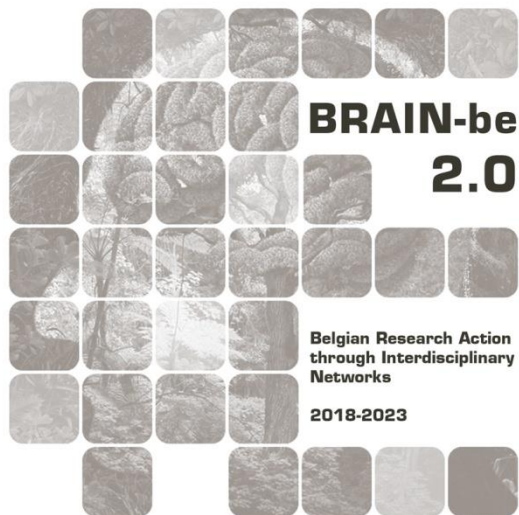


TRAHOME

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

Laure-lise Robben (KU Leuven) - Sophie Samyn (UGent) - Noémie Emmanuel (UC Louvain)

Pillar 3: Federal societal challenges



NETWORK PROJECT

TRAHOME

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

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FINAL REPORT

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ABSTRACT

Homelessness studies have evolved significantly, moving beyond the understanding of homelessness as a mere temporary and static phenomenon. Building upon prior findings of the MEHOBEL – Measuring Homelessness in Belgium – project, this TRAHOME project studies the trajectories of people experiencing homelessness (PEH) and their access to rights from a dynamic perspective. Our objectives are (1) to gain an in-depth understanding of the pathways of PEH, from different perspectives, by making use of a mixed-method approach, (2) to investigate the role of social work and local social policies and how these affect PEH’s trajectories, and (3) to examine the access to rights for PEH and the barriers which restrict their access. We accomplished these objectives by making use of both quantitative and qualitative analyses throughout six distinct studies. First, by making use of an administrative dataset of PEH between 2010 and 2018, we highlighted the prevalence of chronic homelessness in Belgium, with a significant segment of individuals facing administrative invisibility. Second, by making use of qualitative methods, we examined the access barriers to fundamental rights, which extend well beyond the right to housing. Through case studies on persons with a reference address, migrant homelessness in Ghent and women homelessness in Brussels, we contribute to the literature on welfare conditionality, citizenship and non-citizenship or ‘denizenship’, as well as non-take-up and administrative burdens that vulnerable people face in accessing rights. Moreover, we shed light on the punitive consequences if PEH fail to meet the criteria, resulting in the further loss of access to rights and services. Third, we conclude there is a significant role for local social work in providing harm reduction services and facilitating access to these rights. However, these street-level bureaucrats often face contradictory obligations such as balancing fraud prevention with providing access to rights. Based on our findings, we propose both academic and policy recommendations, including the importance of using a dynamic approach for understanding homelessness, ensuring that PEH are not administratively excluded which exacerbates their vulnerability, and making use of a rights-based approach to ensure that all individuals, including migrants, can access fundamental social and human rights.

Keywords

Homelessness, social rights, human rights, social work, citizenship, dynamic analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is a significant, complex, and ever-increasing issue in Europe. Known factors affecting homelessness include rising rental costs, housing shortages, economic instability, health issues, access issues, unemployment, and migration. Moreover, austerity measures and local budget cuts to social services exacerbate the issue in many regions in Europe (Stucker et al., 2017). As an extreme form of poverty and social exclusion, the issue of homelessness affects approximately 900,000 individuals in Europe (FEANTSA, 2023; OECD, 2021). This remains a rough estimate, given that there is a general scarcity of public statistics and an under-representation of people experiencing homelessness (PEH) in demographic studies. In Belgium, there is also a limited availability of public data. Because of this, little is known about its general prevalence, extent and the profiles of PEH. However, monitoring and ending homelessness has become one of the Belgian and European anti-poverty policy priorities, allowing for a prior project funded by Belspo (2012-2017), ‘MEHOBEL’ or ‘Measuring homelessness in Belgium’ to formulate academic and policy recommendations. One of their recommendations was to produce yearly statistics and collect more data – both in quantitative as well as qualitative ways - on individuals experiencing homelessness.

On the one hand, point-in-time counts are key in mapping homelessness on a local level. Since 2008, head counts are organised in the Brussels-Capital Region, mapping the number of people experiencing homelessness over the years. These head counts provide a snapshot of individuals at one point in time and reflect a certain evolution of the phenomenon. In 2022, more than 7,000 individuals were counted, indicating an increase of almost 20% since 2020. This increase in homelessness has been exacerbated by several structural factors, including the housing crisis, economic challenges and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The high cost of living and rising rents in Brussels have made it difficult for many to secure stable housing.

Moreover, a significant portion of the homeless population comprises (undocumented) migrants and asylum seekers, many of whom face difficulties accessing shelter and other relevant services. Alongside the counts in Brussels, other point-in-time counts have mapped local homeless populations to gain insights into the extent and nature of homelessness in Belgium. These counts, organized by the King Baudouin Foundation, mapped different profiles and living situations of the counted population. The extrapolations of these counts show that 13.533 adults and 5942 children are homeless in Flanders and 14.342 adults, and 4713 children are homeless in Wallonia (and 192 individuals in the German speaking Community) (Mertens, Demaerschalk, & Hermans, 2023; De Moor & Wagener, 2024). In 2024, the counts on homelessness in Belgium are financed by the three regional governments. KU Leuven coordinates the counts in Europe in 15 cities (12 countries) in 2024, a project financed by the European Commission¹.

On the other hand, the MEHOBEL-study highlighted that counts alone would not suffice. The researchers concluded that measuring and monitoring homelessness can only be realised by means of a combination of methods, by combining short-term and long-term strategies to map homelessness comprehensively, and to do so by involving relevant stakeholders who are experts in homelessness policies or practices (Demaerschalk et al., 2018). Whereas such counts are an interesting strategy to produce the extent and profile characteristics of homeless persons at a certain moment in time in a certain location, they are less effective in studying the dynamic complexities of the issue. For this reason, this TRAHOME-study wants to investigate deeper into the pathways of people experiencing homelessness, both on a quantitative and qualitative basis.

¹ For more info about the European project : https://www.kuleuven.be/lucas/en/eu_homelessness_counts

By doing so, we aim to contribute to the literature on homelessness. Recently, Lee et al (2021) have therefore advocated for a conceptual and methodological shift in homelessness research. Beyond static conceptualisations, studies have been focusing more on adopting dynamic approaches to examine homelessness as a dynamic phenomenon. Or, if possible, a mix of methods to study homelessness both with a snapshot and dynamic method.

In this TRAHOME-project, we build upon these insights and engage further into gaining an in-depth understanding of the dynamic complexities of homelessness. We focus on different subgroups within the homeless population while elaborating on this dynamic angle: intra-European migrants, single-parent families, and individuals who lack a residential address. The main concepts we examine are accessing and substantially realising human and social rights, the barriers that impede PEH's access and, therefore, their complete trajectory, and the role of local social work practices and social policies to address these issues.

Given the study's emphasis on local practices and social policy, the strategies of Public Centres for Social Welfare (PCSW) are a key research focus. PCSW serve as both the final safety net of social security and the primary point of contact for accessing and realising human and social rights at the local level. They also hold specific responsibilities related to individuals experiencing homelessness, such as granting reference addresses. Additionally, the local and regional counts in Belgium have shown that PCSW clients often face extremely precarious housing situations, making housing a central focus of intervention for social workers in these centres.

This project is grounded in a mixed-methods and multi-level approach in which a quantitative, longitudinal approach to mapping homelessness trajectories is combined with a longitudinal qualitative approach to disentangle the complexity of homeless trajectories and understand the dynamic process of how homelessness emerges and can be tackled arise.

In this report, we first outline the objectives of this study, by briefly giving an overview of the literature on accessing rights, homelessness as a dynamic process, and social work practices. In the methodology section, we discuss in more detail the six distinct studies implemented to study these objectives, as well as the data and methods used. In Chapter 4, we formulate our findings, followed by dissemination and valorisation in Chapter 5. This is mainly a summary of our findings. For more detailed results, we refer to the list of publications added in Chapter 6.

2. STATE OF THE ART AND OBJECTIVES

In this study, we analyse the trajectories of PEH over time in different spaces. We lean on literature focusing on (1) homelessness being a dynamic process, (2) the substantial realisation of human and social rights (specifically for vulnerable groups), and (3) the substantial realisation of rights through social work practices.

2.1 On homelessness as a dynamic process

Over the past two decades, homelessness has increasingly been understood as a dynamic process rather than a static or fixed condition. People move in and out of homelessness, some repeatedly so, due to changes in their personal circumstances, societal conditions, and the availability of resources and support systems. Different concepts can be distinguished when discussing homelessness from a dynamic perspective, such as homeless ‘careers’ (Becker, 1985), ‘pathways’ (Anderson, 2001), housing pathways (Clapham, 2003) and trajectories, amongst others. These concepts call for more nuanced, process-oriented methods that can better identify different subgroups, better inform policy interventions, and more effectively address the complexities of homelessness in contemporary welfare states.

To capture the dynamic nature of homelessness, longitudinal research has enhanced our understanding of the flows of individuals entering and exiting homelessness (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2010; Van Straeten et al., 2016; Scutella et al., 2017). Rather than focusing solely on isolated personal factors, periods of homelessness are interpreted as dynamic processes (Lee et al., 2021), characterised by diverse experiences of housing insecurity. These periods are seen as the outcomes of interactions between individual (micro) and structural (macro) circumstances (O’Sullivan et al., 2023). Longitudinal studies highlight the entry and exit points. People may enter homelessness due to various triggers, such as job loss, family breakdown, domestic violence, eviction or complex needs. Similarly, exiting homelessness is often achieved through access to stable housing, employment, social support, or rehabilitation services. These points are fluid, and individuals may cycle between being housed and unhoused, and between experiencing a sense of home or not. Rather than being a one-time event, homelessness can occur in episodes. Some individuals may experience chronic homelessness (long-term), while others may have transitional (short-term) or episodic homelessness, where they repeatedly lose and regain housing (Culhane et al, 1998). Concerning structural and systemic factors, economic downturns, lack of affordable housing, and inadequate healthcare and social services contribute to the flow of individuals into and out of homelessness. A last insight from longitudinal studies points to the agency and home-making processes of homeless persons (Hoolachan, 2020; Schneider, 2020). Over time, some develop survival strategies, which might either help them eventually exit homelessness or, conversely, make them more entrenched in it (Pleace, O’Sullivan & Johnson, 2021).

In summary, homelessness is a complex, fluctuating condition influenced by a variety of factors that interact over time. Understanding it as a dynamic process implies a variety of research longitudinal research methods.

2.2 On the substantial realisation of rights

One of the core themes of this project is ‘accessibility’. Access to rights and services is crucial for PEH, yet access is a complex notion and has different meanings across disciplines. The concept of ‘access’ increased in popularity alongside the development of the welfare states. With it, the idea of access to services and ‘accessibility’, with reference to the substantial realisation of social and human rights, became fundamental in Western societies (Grymonprez, Roose & Roets, 2017; Grymonprez, 2019).

