

# A sense of social affiliation of homeless people participating in a soccer tournament

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**A** Study Design  
**B** Data Collection  
**C** Statistical Analysis  
**D** Data Interpretation  
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## abstract

**Background:** One of the ways of including homeless persons (especially young people) into society is to enable them to actively participate in sports activities. Implementation of an event of international importance entitled the Homeless World Cup is an excellent example of such activities.

**Material and methods:** The main source of data for this article is the research conducted with the participants of the "Homeless World Cup" Tournament in Poznań in 2013. The study was conducted with the use of the questionnaire technique (direct - the tool was a questionnaire containing 21 questions). The survey was anonymous. The respondents had an opportunity to answer more than one question. In total, 12 homeless players, representatives of the Polish National Team, were examined.

**Results:** The subject of the research was a sense of belonging to homeless people involved in sports activities. The athletes took part in systematic training and participated in an international soccer tournament. The homeless had to do with relations permeated by the spirit of rivalry, cooperation and, of course, disciplining moralism. Taking into account this socio-sport reality and considering homeless people with a research intention, it was possible to assume that one of the consequences of their participation in organized social life would be the discovery of social identity and the anticipated sense of attachment and belonging. This was also the goal of the research task - an explanation of this relationship. The results of the study did not confirm the assumed assumption. Homeless people are people at a young age who have not experienced social isolation and a sense of loneliness. They combined practicing sport with expectations of changing their social position and, in particular, achieving the status of employees. The results related to the personal consequences of practicing sport indicate that homeless people see a correlation between training activity and the necessity to change health behaviors.

**Conclusions:** Most of the surveyed players confirm the fact that their taking up sports activities (playing football) in a decisive manner, inter alia, it changed their lives so far, their positive attitude towards themselves and others, improved their family contacts. Their social and interpersonal relations have visibly improved, and there have been positive changes in their social attitudes, and that sport can be an important factor facilitating their inclusion and return to social life (sport as a way out of homelessness).

**Key words:** social exclusion, sport, homeless, lifestyle, Homeless World Cup.

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## INTRODUCTION

Homelessness in the postmodern society affects many people who increase the masses of the excluded and the disadvantaged. According to Browarczyk and Dębski, a homeless person “is not able to provide oneself with a shelter that meets the minimum requirements to consider it living quarters. A place which meets the conditions of living quarters is one which is suitable for permanent residence without endangering health, and which can satisfy the basic needs of life: accommodation, personal hygiene, preparation of meals” [1, p. 176]. One way of integrating homeless people into society is to give them a chance to participate actively in sports.

## THE NOTION OF HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness is one of the more serious societal problems arising from the pace of economic development in many regions of the world, including Poland. These changes result in the deteriorating material situation of part of the society, which often results in loss of work, residence, and social position. The homeless, as a group, are characterized by a lack of education and professional qualifications. Therefore, they have a negligible chance of finding a job. In addition, homeless people are affected by alcohol and other addictions, resulting in far-reaching personal and social degradation.

According to Sochacki, the homeless are mainly males (approximately 80%), aged between 40 and 60 years. But young people are increasingly becoming homeless as well. Most homeless people live alone. These are divorced, widowed and mostly separated persons. The average period of being homeless is 7 years for women and 5 years for men. The homeless stay in agglomerations and large cities. They have elementary and occupational education, although more and more often there are also people with higher education in this group. “Homeless people are usually professionally passive and/or unemployed and find work in grey economy. The main source of income for homeless people is social welfare, including social benefits, and self-employment in the form of picking recyclable waste and begging. Most of the homeless are in various institutions. Some stay in non-residential places: at stations, in canals or rubbish chutes, and live there without being registered; a large group live in allotment gardens and in garden houses” [2].

The process of becoming a homeless person is long-term and depends on individual personality traits (internal factors) and on external conditions. An unfavorable combination of these factors in many cases leads to transition into homelessness.

