we can see the numbers are very variable. In general, it can be stated that the population decreases during the winter and residential zones then also become more concentrated.



Route No. 4

Locations: Rohan Island, Rohan embankment – tents behind the concrete plant, changing rooms of the former volleyball club + trailer etc., Libeň Island, former Voctářova street car dealership, opposite Kaufland.

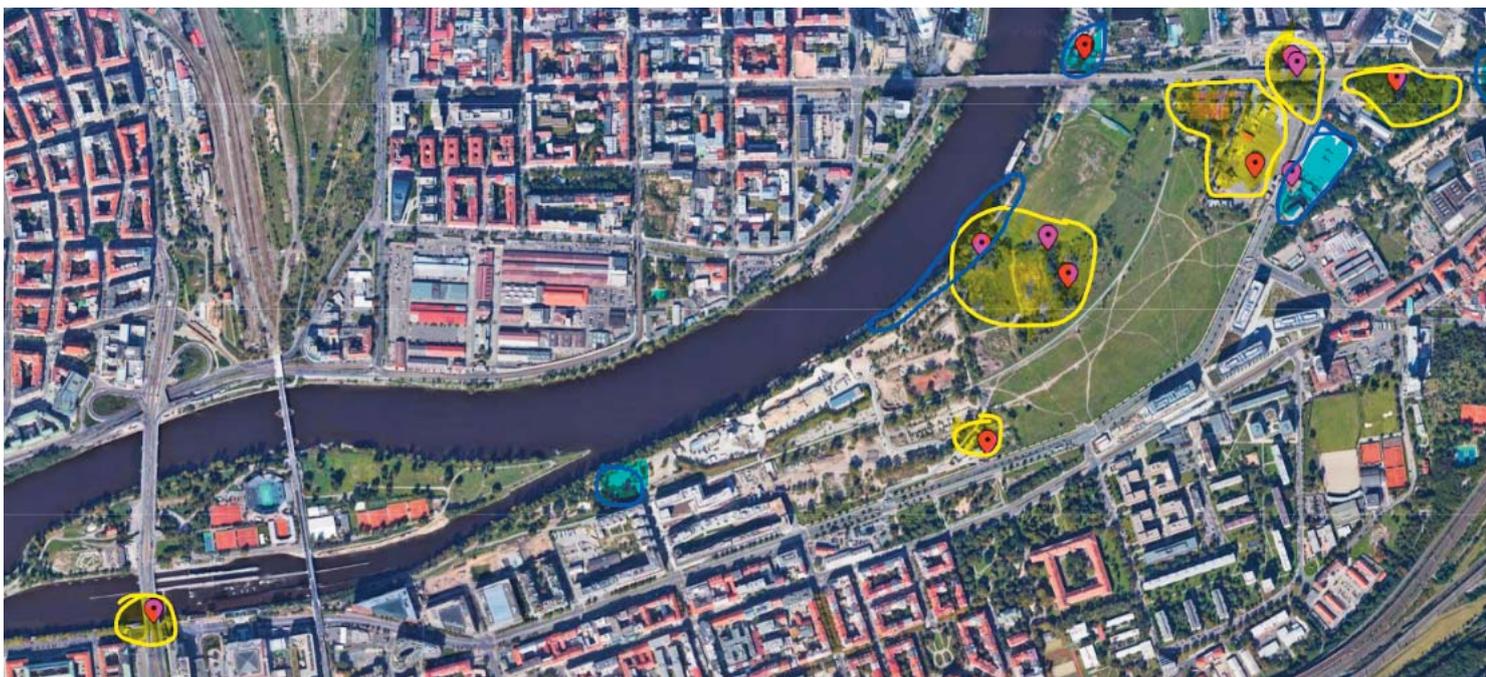
Number of persons counted:



As far as the location is concerned, there are only a few regularly inhabited sites (yellow on the map). People here live in tent settlements, in unused buildings (e.g. changing rooms) or directly under Libeň Bridge itself. However, constant change and fluctuation is common with this issue and so the population and its numbers are constantly changing. “There used to be a lot of people under Libeň Bridge, then it was cleaned up and they moved out, now they’re back again.”. A separate issue remains the people who inhabit the areas north of Libeň Bridge – in small garden buildings, tents on private land, in caravans or directly on boats. Unfortunately, we haven’t been able to find out more than a few random pieces of information about them

| *“This is where the 100 year old grandfather lives, in that caravan.
He lost his flat to crooks, when he got drunk at the pub, they made him sign a piece of paper and sell his flat.”*

There are also several sites of relevance to the whole area from the perspective of a person without shelter – namely: Kaufland, Voctářova, MTS – mobile field services, Palmovka, the Vltava River banks, Přístav).



