

LIVES Impact



© Benoît Tabin

Policy actions aimed at homelessness: half and mini measures

AUTHORS

HÉLÈNE MARTIN, Full professor, Haute école de travail social et de la santé, Lausanne (HETSL), HES-SO

BÉATRICE BERTHO, Scientific collaborator, Haute école de travail social et de la santé, Lausanne (HETSL), HES-SO

'Lockdown' brought to attention the existence of homelessness to people outside professional, activist and welfare circles who were already familiar with it, some of whom had been calling for the development of support measures for many years. The existence of homelessness in Switzerland is not new, but it hardly attracts any attention (Kakpo & Cattacin 2011; Schuway & Knöpfel, 2014; Drilling & al. 2020): for example, Switzerland currently has no official statistics on homelessness nor is there any official definition available. Whilst the field of research on homelessness has been developing in most European countries during the past 40 years or so (Choppin & Gardella, 2013), in Switzerland it is only just beginning. Since 1987, which the UN defined as the international year of shelter for the homeless, the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless ([FEANTSA](#)) has been

a reference point for information and action on homelessness. FEANTSA has developed a typology of homelessness and housing exclusion ([ETHOS](#)) to define and communicate about different «living situations which amount to forms of homelessness across Europe»: a) homelessness consisting of having no shelter of any kind and sleeping rough, b) homelessness with a place to sleep, but of a temporary nature (e.g. institutions), c) access to insecure housing (with a high threat of exclusion due to insecure tenancies, eviction or domestic violence) and finally d) living in inadequate housing (for example, in caravans on illegal campsites, in substandard housing, in conditions of extreme overcrowding).

Research carried out in European countries, referring to one or more of the aforementioned situations of homelessness during the last forty years, has led to a considerable body of knowledge being developed which has allowed different trends to be identified. What does this research tell us and can links be made between the situation in Switzerland and that of its neighbouring countries? ➔

Research trends in EU countries

Unsurprisingly, the review of the literature suggests that different national welfare regimes have a major influence on the causes and nature of homelessness with social security measures capable of reducing homelessness (Busch-Geertsema, Edgar, O'Sullivan, & Pleace, 2010; Mayock, Sheridan, & Parker, 2012; Pleace, 2010). The synthesis of the literature over the past two decades also shows that homelessness in Europe has increased and partly been transformed. While early research had identified local (and male) homelessness as long-term and due to a lack of provision for social problems, recent research highlights the heterogeneity of homelessness situations.

Amongst those people sleeping rough, sleeping in night shelters or residing in insecure or inadequate housing, there are economic migrants from the European Union. These people move to find livelihoods and return to their country of origin after a few years or when the lack of employment opportunities is compounded by homelessness. Within this category, ethnic groups are overrepresented because of vulnerabilities related to racism or immigrant status, in particular due to discrimination in the labour and housing markets, restrictions on access to social assistance and sometimes due to a lack of awareness of migrants' own rights (Pleace, 2010).

Another group of homeless people are those people considered to be 'third country nationals' by EU policies. As a result of the closure of Europe's 'borders' during the 20th century (Blanchard, 2018), these people apply for asylum and are subject to the authorities' unilateral assessment of their motives (Tabin, 2020) or, if they have not received a residence permit or if it has expired, they live illegally on the territory (Edgar, Doherty, & Meert, 2004). Despite some of them having been in undeclared work for years, their access to social benefits is sometimes minimal and sometimes non-existent (Pleace, 2010).

Gender-informed research has furthermore estimated that one-third of homeless people are women (Edgar & Doherty, 2001; Lelubre, 2012), and again the research highlights the variety of such situations. Homeless women outnumber men in some ethnic groups, for example 'Roma' women living in Italy and Moroccan women in Spain (Mostowska & Sheridan, 2016). However, some women have the relative 'advantage' of being referred to more stable accommodation (Loison-Leruste & Perrier 2019; Marpsat, 1999), continuing a history of institutionalising deviant women (Amistini, 2003; O'Sullivan, 2016). Finally, other research points to a tendency among homeless women to use informal networks such as staying with acquaintances, family or living in squats (Marpsat, 1999; Maurin, 2017; Reeve, Goudie, & Casey, 2007), fuelling the 'hidden' (Bretherton, 2017; Löstrand & Quilgars, 2016; Pleace, 2016) and 'transitional' (O'Sullivan, 2016) nature of female homelessness.

And in Switzerland?

In the absence of political definitions, empirical data and final analyses, homelessness in Switzerland is not well known. The results of two ongoing research projects, conducted by the department of social work at the University of North-Western Switzerland and funded by the SNSF¹, will soon make it possible to assess the extent and nature of homelessness in different cities in Switzerland.