A homeless person does not comply with the accepted social norms. He/she behaves pathologically and descends into alcoholism, drug addiction, crime, prostitution and suffers from mental disorders. These are the most common destructive behaviors that generate homelessness.

As pointed out by Olszewski-Strzyżowski, “homelessness is also triggered by objective factors, such as unemployment, low wages, poverty, lack of council housing, insufficient housing for persons leaving orphanages, foster families, or childcare facilities. This prevents an individual from finding a dwelling. The lack of adequate action by the state causes the scale of homelessness to be steadily increasing” [3, p. 123].

Examples of activities aimed at homeless athletes include sports tournaments, conducted by Saint Brother Albert Aid Society of the Gdańsk Circle. In 2004–2008, the Society organized five editions of the European Championship in futsal for the homeless. The tournament was organized in Gdańsk, from year to year attracting a growing number of national teams from Russia, Lithuania, Estonia, Ukraine, the Czech Republic, Denmark, the Netherlands, Hungary and Ireland. The Society also runs a soccer club “Albert Football Team Gdańsk”. In the years 2011–2015 also a project “From the street to EURO 2012! – social revival

of the Letnica District inhabitants” was completed. It was an offer to participate in free, integrated soccer activities for children and youth, learning ballroom dance, and taking hip-hop and break-dance classes. Organizing the Homeless World Cup in street soccer is another example of such animation and preventive activities [4].

## THE IDEA OF THE HOMELESS WORLD CUP

According to Lipoński and Sawala, “street soccer is a variation of soccer that is played on squares and in parks. It applies the basic principles of association football with some modifications, different depending on the degree of formality in a given country or region” [5, p. 129].

According to FIFA, “informal soccer games (street soccer) stimulated by development programs reassert principles and values such as fair play, spirit of cooperation, tolerance, participation and understanding, both of oneself and of others, regardless of whether these are players from one’s own team or opponents. Players learn how to win and lose, how to take responsibility for the team and how to participate actively in creating a community. Anything that is learned during training and on the pitch can be applied immediately in life. In this way, programs of development through soccer in the long run give participants an opportunity to build self-confidence, stimulate to critical thinking and promote many tools needed in everyday life” [6]. FIFA also points out that street soccer and related projects contribute to “social development through soccer”, and the main goal of these activities is to “overcome poverty, hatred and violence and to build bridges between different cultures” [7].

The above goals, indicated by FIFA, are particularly achieved by a tournament promoting street soccer – the Homeless World Cup (HWC). This event was created by Mel Young from Scotland and Harald Schmied from Austria. They thought of organizing such a soccer tournament when they participated in a conference on homelessness in Cape Town in 2001. The first HWC tournament was held in Graz, Austria, in 2003. The motto of this sporting event is to “change the lives of homeless people through soccer” [8]. This competition fully realizes the idea of involving excluded persons in living in society by sport.



Fig. 1. The Homeless World Cup website [8]

The main goal of an international soccer tournament aimed at the homeless and the excluded is to change their lifestyle through sport. The participating teams consist exclusively of homeless people from different countries of the world. The aim of the tournament is both to highlight the problem of homelessness and social exclusion (in its various forms) and to help socially disadvantaged people. As organizers say, “this tournament is pure therapy for those involved, because soccer has a magical effect. The tournament contributes to improving the players’ life situation, and many of them get a job, and many of them sign contracts as players and coaches” [8]. The HWC website features the results of the survey addressed to homeless players – World Cup participants.

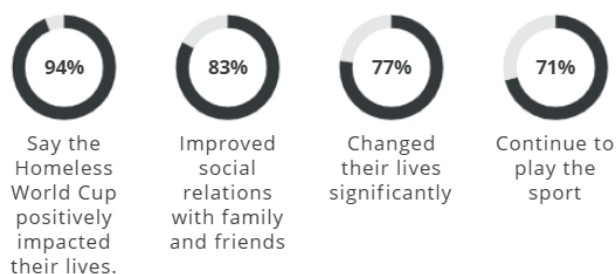


Fig. 2. Players' responses to the impact of their participation in HWC on life [8]

Olszewski-Strzyżowski, while examining the players-representatives of Poland, also playing in the HWC competitions, confirmed that playing football had a significant impact on positive changes in their social attitudes (including improvement in social contacts) and changes in their awareness (including a more positive attitude to life, self-confidence, etc.) [9].

