

**Štěpánka Pfeiferová, Martin Lux,
Tomáš Dvořák, Jana Havlíková,
Martina Mikeszová and Petr Sunega
(eds.): *Housing and Social Care for
the Elderly in Central Europe***
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Czech Academy of Sciences, 165 pp.

Population ageing requires a different approach in housing and social care. This book describes the current situation in several Central European countries and gives recommendations for dealing with the problems that are encountered. The authors provide an extensive analysis of the situation on ageing populations in eight Central European countries: Austria, the Czech Republic, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. In addition to an extensive literature review, the book offers analyses concerning housing accessibility and affordability, social and health care, community building, and access to information and education. The extent of centralisation and decentralisation and an overview of best practices are considered as well. The data were collected using a standardised questionnaire in all the countries in the study, international statistics, and an in-depth literature review. Additional data were obtained through EU-wide international surveys. The main goals of the research described in this book are to improve the lives of elderly and vulnerable people, to increase their autonomy, and to let them live for as long as possible in their current dwellings. These goals are based on various national and international surveys that indicate that the majority of the elderly want to remain in their current houses, even when high-quality institutional care is available elsewhere. Supporting the autonomy of the elderly is beneficial from a macro-financial point of view as well as benefiting the elderly themselves: institutional care is costly and it will become even more expensive owing to the growing number of elderly. The book focus-

es mainly on elderly who need care, but also discusses other vulnerable people with mental or physical disabilities. Both target groups need specific adjustments for living in as pleasant a way as possible. However, both groups are becoming 'increasingly diverse in terms of age, health conditions, financial possibilities, life-styles, consumption patterns and needs'. (p. 9) This makes it complicated to implement a policy that fits all those needs.

Countries are shown here to deal with this challenge in various ways. There are noticeable differences between the post-socialist states and Western European countries. When the post-socialist states transformed their centralised economic systems into free-market economies in the 1990s, almost all public housing became the property of private owners or organisations. This resulted in a so-called 'super-home-ownership' model (p. 90). Many elderly people now live in (too) big dwellings that are unfavourably located with respect to facilities and public transport. These dwellings are moreover usually not suitable for adaptation, for instance by installing stair lifts, rails, or making other repairs. Owing to a shortage of dwellings designated for the elderly and limited financial support from the state, it is difficult for elderly people to find a suitable place to live. In addition, private rental housing is often expensive and insecure, since landlords do not always enter into fair leases with their tenants. Finally, the elderly are not very willing to move anywhere else: most prefer to stay in their current environment, where they have social ties and feel at home.

Germany, Austria, and Italy, by contrast, offer relatively a great deal of private rental housing accessible to all elderly and vulnerable people, owing to the existence of means-tested housing benefits and limited-profit housing organisations. The latter are constructed especially for people with certain needs, and thus provide high-

quality long-term occupancy. In post-socialist states, however, homeownership rates often exceed 90% of the total housing stock, as a result of 'give-away privatisation', in which governments massively sold public dwellings to sitting tenants for advantageous prices. In Poland and the Czech Republic the process of privatisation proceeded much more slowly owing to government rent controls that remained even after the communist regime. Now the share of public housing has considerably decreased, though private rental housing remains expensive. In most post-socialist countries, private landlords are typically former sitting tenants who benefited from give-away privatisation and they demand high rental prices (p. 91). In non-Western European countries, though also in Italy, the costs of institutional and home care are high in comparison to the level of pensions: '... the elderly in the Western countries (Italy, Austria, Germany) ... are two to three times wealthier than the elderly from the post-socialist countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia)' (p. 122). In both Western European and post-socialist countries, family members play an important role in the situations of people in need. Whereas Germany and Austria provide financial support and training to informal caregivers, the other countries generally offer little help. Regarding financial well-being, the elderly are best off in Austria.

The authors conclude that the sustainability of social care and housing heavily depends on the way it is funded. In contrast to Western Europe, the less developed countries in the sample tend to have only one financial source for social care and housing. This means the government provides care and housing only to those who pay (high) contributions. Although it might seem transparent in terms of administering and managing the funding, there is no guarantee for providing social care and housing to all eligible citizens since

poorer households may not be able to fulfil the required contributions. Therefore, governments should make intensive use of the third sector: NGOs, churches, volunteer organisations, not-for-profit organisations, and housing associations. These agencies are open to applying innovative solutions, which are effective for diverse needs. Because of the great variety of needs, the book recommends that governments support local variants instead of universal solutions. Further, a more balanced housing system (with a mix of for sale and rental housing) and more stable rental housing (long-term rental contracts, higher security) are mentioned on the list of recommendations. Also, providing financial assistance for low-income clients to prevent them from being excluded and to stimulate lifetime homes (dwellings that are able to adapt to the changing needs of people in different life stages) are essential. Finally, greater satisfaction and effectiveness is to be derived from involving the elderly themselves in the implementation of new practices.

These recommendations fit the stated aims of the book to take into account both the interests of the elderly and financial considerations. A weakness of the book is that there are hardly any distinctions between the elderly and other vulnerable (disabled) people. Although both elderly and physically or mentally disabled persons of all ages are in the target group, younger disabled people are rarely mentioned. The statement that the majority of the elderly prefer to remain in their current homes does not apply to young disabled people. So it is unclear whether the majority of this group think the same way about remaining in their current dwelling. Further, Italy is the only country that is not represented in all the analyses and the country-specific literature overview. There is no explanation given as to why Italy did not participate in all the components. Lastly, there are nine central research questions laid out at the beginning of the book, but

subsequently there is no chapter or heading that answers all of these questions one by one. Instead, the answers are included altogether in the overall conclusions.

Generally, the book deals with an interesting, up-to-date topic that is accessible to a wide audience. Since it explains specific terms properly, it is suitable for everyone who wants to learn about how countries are currently dealing with the consequences of an ageing population and how they can improve on this in the future. Further, the outcomes of the research provided in the book are very useful for all kinds of parties that are (in)directly involved in this

demographic phenomenon, such as public authorities at the international, national, and local levels, housing organisations, nursing homes, the elderly and other vulnerable people themselves, and their relatives. Pfeiferová and her colleagues make a very useful contribution to sociology with this book, because they precisely describe the current situation in diverse European countries and make suggestions for addressing the problems that are identified.

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