Homelessness Merely an Urban Phenomenon? Exploring Hidden Homelessness in Rural Belgium

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❯ **Abstract_** *Rural homelessness is hardly studied and minimally understood. The available studies as well as practical experience of homelessness charities show that rural homelessness is a reality and that it concerns hidden homelessness, referring to people living temporarily with family/friends or in non-conventional housing. This study aims to explore rural homelessness in Flanders based on an analysis of client files of five more rural public centres for social welfare (PCSW), and by interviewing field workers and homeless persons in this area. Based on using the ETHOS Light typology to analyse 953 client files, we identified that 1 out of 13 clients of these local social services is homeless. More than half of them are hidden homeless. Additional interviews with hidden homeless persons and social workers point to their vulnerable and unstable living situation and relationships. We identify additional barriers for hidden homeless to seek professional help. Based on this explanatory analysis, we recommend a strong research focus on rural (and hidden) homelessness.*

❯ **Keywords_** *Rural homelessness, hidden homelessness, social assistance clients*

Introduction

Traditionally homelessness is mainly depicted as an urban phenomenon (Waegemaekers Schiff *et al.,* 2016; Snelling, 2017). Rough sleepers are mainly visible in cities and services for the homeless are especially situated in urban areas. As a consequence, the concept of urban homelessness dominates policy as well as research agendas. Yet, more and more homelessness charities and organizations (e.g. Robinson and Coward, 2003; Snelling, 2017) as well as empirical studies (e.g. First *et al.,* 1994; Cloke *et al.,* 2000; Argent and Rolley, 2006) point to the emergence and prevalence of rural homelessness. In addition, these studies demonstrate that a considerable amount of rural homelessness concerns hidden homelessness, referring to people living temporarily with family/friends or in non-conventional housing.

Hidden homelessness is often considered as a first step into homelessness, before contact with shelters and other types of social care (Robinson and Coward, 2003). This makes these homeless people rather invisible or 'hidden', not only for the wider public but also for social services. Recent British data (e.g. Snelling, 2017) demonstrate the size as well as the vulnerability of the rural and hidden homeless persons. They report an average of 1.3 homeless people in every 1 000 households to be homeless in predominantly rural municipalities. Housing in the countryside is above all lacking for single people and small households (Snelling, 2017).

Similar to most European countries, available data on homelessness in Belgium mainly focus on larger cities (e.g. the Brussels street count carried out by La Strada) or on the use of residential or floating services for the homeless (e.g. the baseline measurement in Flanders by Meys and Hermans, 2014). Little is known about the presence of homeless persons among the users of the Public Centers for Social Welfare, which are present in each Belgian municipality and are responsible for the organisation and implementation of social aid and the granting of the minimum income scheme.

This explorative study is part of the MEHOBEL-Measuring Homelessness in Belgium- project, financed by the Belgian Federal Public Planning Service Science Policy. The two-fold research question is: *Are there homeless people amongst the clients of Public Centers for Social Welfare in more rural municipalities? If so, how can their situation of homelessness be characterized?*

Definition, Nature and Profile of Rural and Hidden Homelessness

Defining homelessness with ETHOS Light

The development of the ETHOS typology[1] in 2005 by FEANTSA[2] has been a great step forward in developing a common European language to define homelessness. At the 2010 European Consensus Conference, stakeholders and the European Commission agreed on the ETHOS definition for homelessness and housing exclusion. The ETHOS framework does not refer to individuals but to living situations and distinguishes four living circumstances as homelessness or extreme forms of housing exclusion: roofless, houseless, insecure housing and inadequate housing. In spite of the criticism that the framework is grounded in a rather static approach on the nature of homelessness (e.g. Amore, Baker, Howden-Chapman, 2011) and that interpretation of certain categories differ between countries (Busch-Geertsema, Benjaminsen, Hrast, & Pleace, 2014), it can be a convincing tool to stimulate coordinated national policy developments (Edgar, 2012).. On behalf of the measurement of homelessness at EU level as part of the Census 2011, a light version of ETHOS (see Table 1) was developed in 2007.