Currently, the Homeless World Cup Foundation (FHWC), which cooperates with 70 partners worldwide (including Poland), is responsible for organizing competitions and international tournaments. The tournament usually lasts for one week, and 200 matches are played. Matches last 14 minutes (2 halves of 7 minutes) and are played on a pitch which is 20 m long (65ft) and 14 m wide (45ft). The pitch is usually built on a street. The team consists of 4 players on the pitch, 3 players in the field and one goalkeeper, and 4 substitute players. A player taking part in the tournament must be over 16 years old and be homeless in the last year before the tournament. In addition, persons with a status of a political refugee and addicted persons may also participate in the tournament. There are male and female teams in the tournament [8]. The Polish men's national team has successfully participated in tournaments and competitions since 2005 (Table 1). Tens of thousands of players and contestants from around the world have taken part in the tournaments so far.

Table. 1 Results of the Polish men's national team

Year	Place of the tournament	1st place	Place of the Polish team	Number of teams
2003	Austria - Graz	Austria	-	18
2004	Sweden - Goteborg	Italy	-	24
2005	Great Britain - Edinburgh	Italy	2	27
2006	South Africa - Cape Town	Russia	3	48
2007	Denmark - Copenhagen	Scotland	-	48
2008	Australia - Melbourne	Afghani-stan	-	48
2009	Italy - Milan	Ukraine	-	48
2010	Brazil - Rio de Janeiro	Brazil	-	48
2011	France - Paris	Scotland	-	48
2012	Mexico - Mexico City	Chile	-	48
2013	Poland - Poznań	Brazil	7	64
2014	Chile - Santiago	Chile	3	42
2015	Netherlands - Amsterdam	Mexico	12	47
2016	Scotland- Glasgow	Mexico	18	40
2017	Norway - Oslo	Mexico	29	50
2018	Mexico - Mexico City	Mexico	31	42
2019	Wales - Cardiff	Mexico	-	50
2020	Tournament had to be cancelled because of the global pandemic			

Source [8]

## 11TH HOMELESS WORLD CUP IN POZNAŃ

In 2013 Poland organized the Homeless World Cup for the first time in the Malta Centre in Poznań (10–18 August 2013). 48 male and 16 female teams from over 60 countries from 5 continents participated in the tournament. For the first time in the history of the tournament Poland entered a female team. The competition was attended by 512 players and over 300 volunteers from all over the world. Players participating in the tournament were from Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Great Britain, Finland, France, Germany, Ghana, Greece, Hong Kong, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Kenya, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Mexico, Namibia, the Netherlands, Northern Ireland, Norway, the Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Scotland, Slovenia, South Africa, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, the USA, and Wales.



Fig. 3. Promotional poster for the Poznań tournament [10]

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The topic of the research was to analyze a sense of belonging of homeless persons involved in a sports group preparing to participate in an international tournament. As a result of exclusion from professional and, of course, family environments, homeless people lose a sense of their personal as well as professional identity, and experience a state of identity moratorium and even lose their social memory. Very few homeless people who have culturalistic interests and also have achieved pre-defined skills can advance socially, or at least gain a chance to leave the state of exclusion. This involves homeless people who engage in sports activities, more specifically those who are given conditions for participation in training and sports competition. The conducted study, which is an empirical task of a larger whole, is of an exploratory nature. Although it is guided by the hypothesis of the sense of belonging and the initiated social bonds – especially in relation to the excluded homeless people – despite the theoretical supposition, it is aimed at recognizing the consequences of intrapersonal transformation of homeless people who have been involved in a natural social experiment for a longer time. However, other consequences of homeless people's participation in sport cannot be excluded.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study of a survey type used a questionnaire-based method. All subjects met the same conditions and were presented with the same research tools and techniques. Everyone responded to the same questions. The questionnaire contained 21 questions. The respondents had an opportunity to answer more than one question. The survey was anonymous and was