Historical origins

Following the original post-war constitution of social welfare states, social justice and human rights were pursued through securing the citizenship and civic, political and social rights of citizens. After the atrocities of both world wars, rights were understood as symbolic and peaceful vehicles in social welfare states to mitigate the unacceptable consequences of the industrialised capitalist system (Dewanckel et al., 2022). Starting from a collective recognition of individual frailty, due recognition was given to the substantive realisation of citizens’ right to human flourishing (Dean, 2015), entailing the obligation for welfare states to substantively realise rights as a system of mutual protection. At its core, the welfare state was built on a social contract outlining the mutual responsibilities of the state and its citizens. The social rights of citizens entail that the state provided support and resources, while citizens contributed to collective welfare to guarantee social protection and social security through taxes and social norms (Cantillon, 2022). If one contributes to society, one is allowed to access rights, resources and services.

Welfare state transformations

Since the 1970s, the welfare state shifted towards an ‘enabling’ welfare state, that needed to ‘activate’ citizens rather than to passively grant them access to said rights. Welfare provisions gradually transformed from rights-based entitlements to conditional entitlements, conceptualizing the welfare state as a trampoline rather than a safety net (Cox, 1998). This shift increased the burden on individuals, particularly benefit recipients, who were now required to actively earn their entitlements (De Wilde et al., 2016). Vulnerable groups, lacking necessary resources, faced greater challenges in meeting these requirements, and their non-compliance often resulted in benefit cuts or disqualification. This new "work-fare state" model placed the responsibility for managing social risks on individuals, portraying vulnerability as a result of personal failings (Rose, 1996; Rosanvallon, 2000). This focus on individual responsibility undermined the social contract by shifting state responsibilities onto citizens, jeopardizing the state's role in improving living conditions for the vulnerable (McKeever & Walsh, 2020; Cantillon, 2022).

The substantial realisation of social rights for vulnerable groups, such as people experiencing homelessness (PEH), is particularly challenging. They rely heavily on public services but face numerous barriers, including administrative burdens, lack of a fixed address, and pre-existing vulnerabilities. These barriers create a web of obstacles, exacerbating their exclusion from essential services and support (OECD, 2015; Quilgars & Pleace, 2003). Despite welfare state claims, services remain inaccessible to particular groups, leaving their rights unfulfilled (Eurofound, 2015; Groenez & Nicaise, 2002). This debate in the context of homelessness thus reflects the critical discussions surrounding the availability and substantial realisation of rights to essential services and support, and encompasses a range of issues, including the right to affordable, safe, and adequate housing, as well as access to social assistance and rights.

Social and human rights, citizenship, and denizenship

The complexities of this debate are underscored by the myriad of social and human rights issues intertwined with homelessness. People experiencing homelessness are inherently excluded from society, and are people of whom the access to services and welfare rights was or is restricted or denied. More than the overall access issue, homelessness studies have shown that there are different profiles of PEH who need different benefits and services. People experiencing homelessness for a short term have different needs than those experiencing chronic homelessness; those who reside in shelters may have different needs than those who are temporarily sleeping at a house of a friend or relative. Despite minimum income schemes or other kinds of social benefits in several European countries, they do not always reach their target groups.

In this context, the issue of **non-take-up** of social rights can be situated. Non-take-up (NTU) is a widespread issue across Europe and is an indicator of the failure of the welfare state to provide those in need with the minimum necessary resources. By not reaching their target group, these rights and services miss their objectives to alleviate poverty and social exclusion (Eurofound, 2015; European Commission, 2019). Indeed, when we know that the least advantaged members of society generally rely the most on public services. Multiple issues can collide and exacerbate their living situation, such as financial struggles, health issues, unemployment, amongst others (Kruiter & de Jong, 2009). In social policy research, non-take-up is often considered a state, and studies mainly focus on access to a specific right or a specific benefit. Barriers and facilitators are identified at the micro-, meso- and macro-level, building on the pioneering work of Van Oorschot (1998). The Dewanckel et al (2021) plea for a more dynamic understanding of non-take up and for a research perspective that starts from the lifeworld of those who don't have access.

The concept of access is also strongly intertwined with other concepts such as social rights, **citizenship** and denizenship. It has therefore been argued that the key idea of entitlement to (social) rights is traditionally associated with the concept of 'citizenship', but equally well requires a supplementary concept of 'denizenship' to capture the transformations with reference to post-war social rights (see Bloch, 2008; Isin & Nyers, 2003; Vandevordt & Verschraegen, 2019; Turner, 2016). In our project, we have adopted this conceptual lens to engage in the research activities.

Denizen type 1

The 'denizen type 1' initially referred to a person from a foreign country with a legal right of residence (by virtue of a visa or work permit), but with limited rights to welfare and political participation (Turner, 2016). National welfare states indeed intrinsically imply a territorial logic in which entitlements are based on national identities and 'merits'; the welfare state is built upon 'boundaries because it establishes a principle of distributive justice' (Dean, 2011, p. 19). Only if citizens of a certain nation state are formally entitled to (social) rights, they can claim these rights (see Dean, 2011). It is however of crucial importance to acknowledge that people who cannot claim social rights continue to have human rights (Hermans & Roets, 2020).

The influence of international human rights frameworks over the last century has therefore led to the call for inclusion of non-nationals in welfare programs (Benhabib, 2007). However, rather than inclusion, Nash (2010) points out, this has led to a complication of citizenship by blurring the citizen-non-citizen dichotomy and introducing a proliferation of status groups. This has created new forms of inequality for denizens, including super-citizens, marginal citizens, semi-zens, quasi-citizens, sub-citizens, and un-citizens (Nash, 2009). These categories are particularly established through the creation

of migrant and residence statuses, which depend on factors such as the reason for migration, country of origin, and level of social and economic integration.

Today the homeless population includes a growing number of precarious migrants (Hermans et al., 2020). These migrants are without or with temporary residence status, which does not grant them access to regular welfare services. The presence of precarious migrants in Belgium has gradually increased over the past decades, influenced by the cessation of foreign labour recruitment in the 1970s (Brochmann, 2020), increasingly restrictive migration legislation since the 1980s (Düvell, 2006; Rea & Martiniello, 2003), and rising intra-European mobility, especially from poorer to richer countries. As a result, this population is highly diverse, encompassing a wide range of legal situations, including both third-country and EU nationals.

Denizen type 2

The ‘denizen type 2’ refers to individuals with a formal status of citizens who increasingly risk to end up at the bottom rung of the ladder of citizenship, merely resembling denizens ‘with thin, fragmented and fragile social bonds to the public world’ (Turner, 2016, p. 1). Denizenship Type 2 describes the erosion of social citizenship, where citizens begin to resemble denizens or strangers in their own societies due to neoliberal developments and the retrenchment of welfare provisions. While some minority groups may have been granted ‘formal’ citizenship, their ‘substantive’ citizenship may be fragile on their ‘ability to act as citizens’ due to constraints such as poverty and discrimination (Dewanckel et al., 2021; Warming & Fahnøe, 2017).

In practice, the welfare state inherently reproduces social inequality and disadvantage, which is increasingly the case in market-driven societies that produce precarious forms of citizenship that begin ‘to approximate denizenship’ (Turner, 2016, p. 6). The notion of denizen type 2 thus refers to exclusion, marginalisation, emphasizing the demand for fair and just treatment; and the task of public institutions to engage everyone ‘in the mainstream’ (Clarke, 2004). By accessing rights and services, one indirectly claims to be a member of the society and nation. Hence, it is a claim to be a citizen: to possess rights and the capacity to make legitimate demands on the state. Access to the welfare state, therefore, should be differentiated from accessibility, which means being substantially seen, recognized and treated as a citizen. Accessing benefits services and rights – all by ‘fairly treated’ – that this citizenship entails, and being supported by public agencies in ways that are not oppressive or discriminatory (Clarke, 2004).

2.3 On the substantial realisation of rights through social work practices

Social work practices can support vulnerable groups' challenges in balancing human rights and policy implementation. Recent research highlights the evolving nature of social work practices, emphasising a shift from charity interventions towards rights-based approaches (e.g. Maesele, 2008). These approaches make clear that rights are not rigid structures but rather yet socially and politically built constructions (Vandekinderen et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, social and human rights remain to be interpreted and implemented, which is one of social workers' core tasks. Realising rights goes beyond the individual right claimant, but in fact refers to a solidaristic approach to citizenship (Roets, Dean, & De Bie, 2019). Indeed, the citizen is perceived as a rational and autonomous subject who enters a ‘social contract’ with the state informed by principles of social protection and social security, which guarantees their rights in exchange for them meeting the conditions and obligations (Dean, 2015).

Social work plays a crucial role then in shaping society so that human and social rights and social justice can be realised. However, research has repeatedly shown that social work in itself is a dynamic, ongoing process rather than a product-oriented practice. There is a certain complexity and unpredictability in social work interventions, and social workers are increasingly encouraged to adopt a flexible approach to meet the specific needs and circumstances of each client (Vandekinderen et al., 2019), whilst they need to guard who is not in need and detect fraud cases. All of this makes clear that social workers face and produce numerous pressures and challenges, including the increasing individualisation of social issues, conditionality, administrative burdens, resource scarcity and staff shortage. Social work is a front-row witness of the widening discrepancy between the formal recognition of social and human rights, and how these rights are substantially realised in practice (Dewanckel et al., 2022), and finds itself enmeshed in critical complexities and dilemmas associated with a welfare state stringently based on the contributory rights of citizens (Turner, 2016).

In this context, research on street-level bureaucracy has been a great inspiration and foundation for the research project to build upon. This strand of literature also focuses on social work interventions by looking into discretion and interprofessional dynamics. Recent research has revived interest in Lipsky's street-level bureaucracy notion across social policy and social work (Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018). Social work, however, has a relatively autonomous public mandate in the welfare state to shape and pursue a social justice orientation (Lorenz, 2008; Kessler, 2009). The notion of social workers as 'applied social policy makers' is meaningful in this context. It has been associated with the strategies of professional discretion of social work (see Dubois, 2010). Professional discretion can be situated at the street level in its relationship with social policy, and refers to the political and politicising nature of social work practice, whilst 'making use of discretionary spaces and powers, social workers negotiate between policy goals and service users' needs, interpret and adapt policies to concrete individual situations' (Nothdurfter and Hermans, 2018, p. 301).

It is specifically interesting when examining the gap between policy design and implementation, and when examining practices on the local level – so how local actors deal with implementing supralocal policies, how they make use of their discretionary space, and the strategies they use to support vulnerable groups in accessing their entitlements. Outreach work plays a key role here as well, as a form of practice of accessibility, and can be linked with the access debate because “the more complex connections people have with society and social work practices, with often conflicting problem definitions and associated questions of power and self-determination” (Maesele, 2012, p. 56).

Beyond studying social work practices through the lens of street-level bureaucrats, it is also crucial to study the experience of vulnerable groups in accessing and making use of these practices. While fundamental rights provide a foundation for social work, vulnerable persons can experience intensified vulnerabilities and administrative burdens when accessing social services (Numans et al, 2023).