In the meantime, local and qualitative data² that we have collected corroborates several findings from the European research. Homeless people in French-speaking Switzerland refers to a heterogeneity of situations. They are men and women of different ages, including children and the elderly, from Switzerland, European countries and so-called 'third countries'. The administrative status of these people creates different vulnerabilities (Martin & Bertho, 2020).

People with a right to reside in Switzerland are theoretically entitled to social assistance benefits, which should in principle prevent homelessness. Reasons for homeless people not accessing social assistance include: lack of documents proving residence in the municipality, reluctance to apply for assistance that is deemed inappropriate, or for those with a residence permit, fear of losing the permit due to the permit renewal condition of not being «permanently and to a large extent dependent on social assistance» (Art. 63 LEI).

Persons without a residence permit in Switzerland, on the other hand, have no right to social assistance. Economic migrants from EU or EFTA countries are obliged to «have sufficient means of subsistence, both for the duration of the intended stay and for the return to the country of origin» ([SEM, «EU and EFTA nationals, including Switzerland, and their family members»](#)). This obligation, which refers to the agreements that the Confederation has signed with the European Community and with EFTA, allows states to adopt legislative provisions encouraging mobility within Europe (in accordance with market logic) without obliging them to assist 'foreign' persons in cases of distress (Tabin, forthcoming).

Finally, homeless people from so-called 'third countries' are subject to different regimes. Those who have applied for ➤

¹ *Homelessness in Switzerland - Extent and Explanations in 8 of the Biggest Cities*, Edited by Prof. Jörg Dittmann and *Exploring Homelessness and Pathways to Social Inclusion: A Comparative Study of Contexts and Challenges in Swiss and Croatian Cities*, edited by Prof. Matthias Drilling.

² What needs do homeless people have? Analysis of the points of view of people, employees, volunteers and homeless people involved in assistance schemes, ([Lausanne et Suisse romande](#)).

asylum in Switzerland and who are unable to support themselves are entitled to minimum emergency social assistance benefits, which are mostly provided in kind and are much lower than social assistance afforded to residents ([art. 81 LAsi](#)). These people may find themselves homeless when the application process has ended, particularly when turned down – an outcome that can already occur at the very beginning of the asylum procedure. Therefore, they may avoid applying for the minimum emergency social assistance because this recourse would force them to participate in their own expulsion from the country. Some of them have been living in Switzerland for years, including by carrying out undeclared work, but in the absence of a residence permit, they are of course not entitled to social assistance.

Others have a visa or residence permit issued by another Schengen member state. According to the Dublin agreements, these persons may stay in Switzerland «for a short stay not exceeding 90 days per period of 180 days», but on condition (amongst other conditions and similarly to European migrants) that they «have sufficient means of subsistence, both for the duration of the intended stay and for the return to the country of origin» ([SEM, Third-country nationals](#)). As they are not entitled to social assistance, these persons also have a limited right to work, subject to proof that no Swiss national or national from an EU or EFTA country has the profile required to occupy the post ([FNIA, chapter 5, section 1, art. 21](#)).

While Article 12 of the Swiss Constitution guarantees a universal right to obtain assistance in situations of distress in the name of human dignity (Cst, Art. 12), this right is not well respected (Tabin, 2005). Moreover, because of federalism, the cantons and municipalities have a great deal of leeway in responding to what they consider as 'situations of distress'. As a result, homeless services, where they exist, vary widely in terms of capacity and access. In the canton of Vaud, for example, only a few towns and cities offer night-time emergency accommodation (for a financial contribution which the authorities consider modest, but which is inaccessible for people without an income). However, due to the fact that the capacity is deliberately kept smaller than the number of people applying for lodgings (Tabin, Knüsel, & Ansermet, 2016), these accommodations favour certain categories (e.g. those with a residence permit or defined as 'vulnerable') or they have an organised turnover (e.g. according to 'ethnic quotas'). In addition, these schemes produce various forms of discomfort that discourage people from using them (limited number of nights, the need to leave in the morning with one's belongings, etc.) (Bertho & Martin, forthcoming). Indeed, measures to address homelessness are usually accompanied by 'deterrent rationales' (Terrolle, 2004 p. 153).

In this context of 'misery management' (Ansermet & Tabin, 2014), actions complementary or even in place of the welfare

state (Lamoureux, 2002) arising from initiatives led by citizens, activists or charities have sometimes been developed to help the people concerned: soup kitchens, volunteer homeless workers, distribution of blankets for people sleeping rough, health care services, squats, etc. (Lamoureux, 2002). These unevenly distributed initiatives, which sometimes have a questionable moral dimension, also have limitations from the point of view of those who carry them out: while they make it possible to improve the survival conditions of homeless people by making up for the lack of resources supported by policies, they also contribute to making these situations of distress less visible and, because they are illegal, also entail risks for the implementers: occupying an empty house to house homeless people is tantamount to "unlawful entry" (art. 186 of the Criminal Code); giving food, pocket money or a bed to a person without a residence permit is illegal according to the Federal Law on Foreigners and Integration (FNIA) of 16 December 2005 (art. 116).