carried out on 10–18 August 2013 in Poznań, during the tournament. An individual interview was conducted with each player and the conduct of the survey was personally supervised. 12 homeless players, aged between 18 and 32 years, were interviewed. Seven subjects had vocational education, three – secondary and two – primary one; eight of them were from workers' families, three from farmers', and one from an educated family. In terms of the marital status, eleven of them were single, and one homeless person was divorced. Ten homeless people lived in MONAR centers<sup>1</sup> and two in night shelters. Even before qualifying for the national team, these homeless persons had been practicing soccer for two to five years and longer.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In explaining the change in the social identity of homeless people who were allowed to participate in sport, it was important to identify the causes of their homelessness and to identify external circumstances which encouraged the decision to change their lifestyle.

As far as the causes of homelessness are concerned, in most cases it was drug addiction (11 people) and alcoholism (7 people). Some homeless people also became involved in crime (3 persons). It also happened that homelessness was a consequence of lack of dwelling after leaving prison and the simultaneous breakdown of the family (Figure 4). The respondents had an opportunity to answer more than one question.

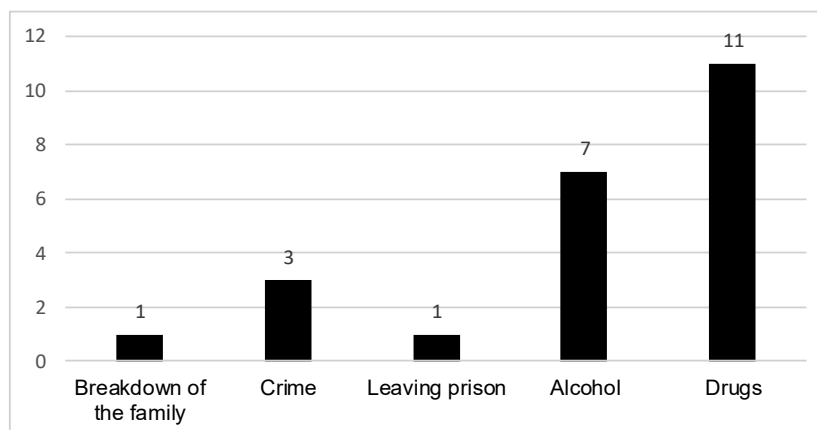


Fig. 4. Causes of homelessness listed by athletes (number of subjects)

Source: own research, 2021

By the time of getting involved in sports, the subjects had been homeless for up to two years (5 persons) and up to a year (5 persons). Two people had been homeless for 6 and 10 years, respectively.

The reasons for homelessness can be indirectly inferred from the declared existential values. Thus, homeless people appreciate family life (10 answers), a possibility of fulfilment (8 subjects) and health (7 subjects). To a lesser extent, they attach importance to professional success, tangible goods (4 answers each) and education (3 subjects) and social relations (2 subjects). We can say that they do not strive for those values that they do not themselves experience: profession, knowledge, a house or an apartment, or social relationships (Figure 5). The respondents had an opportunity to answer more than one question.

The fact of becoming part of the social sport environment was the breakthrough in the lives of homeless people. It was important to determine the homeless people's motivation to start sports activities and the person that triggered a desire for this activity (Figure 6). The respondents had an opportunity to answer more than one question.

<sup>1</sup> MONAR - a Polish non-governmental organization focused on helping drug addicts, the homeless, and other socially excluded groups.