2.4 Objectives of this study

In this study, we contribute to this state-of-the-art research through a mixed-methods approach. We formulate three research objectives, based on this current level of knowledge. First, we aim to gain an in-depth understanding of the pathways of PEH, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Second, we investigate the role of social work and local social policies, and how these affect PEH's trajectories. A final overarching objective is to broaden the understanding of the access to rights for PEH and the access barriers they face.

Table 1. Overview of objectives and methods

Objectives	Study ²	Methods
1. In-depth understanding of the pathways of PEH in Belgium	Study 1, study 3, study 4, study 5	Quantitative and qualitative methods
2. The role of social work and local social policies	Study 2, study 5, study 6	Qualitative methods
3. Access to rights and access barriers for PEH	All studies	Quantitative and qualitative methods

² See Methodology section

3. METHODOLOGY

This project conducted a mixed-method approach and consists of six studies, each with their own data collection and analysis.

3.1. Study 1: Quantitative longitudinal study based on administrative data

In a first study, we studied homelessness on a quantitative basis. We analysed administrative data of the Datawarehouse Labour Market and Social Protection (DWH LM&SP) of the Crossroads Bank of Social Security (CBSS). The centralized Datawarehouse aggregates data from various social sector agencies in Belgium, encompassing individual and household information over time. This includes social security benefits, earnings, and migration backgrounds from other public institutions. By linking street addresses from local welfare agencies with the National Register and employing pseudonymized identity codes, a comprehensive dataset was generated for individuals with a reference address between 2003 and 2018. As we will discuss further, from this dataset, we selected 51,126 individuals who had a reference address at a local welfare agency between 2010 and 2018, for durations ranging from one to nine years. To study recurrence, information from prior spells (starting from 2003) was included.

This administrative dataset includes various characteristics, including gender (male, female), age (<18, 18-27, 28-42, 43-57, 58+), migration background (Belgian, EU, non-EU, unknown), household type (single, couple without or with children, collective household, unknown), number of children (0 to 3 or more), degree of urbanization (urban, rural, or unknown), region (Flemish, Walloon, or Brussels), employment status (employed, unemployed, on social benefits, other/unknown), social assistance status (yes or no), registration status (registered in the national register, not registered, or registered in the waiting- or RAD-register), amongst many others.

Our quantitative data was limited in three ways. First, the data only covers beneficiaries over a one-year span, limiting the ability to track detailed transitions or multiple homeless spells within a year. Consequently, someone with a reference address from December 2017 to February 2018 is considered homeless for two years, as month-specific data is unavailable. Second, the study population represents only a fraction of Belgium's homeless population. Many homeless individuals have residential addresses or face barriers in claiming a reference address (Robben et al., 2023). Data comparison with public statistics is challenging, as the Federal Public Planning Service for Social Integration primarily focuses on those with a reference address who also receive social assistance. In contrast, this study examines all individuals with a reference address, including family members, regardless of their social assistance status. Lastly, while the study views homelessness as a result of the interplay between individual behaviour and socio-economic environment, structural variables could not be included due to data limitations.

3.2 Study 2: Qualitative study into the access to the reference address

While waiting for the delivery of administrative data, we studied one specific administrative indicator of homelessness qualitatively: individuals with a reference address at a Public Centre for Social Welfare (PCSW). Our qualitative analysis consisted of semi-structured interviews with professionals from 2021 to 2023, both in Belgium and internationally. In a second step, we reached out to a researcher who studied administratively invisible groups and the reference address in Brussels, and collaborated with her to write one paper³. In a third step, we reached out to Dutch researchers to cross-nationally study the role of an alternative address for people experiencing homelessness.

³ Robben, Laure-lise, Pierre, Adèle, Hermans, Koen (2023). 'Without an address, you do not exist': the administrative invisibility of people experiencing homelessness in Belgium. *Citizenship Studies*, 27(5), 566-583.

Overall, we made use of purposive and snowball sampling techniques and held interviews with 71 professionals: 35 in Belgium, 26 in the Netherlands, and 10 international professionals. These professionals were working on different policy levels (federal, regional, local) in different cities across Belgium, and are desk clerks in municipalities, coordinators or social workers at poverty organisations, advocacy organisations, other NGOs, shelters, federation of homeless services, associations of municipalities, researchers or social workers at Public Centres for Social Welfare, amongst others. Topics that were covered include the reference address (and alternative addresses) and their policy design, implementation, bureaucratic procedures, application process, eligibility criteria, the actors involved, the repercussions of not being registered, potential stigma, discrimination and access issues.

3.3 Study 3: Qualitative study into the trajectories of precarious migrants experiencing homelessness and the role of outreach social work in Ghent

This study investigated the intersection between homelessness and denizenship, understood as the differentiated attribution of citizenship rights to migrants. More specifically, the study examined homelessness among precarious migrants in Ghent, defined as those who lack formal access to social security, social housing, and welfare services due to their lack of residence status, from two distinct perspectives. First, it explored the practices of outreach social workers (OSWs) in their interactions with these migrants, using the concept of precarity (Butler, 2004; 2009) and social work as a human rights profession (Hermans & Roets, 2020) to discover the strategies that state-employed outreach social workers employ to realise the human rights of this population. Second, it investigated the trajectories and experiences of homeless denizens dispersed throughout the city. In this venture, the concepts of ‘everyday resistance’ (Bayat, 1997; De Certeau, 1984; Papadopoulos et al., 2008) and ‘homemaking’ (Bocagni et al., 2020) were used to discover how precarious migrants make ‘home’ in a situation of homelessness, and what the meaning is of this ‘home’. Thirdly, a collaborative research effort resulted in the production of three ‘zines’. These small, self-published booklets combine photographs with text to represent the fragmentary narratives of the research participants.

The fieldwork for this study was conducted over three distinct periods: January to August 2021, May to August 2022, and March to July 2023. The research employed semi-structured interviews and (participant) observations with social workers and homeless denizens.

This study involved approximately 66 hours of participant observation, where the PI walked alongside professionals and volunteers during their interactions with homeless denizens. These professionals were part of the Outreach Service (Community Stewards or Street Work) and various grassroots initiatives. Additionally, the researcher conducted approximately 120 hours of participant observation interacting directly with denizens dispersed across several city locations. The participants included single men from Bulgaria (n=2), Romania (n=1), Slovakia (n=1), Morocco (n=1), Tunisia (n=2), and Afghanistan (n=2), single women from Afghanistan (n=1) and Nigeria (n=1), and couples from Romania (n=2). In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with professional social workers (n=8) from 2 city services and 1 civil society organization, professional coordinators (n=2) from 1 civil society organization, volunteer coordinators (n=7) from 5 civil society organizations, and policymakers (n=2) from the local government.

3.4 Study 4: Qualitative longitudinal study into the trajectories of women experiencing homelessness

This study takes on a sociological perspective on social disaffiliation, in which the trajectories of individuals are perceived as a succession of experiences of rupture, gradually leading to the loss of housing. For Castel (1995), social disaffiliation results from 'the impossibility of carving out a stable place for oneself in the dominant forms of work organisation and in the recognised modes of community belonging'. Thus, the concept reflects a process of an individual's passage from social integration to exclusion (Castel, 1995). Experiences include marital breakdown, job loss, health issues, addiction, imprisonment, amongst others (Paugam and Clemençon, 2003). To date, this etiological reading (Becker, 1985: 45) of trajectories is not entirely satisfactory for those seeking to understand what is at stake in the trajectories of women, heads of single-parent families, and without a "home". Therefore, the purpose of this study is to move beyond statistics to specific cases, in order to "restore the complexity of social reality" (Perrin-Heredia, 2009) and bring to light the social forces related to these "rupture" effects.

This study is based on semi-structured interviews with 22 women experiencing housing difficulties over a period of two and a half years (between November 2020 and May 2023). Eleven of the 22 respondents were recruited through a Brussels-based association advocating for women's housing rights. Prior to the fieldwork, the researcher actively participated in the association's meetings and various collective events, which allowed her to understand better the social dynamics these women in housing difficulties had to endure throughout their journeys. The other six women were met through a PCSW in the Brussels Capital Region, in the municipality in which the second phase of the research took place. These six women were met via social workers who were assisting them in their search to find housing.

Interviews with a segment of these 22 respondents were repeated, between two and four times. This made it possible to track the evolution of their trajectory over a medium time frame of 2,5 years, and observe more precisely the various alternatives available to women in accessing housing. To make this very concrete, this study paints a detailed picture of the housing trajectory of a woman named Emma⁴, marked by periods of homeless spells. Although this analysis focuses on an individual trajectory, the aim is neither to highlight the "uniqueness" of this journey nor its "representativeness," but rather to draw from the singular case the general mechanisms at play in order to "make intelligible" other similar trajectories (Fossé-Polliak, 1990). The aim, therefore, is to move beyond the paradigm of "rupture" and to uncover the social logics at work in the trajectories of women experiencing homelessness.

3.5 Study 5: The Post-Mobile Living Project in Ghent

This study focused on a temporary government intervention called the Post-Mobile Living Project, which took place in Ghent from November 2020 to June 2023. The project, initiated in response to the removal of informal settlements across the city, offered container housing where individuals could live for up to three years while receiving social assistance and participating in a mandatory integration program. Its goal was to transition participants into stable housing, education, employment, and social integration. Various social work actors, including outreach social workers, other city services, and a regional civil society partner, were involved. The study explored the perspectives of local social policymakers, social work actors, and residents and their family members to uncover the underlying ontological assumptions (Ornellas et al., 2018) in social work policy and practice. The research also

⁴ The first name has been changed.

involved drafting a report that combined CAIMeR theory (Blom & Morén, 2010) with responsive evaluation (Abma, 2006) to conduct a qualitative analysis after the project's conclusion.

The case study was selected for its focus on how local social policies impact migrant homelessness and contribute to the destruction of informal settlements under the guise of public nuisance management, an issue of growing concern in Europe. It highlights the intersection of EU migration and local responses, revealing tensions between the right to movement and restrictive housing policies. It also examines the role of social work as a mediator, balancing the need to enforce policy and advocate for the rights of precarious migrants.

For this study, approximately 70 hours were spent observing professionals as they interacted with residents of this project. These professionals comprised of social work actors involved in the project, including Caritas Flanders, the Community Stewards, Jobteam, and the Education Centre. Alongside the observation, approximately 155 hours were spent on participant observations with the project's residents, including: single men from Slovakia (n=1), Bulgaria (n=1), Romania (n=1) and families from Romania (n=11). Additional observations were carried out during a short field visit of one week to Răcășdia, Romania. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with policymakers (n=2), professional coordinators (n=4), professional social workers (n=7), and teachers (n=2), as well as interviews with residents (n=12), with a Romanian interpreter.

3.6 Study 6: The role of the housing service in the PCSWs

This sixth study is based on an ethnographic study that lasted a total of 12 months within the "housing service" of a Brussels PCSW, between November 2021 and December 2023. The study was conducted in four phases (November-December 2021; February-April 2022; March-May 2023; September-December 2024) over a period of 25 months (between November 2021 and December 2023). This relatively long presence within the PCSW allowed the researcher to observe over 54 consultations during which social workers met with users facing housing difficulties or at risk of losing their housing. It provided an opportunity to learn more about the trajectories of those seeking support in finding or maintaining housing when a conflict arose with their landlord.