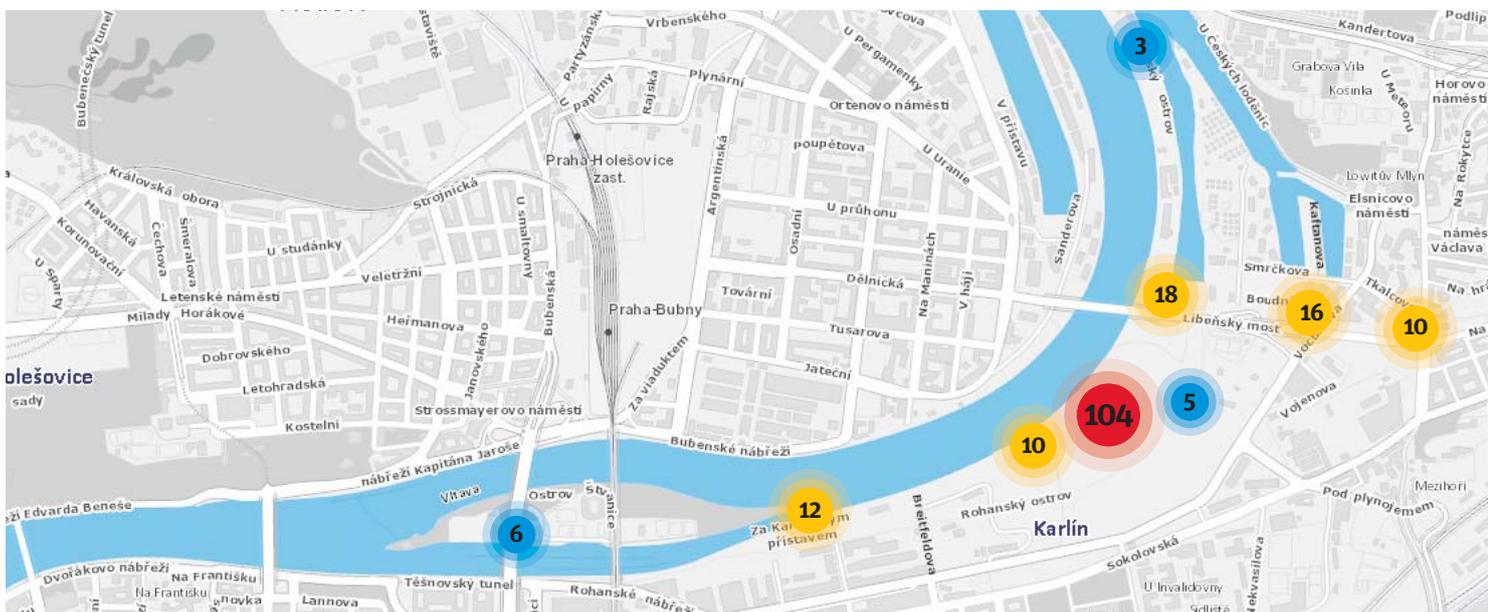
Inhabitants of Rohan Island

We cannot speak of any cohesive group of inhabitants in the locality. There are long-term residents “settlers”, short-term and essentially random “visitors”, substance abusers and homeless people who have shelter (e.g. in a caravan) but have no income and live in material distress. Groups tend to stick together and don’t interact with each other much. “We don’t talk to the people under the bridge and by the playground.” On the other hand, at least the longer-term residents know each other by sight and know about each other. “You wouldn’t know they’re homeless people – when they come out – they’re clean; there’s a guy 28 years old, he comes out smelling of perfume, he’s got a bag and nobody would know he lives under a bridge; he’s trying to get out of it” (Mrs. Jarka, interview 03/2021)

