Brussels Studies

La revue scientifique pour les recherches sur Bruxelles
/ Het wetenschappelijk tijdschrift voor onderzoek over
Brussel / The Journal of Research on Brussels
Fact Sheets | 2019

Homeless and inadequately housed people in the Brussels-Capital Region

Personnes sans-abri et mal logées en Région Bruxelles-Capitale

Dak- en thuislozen in het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest

Benoit Quittelier and Nicolas Horvat

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/brussels/3974>

DOI: 10.4000/brussels.3974

ISSN: 2031-0293

Publisher

Université Saint-Louis Bruxelles

Electronic reference

Benoit Quittelier and Nicolas Horvat, « Homeless and inadequately housed people in the Brussels-Capital Region », *Brussels Studies* [Online], Fact Sheets, no 140, Online since 04 November 2019, connection on 23 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/brussels/3974> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/brussels.3974>

This text was automatically generated on 23 September 2020.

Licence CC BY

Homeless and inadequately housed people in the Brussels-Capital Region

Personnes sans-abri et mal logées en Région Bruxelles-Capitale
Dak- en thuislozen in het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest

Benoit Quittelier and Nicolas Horvat

- 1 Since 2008, the Centre d'appui au secteur bruxellois d'aide aux sans-abri, recently renamed Bruss'Help¹, has organised a vast census every two years² in order to identify homeless and inadequately housed people in the Brussels-Capital Region. The census aims to provide a “snapshot” in order to understand the distribution of the different forms of homelessness and/or inadequate housing in all of the nineteen municipalities of the Region. The comparison of these censuses, which are conducted according to the same protocol, makes it possible to identify developments and better understand a complex phenomenon.

1. A question of method

- 2 Conducting a census of homeless and inadequately housed people raises two issues in particular: who to count and how to count. In fact, the methodology used is obviously a key issue. The aim is to set up a reliable and reproducible process, based on a proven nomenclature shared by as many people as possible.

1.1. A problem of definition

- 3 What is a homeless person? This is a sensitive issue which has been the subject of much debate [see for example Brousse et al., 2008: 22-26; Marpsat, 2009]. According to the general interpretation, the term usually refers to a person deprived of housing who is

forced to live in the streets. Depending on the criteria adopted, this term may in fact cover a much wider range of living conditions.

- 4 Since 2005, FEANTSA (European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless) has proposed a typology of homelessness called ETHOS (European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion). This list of terms is based indirectly on what access to housing should be: “having an adequate dwelling over which a person and his/her family can exercise exclusive possession (physical domain); being able to maintain privacy and enjoy relations (social domain) and having legal title to occupation (legal domain)”.³ In accordance with this definition, FEANTSA distinguishes four types of exclusion: being without shelter (spending the night in the public space or emergency shelters); being homeless (residing in a shelter, reception centre or specialised institution); being in a situation of precarious housing (staying with family or friends temporarily, occupying housing without a formal rental lease and/or being threatened with eviction); and having inadequate housing (living in a temporary or unconventional structure, in a squat or in a situation of negotiated occupancy).
- 5 This typology was adopted for counting purposes in the Brussels region, and provides solid and distinct statistical categories encompassing a wide variety of situations, all characterised by *an absence of housing*. As a benchmark for many censuses at European level, it also allows comparisons to be considered in order to assess the relevance of regional and national policies for tackling homelessness.

1.2. Process and procedure

- 6 The Brussels census is based on a collaboration between professionals and volunteers in the homeless sector, as well as a range of partners from related sectors: hospitals, public transport, Bruxelles Environnement, CPAS, etc. These stakeholders are involved in every step of the process, from locating before the night count to participating on the committee to discuss the results. Furthermore, it is above all on the basis of this tremendous mobilisation that it is possible to record the three types of data from which statistical analyses can be carried out.
- 7 The first data are encoded on the evening of the census by the various accommodation and reception structures: night shelters, emergency or crisis accommodation centres, reception centres and housing support services.⁴ In addition to these figures, there are also those transmitted by non-approved reception structures, such as religious communities, asylum seekers' structures, negotiated occupancy or squats.
- 8 The second source of data is a census of people who spend the night in public spaces. After having previously identified the various locations thanks to the expertise of social workers, the Support Centre produces a network delimiting 71 areas in the Brussels-Capital Region. On the day of the census, between 11 pm and midnight,⁵ nearly 200 volunteers with in-depth or partial knowledge about homelessness travel through these areas in teams of two to conduct the census.
- 9 Finally, censuses are carried out in day centres in order to reduce the risk of double counting and enrich the data collected from a qualitative standpoint. A first questionnaire, covering recently visited places and social services, is submitted two weeks before the census to determine the priority areas to be covered. The day after