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[1] European Typology of Housing and Social exclusion

[2] European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless

Table 1. The ETHOS Light typology

Operational category		Living situation		Definition
1	People living rough	1	Public space/external space	Living in the streets or public spaces without shelter that can be defined as living quarters
2	People in emergency accommodation	2	Overnight shelters	People with no place of usual residence who move frequently between various types of accommodation
3	People living in accommodation for the homeless	3	Homeless hostels	Where the period of stay is less than one year
		4	Temporary accommodation	
		5	Transitional supported accommodation	
		6	Women's shelter or refuge accommodation	
4	People living in institutions	7	Health care institutions	Stay longer than needed due to lack of housing
		8	Penal institutions	No housing available prior to release
5	People living in non-conventional dwellings due to lack of housing	9	Mobile homes	Where the accommodation is used due to a lack of housing and is not the person's usual place of residence
		10	Non-conventional buildings	
		11	Temporary structures	
6	Homeless people living temporarily in conventional housing with family and friends (due to lack of housing)	12	Conventional housing, but not the person's usual place of residence	Where the accommodation is used due to a lack of housing and is not the person's usual place of residence

ETHOS Light focuses on the categories of rooflessness and houselessness and partially redefines them. Categories concerning inadequate and insecure housing are not included in this ETHOS Light version. This has several advantages for the measurement of homelessness (Pleace and Bretherton, 2013). The focus on roof-lessness and houselessness is more manageable, for practical reasons as well as for budget expenditure. Furthermore 'hidden homelessness' (ETHOS Light 5 people living in non-conventional dwelling due to lack of housing and ETHOS Light 6 people living temporarily in conventional housing with family and friends due to lack of housing) is more explicitly mentioned in ETHOS Light. However ETHOS Light, similar to ETHOS, does not account for the dynamics of the living situations of the homeless person. In addition, ETHOS Light doesn't take into account the situation of people living under the threat of eviction, a group often considered crucial for homelessness prevention strategies (for example in the Flemish Integrated plan against Homelessness 2017-2019; Hermans, 2017).

Rural homelessness

Most of the available studies on rural homelessness originates from the United States, Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom and a significant amount of this research is dated (Sloan *et al.,* 2015). As data collection on homelessness is often

service based and specific services for homeless are lacking in more rural communities, accurate measurement of rural homelessness is a challenge. In addition, homelessness is often marginalised within local policy discourses and rural poverty and housing needs are taken as proxy indicators (Cloke *et al.,* 2000; Waegemakers Shiff *et al.,* 2015). An interesting recent report from the UK does calculate rural homelessness in England, describing how in 2015-2016 6 270 families across England's 91 predominantly rural local authorities were accepted as unintentionally homeless and in priority need, an average of 1.3 homeless in every 1 000 households (Snelling, 2017). Even though this number is still lower than the 2.79 for every 1 000 in predominantly urban areas, the report shows homelessness to be on the rise in the rural areas in England.

Reasons for homelessness are similar in rural and urban areas including ending of tenancy, relationship breakdown, family conflict, domestic abuse, losing a source of income and the cyclical nature of mental illness, substance abuse and housing issues (Cloke *et al.,* 2000; Thrane *et al.,* 2006; Waegemakers Shiff *et al.,* 2015). Some studies report that rural homeless persons are more likely to be homeless because of economic reasons than because of mental illness and drug and alcohol abuse (First *et al.,* 1994; Cummins *et al.,* 1998). Cloke and colleagues (2001) point out that housing-related factors such as mortgage arrears and loss of rented accommodation are a much more important cause of rural homelessness (46% of rural homelessness cases and 28% in urban cases; Cloke *et al.,* 2001). For single people and small households, affordable housing is lacking in more rural communities (Cloke *et al.,* 2001; Snelling, 2017; Waegemakers Schiff *et al.,* 2015).

Rural homelessness is reported to have **distinct dynamics,** such as more difficult access to services and lack of specialist homeless services (Jones *et al.,* 2014), increasing the likelihood that the needs of the rural homeless are not met. Cloke and colleagues (2000) who questioned local authorities in rural England depict their spatial practices such as relocating homeless households by pushing the location of homelessness support into nearby towns. Emergency accommodation is only provided in the largest towns of a district. Another characteristic for rural communities, reported by Australian researchers (Argent and Rolley, 2006), is "the community grapevine" or the easy passing on of personal information (such as drug use, mental illness or behaviour problems) between community gatekeepers. As a potential result, studies report how rural homeless remain longer in abusive homes before seeking help than their urban counterparts (Thrane *et al.,* 2006).

