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THE HUMAN IN CRISIS:  
REFLECTIONS ON SOCIAL WORK WITH HOMELESS PEOPLE  
IN AN INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

Homelessness is one of the most pressing social problems faced by contemporary societies. It is not merely a shortage of housing but rather a multi-faceted crisis affecting numerous aspects of life: the loss of personal security, breakdown of social networks, exposure to health risks, and exclusion from meaningful societal participation. Individuals experiencing homelessness occupy a particularly vulnerable position, which is both acutely felt on a personal level and structurally entrenched, making recovery and reintegration complex and difficult (Steckelberg, 2023; Mazur & Kuć, 2019).

Social work in this context occurs in a rather complex tension. On the one hand, practitioners must respond immediately to existential needs, providing access to food, emergency shelter, medical care, and psychosocial support. On the other hand, social work is intended to build long-term pathways to stability, inclusion, and empowerment. The “human in crisis” concept captures both the immediate, individualized experiences of people in precarious situations and the broader structural deficiencies in social and housing policy that exacerbate vulnerability (Borstel et al., 2025; Malyssek & Störch, 2020, pp. 19–124, 232–252; Steckelberg & Wawrok, 2020; Mazur & Kuć, 2019, pp. 15–115, 149–175; Sellner, 2022).

Essential frameworks for social work with homeless populations are grounded in several theoretical approaches. The empowerment approach foregrounds

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client resources, autonomy and self-determination, highlighting the importance of supporting individuals to regain control over their lives (Herriger, 2020). The Housing First policy embodies another foundational model, based on the principle that housing is a basic human right and should not be made conditional upon such aspects as abstinence or participation in treatment programs. Crisis-oriented social work complements these models by linking immediate intervention in emergency situations with strategies aimed at long-term stabilization and resilience building (Gerull, 2024; Aubry et al., 2017).

Normative perspectives are equally significant. Social work is guided by principles such as human dignity, as enshrined in Article 1 of the German Basic Law (Deutsches Institut für Menschenrechte, 2025), and reinforced by the UN Human Rights Charter (Deutsche Gesellschaft für die Vereinten Nationen, n.d.). Additionally, the Capabilities Approach, articulated by Sen (1992), Kuklys (2005), and Nussbaum (2001, 2015), emphasizes individuals' rights to participation, development, and their real opportunities to pursue a fulfilling life. These frameworks collectively highlight the ethical, social, and political dimensions of professional intervention.

Michling's (2024) doctoral dissertation provides particularly valuable insights by situating homelessness within a global context, illustrating how social work can be informed by international comparisons. By examining Germany and Australia—two highly developed welfare states with distinct social, political and institutional approaches to homelessness—Michling demonstrates how differences in welfare structures, policy frameworks, and professional practices shape both the experiences of people affected by homelessness and the strategies employed to support them. While Germany emphasizes municipal responsibility and institutionalized, legally anchored approaches, Australia foregrounds client-centered, flexible models such as Housing First and Rapid Rehousing, combined with federal oversight and robust monitoring systems. This comparative perspective underscores the potential for cross-national learning and highlights the importance of adapting social work interventions to specific structural, cultural and policy contexts (Michling, 2024).

By integrating theoretical models, normative principles, and transnational comparisons, social work can more effectively navigate the tension between immediate crisis intervention and long-term stabilization, ultimately advancing the rights, dignity, and participation of people experiencing homelessness in diverse social contexts.

## 1. GERMANY: SOCIAL WORK WITH HOMELESS PEOPLE

German homelessness services have deep historical roots in the development of municipal welfare responsibilities and the work of independent welfare associations. Legal frameworks are primarily provided by the Social Code (§§ 67–69 SGB [Sozialgesetzbuch], Book 12, “Assistance to Overcome Special Social Difficulties”) and by municipal implementation laws (Engelmann et al., 2020; Lotties, 2019; Michling, 2024). Municipalities are obligated to provide emergency accommodation for people without housing, while independent organizations such as Caritas, Diakonie, or the Arbeiterwohlfahrt complement this provision with counseling, outreach, and ongoing support services (Michling, 2024; Engelmann et al., 2020; Specht, 2018).

Practice in Germany can be conceptualized as a tiered model. It begins with low-threshold services, including street social work, day centers, and meal programs. The next tier comprises emergency and transitional shelters for crisis intervention, followed by assisted living and long-term support aimed at social stabilization, ultimately leading to access to regular housing accompanied by tailored support (Specht, 2018; Michling, 2024). This structured approach allows social workers to respond to immediate needs while simultaneously promoting long-term reintegration and autonomy.

