

Hamrun Drop-in Centre: Qualitative Research on Living in Poverty in Malta

Roxanne Clarke et al.

in partnership with YMCA Malta

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In the heart of Hamrun, there exists a location that welcomes everyone who has been affected by the harsh realities of the system. Here, within the walls of the YMCA's day centre, the hardships of poverty have taken over the lives of all who enter its doors.

As we entered, we were met not with luxury but with the stark reality of human struggle. The faces were etched with countless hardships—faces with names and a story; they are someone else's family member, friend, or former colleague. They had a life before their current situation occurred. This was no luxurious establishment; rather, it was a sanctuary that had to welcome the underprivileged to provide relief from the cruelty of the streets. Here, systemic injustices are revealed. Addiction, unemployment, and broken families are all symptoms of a society that has failed its most vulnerable citizens. In the cramped confines of the centre's basic furnishings and amenities, there existed camaraderie, solace, and sustenance of the mind and body. Characters who, despite the pain, are resilient and courageous.

Mario, a former user, told his story of compassion and selflessness. After years of homelessness and addiction, he has made a successful recovery. To repay society, he now devotes his days to assisting others who face the same challenges he once did. Mario described how he roams the streets at night, looking for homeless people and offering them blankets and food. He also conducts outreach, directing people to sources of help and support.

Martin and Charles volunteered to tell us their story. Martin, a well-groomed middle-aged gentleman, was accompanied by Charles, who, according to Martha, are always joined at the hip. Charles, at twenty-five years old, is Martin's protégé. Charles took Martin under his wing. They have a bond that goes beyond mere companionship; it's a connection born of shared pain and hardship, a refuge from life's relentless storms. In Martin, Charles finds the father figure he never had, unfortunately in dire circumstances. They navigate the turbulent waters of life together, finding comfort in each other's presence and sharing both laughter and tears. Martin made it clear that his future life includes Charles. They spoke of the hardships of the streets, the bitterness of the nights, the hunger, and the unfairness of the system.

Martin's life took a dramatic turn six months ago. He had been comfortably settled living with his brother and in employment, when he was abruptly driven away due to a family dispute. After being forced to leave his brother's home, Martin sought refuge in homeless shelters. However, his circumstances changed once again, and he was forced to live on the streets with nothing but the cold night sky for shelter. Martin was forced to abandon his job due to a lack of a place to rest or attend to basic hygiene needs, plunging him into pennilessness and homelessness.

Similarly, Charles, at 25, left home because of his parentage. His home, riddled with familial conflict, provided no solace. With a mother involved in prostitution and alcohol and a father addicted to gambling Charles made the difficult decision to flee at the age of 16.

Despite having found stability working in hospitality and residing in rented accommodation, the sudden emergence of the pandemic shattered his world, leaving him without employment. Even when he managed to secure a job in construction, his employer's disregard for Charles' rights left him jobless once more. Struggling to afford rent and faced with the stark choice between returning to a toxic household or embracing the uncertainty of homelessness, Charles opted for the latter. Charles demonstrated remarkable resilience by choosing a normal life over drug addiction and is now clean, except for the occasional joint. He yearns for some semblance of normalcy, stability, and routine that is currently unavailable to him. All he wants is to simply live a life free of turmoil and uncertainty.

Each morning, these men face a harsh reality: the looming uncertainty of where they will sleep for the night. They walk through Valletta's streets until the YMCA centre opens, where a warm shower and breakfast provide a brief sense of comfort. Later, they arrive at the soup kitchen or 'Dar Papa Frangisku,' where they will be served a meal. The generosity of Fathers Franco and Marcellino sustains them in the evening thanks to the priests' providence of money. Martin praises Fathers Franco and Marcellino for their unwavering compassion and open doors, which provide support to the men and many others.

