

Accompanying People Until the End: Caring for the Lives, Deaths, and Memories



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Living on the street severely damages health, accelerates ageing and shortens lives. Drawing on the experience of Arrels Fundació in Barcelona, this article examines how people experiencing homelessness are supported through illness, end-of-life care and death. It argues that accompaniment must extend beyond healthcare to include dignity, personal choice, grief and remembrance. Public memorial practices also play a vital role in making visible lives too often erased from collective memory.

In the city of Barcelona, nearly 2,000 people are currently sleeping rough. Their daily lives, exposed to the elements, involve far more than simply lacking a roof over their heads: it means having lost resources, trust, safety, social ties, health, and rights. It is a situation of permanent strain that affects both the person and their health. When you live on the street, it is difficult to sleep and rest properly. You must remain constantly alert and keep moving in order to shower, eat and access basic services. You are more exposed to violence and less likely to seek medical care.

At Arrels, we know this because for four decades we have been supporting people experiencing homelessness and going out onto the streets of the city to meet them. We also know it because, over recent years, people themselves have shared their situations and needs with us through surveys.

On average, people sleeping rough in Barcelona are 43 years old and have spent 4 years and 5 months living on the streets. More than half struggle to rest during the day and are unable to eat hot meals; more than 80% have experienced physical and/or verbal violence; and many have no healthcare coverage beyond emergency services. Four in ten people living on the streets rate their health negatively, whereas among the city's population as a whole this figure does not exceed 20%.

The longer someone lives on the street, the more their health deteriorates and the faster ageing processes accelerate. In fact, people sleeping rough in Barcelona have an average life expectancy of 58 years – 25 years less than the rest of the city's residents.

When we talk about death and homelessness, we are not speaking only about the final days of life. We are speaking about life trajectories marked by exclusion, loss of rights and ongoing exhaustion that often accelerates processes of frailty. The people we support at Arrels experience the physical, cognitive, and emotional signs of ageing earlier in life. Many live with chronic illnesses, mental health problems, ongoing substance use, and cognitive deterioration that are often worsened by difficulties accessing and maintaining continuity of care within the healthcare system.

Support from Beginning to End

At Arrels, we build relationships with people living on the streets and accompany them from the moment we meet them until they pass away. Our model of care involves providing holistic support, respecting each person's pace and decisions, avoiding imposing choices on them and enabling them to decide for themselves until the very end.

We work from a harm reduction perspective, placing the person at the centre when supporting situations of fragile health and offering assistance in everyday matters so that they can maintain a certain degree of autonomy. We do this in many ways: for example, by fostering and supporting the relationship between the person and the healthcare system, helping with daily activities such as showering or remembering medication, respecting people's decisions during medical and recovery processes, visiting people in hospital or supporting those who move into residential care homes for older people.

With people we support directly on the streets, this becomes more difficult. However, when we can guarantee accommodation, support related to health and end-of-life care offers many more possibilities.

Having access to a stable accommodation facilitates rest, continuous access to healthcare and stronger relationships with professional support teams. It also allows us to address, more calmly, issues that often remain invisible when someone is living on the street: talking about what they would like to happen if their health deteriorates, whether they would like to say goodbye to someone or contact someone, or what they would like to happen to their belongings.

These are delicate, intimate, and profound conversations that form part of accompaniment and reflect a way of caring grounded in respect and in the right to make decisions about one's own life until the very end.

The Right to Be Remembered: sharing grief, raising awareness and making reality visible

The deaths of people experiencing homelessness whom we support at Arrels often come unexpectedly. Some people pass away after periods of deterioration during which we are able to be present and accompany them. Others die suddenly, due to illnesses not detected in time, situations of violence or the accumulated exhaustion caused by having to survive on the streets.

We never tire of saying that having to live on the street is not normal — and dying on the street even less so. When this happens, our feelings of helplessness and injustice are immense. Even more so when the death

is classified as “natural causes”. It is difficult to speak of a natural death when someone has spent years living on the streets, in extreme conditions, without basic rights and exposed to violence and the elements.

At Arrels, staff and volunteers try to ensure that end-of-life support is not focused solely on death itself, but also on how the person has been able to live through this final stage of life. Despite the fragility of the situation, we want them to have experienced moments of safety, to have had someone by their side, and for their wishes and rights to have been acknowledged.

For us, accompanying someone in death means maintaining until the very end the relationship we built with that person. We do this in hospitals and recovery centres, in housing or care homes, and directly on the streets.

The solitary funeral of someone we had accompanied during their lifetime deeply affected us and led us to create internal protocols to ensure this would never happen again. Because everyone has the right to be buried and mourned in the company of others.

In this context, 2009 marked a turning point for Arrels in supporting people experiencing homelessness at the end of their lives in Barcelona.

Over time, and inspired by other European initiatives, we realised that this grief also needed to be shared collectively and that this reality had to be made visible. Since 2016, every autumn we have organised a public memorial to remember the people experiencing homelessness who died during the previous year and to denounce the fact that having to live on the streets damages health and shortens lives.

We hold the memorial in a central square in the city. We place a pair of shoes for each person we remember and read out their full names; there is also music and white roses in remembrance. It is an open, community-based space that brings together people experiencing homelessness, volunteers and staff from Arrels, social organisations from across the city, and members of the public. It is at once a tribute, a space for mourning, and an act of denunciation.

Why is this so important to us? Because there are usually no farewell rituals for people who have lived on the streets. Relationships with family

and social networks have often been broken, and there are no spaces in which to share grief and dignity. That is why we defend the right to be remembered as a right that is too often violated.

Over the past ten years, we have publicly remembered more than 600 people who had experienced homelessness in Barcelona and who have since then passed away. These are deaths we could not prevent, but we have tried to ensure that they do not disappear into oblivion and that they continue to challenge us as a society.

Remembering people experiencing homelessness who have died means asking ourselves how we want to care for one another as a society and what it means that someone grows old and dies as a consequence of life on the streets.

No one should die homeless and alone. Nor should anyone die without being remembered.