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SUMMARY

# TRAHOME

## Homelessness trajectories and non-take-up of social rights from a dynamic perspective

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SUMMARY

The TRAHOME project studies the trajectories of people experiencing homelessness (PEH) and their access to social rights. Homelessness is conceptualized as a dynamic process, rather than a static condition, with individuals moving through different stages, categories, and experiences of homelessness. This perspective highlights the significance of both quantitative and qualitative approaches in understanding the complex nature of homelessness, focusing on profiles, trajectories, and lived experiences. Moreover, we lean on literature on the substantial realisation of human and social rights, as well as how, and to what extent, social work practices and local social policies affect this realisation of rights.

By building upon insights of prior studies, such as the MEHOBEL project, this project accomplishes three research objectives. First, we gain an in-depth understanding of the trajectories of PEH by utilizing a mixed-method approach. Second, we analyse the role of social work and local social policies, and how these affect PEH's trajectories. Third, we reflect and broaden our understanding of PEH's access to rights, and the hurdles they face. The project comprised six distinct yet interrelated studies, each employing various methodological approaches to explore different aspects of homelessness. A first study employs a quantitative analysis of administrative data from Belgium's Crossroads Bank for Social Security (CBSS), specifically from the Datawarehouse Labour Market and Social Protection (DWH LM&SP). The five other studies employ qualitative research methods, including participant observation and interviews with social workers, professionals from governmental and non-governmental sectors, landlords, Judge of the Peace Court, lawyers, and PEH themselves.

A first conclusion is based on our quantitative analysis of PEH between 2010 and 2018. The study focused on individuals registered with a reference address at the Public Centre for Social Welfare (PCSW), expanding on previous research by Kuhn & Culhane (1998) who categorized homelessness into three types: transitional, episodic and chronic homelessness. We investigated first-timers, re-enterers, chronic, and extremely chronic PEH, and found the people in the two last groups comprised the majority. On average, PEH had a reference address for 2.5 years. The group of first-timers is one with specific vulnerable individuals such as families and women who are more likely to exit homelessness quickly, whilst chronic homelessness is characterised by single adults, males, of which a significant segment is administratively excluded. This administrative invisibility leads to the exacerbation of their situation – the lack of an address is a significant barrier in accessing rights such as social protection schemes, social housing, voting rights, amongst many others.

A second conclusion is based on our qualitative analysis, offering a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of PEH. More specifically, by shedding light on three groups: migrants and denizens experiencing homelessness, women's homelessness and PEH without an address.

First, our project explored the experiences of precarious migrants who continuously adapted their strategies to navigate homelessness, government policies and personal aspirations. This group, termed 'denizen rebels', actively resisted criminalisation while asserting their presence in the city of Ghent, Belgium. Their homemaking efforts were characterized by creating diverse domestic spaces despite their unstable housing situation, and they heavily relied on outreach workers and charities for survival. Migrants' experiences revealed significant mental and physical health challenges, as well as the emotional and physical labour required to navigate their precarious housing situations. Importantly, their sense of 'home' was often shaped by complex transnational family dynamics and broader migration patterns.

Second, following the trajectory of a single woman, single mother, and her children, drawn from a total sample of 22 women surveyed, revealed structural factors contributing to women's homelessness, including intra-family violence, female material insecurity and the inadequacy of housing policies in addressing the needs of women. This woman's trajectory reflects broader patterns of chronic homelessness among women. It reveals the complex strategies they employ to escape it. Based on this trajectory, the study shows the gaps that exist in the public systems for supporting these single-parent households to avoid the street.

Third, we investigate the factors influencing the non-take-up and administrative burdens of people experiencing homelessness who want to claim a reference address. This is an alternative administrative address at the PCSW, allowing for PEH to remain access to other social and civil rights that require a proof of address. Because of this, we define this address as a *minimum minimorum* of social protection. However, due to hiatus between policy design and implementation, the policy reflects and reinforces administrative and social exclusion of its beneficiaries due to the punitive consequences when not complying to the criteria; the interprofessional arbitrary variation of the administration; and the potential stigmatisation and discrimination when making use professional PCSW support and/or making use of such an alternative address.

A third conclusion, also based on our qualitative analysis, is that access to fundamental human and social rights extends well beyond housing. The interconnectedness of rights, including social protection, healthcare and welfare, is critical for improving outcomes for PEH. One stream of literature we glanced at refers to welfare conditionality and its implications for vulnerable groups. Welfare conditionality, which requires recipients to meet behavioural conditions (e.g. seeking employment or housing), disproportionately affects vulnerable groups including PEH. This conditionality often leads to administrative exclusion, where failing to meet the eligibility criteria results in the loss of access to rights and services. Another stream of literature we examined is this of citizenship and denizenship, and the role of social work and local social policy, for instance, on assisting precarious groups such as 'denizens', i.e. those migrants who cannot access social services due to their precarious legal status. A

last stream of literature examines the specific access barriers for vulnerable groups through the theoretical framework of administrative burdens. Administrative burdens, such as bureaucratic complex procedures, pose significant challenges for PEH seeking access to rights. Street-level bureaucrats play a key role in mitigating these burdens, whilst they face contradictory obligations such as balancing fraud prevention with providing access to rights.

Furthermore, a fourth conclusion highlights the challenges and opportunities for social work and local social policy in addressing homelessness. In a first study we examined housing services in Brussels. Social workers supporting households facing rental debt and eviction navigate a complex system, employing investigative, negotiation, moral, and emotional labour to help individuals remain in their housing. However, the study found that these practices often adapt to an unequal housing market, rather than challenging its structural inequalities. A second study looked into outreach social work in Ghent. While these social workers provide harm reduction services and facilitate access to basic support, they are caught between their professional ethics and the government's exclusionary policies, complicating their ability to advocate for human rights. A third study focusses on the Post-Mobile Living Project in Ghent, a local project providing temporary housing to migrants in container units, which revealed tensions between local policy makers and social workers. While policymakers prioritized economic integration and assimilation, social workers focused on a more complex understanding of residents' needs. The study highlights the importance of involving marginalized communities in decision-making processes and addressing structural factors such as pervasive racism and housing precarity. Furthermore, the role of localism is highlighted, in shaping access to these local services, with decentralised policies creating disparities in service provision across regions and municipalities. These findings point to the need for more inclusive policies that prioritise access to social rights for all individuals, regardless of their housing or citizenship status.

The TRAHOME project recommends more comprehensive, long-term policy support for vulnerable population groups such as PEH, particularly for those experiencing chronic homelessness. These policies need to be inclusive – ensure access for all individuals, regardless of their citizenship or housing status. This includes addressing welfare conditionality and administrative burdens that disproportionately affect vulnerable groups. These results show also the importance of developing innovative social work practices at the intersection of homelessness and migration. Given the mobility patterns and the often changing and volatile nature of this population, efforts cannot be limited to a fixed group of registered individuals. Lastly, social workers are crucial intermediaries in supporting individuals facing housing insecurity, but their work is constrained by structural inequalities in the housing market. Efforts should be made to support social workers and provide them with the tools and resources needed to challenge these inequalities.