This ethnographic work also offered a chance to observe the practices of social workers, who are often forced to "improvise" to individually support people losing their housing, despite the severe lack of housing solutions and the ongoing housing crisis in Brussels (Dessouroux et al., 2016; Romainville 2015; OCD, 2024). To deepen the understanding of how this "housing crisis" impacts social work, we conducted 44 semi-structured interviews with social workers (some of whom were interviewed multiple times over the 25-month period) and administrative staff engaged in this service. Informal conversations and the researcher's presence in the offices allowed for almost daily interactions over a relatively long period with the social workers, granting access to their "private world" (Schwartz, 1990), their views on social work, and their aspirations for the future.

The materials collected during this fieldwork thus allow for a comparison of the housing trajectories of PCSW users and the practices and perceptions of social workers. The 25-month presence within the service also made it possible to study, beyond user-social worker interactions, the effects of management policies and leadership changes on PCSW staff.

4. SCIENTIFIC RESULTS

4.1 Homelessness as a dynamic process: insights from quantitative and qualitative studies

4.1.1 Insights from the quantitative analysis

Our first study consisted of a **quantitative analysis** of a new longitudinal dataset of PEH in Belgium (see *methodology* for more detailed information)⁵. We studied one indicator of homelessness, i.e. individuals with a reference address at a PCSW as registered in the National Register. Following the work of Kuhn and Culhane (1998), we analysed patterns in the duration and recurrence of homelessness for these individuals between 2010 and 2018. Whereas Kuhn and Culhane distinguished between transitional (or short-term), episodic (or recurrent) and chronic (or long-term) homelessness, their analysis was limited because they only focus on the duration of individuals staying in shelters and whether they readmit in these institutions. Their research has shown that the vast majority of ‘shelter stayers’ do so temporarily (Culhane et al, 1994; Kuhn and Culhane, 1998) and differ in characteristics and service needs compared to individuals facing chronic homelessness. Chronic homelessness certainly exists among this group, yet is far less common than a single, brief spell of homelessness (Culhane et al, 2007; Kuhn & Culhane, 1998). This study was replicated in Denmark by Benjaminen and Andrade (2016) and showed similar patterns in the duration of homelessness. Our analysis contributes to this literature, because our target group is broader. Glancing at the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS), people with a reference address can be found in either one of the four distinct ETHOS categories (i.e. rooflessness, house-lessness, insecure housing and inadequate housing).

Our dataset contains 51,121 individuals facing homelessness between 2010 and 2018; with an average of 2.4 years in their homeless spell. We distinguish between ‘first-timers’ (36%) who entered homelessness for the first (and only, or at least in our dataset) time for one year; ‘re-enterers’ (7.2%); ‘chronic homelessness’ (46.8%) and ‘extremely chronic homelessness’ (10.0%). In contrast with prior research, the chronic cluster is the largest group, with an average of 2.5 years facing a homeless spell (see Table 2).

Table 2. Four clusters of PEH and their mean total duration (Source: Own calculations on CBSS, 2023).

	First-timers	Re-enterers	Chronic homelessness	Extremely chronic homelessness
Total (n)	18 390	3678	23 928	5130
Total (%)	36.0	7.2	46.8	10.0
Mean total duration homeless spells (in years)	1	4.1	2.5	6.5

⁵ This study titled “Homelessness duration and recurrence in Belgium”, written by Laure-lise Robben & Koen Hermans, is submitted in an international peer-reviewed journal, and currently under review.

The complexity of chronic homelessness is additionally highlighted by looking separately at a group who faced a subsequent homeless spell for five years or longer, which we termed as the ‘extremely chronic’ cluster. The latter group is characterised by a significant number of ‘unknowns’ and unregistered individuals who clearly are administratively excluded (see Robben, Pierre & Hermans, 2023), indicating the difficulty in reaching this group and the need for specific intervention strategies. Regarding the profiles, we observed that an older age was associated with longer spells, while younger age correlated with shorter durations. First-timers were predominantly females and families with children, aligning with previous research suggesting that women with children are more likely to quickly exit homelessness services and secure stable housing (Morrin & O’Donoghue Hynes, 2018). Interestingly, the chronic cluster included a significant number of young families, indicating a need for family-oriented services. Although re-enterers constituted the smallest cluster (7.2%), they experienced an average homelessness duration of 4.4 years and shared characteristics with the extremely chronic cluster, being typically older, male, and single. Both clusters require proactive interventions tailored to the dynamics of re-entering or prolonged homelessness.

This study also reflected on the reference address and its effectiveness as a policy measure in supporting PEH (see also further). Despite being intended as a short-term measure, our analysis suggests the need for long-term support due to the persistent and complex nature of their situations. We advocate for extending the usage and accessibility of support measures to provide ongoing assistance and prevent administrative exclusion for those experiencing chronic homelessness⁶.

4.1.2 Qualitative insights

Besides a quantitative view on the profiles and trajectories, we also examined the trajectories of individuals by means of qualitative methods.

Firstly, by exploring the trajectories of precarious migrants experiencing homelessness over the course of three years, we were able to gain insights into their perspectives on homelessness, policies and practices affecting them, and how they construct a sense of ‘home’ both materially and symbolically despite their homelessness. We found ‘denizen homelessness’ to be a dynamic process characterized by highly diverse trajectories and shifting aspirations. Rather than passively ‘experiencing’ homelessness, these migrants continuously adapted their strategies to a rapidly changing and unpredictable environment shaped by government decisions, interactions with other denizens and citizens in their immediate surroundings, and their evolving personal goals. These aspirations evolved as their conditions changed and in connection with complex transnational family dynamics. They carefully weighed their (limited) options and chose what they considered best for themselves or their families. In fact, both studies reveal that they primarily sought comfort, safety, and opportunities to improve their lives and those of their families. As part of Study 3, we explored how precarious migrants engaged in complex homemaking practices, considering the search for ‘home’ part of an ongoing process that is never complete (Boccagni et al., 2020; Baxter & Brickell, 2014). Their homemaking involved creating and occupying diverse domestic spaces and navigating intricate dimensions of time and place. Through these practices, they became ‘denizen rebels’, resisting their criminalization and asserting their presence in the city. Simultaneously, the study revealed their need for care and the crucial relationships some had with outreach social workers, doctors, and charities, on whom they depended for survival. Shaped by a difficult upbringing and/or a life on the move in the margins, many faced

⁶ This paper is currently in the peer-review process.

severe mental and physical health challenges.⁷ Additionally, in Study 5, we used the CAIMeR theory (Blom & Morén, 2010) and responsive evaluation (Abma, 2006) to examine the experiences of Intra-European migrant residents and their families involved in the post-mobile intervention, alongside other stakeholders, through a qualitative evaluation of the project. It was found that they had differing opinions on their perceived 'homelessness' before the project, when they were living in informal settlements. Additionally, most located 'home', at least partially, elsewhere. The resident's perceptions of the government project varied widely, shaped by their subjective experience of its material conditions, social assistance, and conditional framework. These factors influenced their decisions to remain in or leave the project. Those who left either went to another country, found housing, entered other temporary accommodation projects, or turned to squatting or sleeping in cars as their primary dwelling.⁸ Both studies revealed that the homemaking efforts of precarious migrants were characterized by a form of permanent impermanence—whether by choice, by force, or somewhere in between—requiring significant emotional and physical labour. This process revealed ad-hoc decision making but also created significant stress, often clashing with the conditions and expectations of integration efforts or other aspirations people held. In this sense, their 'homelessness' gains significance as it refers to the high levels of uncertainty and unpredictability that define their trajectories.

Secondly, in Study 4, we focus on an in-depth exploration of the residential trajectory of a single mother called Lieve. Although the researcher focuses on a single trajectory, she was able to analyse and understand it thanks to numerous meetings and interviews with 21 other women who had experienced the same type of situation. It is in this context that Lieve's story takes on its full meaning, alongside these other stories. Neither a 'representative' figure nor an 'exemplar' of women's homelessness, Lieve's story and the meticulous study of her development make it possible to identify a series of structural factors in women's homelessness, thus echoing a much wider range of survey material (in total, 22 in-depth interviews were conducted with single mothers experiencing homelessness or poor housing). Lieve moved seventeen times over the course of seventeen years. By mapping risk events such as the breakup and the accident she experienced, we bring out the social logics in her homelessness spell, and further aim to identify patterns across spells of different case studies. In this specific case, three social dynamics can be identified: intra-family violence, female material insecurity and the inadequacy of housing policies to the needs and rights of women. All these angles intervene in the analysis of chronic homeless spells, and highlight the strategies of PEH to escape them, alongside the (lack of) policy interventions to prevent or end their spells⁹.

4.2 Main insights on the substantial realisation of rights

The homeless population is characterized as heterogenous and super-diverse, and so access as such can be understood as stages on a continuum (see also de Jong & Rizvi, 2009) in which some persons do not have access for one specific service whilst others find almost all rights and services to be out of their reach. Access to fundamental rights of PEH goes beyond the focus on the right to housing. In fact, these fundamental rights were found to be strongly interconnected. This project gains a better understanding

⁷ These findings are included in an article submitted to an international peer-reviewed journal, and currently under review, as: Samyn, S., Hermans, K., & Roets, G. (2024). The denizen rebel: uncovering the everyday resistance of homeless denizens through homemaking practices.

⁸ These findings are included in a research report as: Samyn, S., Roets, G., & Hermans, K. (2023). *A qualitative and responsive analysis of the post-mobile living project in Ghent*. Ghent University.

⁹ These findings are part of a Chapter in Noémie Emmanuel's PhD dissertation, which is expected to be completed in the first part of 2025..

of mechanisms that impede access to rights and services for people experiencing homelessness, as well as programs or innovative solutions that may have (tried to) improve it. Welfare conditionality, which requires recipients to meet certain behavioural conditions to access rights, disproportionately affects vulnerable groups, such as ethnic minorities, individuals with disabilities and lone parents (Reeves & Loopstra, 2017), and people experiencing homelessness, as this project shows. Below, we briefly address how the access debate manifests itself in the different studies.

Study 3 focuses on conditions of accessibility of housing for precarious migrants and their resistance practices that they deploy to achieve housing. The ‘accessibility’ debate is interesting when looking into the cross-section of outreach work, social work, and availability of services for precarious migrants, such as in our case study in Ghent. Migrants’ experiences with limited social protection underscores how exclusionary strategies, often based on principles of (non-)citizenship, contrast with rights-based approaches. Citizenship is mainly interpreted as ‘national citizenship’, and access has therefore been centred on who is to be included in the nation, and on which terms this nation imposes. However, the material control and symbolic ownership of such ‘national’ spaces has become increasingly complex as borders are changed, rendered reconstructed and permeable. People -within and outside- of these borders demand access to the privileges that this nation’s membership entails (Clarke, 2004). Yet, those that are excluded from ‘access’ are not just migrants, but also persons who have suddenly found themselves outside of the symbolic space because of their living situation.