Homeless people and the public

On the contrary, what is almost characteristic of the Rohan Island locality and the subject of homelessness in general, the relatively low frequency of problems and conflicts compared to other places in Prague. This theme resonated quite significantly among responses to the online questionnaire conducted in May 2021 in preparation for the Rohan Island Concept. According to the respondents, the presence of homeless people practically copies the locations reported by professionals working in the area. However, the “settlement” location between the golf course and the concrete plant is of the greatest perceived importance as it is the most “in plain sight”. People most often report a **reduced sense of security or comfort** and problems with **litter**, which they associate with the presence of people without shelter. But almost no one mentioned any real conflicts. There are specific concerns about syringes or dogs running loose (running about in between cyclists’ bikes). The feeling of danger stems from unpredictability of behavior (e.g. a person under the influence) rather than from any real threat. Smoke from bonfires when poor quality material and waste are burned is also a nuisance. “There are some complaints from the public, **but there are no conflicts. People are more just bothered by having to look at homeless people.**” (Holíková, Prague 8 city district) The operator of the car dealership near Libeň Bridge mentioned specific problems in an interview, saying one of the homeless people is sneaking into his parked cars.

Even from the point of view of the police, the locality is perceived as relatively trouble-free – the police tend to visit the site as part of regular patrols rather than for one-off interventions with a specific cause. “In the RI locality, which is depopulated, homeless people are less of a problem for the police than they are for example in Palmovka.” This allows the police to function in other ways than merely law enforcement. It cannot be said that the police are only a repressive force, they often have a positive approach to our clients.” (Fiala, Caritas Prague) “When the police find a client they feel should be connected to a support service, they get them in touch with a social worker from the district.” (Holíková, Prague 8 MD)



The points and numbers shown on the map indicate the repetition of the keyword “homeless”. The area of the “settlement” with the number 95 clearly dominates.

Cooperation with field services and scenarios for the future

The Salvation Army and Caritas of the Archdiocese of Prague are the main organizations working with the homeless on Rohan Island. Both have outreach programs there and both operate shelters in the vicinity – the Salvation Army on Tusarova Street in Holešovice and Caritas on Pernerova Street in Karlín. The Salvation Army has set up a station for the MTS (mobile field service) at the Libeň Bridge. Concerning care for drug addicts, the Progressive and Drop In organizations are active here, mainly implementing their outreach programs – visiting clients, counseling, providing syringe exchange and other assistance.

Mobile field service – facilities

We talked about the field service with the field worker Mr. Rakušan. According to him, quite a significant feature of the Rohan Island residents is that they cooperate with field social services and generally tend to take care of the place and stay there. In 2020, there was a fairly significant effort to clean up the site, but this was eventually discontinued due to complications with the Covid-19 outbreak (failure to arrange for a container to be brought in). But the local residents were interested in participating. Around 50 people use MTS services during the summer, which is one day a week when a van with a field food dispenser and small clinic for basic treatment is brought on site. Roughly one third of the clients are residents of the locality, while the rest commute to the MTS or come from further afield. Things the MTS needs in place at a very basic level include: a **paved area** that can be reached by van, a degree of privacy (“not to be seen too much”) and good transport accessibility for clients. It is important to consider the effects of combining various different operations (kindergarten, shopping center, town hall, etc.). An added benefit would be a **covered area** for serving food (“It’s pretty undignified here in the snow and rain sometimes.”), the **possibility of storing** a few beer sets, a **trash can** or a dumpster. If there was access to potable water for hand washing or a **mobile shower connection**, that would be great. (Rakušan, Salvation Army MTS)

Of these spatial and other requirements for the location of the MTS, the ideal location seems to be the one that is already used for this service in the area – i.e. near the pillars of Libeň Bridge on the right bank of the Vltava River.



Fixpoint

In terms of care for drug addicts, the installation of one or more “fixpoint” devices would be worth considering, allowing potentially hazardous waste in the form of used syringes to be safely stored in a small inaccessible container. A strong argument for placement of the fixpoint is that it should be “where the clients take, not where they pass through” (Plaček, Progressive). The topic of concerns for infectious waste after drug use in the territory resonates quite significantly among the responses to the e-questionnaire launched among the general public in preparation for the Concept. Placement of the fixpoint could also be justified on this basis.