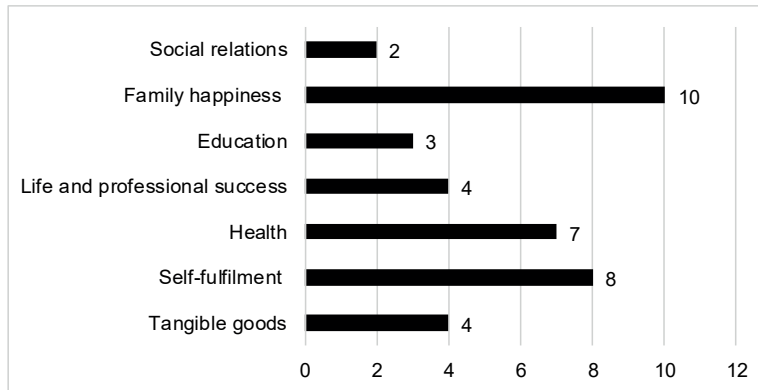


Fig. 5. Life priorities of the homeless (number of subjects)

Source: own research, 2021

The players indicated that they motivated themselves (self-motivation) to start playing soccer (10 subjects), then a coach (5 subjects), friends (4 subjects), parents (2 subjects), a probation officer (1 subject).

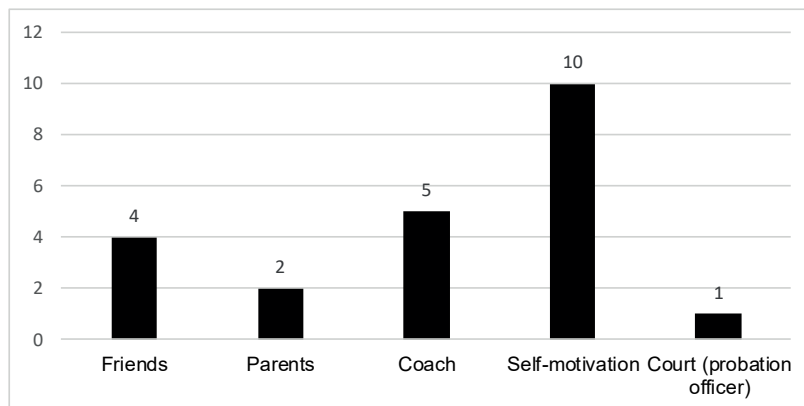


Fig. 6. Persons motivating homeless players to take up soccer (number of subjects)

Source: own research, 2021

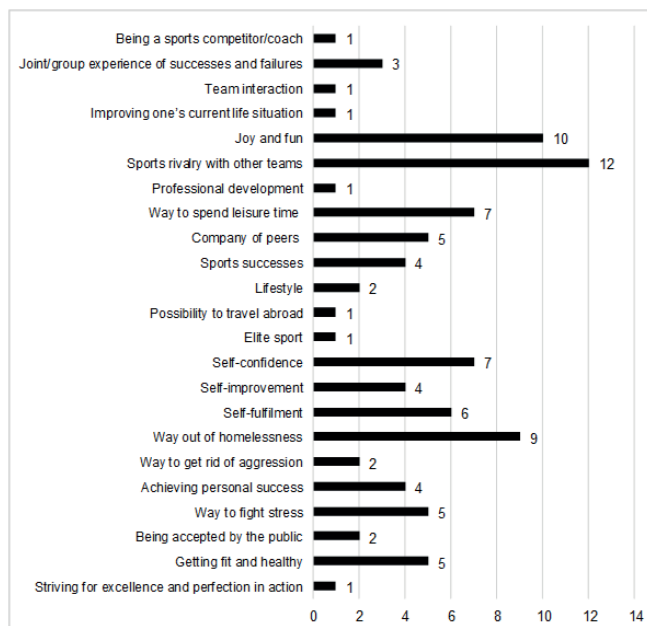


Fig. 7. The personal consequences of practicing sport by the homeless (number of subjects)

Source: own research, 2021

Homeless athletes took up soccer out of the desire to compete in sports. This was a primary motive for their decisions and actions (12 subjects). They were also motivated by a desire to experience the joys of fun (10 subjects). Moreover, they saw a way out of homelessness in it (9 subjects). Some of them saw the game as a possibility to raise self-confidence (7 subjects), conditions for personal fulfilment (6 subjects) and to help overcome stress and to establish social relations with their peers (5 each). The respondents had an opportunity to answer more than one question.