the census, a second questionnaire is used to verify the data collected and to estimate the number of people who may not have been taken into account.

1.3. The need to increase the number of censuses

- ¹⁰ Since 2008, partnerships have multiplied and have become more effective, improving the comprehensiveness of censuses and a better understanding of homelessness in the Brussels region.⁶ However, some categories of the population concerned are not identified by our tools: this is the case in particular for people threatened with eviction or for those who, having lost their homes, stay with friends or family (“precarious housing” category from the ETHOS typology).⁷ Moreover, while the statistical method makes it possible to measure the extent of the phenomenon, it provides only a few elements allowing a contextualisation of the analysis. The authorities are asking for figures enabling them to quantify the “need”, but an increase in the angles of approach, in particular via qualitative censuses, remains essential in order to better understand the reality of this heterogeneous and constantly changing population.

2. The 2018 census figures

- ¹¹ The data presented here are based on the fifth census of homeless and inadequately housed people in the Brussels-Capital Region [La Strada, 2019].⁸

2.1. A constantly evolving phenomenon

- ¹² 4 187 people were counted during the night of 5 November 2018. Of these, 51,4 % were homeless (in the streets or in emergency shelters), 22,2 % without housing (in reception centres and CPAS temporary housing) and 24,8 % in inadequate housing (in squats, religious communities, etc.).

Figure 1. Distribution of people who were homeless, without housing or inadequately housed on 5 November 2018.

Source: La Strada, 2019

Figure 2. Evolution of numbers according to census location between 2016 and 2018.

Source: La Strada, 2019

- 13 759 people, including 20 minors, spent the night in public spaces on the evening of the census (18,1 % of the people counted). While the number of individuals counted in the

streets, parks, train stations and metro stations increased only slightly between 2016 and 2018 (+ 7,4 %), this number almost tripled (+ 182,1 %) between 2008 and 2018.

- 14 707 people received emergency and crisis accommodation. The number of people in the Samusocial centres increased by 49,1 % compared to 2016. If we take into account the number of people housed by the Citizen's Platform⁹ (685 additional people), which provides a similar reception to a migrant population, the increase in the population recorded in emergency accommodation centres since 2008 amounts to 293 7 %. This evolution is largely due to the increase in reception capacities.
- 15 930 people were housed by a recognised service: CPAS temporary accommodations (0,5 %) and reception houses (21,7 %). The number of people counted in shelters depends largely on the number of places available: since the supply has remained relatively stable over the past ten years, the number of staff has changed very little.
- 16 1 044 people had inadequate housing, which represented 24,9 % of the population counted: 5 % in non-recognised accommodation facilities, 6,3 % in religious communities, 7,9 % in negotiated occupancy and 5,6 % in squats. For people in inadequate housing, there are contrasting trends. While religious communities (+ 40,2 %) and negotiated occupancy (+ 21,1 %) continue to provide housing to more and more people, there has been a significant decrease in the number of individuals recorded in squats. But it should be noted that following the anti-squat law which extended the criminalisation of this practice, information transmission has been more fragmented.

2.2. Composition and geographical distribution of the population

- 17 The increase in the number of women who spend the night in the streets is probably the most significant element of the last census: this number has risen from 50 to 84 in two years (+ 68 %). However, the results indicate that men are still in the majority (59,1 %), mainly among those in the public space (66,4 %).

Figure 3. Socio-demographic profile of people who were homeless, without housing or inadequately housed, November 5, 2018.