It is, therefore, not only about those who are ‘spatially’ excluded, but also those who find themselves ‘socially excluded’. In recent years, a new ‘localism’ (Clarke, 2004; Kazepov et al., 2022) due to decentralisation reforms gave more mandates to localities and made them the focal points for governing local citizens. The different axes of place, space and access come together in this study, in which the local policy implementation is investigated. As was mentioned in Chapter 2, the homeless population consists of an increasing number of precarious migrants (Hermans et al., 2020), a highly diverse group encompassing a wide range of legal situations including both third-country and EU nationals. What they share is a lack of registration in either the alien or citizen registry, resulting in a lack of access to formal social rights linked to social housing or the services and benefits provided by the PCSW. The findings in Studies 3 and 5 identified three primary local policy responses to the presence of precarious migrants within the homeless population: the criminalization of homelessness, the provision of humanitarian assistance, and the instrumentalization of social work.

Study 4 also elaborated on the limits to access that people experiencing homelessness face. In this paper, a case study is conducted on the eviction process of an individual, Mr. Diallo¹⁰, by identifying the practices and activities necessary for this tenant, facing housing vulnerability, to remain in his home. By navigating through his professional and private life, this study allows for a better understanding of the role of the various actors involved and the efforts made by the tenant to obtain and maintain access to his rights, particularly his right to housing.

The first part of the fourth study focuses on a detailed analysis of the different stages of the institutional career (Becker, 1985) of Mr. Diallo, a seasonal worker from Guinea, who arrived in Belgium eleven years ago. When the researcher meets him, he is being sued by his landlord for three months of unpaid rent. In the first part of the paper, the researcher proposes a meticulous study of the judicial eviction process (eleven semi-structured interviews conducted with Mr. Diallo, his social workers, the Judge of

¹⁰ The name has been changed.

the Peace Court, ethnographic observation during court hearings, analysis of administrative documents). The study of this trajectory allows us to identify:

- (1) The indispensable investment shown by Mr. Diallo to engage with institutions and assert his rights: numerous and regular contacts with social workers; the burdensome administrative procedures; seeking assistance from different housing sectors (housing services of the PCSW, Regional Housing Inspection Department, association fighting against housing unfitness); administrative management of documents and proof of the unfitness of his housing.
- (2) His perception of the lengthy judicial procedure in which he is involved, the difficulty in directly contacting his pro bono lawyer, and understanding the workings of such procedures;
- (3) The complexity of Mr. Diallo's housing trajectory and the multiple causes that could explain his difficulty in paying rent: interruption of income, loss of his residence permit, the unfitness of his housing.

Each of these three elements is put into perspective with the practices and representations of the various actors (social workers, Judge of the Peace Court) who crossed Mr. Diallo's path during his journey and who were interviewed. This approach allows us to learn more about this configuration of actors. The second part of the chapter offers a reflection on the configuration (Elias, 1993) of actors within which Mr. Diallo operates. Closely following his trajectory of poor housing, studying in detail the judicial process and the role of the different involved actors, allows us to learn more about this specific segment of the housing market intended for poor tenants. This helps identifying some of its characteristics by focusing on three dynamics running through it:

- (1) The opposing logics of social workers: the social worker from the PCSW housing service opens Mr. Diallo's case as one of rent debt. Meanwhile, the social worker from the "Living Together" association views Mr. Diallo's case as a housing unfitness problem. Mr. Diallo's complex history is thus simplified by a "single-cause" interpretation (debt or unfitness). Depending on how they interpret the tenant's situation, social workers use different tools and mechanisms to maintain housing but fail to grasp the complexity of his situation. This simplified interpretation is the first obstacle to the tenant's access to the right to housing.
- (2) The landlord's role in Mr. Diallo's trajectory: a thorough study of this configuration allows us to understand the role played by the landlord in Mr. Diallo's trajectory. By following this path, we see that the landlord develops a certain know-how and manages to tap into services intended for poor tenants to assert his property rights. In turn, social workers develop an ambiguous relationship with this landlord, well-known to their service. For example, Mrs. Gron takes an ambiguous view of the landlord's activities because, although he rents housing on the verge of unfitness, it must be recognized that he "does not discriminate." These housing units allow poor and foreign tenants to avoid homelessness but keep them in an ultra-precarious segment of the housing market. This represents the second obstacle to full access to the right to housing.
- (3) The inequalities in access to resources within the sector to assert one's rights: throughout the analysis, we discover that the landlord develops a deep knowledge of institutions (PCSW, Judge of the Peace Court, Housing Service) and individuals (the social workers in these institutions) that he can turn to to facilitate his progress in the judicial process. While

the landlord benefits from status and skills, Mr. Diallo, on the other hand, must contend with forces of anonymity, forgetfulness, distancing, and even silencing. This is not due to the social workers or the lawyer who assists Mr. Diallo but, as we illustrate in the paper, to a system under strain: the social work sector, like free legal aid, can only keep beneficiaries at a certain distance (here the lawyer), translate the requests of rights-holders into files to be handled, share the management of a case between multiple actors, “subcontract” (here the social worker and lawyer), and resolve a case that has burdened the tenant for over three years in “not even five minutes.” These strategies of distancing and translation are ways to cope with an ever-growing workload, with ever-decreasing resources, even if it means forgetting the elements provided and asking for them again, anonymizing the rights-holders, or silencing their stories and desires. This strained sector represents the third obstacle we identified in the access to the right to housing for poor tenants.

In Study 2, the accessibility debate becomes very concrete by examining – both empirically and theoretically - the role of being registered, and having a fixed address, to access welfare provision. To date, civil registration in Belgium is a minimum prerequisite to gain access to social rights and services. In its absence, “one does not exist” because one cannot fully participate in economic, civil and political society (Prescott, 2015). Consequently, a civil registry has become, besides a source of information, an instrument for inclusion and exclusion (Peeters & Widlak, 2018). However, “invisible” or “hidden” persons, such as persons experiencing homelessness (PEH), prove to be a difficult fit for the criteria of the registry (Glasser et al., 2014) and are not officially registered. This is problematic, because being administratively excluded induces the exclusion from social rights and services (Peeters & Widlak, 2018). Specifically, for PEH, losing one’s permanent address leads to the vicious cycle that has come to be known as the “Postal Paradox”: having no address keeps PEH homeless because access to social rights and services is restricted (Byrne, 2018).

Several welfare states provide an alternative administrative address for PEH to try and overcome said paradox. We investigated the reference address at a local welfare agency in Belgium, specifically designed for homeless persons, both from a non-take-up (NTU) and administrative burdens (AB) framework. Overall, the question asked is: ‘If it was designed to include these homeless persons, does it succeed in doing so?’. We shed light on the responsibilities on different policy levels (such as the policy design, administration, and client level), and found a myriad of barriers influencing homeless persons’ access to the reference address. In line with prior knowledge, the homelessness definition was subject to many disputes (such as Sullivan, 2022; Pleace and Hermans (2020), the entitlement and eligibility criteria were difficult to comply with due to additional (unlawful) conditions that were imposed based on recipients’ behaviour, such as the willingness to work, to look for housing, and so on. Due to the presence of these factors influencing the non-take-up¹¹ and administrative burdens¹² that claimants can experience, the reference address as such can reflect and reinforce administrative (and therefore social) exclusion, due to their punitive, disproportionate consequences when not complying (i.e. administrative deletion), their subjection to interprofessional (often arbitrary) variation and potential stigmatisation and discrimination.

¹¹ This study was published with the following reference: Robben, L. L., Roets, G., Wagener, M., Van Lancker, W., & Hermans, K. (2023). Including the most excluded? A qualitative study on the address registration for people experiencing homelessness in Belgium. *Administration & Society*, 55(6), 1093-1117.

¹² This study was published: Robben, L. L., Peeters, R., & Widlak, A. (2024). Burdens on the gateway to the state: Administrative burdens in the registration of people experiencing homelessness in Belgium and the Netherlands. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 43(3), 780-803.

Moreover, we investigated the interconnectedness of access (through registration) with the concept of (non-)citizenship and denizenship¹³. By investigating the concepts of a domicile-based and local citizenship, they highlighted that one's domicile in a particular municipality determines one's eligibility and therefore one's citizenship status. Yet, a study by Kostakopoulou (2008) addressed the tension between the domicile principle and the territorial nature, and the fact that individuals – certainly those experiencing homelessness – are increasingly mobile and non-committal to one particular locality. In this way, granting or refusing claimants a reference address in a municipality became a tool for in- or exclusion, or citizenship/non-citizenship. Certainly when implementing conditional welfare, and the possibility of being administratively deleted if they do not comply, this led Robben, Pierre & Hermans (2023) to argue that homeless persons are treated as non-citizens or denizens (Turner, 2016), making it difficult for them to access rights and services, exacerbating their already precarious living situation.

Even though this project operates within a diversity of theoretical frameworks that each of the studies used, we offer a multifaceted understanding of homelessness as a complex social issue. Initially operating within their own theoretical paradigms, the intersection of theory and data was crucial to gain insights into the nuances of homelessness, but also into the effectiveness of welfare systems to address this issue. Despite this diversity of approaches, a common ground can be found when it comes to the 'access' debate.

4.3 Main insights in the social work policy and practice

As the responsibility for dealing with poverty and homelessness has increasingly decentralized to the local level in Belgium, this prompts a critical inquiry regarding the (potential) role of (local) social policy and social work in dealing with homelessness within a certain jurisdiction. As part of this research project, we conducted qualitative inquiries into three concrete practices in Brussels and Ghent: the housing service of the PCSW in Brussels (study 6), outreach social work in Ghent (study 3), and the post-mobile living project in Ghent (study 5). Through ethnographic methods, combining observations and interviews, we gained in-depth knowledge about how these policies and practices are trying to address different aspects of homelessness.

Collectively, the studies emphasize the need for systemic solutions that transcend immediate interventions, acknowledging the dynamics of the private housing market, (circular) migration and the structural nature of poverty and marginalization. Social workers, grappling with complex and often contradictory demands, play a crucial role as intermediaries. Still, meaningful change requires broader shifts in policy and societal norms towards equity and inclusion of marginalized communities. Although shaped by their respective local contexts, these case studies are exemplary of social policy and social work practices in other urban realities in Belgium.

On the role of social work practices in securing housing in Brussels

Study 6 aimed to investigate the impact of the housing "crisis" on social work in Brussels. Drawing from a two-year ethnographic inquiry (Weber, 2009) within a so-called "housing service" of a Brussels PCSW, we examined the practices of social workers supporting households facing rental debt and/or eviction. The primary objective for social workers in this service is to help these individuals remaining in their housing. Employing Goffman's theory (*Interaction Ritual*, 1967), we analysed how these objectives influence social work and the provided support. Our focus was on interview situations where

¹³ This study was published with the following reference: Robben, Pierre & Hermans (2023). 'Without an address, you do not exist': the administrative invisibility of people experiencing homelessness in Belgium. *Citizenship Studies*, 27(5), 566-583.

social workers engaged with households experiencing rental debt issues with private landlords. In a first step we identified the specific types of labour involved in the practices of social workers during these interviews with clients facing eviction:

(1) The investigative labour:

During the interview, the social workers aim to collect the user's story and comprehend the circumstances leading to their rental debt. To achieve this, the social worker assesses the user's budget by inquiring about their expenses and probing into the event or "accident" that resulted in the current debt. Additionally, they collect various evidence and administrative documents that elucidate the user's situation.