Coaches and activists speak about the favorable transformation of homeless athletes. Jacek Karczewski, the coach of the national team, points out that “the tournament gives them self-esteem and discipline; it teaches them how to work in a group. This event shows me that you can enjoy different things and you do not need alcohol to do this. We learn respect and also how to accept failure. We learn to support each other and to be together in difficult moments. I know many guys who were involved in this team. Many of them recovered from the addiction, set up families, work and study” [11]. The President of the Association the Homeless Polish National Team, Maciej Gudra, notes that participation in sport leads to “becoming independent” by people who play in the homeless representation. “Working with these people we see the progress they make. They are a lot of more self-confident; they approach life better and know what they want to do to make it look better” [12] (www.natemat.pl, 2019).

Homeless people also pointed to the personal consequences of participation in trainings and sport activities (Figure 8). The respondents had an opportunity to answer more than one question.

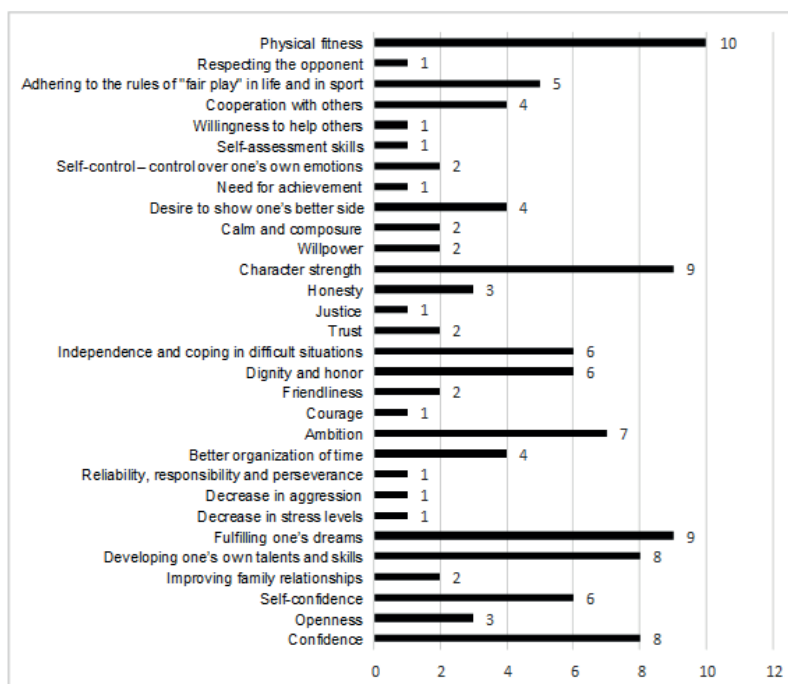


Fig. 8. The personal consequences of practicing sport by the homeless (number of subjects)

Source: own research, 2021

They related the consequences to enhanced physical fitness (10 subjects), increased character strength (9 subjects) and increased self-confidence (7 subjects). They also gained a sense of resourcefulness, peace and composure from sport (6 subjects). Moral ideals of dignity and honor have also become closer to them (6 subjects). The respondents had an opportunity to answer more than one question.



As far as family and social consequences are concerned, homeless athletes experienced considerable support from their families (8 subjects) and saw an improvement in their relationships with the next of kin (5 subjects) (Figure 9). The respondents had an opportunity to answer more than one question.

In the institutional context, athletes found an understanding of their position towards leaving homelessness insofar as they could count on finding employment (5 subjects). In most cases, however, they did not see changes in the attitude to them which would indicate an improvement in or a change of their status of the excluded. Nonetheless, athletes were of the opinion that the possibility of leaving homelessness was significant thanks to practicing sports (8 subjects). Owing to their own effort, athletes could leave homelessness (10 subjects), but they would need the employer's assistance, the support of their families and a psychotherapist. An important condition for achieving independence is living or at least a guaranteed place in a night shelter.



