

Hidden homelessness : a state of the art and avenues for additional inquiry

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Within Europe, a shared transnational framework for defining homelessness and housing exclusion is provided by the European Typology of Homelessness and housing exclusion (ETHOS). ETHOS classifies living situations that constitute homelessness or housing exclusion and divides them into 13 (ETHOS) or 6 (ETHOS Light) operational categories that can be used for mapping homelessness, as well as for developing, monitoring and evaluating policies. Public policies and services for homeless often focus on the roofless and the houseless (ETHOS Light category 1 to 3). However, the concept of homelessness refers to other living situations than sleeping rough or staying in shelters. A large group of people who experience homelessness stay out of sight of social services, policy makers and researchers, namely those living temporarily with family/friends or in non-conventional housing. The situation of these 'hidden homeless' is not visible, not in the street or in shelters, nor in official homelessness statistics.

Internationally, there is no consensus yet concerning the definition of hidden homelessness, nor regarding the most valid and reliable methods to measure and monitor hidden homelessness. This is to an important degree due to the methodological challenges that research on hidden homelessness meets following the invisible character of the phenomenon. Notwithstanding methodological challenges, researchers into homelessness agree that more studies ought to be carried out focusing on hidden homelessness. Firstly, hidden homelessness ought to be studied because it represents a situation of severe housing insecurity. Secondly, informal sheltering plays a key role in keeping many people off the streets and keeping down the number of people who ask for a public shelter. Thirdly, researchers hypothesize that the strategy for dealing with housing needs that results in hidden homelessness is employed more often by particular groups such as youngsters, women and families, and immigrants. It is not unlikely to assume that people living in a situation of hidden homelessness differ in important ways from homeless living in shelters. A better understanding of hidden homelessness and the support structures hidden homeless use will be an important link in preventing homelessness and the development of more adequate support.

In this paper, we present the results of a scoping review on hidden homelessness, as an integrated part of a larger study on hidden homelessness in Brussels, Belgium. In the broader study, we aim to gain insight into the diversity of living situations, needs and informal strategies of hidden homeless people in Brussels and the role that informal support practices play in the support of hidden homeless. As hidden homelessness has not been widely studied, the scoping review gives a clear indication of the volume of available theoretical and empirical studies on hidden homelessness. After presenting an analysis of the existing body of knowledge, we identify a number of avenues for additional inquiry in this field and we highlight the importance of these insights for social work research and practice.

Links to the following subtheme of the conference: Social work and homelessness (stream B.3)