Source: La Strada, 2019

- 18 Of the 612 children counted on the night of 5 November 2018, 265 were homeless (20 in the public space and 245 in an emergency shelter), 256 were staying in a shelter, 4 were in temporary accommodations, 4 were housed by a religious community, 72 were in negotiated occupancy, and 11 spent the night in a squat. Despite the government's stated intention to prevent minors from having to spend the night outside, in particular by opening places for families in Samusocial centres, the number of children who spend the night in the streets has decreased only slightly over the past two years (24 in 2016).
- 19 Finally, the 2018 census confirms a trend already observed in 2016, namely the increase in the relative number of people identified outside the city centre, in this case included in the Pentagon (26 % in 2014; 44 % in 2016; 54 % in 2018), mainly in the neighbourhoods in the inner ring. The proportion of homeless people taking refuge in train stations remains relatively stable (16 % in 2018 compared to 17 % in 2016).

3. Some thoughts

- 20 The number of homeless and inadequately housed people in the Brussels-Capital Region has more than doubled over the past ten years (+ 142,2 %). This increase is all the more worrying as it is most probably underestimated, as several categories of people are still only very partially covered by the census. The proportion of the most precarious living situations has also risen sharply: in 2018, more than half of the people counted fell into the category of "homeless". This segment of the population has grown by 327,6 % over the past decade.

Figure 4. Overall evolution of the census population between 2008 and 2018.

Source: La Strada, 2019

3.1. The choice in terms of public policy in the area of homelessness

- 21 The data collected not only make it possible to draw a conclusion: they also provide an account of the type of policy response to homelessness over the past ten years. The huge increase in the number of people in emergency accommodations (+ 594,9 % since 2008), particularly when compared to the very slight increase in the number of places available in reception centres (+ 15,9 %), is an indication in particular of the directions taken. The Brussels public authorities seem to have favoured shelters¹⁰ – an increase in the capacity of the centres managed by Samusocial and a subsidy for the Porte d'Ulysse centre – to the detriment of a more structural approach based on strengthening support and monitoring mechanisms. There is the risk that, “the lack of available places and alternatives for upward exits, transforms emergency facilities into a saturated waiting area” [FEANTSA and Fondation Abbé Pierre, 2019: 21]. This short-term view is also reflected in what professionals in the sector have traditionally called “thermometer management”: the temporary increase in accommodation capacity during the winter period is followed by the lack of sufficient resources which services must deal with to provide accommodation the rest of the year.¹¹
- 22 The latest results highlight another phenomenon. On the evening of the census, 248 people were housed voluntarily by Brussels households via the Citizen Platform. While we can only praise the charity of individuals who occasionally offer their services to alleviate the urgency of the current situation, the development of this practice raises serious questions: beyond its original intention, this type of initiative runs the risk of masking the failure of the public authorities – which at the same time are already gradually withdrawing themselves from their missions by relying on the increasing number of private initiatives. More generally, it can be noted that one in four people (24,9 %) find a housing solution outside any publicly funded system (non-approved housing structure, religious communities, squats or negotiated occupancy).
- 23 However, another set of figures shows an encouraging outlook. Traditional supported housing has increased by 28,6 % in Brussels over the last two years (1 394 people monitored); Housing First¹² programmes have doubled (120 people monitored). A total of 1 514 people are no longer homeless or have avoided becoming homeless thanks to these two solutions. However, these services can only work if they can obtain decent, low-rent apartments. The housing stock of this type is limited and the various structures – which end up competing for it – participate under duress in removing cheap housing from the circuit which could have benefited underprivileged households.

3.2. The socio-economic context in Brussels and the political treatment of the migration issue

- 24 The Brussels authorities are struggling to cope with the growing number of homeless people. In the opinion of many observers, the palliative measures adopted to curb the phenomenon are not up to the challenge: the increase in the number of homeless and inadequately housed people, observed in almost all major European cities, can only be stopped if the mechanisms leading to exclusion are addressed. There are many

intertwined structural causes of homelessness, thus making it difficult to draw a complete picture. Three particularly salient elements can nevertheless be retained in order to shed light on the situation in Brussels: the increasing precariousness of the working classes, the unfavourable context of access to housing and the political treatment of migration flows.