Fig. 9. Family, social and institutional consequences of practicing sport by the homeless (number of subjects)

Source: own research, 2021

Institutions are not involved in leaving homelessness. The next of kin do not express such interest either, even though they encourage homeless people to practice sports. In reality, the homeless help themselves, which can be a consequence of the gained sense of self-effectiveness and rebuilt self-confidence, and a belief that sport activity is important in leaving homelessness – so they say themselves. Research data show specific isolation in their efforts to leave homelessness, but they also show how the rebuilt belief in one's own capabilities allows them to persevere in order to improve their social and professional situation. Homeless people are not left alone. There are many helpers: family, church, a psychologist, a night shelter. But when homeless persons are trying to go out of homelessness, suddenly they are on their own. Neither does the employer meet their needs nor do the city services help them in finding an apartment. The soccer club in which a homeless person is a player does not participate in his efforts to leave homelessness.

Homeless people speak about this duality of their relationships with the public when, on the one hand, they appreciate others' help in gaining access to the sport environment, and, on the other hand, they notice their absence in an effort to "abandon" the homeless status. As long as they are homeless, athletes have a place in the sports community, but this is not unconditional either – not every homeless person can become an athlete. As soon as they leave homelessness, they lose their status of a homeless athlete and do not

gain any ally in their efforts to acquire workers' rights and social housing rights. This is explained by the information from interviews with homeless athletes. Athletes themselves recognize that participation in sports as homeless people will not change their position in society. There is no such dependence, and possibly they had no illusion that even after victory in the tournament society would give them such expected "rewards" as dwelling and work. They did not think so. But they thought of the personal and personality benefits when they began to train and play in matches and tournaments systematically.

Before taking up sport activity, in their vast majority, the participants of the tournament had been alcohol and drug addicted. When they left their childcare centers or prisons, they stayed in MONAR centers. As they pointed out, sports and soccer changed their lives and became a way of recovering from addictions. The players accepting the role of Polish representatives profess that their participation in the tournament and other competitions has significantly changed their health behaviors. Training activity forced them to give up alcohol and drugs and thus it became a remedy. Sport saved them from drug addiction. Homeless people simply say that sport is a "form of therapy" for them.

*"For me, the game is a fulfillment of childhood dreams, as well as some kind of reward. Soccer is a form of therapy for me because I am addicted";*

*"I've been addicted to hard drugs for many years. I decided to do something with myself and finally find treatment. I've always liked soccer and I guess it pulled me from this addiction";*

*"I'm not going to go back to addiction, although I'm still in the center, but thanks to playing, I'll succeed";*

*"This soccer is my passion, because I've been interested since I was a child, but addiction foiled my plans, but I'm getting myself out of it because of the game".<sup>2</sup>*

It follows from these statements that, for the athletes, working in a team and taking up soccer activity is a way to improve their living conditions and to recover from addictions, thus giving them a chance to return to life in society.

The athletes also pointed to the various forms of aid that would support them in leaving homelessness.