(2) The negotiation labour:

After identifying the cause of the debt, the social worker acts based on the situation. This may involve reaching out to the private landlord or bailiffs to negotiate a repayment plan, request a postponement of a hearing, or prevent eviction. In this process, the social worker utilizes various social, economic, or legal arguments to ensure the beneficiary remains in their accommodation.

(3) The moral labour:

Within the structured interview framework, social workers also use the opportunity to provide recommendations to users on how to become "responsible tenants". This moral guidance covers aspects of budget management (such as prioritizing rent payments over other expenses and paying on time) as well as maintaining the accommodation (including hygiene rules) and addressing unsanitary conditions.

(4) The emotional labour :

People suffering from inadequate housing also experience mental health problems, whether linked to their involvement in eviction proceedings, their precarious living conditions and/or other factors independent of their social condition. The meeting with the social worker is the moment when they can express different emotions such as fear, apprehension or despair. Social workers are, therefore, regularly called upon to respond to these emotions, to reassure beneficiaries and even "coach them". One social worker, for example, explains that her visits are often an opportunity to 'motivate people to want to get out of their situation'.

As a result, social workers find themselves interacting on a daily basis with a wide range of different actors: people with inadequate housing, private landlords, social workers from the voluntary sector, Judge of the Peace Court and lawyers. We found that in the practices of social workers in the PCSW, various intersecting logics emerge, which can be contradictory, particularly as they are associated with different fields: the social, moral, economic, and sometimes legal field. In the second part of our study, we analysed the implications of this situation on the practice of the social workers we encountered, as well as the strategies they employ to reconcile these different fields in their interactions with users, their relationships within the institution, and their professional identity as social workers (Avril et al., 2010 ; Serre, 2009). The main findings reveal that:

- (1) Social workers experience competition with their clients.
- (2) Social workers face high levels of stress and emotional burden, sometimes leading to frequent or prolonged sick leave.
- (3) There is a significant prevalence of teleworking, administrative tasks, writing workload, and referrals to other departments.

Understanding these practices and representations is only possible if they are studied in the wider context of working conditions within the social sector (staff shortages, loss of meaning, neo-management, restructuring, lack of communication with the ‘little hands’ in direct contact with the public, quantitative evaluation of support work, etc.). Finally, the study revealed that while these practices of social workers enable users to remain in housing, they do not provide the necessary levers for users to escape from a deeply unequal housing market system. Instead, users and social work adapt to this system as it currently exists.

On outreach social work with precarious migrants experiencing homelessness

Study 3 focused on outreach social work in Ghent and its interaction with homeless precarious migrants. The study investigated the strategies employed by outreach workers to support these migrants and explored the extent to which these practices contribute to realizing the (human) rights of these individuals. Specifically, the study examined two distinct practices within outreach social work (OSW): street corner workers and community stewards. Street corner workers focus on a particular neighbourhood, whereas community stewards engage with destitute Intra-European migrants dispersed throughout the city.

The study showed that outreach social workers (OSWs) face challenges stemming from complex intersections of various precarity layers influenced by global, state, and market dynamics. Many of these structural inequalities lie outside their immediate mandate, complicating their efforts and raising questions about their practice's transformative potential.

At the same time, within their mandate to take care of the most vulnerable in the city by (re)connecting them to support services within the welfare system, the OSWs face challenges in their interactions with precarious migrants. They hold a difficult position, caught between their professional ethics grounded in human rights, and their position as civil servants of a government that ultimately doesn't recognize the human rights of these people. The services made formally available by the (local) government – the UMA and the night shelter – resonate the concept of “precarious inclusion in the welfare state”, as coined by Karlsen (2021), which, rather than mere exclusion, departs from a humanitarian logic prioritising bodily survival rather than a rights-based approach, ultimately signalling hierarchical conceptions of human worth within national borders (Misje, 2022).

We observed that the OSWs are primarily occupied with facilitating access to basic support, engaged in a kind of harm reduction approach, which does not aim to eliminate the underlying problems of housing exclusion and precarious status, but merely seeks to reduce the risks involved in these precarious lives. They turn to the formal and informal services which are locally available, whose access is challenged by (1) the complex physical and mental health needs people face, often related to their precarious lifestyles, (2) heightened distrust of services due to their precarious status, (3) numerous administrative and procedural barriers complicating access, even to very basic services often labelled as ‘low-threshold’, and (4) the navigation of the various rationales and conditionalities underlying this fragmented and fragile support landscape. This facilitation task appears to be very labour- and time-intensive, leaving limited or no time for any work that transcends these immediate issues.

The OSWs maintain an inclusive interpretation of citizenship, recognizing individuals based on their presence in the city and guiding their actions and interventions with respect, time, and non-judgment. While they do not advocate against the increasing criminalization of certain forms of homelessness or the government's stringent return policies for irregular migrants, they do not collaborate with these government efforts; They neither register nor report any of their observations or interactions, and they bear many 'secrets' of actions and lives that take place in the grey zones of the law.

In the case of intra-European migration, we observed that the professional ethics of OSWs are particularly strained. Dominant and normalized discourses around individual responsibility, nuisance, and the welfare magnet hypothesis in some cases influence individual social workers.¹⁴

On local social policy and work interventions in the post-mobile project in Ghent

In study 5, we critically explored the local social policy and work interventions, called ‘the post-mobile living project’, which took place from 2020 to 2023 in Ghent. The project provided temporary housing in container units for mainly Intra-European individuals and families who had previously lived in caravans and self-made houses. It was accompanied by mandatory integration assistance. In a first instance, our qualitative study explored the underlying ontological assumptions of the social work interventions in this project, aiming to gain insights into its impact on advancing or hindering the pursuit of social justice within the Roma community. Secondly, combining responsive analysis and the CAIMeR theory, we made a qualitative analysis of the project in order to identify the meaning of the project from the perspective of local policymakers, practitioners and residents, paying particular attention to the social context in which the project took place. We made this analysis in response to the one-sided (public) narrative about the project, which relied on a quantitative numerical evaluation based on a narrow understanding of so-called integration pathways.

Our findings firstly revealed different ontological frameworks regarding how the social problem was defined, the project’s goals and the principles guiding practice, thus exposing tensions between the local policymakers and the social justice orientation of social work practitioners. Notably, the design of the project, as orchestrated by the local government, reflects a neoliberal, managerialist approach intertwined with a very narrow interpretation of integration. Within this approach, the expectation for Roma families is to assimilate into Belgian societal norms, guiding them towards sedentary life and formal employment. The focus on efficiency moreover restricts the discretionary space of social work while “welfare chauvinism” is at stake as a reference point for local politicians (Garrett, 2019). They draw a strong, discursive distinction between ‘us’ (the deserving), and ‘them’ (the undeserving), echoing a 19th century distinction based on judging welfare recipients’ merit, that is today also racialized (Garrett, 2019; Kessler, Oechler & Schröder, 2019).

The social workers struggle to work in these circumstances. The conditional framework and economic logics contrast with their human rights approach. Knowing the families closely, they have a much more complex understanding of the challenges experienced by the residents. Moreover, our analysis suggests a notable absence of focus on collective responsibilities and systemic solutions that transcend the boundaries of the interventions. Providing temporary shelter in a context of a housing crisis is a priori problematic. In this context, social workers can merely function as intermediaries between the families and the project’s outlines, and by extension broader society. The analysis lastly reveals a striking absence of anti-oppressive practices within the program, a failure to involve Roma individuals meaningfully in decision-making processes, and a notable oversight in addressing the pervasive issue of anti-gypsyism.¹⁵

¹⁴ These findings are included in an article submitted to an international peer-reviewed journal, and currently under review, as: Samyn, S., Hermans, K., & Roets, G. (2024). Realising rights in the shadow of the welfare state: An urban ethnography of outreach social work with precarious migrants experiencing homelessness.

¹⁵ These findings are included in: Samyn, S., Cioarta, I., Wagener, M., Hermans, K., & Roets, G. (2024). ‘We Reach out but we Also Expect Something in Return’: Social Work Engaging with Roma People in Temporary Container Homes at the Edge of the City. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 54(2), 741-76.

Our analysis showed that valuable social work was conducted during the project, which cannot be captured in the quantitative evaluation which was carried out by the local public administration . Important results include that people have gained more trust in services and assistance, that the social economy proved to be a promising venue for those struggling with illiteracy and low formal skills, and that children gained self-confidence in their life in Ghent, making them feel more empowered to go to school. Residents also built meaningful relationships with social workers who supported them in the different paths they took. Those paths are very different as residents were active agents in how they understood and made use of the intervention.

However, important factors complicated meaningful engagement for social workers and residents seeking viable pathways:

- The conditional framework included compulsory integration and Dutch lessons, employment assistance, and school attendance for children, while most residents did not have a basic income.
- Very basic material circumstances and strict on-site regulations, for example regarding family visits.
- The political and public sensitivity surrounding the project and the intermediary public evaluations made in the city council, which are uncommon for interventions of similar complexity targeting other populations.
- Unrealistic expectations by some about the outcomes of this temporary (short-term) project, while research indicates that long-term interventions are essential for marginalized individuals experiencing chronic poverty, with better outcomes achieved over time.

The project was presented as a one-off comprehensive solution for people living in caravans and self-made houses in the city. However, a long-term and structural policy will be needed that remains committed to these residents in the city. This policy should also take into account the dynamics of circular migration (in the context of free movement of people in the EU) and involve families more in defining the objectives of interventions.

Administrative burdens and street-level bureaucracy

Finally, in Study 2, we also studied how social workers, as policy implementers, can actively shape policies¹⁶. For this, we made use of the literature on street-level bureaucrats and administrative burdens. The study of administrative burdens focuses on the obstacles that states create, affecting citizens' access to rights, benefits and services, and the associated costs these pose for citizens (Moynihan et al., 2015).

In turn, administrative burdens have increasingly become known as “policymaking by other means” (Herd & Moynihan, 2018), where the state intentionally complicates access to formally entitled benefits and services (Broom et al., 2023). In studying the reference address at a local welfare agency for people experiencing homelessness, we studied the role of street-level bureaucrats in constructing or mitigating

¹⁶ This study was published: Robben, Peeters & Widlak (2024). Burdens on the gateway to the state: Administrative burdens in the registration of people experiencing homelessness in Belgium and the Netherlands. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 43(3), 780-803.

administrative burdens. Specifically, by making use of their discretionary space, street-level bureaucrats deal with implementing federally designed policies at the local level. However, we found they have contradictory obligations: they need to identify eligible applicants of the reference address and provide access to rights and services to which they are entitled; but they also need to practice restraint in granting rights because of possible cases of fraud. To play their role efficiently, social workers develop notions of deservingness (Baekgaard et al., 2021; Jilke & Tummers, 2018) - they cope with high workloads, staff and resource scarcity, and conflicting tasks by prioritising certain clients over others based on judgments of neediness.