- 25 Among the reasons involved in exposing an ever-widening segment of the Brussels population to the risk of homelessness and inadequate housing, is above all the obvious rise in socio-economic inequalities. The impoverishment of the working classes and the most vulnerable sections of the middle class has increased over the past ten years. Between 2007 and 2017, the number of beneficiaries of the social integration income increased by 73,4 %. In January 2017, no less than one fifth of the Brussels population aged 18 to 64 received a social assistance allowance or a replacement income [*Observatoire de la Santé et du Social*, 2018: 22-24]. At national level, 16,4 % of the population was at risk of income poverty in 2018.¹³ There is also “a growing gap between the evolution of social minima and the evolution of people's needs, and between the existence of social rights and people's real possibilities to access them” [La Strada, 2017: 101].
- 26 In addition to the significant level of precariousness, the housing situation in Brussels is also difficult. Although rents have stayed the same in Brussels since 2015, this has occurred after ten years of a steady increase. As a result, by setting the share of income allocated to rent at 30 %, the first decile of the cheapest housing in the urban area is accessible to only 52 % of the Brussels population [De Keersmaecker, 2018: 28 and 42]. The political responses to this reality remain tentative. It should be noted in particular that there are only 36 117 rented social housing units in the Brussels Capital Region, while there are more than 48 804 households on the waiting list [*Observatoire de la Santé et du Social*, 2018: 55]. Pressure on the rental market and the shortage of cheap housing (including social housing) contribute to impoverishment.
- 27 The enlargement of the European Union has led to an increased influx of Europeans from the new member states, who unfortunately do not always find housing. There has also been an increase in the number of migrants entering Belgium (whether or not they wish to settle permanently in Belgium) [Vause, 2018]. Over time, Brussels has thus become a point of departure for some of the migrants wishing to reach the United Kingdom. Although increased international mobility concerns all social strata, in Brussels in particular it generates an influx of precarious foreign populations whose residence status in the territory is highly variable. In the absence of strong measures at federal and European level (naturalisation campaign, European flow management policy, etc.), the Brussels-Capital Region must actually manage a situation which goes beyond the scope of its competences, often offering only night shelter to illegal foreigners in the territory.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BROUSSE, C., FIRDION, J.-M. and MARPSAT, M., 2008. Les sans-domicile. Repères 523. Paris: La Découverte.
- BUXANT, C., 2018. Housing First : une invitation à envisager la fin du sans-abrisme. In: Vie sociale. vol. 23-24, no 3-4, pp. 125-136.
- COLLECTIF LES MORTS DE LA RUE, 2018. Mortalité des personnes sans-domicile 2017. L'enquête dénombrer et décrire. Paris: CMDR.
- DE KEERSMAECKER, M.-L., 2018. Observatoire des Loyers. Enquête 2017. Brussels: SLRB-BGHM.
- FEANTSA et FONDATION ABBÉ PIERRE, 2019. Quatrième Regard sur le mal-logement en Europe. Brussels/Paris : FEANTSA/Fondation Abbé Pierre.
- LA STRADA, 2017. Dénombrement des personnes sans-abri et mal logées en Région de Bruxelles-Capitale. Quatrième et double édition : 7 novembre 2016 - 6 mars 2017. Brussels: La Strada.
- LA STRADA, 2019. Dénombrement des personnes sans-abri et mal logées en Région de Bruxelles-Capitale. Cinquième édition : 5 novembre 2018. Brussels: La Strada.
- MARPSAT, M., 2009. Les définitions des sans-domicile en Europe : convergences et divergences. In: *Courrier des statistiques*. vol. 126, no 1, pp. 49-58.
- OBSERVATOIRE DE LA SANTÉ ET DU SOCIAL, 2018. Baromètre social 2018. Rapport bruxellois sur l'état de la pauvreté 2018. Brussels: Commission communautaire commune.
- VAUSE, S., 2018. 1997-2017 : un bilan de deux décennies d'immigrations en Belgique. Brussels: Myria.

