



# Rough Sleepers Have Their Reasons

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## WHY DO SOME ROUGH SLEEPERS REFUSE ACCOMMODATION?

It's true, there are those who refuse services intended to help them. The problem comes crashing into the limelight when, during periods of extreme cold weather, some rough sleepers put their lives at risk by doing so. Refusals of this sort often come from those people who are clearly in greatest need. Services have also been approved and set up for them over the past thirty or so years and are expected to deal with problems labelled "social crises" and "extreme exclusion". This observation attracts extensive press coverage. By contrast, the reasons why these people refuse help are very rarely examined in detail.

Services come across this refusal and rejection of accommodation on a daily basis. In Paris, but also in numerous other towns in France and in Europe, mobile outreach units, like the *Samu Sociaux*, and specialist prevention or volunteer teams providing street-based services for homeless people in areas of the city, are confronted every day with rough sleepers who decline, in sometimes less than delicate terms, help that is offered to them. They might say yes to a coffee, a blanket or a meal, but they refuse to go into an emergency hostel or to get into a vehicle that might take them to one. Often, among those people found dead on the street are rough sleepers who had already come into contact with services several times, even in the hours immediately before their death. But each time they refused the offer of accommodation.

## USING A SOCIOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK TO UNDERSTAND THESE REFUSALS

Traditional sociological theory can allow us to explore the hypothesis of this behaviour, which on the face of it seems absurd, being rational. Let us dispel straight away a mistaken assumption, that has been disproven many times and yet reused as many times: we should not try to say that all homeless people are always reasonable individuals; instead we need to ask, methodologically, what makes sense for rough sleepers as social actors.

This 'rationalist' perspective is not limited to instrumental rationality and is not about simply working out what rough sleepers expected to gain from their actions. Just as for other social actors, the explanation of rough sleepers' behaviour must take other types of rationality into account. The work of Raymond Boudon, following on from Max Weber's analysis, distinguishes instrumental, bounded, cognitive and axiological dimensions of rationality.

In their daily life, rough sleepers (like every one of us, in fact) have specific goals: (*instrumental rationality*): accessing a service structure, receiving a service. It is also important to remember that rough sleepers have to decide where to go, where to ask for services, where to find a place to rest in a service landscape that not even the authorities know the full makeup of. Their choices can therefore not be about real utility maximisation, but rather are about looking for a solution that is good enough (*bounded rationality*). Rough sleepers are faced with a lack of information, that's clear, but above all they find themselves in situations where there is no simple way out of. They have to come up with theories to explain the situation they are in and to try to get out of it. In order to decide on daily activities and perhaps more long-term strategies, they need to come up with beliefs. They have to stick to these beliefs and, in sticking to them, understand what they have them for (*cognitive rationality*). Lastly, like all other social actors, rough sleepers have opinions, ideas and values. These lead them to make reasoned choices – which can sometimes be misunderstood (for example refusing accommodation in order to preserve one's dignity more than one's safety) – in their contacts with accommodation-providing services (*axiological rationality*).

All in all, believing that rough sleepers have needs, but also ideas and principles, means seeing them as real social actors. This premise allows a real understanding of rough sleepers' realities, that goes deeper than approaches limited to identifying mental illnesses, 'desocialisation' or a specific sub-culture.

The rationality premise is a humanist perspective that does not make rough sleepers out to be completely dominated agents with such a limited ability to act that it is not worth studying in detail anyway. A premise of this sort recognises that people thought to be 'in greatest difficulty' should also have the greatest dignity. As such, it links up with the aims of many campaigners for an end to extreme poverty.

## OTHER REASONS FOR REFUSAL

Analysis of rough sleepers' refusal of accommodation services usually falls back on cursory explanations that make reference to rough-sleeper behaviour as associated with mental illnesses specific to their situation. It is alleged that people refuse accommodation because they have issues like not being able to imagine the benefits that they could gain from different services. This explanation of course has its benefits in pathological terms but it seems lacking because it cannot be the explanation for every situation, far from it.

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It is useful to think seriously about the contexts behind these refusals, and listen to the reasons rough sleepers give to explain them. These reasons, given by rough sleepers or by those who help them, can be very varied: violence in hostels, inflexible rules, not being able to participate in the community, lack of information, humiliation, etc.

Not accepting help can thus be explained by reasons that have nothing to do with mental illness. Homeless people have their reasons, in the opinion of past or potential users of the services, and they also talk about them quite freely when they are asked about them.

Some rough sleepers refuse accommodation because they fear the consequences of going into an emergency hostel: being separated from their partner, violence at night, detection by the police. This is *instrumental rationality*: the refusals are understandable because they have their uses.

What's more, most rough sleepers have a regular routine and have reasons for following it in their daily life. The activities and plans that they have set out for themselves can clash with the services offered and provided by the state. Leaving an area where you have put down roots carries the risk of not being able to be accepted there again or find belongings left behind there. This is *bounded rationality*, those concerned cannot know exactly what is going to happen.

We must also realise that rough sleepers, who have been dealing with a difficult situation for several years, have preferences, ideas and beliefs that have developed over time. Having realised how useless or even dangerous is it to use certain services, they can develop a reasoned argument based on theories that are very critical of the service system. Taking this *cognitive dimension of rationality* into account means giving rough sleepers the status of social actors capable of analysing, whilst still not having complete control over, their experiences.

Lastly, it is important to remember that rough sleepers will have ideas and goals - of course - but they also have values. Not wanting to be at close quarters with lots of other people, wanting to preserve their dignity, not wishing to be identified, even after years, as a rough sleeper, are elements of an *axiological ration-*

*ality* that allow us to understand why they do not seek help from support services or why they send outreach teams away. At the end of the day, not seeking help, refusing and rejecting services can stem from completely rational choices.

Even if rough sleepers have their reasons not to ask for or accept help from services and accommodation providers does not mean they are right to do so. The aim of this article is just to understand why they may do so.

## ACTUALLY TWO SEPARATE PROBLEMS

What can be done? This is not such a complicated issue as it seems. There are really just two different problems that emerge and that warrant different responses.

*Mental illness.* Some street homeless people – as commentators invariably point out – have serious mental illnesses. They are incapable of taking stock of their situation. A situation that will not get better while they are on the street. Probably what is needed for them – the difficulty being distinguishing them from the others – is to look again at protocols for compulsory admission to hospital or hospitalisation at the request of a third party, so that they enter the service system in an appropriate way. It is pointless to complain about rough sleepers and their mental health problems, as has been done for years. If it is the case that they have mental health needs, we must act and protect them. For this to happen, enforcement will be necessary.

*Inappropriate service provision.* It can't be denied, many homeless people feel that hostel services are not for them. This can be because of poor hygiene, very high populations and little privacy or a real possibility of danger. The billions of euros that have been spent and are still being spent on emergency accommodation and its improvement over many years would greatly benefit from being looked at again... We must be able to do better.

All these issues are clearly sensitive and complicated. Still, they can be easily summed up in these two situations. In both cases, it seems inappropriate not to think that some form of compulsion, or at least of guidance, is necessary. Not admitting this characteristic of a dangerous form of wishful thinking.