In recent years, Housing First has gained traction in Germany. Projects in cities such as Berlin and Düsseldorf demonstrate that unconditional provision of immediate housing fosters sustainable stabilization and reduces the risk of recurrent homelessness (Bundesverband Housing First e. V., 2024; Berlin: Senatsverwaltung für Arbeit, Soziales, Gleichstellung, Integration, Vielfalt und Antidiskriminierung, 2018; Landeshauptstadt Düsseldorf, 2024). Evidence indicates that 80–90% of participants maintain long-term housing – outcomes that traditional tiered models often fail to achieve (Bundesverband Housing First e. V., 2024; Gerull, 2021).

Challenges specific to Germany include migration and EU freedom of movement, as many affected individuals lack entitlement to social benefits, as well as hidden homelessness, which disproportionately affects women living in precarious housing arrangements, often unrecorded in official statistics. Mental health issues and substance use disorders require intensive, individualized social work interventions, while the shortage of affordable housing—especially in urban centers—continues to exacerbate structural vulnerability. Within this multifaceted context, social work in Germany occurs at the intersection of pragmatic crisis management, individualized empowerment, and political

advocacy for systemic reforms, striving to balance immediate needs with long-term structural change (Michling, 2024, pp. 49–71).<sup>1</sup>

## 2. AUSTRALIA: SOCIAL WORK WITH HOMELESS PEOPLE

Australia has a different welfare state tradition, strongly shaped by federal responsibilities and national strategies. A central role is played by the Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) system, which is funded by federal and state resources and implemented by non-profit organizations (Spinney et al., 2020).<sup>2</sup>

An important guiding principle in Australia is the concept of Rapid Rehousing, which aims to minimize the duration of homelessness by quickly securing regular housing for affected individuals. This approach is complemented by Housing First, particularly for people experiencing chronic or long-term homelessness, ensuring immediate access to stable accommodation without preconditions (Spinney et al., 2020; Valentine et al., 2020). These strategies emphasize the importance of housing as a fundamental right and the centrality of client-centered approaches in addressing homelessness.

Australia differs from Germany in several structural and demographic respects. A significant proportion of the homeless population belongs to First Nations peoples (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples). Their situation is intricately linked to colonial history, systemic disadvantage, and cultural marginalization. Ongoing discussions around Indigenous Data Sovereignty further underscore the need for Indigenous-led perspectives in both research and policy development (Moskos et al., 2025; Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, 2024). Youth homelessness also represents a critical concern, necessitating targeted programs, while family homelessness related to domestic violence receives heightened attention, reflecting the country's focus on socially sensitive and trauma-informed interventions (MacKenzie et al., 2020; Valentine et al., 2020).

Social work in Australia integrates immediate crisis intervention, such as emergency shelters and mobile outreach teams—particularly during crises like

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<sup>1</sup> At the end of January 2025, 474,700 homeless people were accommodated in Germany. Of those housed, 41% were under 25 years old, and 29% came from Ukraine. By household composition, couples with children represented the largest group among the accommodated homeless population, accounting for approximately 34% (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025a).

<sup>2</sup> In the 2021 census, an estimated 122,494 people were homeless in Australia. Of these, 55.9% were male and 44.1% were female, whereas young people between the ages of 12 and 24 accounted for 23.0% of the homeless population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

the COVID-19 pandemic—with longer-term case management and support aimed at sustainable stabilization. In contrast to Germany, data monitoring and evaluation are more systematically institutionalized, allowing for evidence-informed policy adjustments and continuous improvement of service delivery (Liu et al., 2023; Hartley et al., 2025; Brackertz & Davison, 2022). This institutionalized approach facilitates both accountability and the ability to respond flexibly to emerging trends in homelessness, while also reinforcing culturally sensitive and client-centered practice.

### 3. INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON: GERMANY VS AUSTRALIA

A comparison between Germany and Australia highlights both similarities and differences in homelessness policy, with “the human in crisis” always at the center (Borstel et al., 2025; Sellner, 2022). In Germany, responsibility lies primarily with municipalities and independent providers, and legal frameworks play a central role in the implementation of support, whereas Australia relies on federal programs, complemented by national monitoring (Michling, 2024; Martin et al., 2023). Differences also emerge in practical approaches: in Germany, the tiered model dominates (Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft der Freien Wohlfahrtspflege e. V., 2024), while in Australia, Rapid Rehousing and the Housing First approach focus more on the immediate needs of clients, client-centered practice, and long-term housing provision (Roggenbuck, 2022; Spinney et al., 2020; Valentine et al., 2020).