In regard to the reference address, this became very palpable when discussing the eligibility criteria. Social workers need to assess whether someone is “really” homeless, by e.g. a means- and living situation (do they actually sleep on a friend’s couch?) test. In this example, several social workers appeared to construct additional –albeit unlawful- conditions, which in fact are administrative burdens. On the other hand, we also found street-level bureaucrats developed practices to mitigate burdens for the most vulnerable groups, for instance, when they were confronted with the consequences of administrative exclusion if they failed to meet the eligibility criteria¹⁷.

¹⁷ More on this study can be found in the publication of Robben, Peeters & Widlak (2024).

5. POLICY AND ACADEMIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Belgium has endorsed the European ambition to end homelessness by 2030. This particularly ambitious goal requires a better understanding of this social issue. The TRAHOME project starts from a dynamic approach to homelessness, studies the non-use of social rights and services, and which practices and policies at the local level contribute to reducing this issue.

In this final part of the study, we bring together several recommendations that emerged from the research itself and were validated in focus group discussions with representatives of governments, umbrella organisations, homelessness organisations and representatives of PEH.

5.1 Policy recommendations

1. The importance of a dynamic and longitudinal approach to homelessness

The TRAHOME research shows that a dynamic approach is imperative to broaden and deepen existing knowledge of homelessness. In recent years, point-in-time counts have taken place across Belgium, pointing to the fact that the homeless population is very diverse. For this reason, we quantitatively studied the duration and recurrence of homelessness and the different characteristics of our clustered groups. Alongside this analysis, we deliberately chose to qualitatively study two sub-populations in detail: women and migrants experiencing homelessness. Even though this categorisation includes pitfalls and runs the risk of generalising and homogenising their needs and aspirations, it allowed us to investigate these groups in detail.

Longitudinal quantitative analysis

Beyond what was expected, as stated in prior research (e.g. Kuhn & Culhane, 1998), our longitudinal quantitative analysis demonstrates that there is a high prevalence of chronic homelessness in Belgium. This group contains specific characteristics, such as people who are administratively invisible, single men, and elderly individuals. Even though they make use of the reference address, they clearly suffer from housing insecurity and administrative invisibility for a long period of time. For this reason, policy makers need to address challenges that are specific to this group. Special attention to tackling chronic homelessness, for instance through housing first and other housing-led measures, therefore remains imperative.

Longitudinal qualitative analysis of women at risk of homelessness' trajectories

The longitudinal qualitative analysis of the trajectories of women at risk for homelessness indicate how they are trapped in a catch-22, or no-win situation. Low-income tenants have access to a specific segment of the housing market where: (1) rent consumes a significant portion of their monthly budget for (2) housing that is often substandard and/or too small for the household occupying it. Participants in the focus group noted that renovation assistance programs for landlords are helpful, but landlords often take advantage of these programs by increasing the rent once the housing has been renovated. Tools are needed to ensure both sanitary and financially accessible housing for the poorest tenants.

Numerous policy recommendations can be formulated here. Foremost, a thorough housing-led strategy that commits to sufficient affordable housing is an absolute necessity to reduce homelessness in a structural way.

Longitudinal qualitative analysis of precarious migrants' trajectories

The longitudinal qualitative study of trajectories of precarious migrants also point to the particularly high stress and uncertainty in which they live. Even though they have no right of residence, the research

shows that they try to survive in the city through all kinds of 'home-making activities'. Homeless denizens' aspirations are diverse, unpredictable, and sometimes deliberately 'hidden' as a form of agency. These findings not only humanise them but also carry significant implications.

If we consider these residents worthy of living in dignity, they should be provided with various dwelling and homemaking options, and the autonomy to choose what suits them best. In addition to making the rental market more accessible, there is a need for flexible housing options for those who (at the moment) do not intend to stay in the city permanently in the slipstream of their circular migration, considering multispatial notions of home and the desirability of impermanence.

Temporary housing options that are neither conditional nor strictly time-limited should be made available, with the possibility of shared management between residents and authorities. These could be modelled after existing traveller sites, which, instead of being defunded as is currently the case, require renewed and increased investment to accommodate a broader range of residents, including precarious migrants. Incorporating temporary dwellings, such as mobile structures or short-term building occupations, could moreover be integrated into neighbourhood development and urban planning processes. Instead of penalising survival, efforts could be focused on facilitating homemaking practices that ensure people feel safer and more comfortable, reducing the negative physical and mental consequences of homelessness.

Recommendations:

1. Use a dynamic and longitudinal approach to homelessness to understand the trajectories of persons experiencing homelessness
2. Affordable housing is the first and foremost solution to end homelessness and ending homelessness is only feasible if sufficient affordable housing is available for the most deprived groups in society
3. Chronic homelessness is an underestimated social problem in Belgium and requires a housing-led approach
4. Invest at the national and local level in temporary accommodation and dwellings for precarious migrants

2. Homelessness and the non-take up of social rights

Homelessness is also strongly associated with non-take-up of social rights. Evidence suggests that PEH have lower NTU rates compared to the general population (Chareyron & Domingues, 2018; Szeintuch, 2020). Our research shows that PEH in Belgium are also confronted with a myriad of factors when applying for a reference address at a PCSW. Demonstrating a (reference) address is a crucial prerequisite for accessing social rights, including unemployment benefits, child allowance, a valid ID, social housing. Barriers in accessing this specific reference address clearly affects the NTU of other rights. This was also reaffirmed in the focus group discussions, in which policy recommendations also were discussed. It quickly became a debate regarding the new Circular¹⁸. The recent Circular launched in July 2023 was supposed to replace the first three circulars and provide more clarity. However, the rules and guidelines remain ambiguous and therefore can still have unintended consequences. Concrete policy recommendations are to start a debate on how the conditions to access the reference address can be more adapted to its target group. For instance, our qualitative analysis of Study 2 raised concerns on the requirement of a local connection to the municipality of the PCSW. This condition is particularly difficult for a highly mobile population group to meet, leading to them being pushed towards

¹⁸ This Circular is more elaborately discussed in the doctoral thesis of Laure-lise Robben, titled 'Including the most excluded'.

neighbouring municipalities, and potentially causing even more NTU of the reference address. Not fulfilling the requirements leads to punitive repercussions of an already vulnerable group, perpetuating their exclusion from society. Future studies can further focus on the unintended outcomes of policy implementation and welfare conditionality. The debate on the effects of welfare conditionality on the most vulnerable groups that regularly fall foul of the requirements and are unfairly penalised with administrative (and subsequent social) exclusion when failing to comply need a specific research agenda.

Connected to this, is the administrative exclusion of PEH and its far-reaching consequences. Being excluded from the register, due to the loss of a (reference) address or because one does not comply with the register's or PCSW's criteria, leads to becoming entrapped in the 'Postal Paradox'. Homelessness will persist because the access to rights and services remains restricted (Byrne, 2018). Given these persons are often interpreted as 'missings' in administrative datasets, we recommend more policy attention is needed to address these administratively invisible groups. Research attention is also needed to study these individuals and their trajectories in detail.

As our research shows, imposing conditions to an already vulnerable group exacerbates their vulnerability because the substantial realisation of human and social rights remains restricted. Welfare conditionality is known to disproportionately affect these groups, because they are facing increased rates of benefit sanctions which are punitive rather than supportive (Reeve, 2017). Certainly, for PEH with a migrant status, such as the residents of the postmobile project, this conditionality compounds their precarity, leading some (back) to sleeping rough. Moreover, conditionality restricts the discretion of street-level bureaucrats – as they are required to check whether fraud or misuse is in place. As Study 2 pointed out, their notions of deservingness and their definitions of homelessness are crucial here. On the one hand, addressing the strictly imposed conditions to services and rights such as the reference address is necessary; but on the other hand, more attention needs to be paid to unlawfully imposed conditions which are difficult to impossible for claimants to meet.

The post-mobile project made this very clear, setting up numerous complex standards for its residents; academic research should focus even more on the street-level implementation of welfare conditionality (see Berkel, 2019) for different vulnerable groups and how deservingness plays a role. Public narratives often blame individuals rather than societal factors for their circumstances. This perspective frames conditional welfare as a means to modify individual behaviour, turning broader social issues like unemployment and homelessness into moral failings that require correction.

More generally, a shift from a humanitarian **rights-based approach**, both in local, regional and federal social policy, is needed to ensure equitable access to housing, healthcare, and social rights and services for all PEH. In our research, we show that especially for precarious migrants, humanitarian aid programs are developed at the local level. These programs fulfil basic needs, but need to be supplemented by a rights-based approach on the national and transnational level, that recognizes housing and the substantial realisation of social and human rights rights as a fundamental right.

This includes ensuring that homeless individuals are treated with dignity and respect and have a voice in the development of policies that affect them.

The research highlights the severe consequences of an inaccessible housing market and points to the government's failure to fulfil one of its core responsibilities, for citizens and denizens alike. Housing is a fundamental human right inscribed in the Belgian Constitution, which recognises this right as part of the broader right to human dignity (Article 23, 3° of the Belgian Constitution). This study highlights the need for greater government involvement in the housing market at various levels.

With regards to migrant homelessness, there is significant potential for legal work and approaches aimed at securing access to formal rights, which would allow homeless denizens access to the welfare system and its services, such as social housing and welfare benefits. First, there are grey areas and ambiguities in the interpretation of the EU legal framework that can be leveraged through legal advocacy. For instance, a more favourable interpretation of the term ‘worker’ in the Directive 2004/38 on the right of free movement for EU citizens could enable easier access to social rights for many individuals, who now struggle to meet the requirements set by the city’s administration. Second, many third-country nationals might be eligible for residency through regularisation or asylum applications that were never thoroughly or properly conducted.

While race and ethnicity should not be the primary focus of policy, they also shouldn’t be treated as taboo subjects. Acknowledging differences and—when relevant—naming and defining them is crucial. The findings highlighted the impossibility of ignoring race and ethnicity when the goal is to engage with diverse communities meaningfully. To address the hesitancy in policy and to avoid reinforcing stereotypes and societal divisions, this can be approached through dialogue with the communities involved, helping to uncover their needs and priorities.

Recommendations:

1. Start from a rights-based and housing-led approach to homelessness in (trans-)national, regional and local action plans.
2. Strengthen the fight against non-take up of social rights for PEH and secure access to a reference address for PEH since this is needed to facilitate access to other social rights.
3. Avoid administrative exclusion, given the tremendous effects of the removal from the National Register for PEH.
4. Reach out and involve precarious migrant populations to understand their needs and priorities.