In times of 'coronavirus crisis'

The measures put in place to contain the pandemic in the spring of 2020 disrupted the functioning of the response to homelessness and the living conditions of homeless people. Many associations fighting against precariousness and offering reintegration activities, had to close their doors and suspended all activities during the confinement. The services already in place had to change some of their practices, sometimes in a restrictive manner: in addition to the adoption of measures affecting the general population (respect for distance, wearing of masks, confinement of 'at-risk' populations), organisations had to close some of their common areas (refectories) and relocate some activities outside (e.g. distribution of meals) or increase hygiene measures tenfold (e.g. cleaning of supplies).

However, the professionals, activists and volunteers working with homeless people were also able to put in place measures that they had been calling for in vain for several years from the public authorities. Thanks to private solidarity funds, in particular from [Swiss Solidarity](#), and increased public funding, temporary projects have been realised, albeit very unevenly dispersed from one region to another. Actions have been set up ex nihilo, in particular the opening of collective spaces, supervised by un-trained people recruited on an ad-hoc basis by the army under the framework of civil protection, making it possible to confine people who were living on the street. This unprecedented situation of having sufficient beds in some cities, albeit mostly in collective shelters, has enabled homeless people to avoid bad weather and police checks and actually sleep every night (sleeping rough is a practice Swiss municipalities generally criminalise) for a few weeks. Staff working in the established night shelters, who usually had to throw homeless people out onto the streets every morning, have sometimes been able to provide daytime ➤

shelters. Access to night-time emergency accommodation has also sometimes been provided free of charge. New services were offered, such as midday meals, the possibility of social service follow-up, access to legal services and more health and care facilities. In addition, different measures to move from emergency to transitional housing solutions (studios or flats) have been proposed or developed. One measure worth noting: in the canton of Geneva, a fund of 15 million was approved by vote to compensate undocumented migrants for loss of income, which was challenged by a referendum launched by the Swiss People's Party (SVP) and the Geneva Citizens Movement.

The 'return to the abnormal', as of May 2020, reduced or put an end to several of those aforementioned measures, in particular day-care centres, having a sufficient number of beds and free stays. Admittedly, measures financed are being extended beyond

the lockdown period and the upsurge in the infection rates of the pandemic in the autumn is leading some municipal or cantonal authorities to redeploy some of the measures implemented last spring. Some of these measures, both temporary and experimental, will be evaluated by those who provide them, by those who benefit from them and by the funders. It is feared that most of these measures will eventually be abandoned. Yet, instead of a return to the denial of the problem of homelessness, it would only be right and essential that public action should be developed and sustained to deal with the situations made visible by the 'corona-virus crisis'. ■

References:

- Amistini, Carole. (2003).** Les femmes sans domicile : domination sociale et ambiguïté de la prise en charge. In Patrick Gaboriau & Daniel Terrolle (Eds.), *Ethnologie des sans-logis : étude d'une forme de domination sociale* (pp. 111-145). Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Ansermet, Claire, & Tabin, Jean-Pierre. (2014).** Misère de la gestion de la misère. *Le Sociographe*, 48, 45-55.
- Bertho, Béatrice, & Martin, Hélène. (A paraître).** «An especially thankless work»? Filtering practices in emergency shelters and ethical dilemmas for street-level social workers in Western Switzerland. *Zeitschrift für Sozialreform/Journal of Social Policy Research*.
- Blanchard, Emmanuel. (2018).** La « libre circulation »: retour sur le «monde d'hier». *Plein droit*, 116, 3-7.
- Bretherton, Joanne. (2017).** Reconsidering Gender in Homelessness. *European Journal of Homelessness*, 11(1), 1-22.
- Busch-Geertsema, Volker, Edgar, William, O'Sullivan, Eoin, & Pleace, Nicholas. (2010).** Homelessness and Homeless Policies in Europe: Lessons from Research. Brussels: Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities.
- Choppin, Katia, & Gardella, Édouard. (2013).** Les sciences sociales et le sans-abrisme. Recension bibliographique de langue française 1987-2012. Saint-Étienne: Université de Saint-Étienne.
- Edgar, Bill, Doherty, J, & Meert, H. (2004).** Immigration and Homelessness in Europe. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Edgar, Bill, & Doherty, Joe. (2001).** La femme sans-abri en Europe : parcours, services et expériences. Bruxelles: Feantsa.
- Lamoureux, Henri. (2002).** Le danger d'un détournement de sens: Portée et limites du bénévolat. *Nouvelles pratiques sociales*, 152, 77-86.
- Lelubre, Marjorie (2012).** La féminisation du sans-abrisme bruxellois : une évolution à mieux définir. *Brussels Studies*, 62.
- Loison-Leruste, Marie, & Perrier, Gwenaëlle. (2019).** Les trajectoires des femmes sans domicile à travers le prisme du genre : entre vulnérabilité et protection. *Déviance et société*, 43(1), 77-100.
- Löstrand, Cecilia Hansen, & Quilgars, Deborah. (2016).** Cultural Images and Definitions of Homeless Women: Implications for Policy and Practice at the European Level. In Paola Mayock & Joanne Bretherton (Eds.), *Women's Homelessness in Europe* (pp. 41-73). Dublin: Palgrave macmillan.
- Marpas, Maryse. (1999).** Un avantage sous contrainte : le risque moindre pour les femmes de se trouver sans abri. *Population*, 54(6), 885-932.
- Martin, Hélène, & Bertho, Béatrice. (2020).** Crimes et châtements dans la modernité tardive. *Politiques urbaines du sans-abrisme. Sciences et actions sociales*, 13.
- Maurin, Marine. (2017).** Femmes sans abri : vivre la ville la nuit. Représentations et pratiques. *Les Annales de la recherche urbaine*, 112, 138-149.
- Mayock, P., Sheridan, S., & Parker, S. (2012).** Migrant Women and Homelessness: The Role of Gender-based Violence. *European Journal of Homelessness*, 6, 1, 59-82, 6(1), 59-82.
- Mostowska, Magdalena, & Sheridan, Sarah. (2016).** Migrant Women and Homelessness. In Paola Mayock & Joanne Bretherton (Eds.), *Women's homelessness in Europe* (pp. 235-263). Dublin: Palgrave macmillan.
- O'Sullivan, Eoin. (2016).** Women's Homelessness: A Historical Perspective. In Paola Mayock & Joanne Bretherton (Eds.), *Women's homelessness in Europe* (pp. 15-40). Dublin: Palgrave macmillan.
- Pleace, Nicholas. (2010).** Immigration and Homelessness. In Bill Edgar & Joe Doherty (Eds.), *Homelessness Research in Europe* (pp. 143-162). Brussels: Feantsa.
- Pleace, Nicholas. (2016).** Exclusion by Definition: the Under-representation of Woman in European Homelessness Statistics. In Paola Mayock & Joanne Bretherton (Eds.), *Women's Homelessness in Europe* (pp. 105-126). Dublin: Palgrave macmillan.
- Reeve, Kesia, Goudie, Rosalind, & Casey, Rionach. (2007).** Homeless Women : Homelessness Careers, Homelessness Landscapes. London: Crisis.
- Tabin, Jean-Pierre. (2005).** L'article 12 de la Constitution fédérale : une « dignité » à géométrie variable. In Walter Schmid & Ueli Tecklenburg (Eds.), *Vivre dignement? L'aide sociale suisse en question. Une publication pour le 100e anniversaire de la Conférence suisse des institutions d'action sociale (CSIAS)* (pp. 133-142). Luzern: Caritas-Verlag.
- Tabin, Jean-Pierre. (2020).** Postface. In Anne-Cécile Leyvraz, Raphaël Rey, Damian Rosset, & Robin Stünzi (Eds.), *Asile et abus. Regards pluridisciplinaires sur un discours dominant* (pp. 253-261). Zurich et Genève: Seismo.
- Tabin, Jean-Pierre. (A paraître).** Le côté obscur de l'Etat social. *Almanach social 2021 de Caritas suisse*.
- Tabin, Jean-Pierre, Knüsel, René, & Ansermet, Claire. (2016).** Lutter contre les pauvres. Les politiques face à la mendicité dans le canton de Vaud. Lausanne: Editions d'en Bas.
- Terrolle, Daniel. (2004).** La ville dissuasive : l'envers de la solidarité avec les SDF. *Espaces et sociétés, Espaces et sociétés*(116-117), 143-157.

LIVES Impact (ISSN: 2297-6124) publishes regularly policy-relevant research findings from studies conducted at the LIVES Centre. It is published in three languages (French, German and English) and is sent to decision-makers in public administration, politics and non-governmental organizations, mostly in Switzerland.

In response to the current health crisis, **LIVES impact** launches Special Issues which are aimed at providing useful guidance and policy-relevant insights from the perspective of both the life course as well as more broadly behavioural and social sciences.

Special issues editors: Pascal Maeder, HES-SO & LIVES Centre (pascal.maeder@hes-so.ch)

Archives: www.centre-lives.ch/impact

Centre LIVES, Université de Lausanne, Bâtiment Géopolis, CH-1015 Lausanne, www.centre-lives.ch, T +41 21 692 38 71, ktt@lives-ncrc.ch