The comparison of qualitative studies by Michling (2024) also emphasizes these differences in the everyday professional practice of social workers (Michling, 2024, pp. 167–251). In Germany, social work is strongly institutionalized: social workers often function as the “extended arm” of state bureaucracy, requiring both legal expertise and socio-pedagogical skills to advise clients on legal and social matters. In urban contexts, there is a functional division of labor with clear boundaries from other professions. Despite its social relevance, the field suffers from low pay, limited prestige, and staff shortages, which fosters deprofessionalization. The relationship with clients tends to remain professionally distant; emotional detachment is considered a key competency. Major challenges include migration-related changes in client groups and increasing legal complexity (Michling, 2024, pp. 167–251).

In Australia, by contrast, social work is more rooted in civil society initiatives and largely embedded in NGO structures. Practice is primarily understood as

flexible crisis intervention, often carried out in small, minimally specialized teams. While relevant qualifications such as bachelor's degrees are available, they do not automatically lead to higher pay or managerial positions. More important are social skills, shared value orientations, and practice-based knowledge transfer. Social workers primarily see themselves as advocates and supporters of their clients rather than as representatives of social order. An explicitly critical stance toward state institutions is sometimes expressed, particularly in addressing racism and policing. The relationship with clients is more personal, even though self-protection through boundaries is emphasized. Current challenges include housing shortages, climate-related crises, and complex issues related to addiction and mental health (Michling, 2024).

Data availability is particularly noteworthy: Australia has a solid statistical foundation with comprehensive national surveys, such as the census ran by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023). In Germany, there were long gaps in official statistics on accommodated homeless people; only with the Homelessness Reporting Act of 2020 and the first survey in 2022 did a systematic expansion begin (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025b). Differences also appear in the composition of target groups. In Germany, migrants and hidden homelessness are central issues (Haj Ahmad, 2024; Deutscher Bundestag, 2025), whereas in Australia, First Nations peoples, youth, and families are a particular focus—groups whose crises require special attention and tailored, client-centered support (Davison et al., 2024; MacKenzie et al., 2020; Michling, 2024).

From an international perspective, this comparison reveals mutual learning potential: Germany could benefit in particular from Australia's centralized governance, data monitoring, and client-centered approaches (Liu et al., 2023; Hartley et al., 2025; Brackertz & Davison, 2022), while Australia could draw insights from Germany's civil-society-based provider structures, which enable flexible, locally anchored support services (Engelmann et al., 2020; Specht, 2018; Borstel et al., 2025; Steckelberg, 2023). Michling's (2024) dissertation emphasizes that international comparisons do not merely highlight deficiencies but rather initiate reflection and learning processes that help continuously improve support for the human in crisis.

## CONCLUSIONS

Michling's study (2024) offers significant new insights for social work, particularly regarding the triple mandate within social-spatial contexts. It simultaneously

raises the fundamental question of the theoretical foundations underpinning the discipline's understanding of human action (Birgmeier, 2009, p. 24). The triple mandate illustrates that social work is not only tasked with mediating between assistance and control in the tension between clients and the state but must also assert its professional expertise and autonomy (Lutz, 2020). This dual focus highlights the profession's complex role: balancing immediate crisis intervention with methodological rigor and systemic advocacy.

In Germany, this framework constitutes a cornerstone for consolidating social work as a recognized, autonomous profession. Professionals in emergency shelters typically possess academic qualifications and methodological competencies, enabling support at both micro and macro levels: empowerment and direct psychosocial intervention for individuals, and advocacy and societal engagement at the structural level. Such an integrated approach has enhanced the recognition of social work within the field of homelessness, reinforcing its status as an independent evidence-informed practice. Michling's findings also emphasize the political dimension of the profession: increased engagement with intermediary structures, hegemonic dynamics, and social movements can further strengthen professional authority and societal impact (Krummenacher, 2017). As Diebäcker and Hofer (2019, p. 123) note, social work is always embedded within broader societal frameworks, shaped by clients' life histories, political mandates, and economic resources. This underscores the need for robust training and specialized methodological approaches, such as the SONI model of social-space orientation (Früchtel et al., 2013; cf. also Krummenacher, 2017; Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2020),<sup>3</sup> which enable practitioners to navigate the tension between immediate crisis response and long-term stabilization strategies.

In Australia, social work foregrounds the practitioner's role as a committed advocate and facilitator for clients. Operating at the intersection of individual needs and complex social, cultural, and ecological contexts, practitioners combine direct service provision with the analysis of structural inequalities (AASW 2020, p. 6). Advocacy and socio-political reform constitute the profession's core mandate, ensuring equitable access to resources through awareness-raising, the development of fair distribution mechanisms, and initiatives

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<sup>3</sup> The SONI model by Früchtel et al. (2013) conceptualizes social work across four levels: social structure, organization, network, and individual. It combines the analysis of societal conditions with organizational structures, promotes networks within the social environment, and simultaneously supports the individual. The aim of this integrated perspective is to activate resources, enable participation, and overcome social exclusion (Früchtel et al., 2013, pp. 11–22).

for systemic transformation (AASW, 2020). Furthermore, social work actively contributes to policy-making processes by involving service users in co-production, thereby reinforcing participatory approaches and user-centered design (AASW, 2020, p. 9). Key developmental trajectories include feminist frameworks, critical reflexivity, incorporation of Indigenous knowledge systems, engagement with gender-based violence, and the continuous socio-political evolution of the profession (Lawrence, 2016; Noble, Pease, & Ife, 2017; Carson & Kerr, 2017; Hughes & Wearing, 2021).