Martin and Charles endure terrifying nights spent on the unforgiving streets of Aldo Moro or Triq Dicembru Tlettax. They sometimes seek refuge in the makeshift shelter of a bus stop or an abandoned building with no windows or doors, exposing themselves to the harsh elements of cold and rain. Their sleep is restless as they lie in the dark on hard ground beneath canvases, alert for their safety and fearful of being attacked by passersby. Martin, clutching a screwdriver for protection, demonstrates their unwavering vigilance towards unknown threats. In a disturbing incident at Valletta's yellow garage, the men were attacked with eggs by a group of teenagers. Such encounters only heighten their anxiety as they struggle with the constant fear for their safety, knowing all too well that the next assault could have far worse consequences. Given the hard night, the men's physical and mental health is deteriorating, waking up with aching bodies and exhaustion.

Difficult nights have negative effects on the men's physical and mental health. They not only wake up with an aching body, but they are also more susceptible to colds, malnutrition, exhaustion or depression. Martin described how he and Charles recently awoke feeling extremely ill. Although the clinic is free to all, Martin and Charles were unable to access free medicine because they had no address, forcing them to rely on Fr. Franco's providence to purchase medicine. Martin and Charles are both caught in a cycle of poverty; not having a fixed address prevents them from being able to access housing, which further prevents them from being able to find work, leaving them stuck with no obvious way out.

Martin expresses his desire and willingness to work, but he emphasises a critical point: without adequate rest, he cannot perform his duties effectively. As a specialist in turnkey and construction, he is concerned that sleep deprivation will jeopardise not only his safety but also that of others on the job site. Martin also points out how important it is to have a place to go after a hard day's work to relax and take care of basic needs. He stresses the need for comfort and cleanliness to ensure that one is ready for the next day's work.

However, securing housing proves to be impossible. Martin recounts a frustrating encounter when he attempted to apply for government housing at the housing authority, only to be met with rejection. The authority declined his application, based on the requirement of a fixed address for submission. This left Martin fuming with frustration, as he confronted the woman at the counter, strongly expressing his disbelief. In a fit of rage, he sarcastically offered the address of the tree under which he resides on Aldo Moro Street, or Dicembru Tlettax. His outburst drew the attention of the police, who intervened and threatened arrest. Martin's rage boiled over as he condemned the system's perceived injustice, lamenting the preferential treatment given to the more privileged members of society. He has a desperate desire to confront the prime minister or the president, convinced that his predicament, and that of countless others like him, goes unnoticed at Castille. Martin wants nothing more than to expose the grim reality that people like himself face. His anger extends to the subject of rental costs, where he speaks out against landlords who take advantage of the influx of foreign workers by raising rents beyond affordability.

Despite the systemic failures he faces, Martin finds assistance provided by various agencies such as the YMCA, the church, and Appogg. He thinks highly of Caroline, his social worker, for her efforts on his behalf. Caroline's advocacy led him to apply for benefits, but the meagre sum of 130 euros is not enough to take him off the streets. Caroline persistently tries to find him shelter, but such efforts are futile due to the constant overcrowding. Martin maintains regular contact with his daughter and two granddaughters, but he bears the weight of his situation alone, preferring not to burden them with his problems. Despite his daughter's invitation to stay with them, Martin's pride prevents him from accepting, fearing that he will make his family uncomfortable or place a financial burden on them. Instead, Martin silently bears the hardships of street life, shielding his loved ones from the harsh realities of his situation. His reluctance to seek refuge with his family demonstrates his desire to maintain their peace of mind and protect them from unnecessary worry or distress.

Despite their hardships, Charles and Martin maintain their pride, refusing to commit theft or violence, even if it means going hungry. They prioritise integrity and dignity over everything else. Both men maintain a cheerful demeanour, finding solace in humour as a way of dealing with their difficulties. They understand the value of maintaining a positive attitude, recognising that despair can lead to destructive behaviour. Their ambitions are modest but profound; all they want is a simple room with a bed in which to rest. Martin wants to banish society's notion that all homeless people are addicts. He longs to be seen for who he truly is, free of the labels imposed by society.