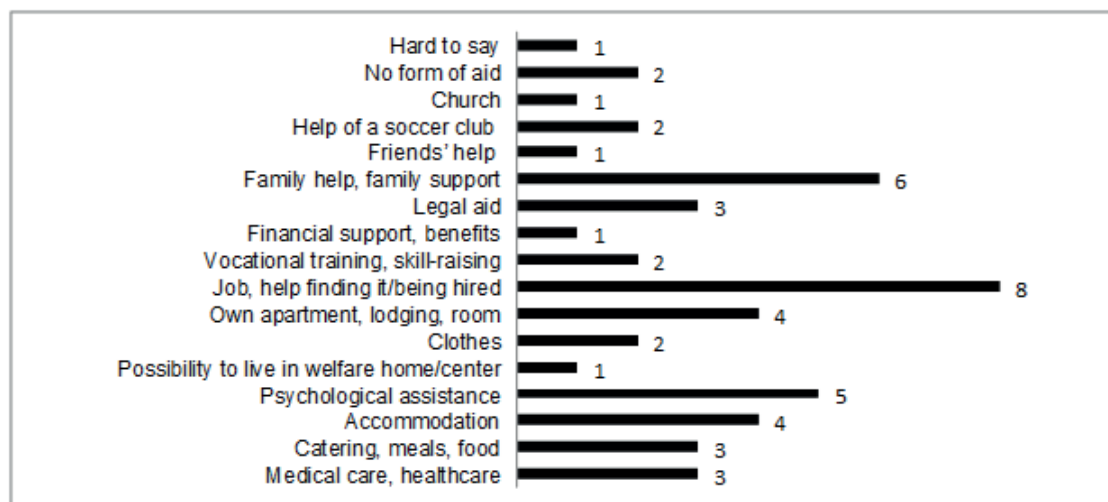


Fig. 10. Forms of aid indicated by athletes to support them in leaving homelessness (number of subjects)

Source: own research, 2021

<sup>2</sup> The author's interviews with players during the tournament on 10-18 Aug. 2013 in Poznan.

According to the responses, the most important forms of assistance that would help the subjects leave homelessness were the following (Fig. 10): finding a job (8 responses), family support (6 subjects) and psychological assistance (5 subjects), own apartment and finding accommodation (4 each). They thought that, among others, medical care, help of a soccer club, friends' help, and church assistance were less important (1 response each). The respondents had an opportunity to answer more than one question.

## CONCLUSIONS

In light of the research data, the hypothesis of the sense of belonging among homeless athletes has not been confirmed. Therefore, the sense of belonging is not a consequence (result) of involving homeless people in sports training and competitions. Despite exclusion, homeless people do not feel either loneliness or deprivation of social relations. In the sport environment they share their fate with the equally disadvantaged, and based on a principle of reciprocity, they likewise meet their social and friendly expectations. Thus, personal consequences of their sporting activity should be seen somewhere else. A thorough analysis of the data allows formulating the following conclusions:

- homelessness of people included in the sports community was a consequence of criminal activity and a consequence of drug and alcohol addiction. Breakup of the family may also lead to homelessness and the necessity to leave the dwelling;
- the inclusion of homeless people in sport and obliging them to train regularly was determined by their previous experience and soccer skills;
- despite exclusion from working life and the perceived harm caused by the inability to leave homelessness, homeless persons sought, each in their own way, to engage in sport activity;
- as athletes, the homeless saw the prestigious activity as a change of their status that would allow them to leave homelessness. Participation of homeless people in sport has not changed their position in society, despite the achieved athletic recognition. Even winning a championship tournament does not lead athletes to get out of the homeless status;
- as athletes, the homeless participated in institutionally organized training and tournament activity. Despite the perceived marginalization in the inevitable "return to the night shelter", they were not dissocialized enough to fall into a state of "broken ties". Sports relations brought homeless people closer to each other, making them feel a sense of their belonging to the task force, on the basis of secondary socialization. The homeless athletes' arising sense of belonging is, therefore, not a consequence or a motive of practicing sports as a need for ties. This conclusion is different from, for example, Fehsenfeld's [12] conclusions of the research conducted on the excluded participants in sports activities who are bound by a sense of loneliness, and in the final phase of a successful socialization process by a sense of belonging. The disadvantaged recognized themselves as sitting in the same boat. The sense of belonging indicated by them was a consequence of joint commitment to a sports task that was just a pretext, not an end in itself;
- sport activity remains dependent on health behaviors consciously undertaken by the homeless. When one considers that sport activity forces a homeless person, so far alcohol- and drug-addicted, to protect his own health, in the light of the obtained results, one can conclude that, regardless of the type of social exclusion, training work favorably changes an athlete's lifestyle.

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