3. Local social policies and social work practices

Housing practices by social workers in PCSW

This research also points to the role of social work practices in reducing but also perpetuating the problem of homelessness. For instance, we see that social workers of PCSW support individuals to keep their housing but, at the same time, in doing so, ensure that these individuals stay in substandard housing. They are forced to do so because of the insufficient quality and the lack of affordable housing. Social workers who assist tenants in precarious housing situations have few options for relocating people. Alternatives are scarce. As a result, social workers are forced to find ways to keep tenants in their current housing (negotiating with landlords, covering rent arrears, offering "housing education" programs, etc.) even when the housing is not suitable or compliant. These practices create tensions with the objectives of social work (emancipation, respect for rights, well-being, meeting needs, etc.). These tensions cause distress for social workers. It is therefore necessary to increase alternatives to the private housing market to provide dignified social support for both tenants and social workers. Should such supply of housing be available, these social workers could focus much more on the long term and on solutions that help improve their clients' situation in a sustainable way.

Appealing to the regional housing inspection authorities is a lever to ensure tenants’ right to housing. However, some associations avoid involving the regional housing inspection because it can have consequences for the tenant: the landlord might decide to terminate the lease if a tenant files a complaint about unsanitary conditions. For undocumented tenants, appealing to the regional housing inspection to

report substandard housing is impossible since their occupations are often not legally registered. More pressure tools are needed to hold landlords accountable for renting unsanitary housing, while avoiding the risk of tenants losing their homes. Associations should be given more resources and staff with technical expertise to assess and document the unsanitary conditions of housing. These documents should carry weight in the Justice of the Peace courts or during negotiations with landlords.

Social workers involved in eviction procedures

Legal proceedings in the Peace courts represent a heavy administrative burden for tenants who are already vulnerable. The lack of access and the digital divide are also factors. This requires specific support, which exhausts not only the tenants but also the social workers. More resources are needed to assist tenants in asserting their rights against landlords. Lawyers have a monopoly on representing tenants. Social workers cannot defend tenants in court. The presence of a lawyer is crucial to the tenant's outcome, but they cannot always afford one. The social workers involved in the study plea for more resources to collaborate with lawyers and to have a network of lawyers with social awareness, who can adequately support people with little experience in the legal system. The lawyer must also be able to explain and anticipate the consequences of legal actions on the household they are supporting.

Based on the focus groups and the input from social workers, this list of very specific recommendations on evictions procedures shed a light on the complexities of working in and with the Justice of Peace to secure housing:

- The Judges should systematically ask about the housing condition when there is a rental debt because these issues are often interconnected. However, courts tend to address the debt issue only, without questioning the housing quality.
- The Judges should refer to the indicative rent scale, even if only for guidance, to determine whether the rent exceeds what is suggested in the scale during hearings.
- Judges should receive training on domestic violence issues. Sometimes, a judge may order cohabitation following a separation, even when there is domestic violence in the relationship.
- Police are poorly trained and informed about housing rights. They often refuse to take complaints following illegal evictions (those carried out without judicial oversight). Police officers need training on housing rights and eviction procedures.
- In many cases, multiple tenants in the same building face similar issues with the same landlord. There is no possibility for collective legal action in Justice of the Peace courts. There should be a way to allow collective legal claims in housing matters.
- Sometimes a landlord has been convicted multiple times for issues with the same property, but authorities do not consider the landlord's history. In court, it would be useful if the judge could review the landlord's past offences.

People who experience precarious housing, substandard conditions, and/or eviction proceedings often face mental health challenges, including fear, stress, and anger. Social workers need more resources to help users restore their mental health.

Social work practices with precarious migrants

This study also sheds light on social workers working with precarious migrants. At the intersection of homelessness and migration, a growing number of social work practices are developed that, on the one hand, try to provide help for survival but, on the other, also face the difficulties of arriving at more

structural solutions. Support for such practices is waning in a society that expects a more incisive approach to migration issues. Therefore, it requires much perseverance from social workers to work with these people.

However, the term migration does conceal a multitude of migration patterns and phenomena. Recognising this diversity is the first necessary step towards a more structural approach to migrant homelessness. Bringing together expertise on migration and on homelessness is necessary to work out innovative solutions. The Focus group discussions highlighted for instance the importance of tailor-made solutions for circular migration (e.g. transit sites) in line with EU labour migration. Also the ‘Accommodation and Orientation’ project is seen as a promising approach for precarious migrants.

These results show the importance of developing such 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, nor should they be temporary. Moving away from the notion of simply ‘fixing’ the problem, it requires a serious and ongoing commitment.

In the focus groups, the tendency towards decentralisation and increasingly local welfare provision has been critically tackled as an insufficient strategy to deal with these challenges (Andreotti & Mingione, 2016). The re-scaling of the nation states’ powers downwards to the local level requires that the national – and even transnational, European - welfare regulations and reforms and state responsibilities for implementation should be reclaimed.

At this moment, the cities themselves are confronted with the lack of a cohesive policy approach to support precarious migrants. Some projects are developed with the support of the federal government (such as ‘Accommodation and Orientation’ in Gent). As with any social intervention, it is important to recognize that while initiatives like ‘Accommodation and Orientation’ are extremely valuable, we must also continue caring for those who fall outside these systems. These projects also have a large need in the field to scale up such approaches that are based on guaranteeing rest and accommodation while focusing strongly on the juridical elements of their situation.

Recommendations:

1. More affordable housing would lead to more time for social workers to invest in the human flourishing and the social mobility of their clients
2. Strengthen the fight against slumlords, since families are stuck in low-quality housing and are forced to apply to these slumlords for low-standard housing
3. Bringing together expertise on migration and on homelessness on the (trans-)national and European level is necessary to work out innovative solutions

5.2 Recommendations for research

Addressing homelessness is a multifaceted challenge that demands further research across various areas. The following key areas of focus provide a foundation for future research endeavours, particularly aimed at improving homelessness policies, practices, and outcomes.

1. Longitudinal research on (hidden) homeless populations

Besides policy recommendations, there are several academic recommendations connected to these studies as well. Glancing at Study 1, future studies need to dive deeper into the complexities of this chronicity. The recent point-in-time counts paint a detailed picture of the homeless population in a specific region in a limited timeframe, and we therefore recommend future research to combine multiple data sources and making use of integrated administrative datasets (see also Byrne et al., 2020; Culhane, 2016) as well. Furthermore, more detailed information on the association between duration and recurrence and structural factors can pave the way for more informed interventions and policy decisions. Housing-led initiatives such as Housing First, for instance, successfully target chronic homelessness with high levels of support needs and prevent the recurrence of their spells (Padgett et al., 2016), even though they are currently on a smaller scale in Belgium.

The complexity of homelessness requires in-depth, longitudinal studies that combine both quantitative and qualitative analysis. These studies would help track the long-term effectiveness of homelessness interventions, the demographic changes within the homeless population, and the various social, economic, and political factors that influence housing instability. For example, longitudinal quantitative data could shed a light on the inflow into, the process of and the outflow out of homelessness, while qualitative data could provide a more lifeworld-oriented insight in the agency of homeless persons. Drawing from multiple data sources, a mixed-methods approach would provide a more comprehensive understanding of homelessness as a social issue, allowing for better-informed policies and interventions.

In addition, homelessness research would benefit from a deeper focus on hidden groups within the homeless population. These groups may include individuals or families who experience temporary, unstable housing arrangements or who avoid shelters, making them difficult to identify and support, but also those staying temporarily with friends or persons leaving institutions without a housing solution. Longitudinal research could reveal the long-term trajectories of these populations, shedding light on the complex and often cyclical nature of homelessness.

2. The importance of street-level research

Our research shows the importance of a street-level approach (1) to understand the gaps between policy intentions and policy outcomes and (2) to grasp the complexities in the daily practice of social workers and the lifeworld of persons experiencing homelessness. Analyzing how policies impact vulnerable populations is essential to shaping more inclusive and effective responses to homelessness.

This includes investigating how national and transnational, European policies or even well-intentioned projects such as the post-mobile living project in Ghent, differ between other national and theoretical frameworks and their practical implementation across Europe. As our studies show, this requires a long-term engagement with the field to understand the policies in action from the inside.

A street-level approach is not only about studying the implementation of social policies but also about adopting a bottom-up perspective to gain insight into what is happening on the ground, and strive for social justice and social change. The starting point of this bottom-up approach is the lifeworld of

individuals experiencing homelessness. By closely following these individuals, building a relationship of trust and observing their interactions with services, we can gain a much deeper understanding of the barriers they face and the survival strategies they employ.

3. Conditionalities within homelessness policies

Our research underscores the importance of a non-take up perspective, the administrative burden approach. Research should focus on hidden or subtle conditionalities that undermine the access to social rights. Research in this area should critically examine how these conditions are defined, implemented, and enforced in practice. Are there specific barriers preventing certain individuals from benefiting from these programs? Are those conditions fair, and do they support the overall goal of reducing homelessness?

4. PANhome: Crisis management during and after COVID-19

PANhome is the follow-up project by the same research institutions. The COVID-19 pandemic brought new challenges to the homeless sector, but it also presented an opportunity to study crisis management within this field. This project investigates the practices adopted by the homeless sector during and after the pandemic, and the lessons learned in managing a public health crisis. This new project focuses on how the sector—already familiar with crisis situations—responded to an unprecedented global emergency. What worked, and what didn't? How did service providers, policymakers, and homeless individuals navigate the pandemic, and what innovations emerged from these experiences? Lessons from COVID-19 could be applied to future crises and inform a more resilient approach to homelessness.

6. SOCIETAL AND ACADEMIC VALORISATION

We founded a Belgian network of homelessness research and organised to conferences both in March 2022 and May 2023 (co-organized with the Interfederal Service ‘Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion’ and Bruss’Help). Besides networking and getting to know other homelessness and housing researchers’ work of different universities in Belgium, the three PhD students presented their own (preliminary) work, alongside keynote presentations by prof. Dr. Paula Mayock (Trinity College, Dublin) and Elisabetta Rosa (UC Louvain). The follow-up project, PANhome, will further invest in this network and in collaborating between researchers in Belgium.

7. PUBLICATIONS

International publications

Robben, L.-L., Pierre, Adèle & Hermans, Koen. (2023). ‘Without an address, you do not exist’: The Administrative Invisibility of People Experiencing Homelessness in Belgium. *Citizenship Studies*, 27(5), 566-583.

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Robben, L.-L. (2024). Overcoming the Postal Paradox? A policy Discussion Paper on the Right to an Address for People Experiencing Homelessness. *European Journal of Homelessness*, 18(2), 167-188.

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Samyn, S., Cioarta, I., Wagener, M., Hermans, K., & Roets, G. (2024). ‘We Reach out but we Also Expect Something in Return’: Social Work Engaging with Roma People in Temporary Container Homes at the Edge of the City. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 54(2), 741-761.

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Samyn, S., Hermans, K., & Roets, G. (2024). Realising rights in the shadow of the welfare state: An urban ethnography of outreach social work with precarious migrants experiencing homelessness.

Samyn, S., Hermans, K., & Roets, G. (2024). The denizen rebel: uncovering the everyday resistance of homeless denizens through homemaking practices.

National (peer-reviewed)

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National (other)

Robben, L.-L. & Hermans, K. (2023). Geef dak- en thuislozen een adres. *Samenleving & Politiek* 2023 (5). Available at: <https://www.sampol.be/2023/05/geef-dak-en-thuislozen-een-adres>

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