NOTES

1. The non-profit organisation La Strada has recently joined this new umbrella association in accordance with the directive adopted to reform the homeless sector.
2. The census takes place in early November, just before the start of the winter plan. The "snapshot" obtained therefore reflects the reception solutions available all year round.
3. FEANTSA, 2007. European typology on homelessness and housing exclusion. Available at the following address: https://www.feantsa.org/download/fr___2525022567407186066.pdf.
4. These support services include temporary housing, supported housing and *Housing First* schemes.
5. This time slot has been chosen in order to identify only those who spend the night outdoors due to a lack of housing or accommodation.
6. The use of censuses as a statistical tool has been improved and refined over the years. The partnerships established in 2008 have become deeper and more effective and new data sources have been added gradually. All of this has made it possible to improve the comprehensiveness of the figures collected and to have a broader understanding of the reality in Brussels. However, the steady increase in the number of homeless and inadequately housed people should not be limited to a simple statistical artefact.
7. Professionals generally use the term "hidden homelessness" to refer to this phenomenon, as it is so difficult to assess its extent.

8. This latest census supplements the four previous ones carried out in 2008, 2010, 2014 and 2016 (a census was not conducted in 2012).
 9. Plateforme Citoyenne de Soutien aux Réfugiés, founded in 2014, manages both the accommodation offered by individuals and the accommodation centre at Porte d'Ulysse.
 10. This choice seems to be dictated partly by the federal government's migration policy: given their administrative situation, a substantial proportion of people using emergency accommodation cannot claim social support or a place in a so-called stabilisation structure.
 11. While it is easy to understand the measures taken to prevent the death of people forced to spend the night outside, in reality, it seems to be poorly justified to limit them to the winter periods alone. Existing studies show that winter is not a much riskier season than summer for the homeless [*Collectif Les Morts de la Rue*, 2018: 5].
 12. Housing First consists of “immediate access to housing when coming from the streets, with no other conditions than those which any given tenant is subject to (paying rent and respecting a lease agreement). There is no duty of care or planning; the model is part of an approach to risk reduction.” [Buxant, 2018: 126].
 13. STATBEL, 2019. Risque de pauvreté ou d'exclusion sociale. Available at the address: <https://statbel.fgov.be/fr/themes/menages/pauvrete-et-conditions-de-vie/risque-de-pauvrete-ou-dexclusion-sociale#news>.
-

ABSTRACTS

On 5 November 2018, Centre d'appui au secteur de l'aide aux sans-abri organised the fifth census of homeless and inadequately housed people in the Brussels-Capital Region. The results from this census supplement a study which has been ongoing for ten years. This article presents the methodology used and the main trends observed. It also proposes some elements for analysis which could shed light on the evolution of the phenomenon.

Le 5 novembre 2018, le Centre d'appui au secteur de l'aide aux sans-abri a organisé un cinquième dénombrement des personnes sans-abri et mal logées en Région de Bruxelles-Capitale. Les résultats issus de cette enquête viennent compléter une étude qui s'étale aujourd'hui sur dix ans. Cet article présente la méthodologie employée et les grandes tendances observées. Il propose également quelques éléments d'analyse susceptibles d'éclairer l'évolution du phénomène.

Op 5 november 2018 organiseerde het Steunpunt Thuislozenzorg Brussel een vijfde telling van dak- en thuislozen in het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest. De resultaten van die enquête vullen een studie aan die nu al tien jaar loopt. In dit artikel worden de toegepaste methodologie en de grote vastgestelde tendensen uiteengezet. Het biedt ook enkele analyse-elementen die meer inzicht kunnen geven in de ontwikkeling van het fenomeen.

INDEX

Keywords: social inequalities, housing, poverty, population, associative sector

Subjects: 4. santé – qualité de vie – inégalités sociales

Trefwoorden sociale ongelijkheden, huisvesting, armoede, bevolking, verenigingen

Mots-clés: inégalités sociales, logement, pauvreté, population, secteur associatif

AUTHORS

BENOIT QUITTELIER

Benoît Quittelier has a doctorate in geography and is a researcher with Centre d'appui au secteur de l'aide aux sans-abri. He is in charge of processing data from the different shelters and reception centres.

bquittelier[at]lastrada.brussels

NICOLAS HORVAT

Nicolas Horvat is a researcher with Centre d'appui au secteur de l'aide aux sans-abri. He is in charge of organising the census of homeless and inadequately housed people in the Brussels-Capital Region.

nhorvat[at]lastrada.brussels