Involvement of homeless people in the maintenance of the territory

One of the most pressing needs of people without shelter in general is the possibility of earning an income. Finding even a one-off job can be very difficult for many reasons (see Chapter 2, Analysis of Homelessness). If a system of providing services in return for services (e.g. cleaning for food or meal vouchers) could be implemented locally, this might be an example of good practice. Not only abroad, but also in Prague there is at least one similar program – known as Homeless Blues in Prague 9. Homeless people are offered living quarters in exchange for taking care of their surroundings, with the understanding that this should be only temporary housing, allowing for resocialization and subsequently moving to regular housing. Although statistically only a few clients of this program have found subsequent housing, from our point of view the project cannot be evaluated as a failure. Considering the prices of apartments and rentals in Prague, which are often high even for middle-income groups, this is actually not a very surprising result.

- | “We see most people trying to have a better attitude not only towards themselves but also towards their surroundings.”
- | “Officially, we have seven homeless people working on a part-time basis as orderlies and cleaners, and others are working, for example, as parking attendants for private companies in Prague 9, etc.” (K. Valenta, 16 December 2019)
- | “We’ve also reduced the cost of clean-ups and eliminating illegal waste dumps – cooperating homeless people call us on their own and take photos of problematic spots.”

Most of the participants left the Homeless Blues project early because they were not sufficiently able to take care of their assigned area. Nevertheless, there are a few long-term residents who take care of their dwelling and raise animals. Interviews with members of the public indicate that the site is neater and safer from their perspective than before the project.

A possible pitfall of this project and others like it, is that it is not systematically linked to social work, the field work is rather haphazard and therefore does not allow participants to work systematically on solving individual barriers to obtaining standard housing. The issue of homelessness is a very complex one, and its solutions need to be comprehensive.

- | “If they made a park here, I would take care, live, maintain and do what I have to do because I don’t want to move anywhere else” (Mrs. Jarka, interview 03/2021)



¹ zdroj: Brífink k projektu Prahy 9 Homeless Blues (Štěpán Ripka, poradce radního HMP Adama Záborského, 8. 1. 2020)

Emergency site / camping site

In connection with the Covid-19 epidemic, Prague was forced to build an emergency tent city for homeless people who came into contact with the virus. This “little town” was built in Troja near the city ring road in April 2020 with the help of the army. Theoretically, such a site for emergency situations (epidemics, severe winters, etc.) would make sense as part of Prague’s crisis infrastructure and perhaps the Rohan Island area would be a good fit for it. Realistically, it would be used minimally, but in a crisis there would be the necessary space, with electricity and water connections.



What to watch out for

It is worth mentioning here the relatively “thorny” nature of the topic and the very low political will to pass any measures concerning this issue. It is therefore advisable to communicate topics and measures predominantly internally and among experts, and to think carefully about any communication towards the general public.

Do not propose permanent solutions and measures. Regarding the siting of an emergency campsite or MTS station or shower site – here it is important to remember that access to such a facility is considered a resource to some extent. And this can lead to certain conflicts. “It could go wrong, they’d kick out the nice older gentlemen and the drug addicts would take over.” (Drozd, Salvation Army). A permanent facility cannot operate without supervision. So the recommendation is rather to set up something that functions intermittently but under improved conditions than today. A measure for intermittent traffic could also have better political traction.

Take care of maintenance and ongoing servicing. If any infrastructure is to be installed in the area, it is essential that the issue of its governance is well resolved. For example, waste bins would be very helpful in the area, but if they are not balanced, their total effect might tend to be negative.



Summary

Homelessness is a significant issue for the territory in the context of the forthcoming Concept. This is due to both – by Prague standards – the significant concentration of people without shelter here, as well as the mental image their presence evokes in visitors and users of the space. In a way, homelessness is starkly “visualized” here, which may be a result of the strong contrasts one experiences in the area. For example, seeing golfers on the green playing golf a few meters away from homeless dwellings hidden in the urban wilderness. Rohan and Libeň islands offer one of the last options for homeless people to spend their nights outdoors in inner Prague outside of specialized facilities such as hostels, shelters, etc. Detailed field research on homelessness is somewhat pioneering and could establish good practices in terms of greater attention as part of zoning planning processes instead of turning a blind eye to this fact.

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