From an international perspective, the “human in crisis” remains the central focus of professional practice (Borstel et al., 2025; Steckelberg, 2023). Homelessness exemplifies the intricate entanglement of individual life trajectories with structural constraints, demonstrating how existential crises shape lived experiences. This intersectionality demands a multifaceted professional response, summarized in three core principles: first, support services must respect the dignity, autonomy, and immediate needs of people in acute crises (Borstel et al., 2025; Steckelberg, 2023; Burgold, 2022; Mazur & Kuć, 2019). Second, sustainable housing stability can only be ensured through immediate access to secure, permanent housing – a conclusion strongly supported by Housing First initiatives (Bundesverband Housing First e. V., 2024; Landeshauptstadt Düsseldorf, 2024; Gerull, 2021; Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Wohnungslosenhilfe, n.d.). Third, social work must not only accompany clients through acute crises but also expose the structural causes of social vulnerability and advocate for systemic change (Borstel et al., 2025; Steckelberg, 2023; Gerull, 2021, 2024).

Michling’s PhD (2024) makes a vital contribution by demonstrating the value of international comparative perspectives. While local contexts shape practice, cross-national comparison reveals transferable lessons that can inform both policy and methodology. For instance, Germany emphasizes institutionalized, legally anchored frameworks, whereas Australia prioritizes client-centered flexibility and participatory methods. These contrasts illuminate the interplay between structural conditions, policy regimes, and professional practice, offering substantial potential for mutual learning. Michling’s work underscores that international comparison is not merely diagnostic; it catalyzes reflection and professional learning, ultimately enhancing social work’s capacity to respond effectively to the complex needs of the human in crisis.

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THE HUMAN IN CRISIS:  
REFLECTIONS ON SOCIAL WORK WITH HOMELESS PEOPLE  
IN AN INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

SUMMARY

Homelessness is a complex phenomenon revealing both individual crises and structural shortcomings. In the article I examine approaches to this issue in Germany and Australia. In Germany, the tiered model of assistance and the work of independent welfare associations shape practice, while the Housing First program has only been implemented in pilot projects so far. In contrast, Australia emphasizes Housing First and Rapid Rehousing, supported by federal programs and systematic monitoring. Specific target groups, including First Nations Peoples, youth, and families, require culturally sensitive interventions.

The comparison highlights differences and mutual learning opportunities for international social work. Drawing on my PhD dissertation (2024), I claim social work can be seen as empowering the “human in crisis,” promoting dignity, self-determination, and social participation. Implications for practice, policy, and research are emphasized.

**Keywords:** homelessness; social work; Housing First; Germany; Australia; crisis intervention; empowerment; welfare system

CZŁOWIEK W KRYZYSIE –  
REFLEKSJE NA TEMAT PRACY SOCJALNEJ  
Z OSOBAMI BEZDOMNYMI. PORÓWNANIE

STRESZCZENIE

Bezdomność jest złożonym zjawiskiem, które uwidacznia zarówno kryzysy indywidualne, jak i niedostatki strukturalne. Prezentowany artykuł analizuje podejścia do tego zagadnienia w Niemczech i Australii. W Niemczech praktykę kształtuje model stopniowanej pomocy oraz działalność niezależnych organizacji dobroczynnych, natomiast Housing First wdrażany jest dotychczas jedynie w ramach projektów pilotażowych. Z kolei w Australii większy nacisk kładzie się na Housing First i Rapid Rehousing, wspierane przez programy federalne i systematyczny monitoring. Szczególne grupy docelowe, takie jak Pierwotni Mieszkańcy (First Nations Peoples), młodzież i rodziny, wymagają interwencji uwzględniających różnice kulturowe.

Porównanie uwidacznia różnice oraz możliwości wzajemnego uczenia się w pracy socjalnej międzynarodowo. Odwołując się do swojej pracy doktorskiej (2024), autorka podkreśla, że praca socjalna powinna wzmacniać „człowieka w kryzysie”, promując godność, samostanowienie i uczestnictwo w życiu społecznym. Wskazane są także implikacje dla praktyki, polityki i badań.

**Słowa kluczowe:** bezdomność; praca socjalna; Housing First; Niemcy; Australia; interwencja kryzysowa; empowerment; system opieki społecznej