Even though a few interesting studies have been carried out on the topic, country specific research narrowly focused on a specific locality is hard to generalize (Waegemakers Shiff *et al.,* 2015). The definition as well as a broader interpretation

of what rurality entails should be kept in mind when studying rural homelessness, not overlooking the specific aspects of the rural area such as tourism and climate and the more general economic situation and social security provision.

Hidden homelessness

'Hidden homelessness' refers to persons who are provisionally accommodated (Eberle *et al.,* 2009). Provisionally accommodated can mean to live temporarily with family/friends due to lack of housing (ETHOS Light 6) or living in non-conventional dwellings due to lack of housing (such as a squat, a garage, ETHOS Light 5). Hidden homeless individuals lack the privacy of an own home and have no legal rights to occupancy. As hidden homeless people often don't make use of services, and homeless counts tend to be service based, the size of this group is hard to measure. Some studies try to estimate the number of hidden homeless and report daily numbers as high as 9 196 in Metro Vancouver (Eberle *et al.,* 2009) or 12 500 hidden homeless persons in London, which is a number 13 times higher than the number of rough sleepers (London Assembly Housing Committee, 2017).

Some studies suggest that in rural areas people are more likely to depend on family/friends (Robinson and Coward, 2003; Trella and Hilton, 2014; Snelling, 2017). Turning to friends and family is a self-evident first step when ending up homeless and most homeless people do not turn to shelters until they have completely exhausted their social networks (Shinn *et al.,* 1991). 'Couch surfing' or turning towards a non-conventional dwelling can be the most convenient option as well as the result of the (un)availability and dislike of other options. Formal shelters can be unavailable in the vicinity, people are not aware of their existence or have negative experiences or perceptions towards shelters (Robinson and Coward, 2003; McLoughlin, 2013). Hidden homeless people may not necessarily identify themselves as homeless or fear the stigma of being labelled homeless (McLoughlin, 2013). More than in cities, people perceive stigma due to the close-knit nature of rural communities and the 'cultures of rurality' (Cloke *et al.,* 2000).

Only very few studies focus on the **socio-demographics**. These report slightly more males and a largely single or divorced group (Robinson and Coward, 2003; Crawley *et al.,* 2013). Another often mentioned subgroup who is believed not to approach local authorities for homeless support and find shelter with friends/family are youngsters (Robinson and Coward, 2003; Distasio *et al.,* 2005; Milbourne and Cloke, 2006; Curry *et al.,* 2017). Other studies point out that women and families more often rely on informal networks for support as they fear the 'roughness' of shelters (Edgar and Doherty, 2001; Robinson and Coward, 2003; Baptista, 2010). Immigrants too are reported to fall back on their social network when looking for a place to stay (Robinson and Coward, 2003; Fiedler *et al.,* 2006).

Studies that focus on young people report how they leave their homes as a consequence of overcrowding, difficult relationships with a parent or stepparents, violence and abuse and/or a family context with alcohol, drug use or mental illness (McLoughlin, 2013). Leaving their family home is a short-term tactic as well as a coping strategy, as youngsters try to avoid social isolation (McLoughlin, 2013).

Qualitative research depicts less positive experiences of hidden homeless. Young people interviewed by McLoughlin (2013) rarely felt 'at home' in their couch surfing households. In what the author calls "a cycle of uncertainty and discomfort", people tend to minimize their presence and impact. As a consequence, hidden homeless tend to move from one couch to another (Robinson and Coward, 2003; McLoughlin, 2013).

The Public Centers for Social Welfare and their Services for Homeless People

For Belgium, no data exist on rural homelessness. To obtain a first idea on its presence in Flanders, we focus on the Public Centres for Social Welfare (PCSW)[3]. PCSW is an interesting starting point to study the topic of rural homelessness as these social services provide social assistance in all of the 589 Belgian municipalities. Specific homeless organizations are mostly available in cities and larger municipalities, yet PCSW will be the only social organization present in a large number of (more) rural municipalities.

The role and organization of the PCSW is defined by the Federal PCSW Act of 8 July 1976, stating that everyone is entitled to social assistance to realise human dignity and that in every municipality, a separate public body has to provide these services. The right to social assistance includes various types of support such as minimum income, debt counselling, legal advice, medical assistance for undocumented migrants, psychological and social support, guidance to socio-cultural activities, etc. Some larger PCSW set up additional services such as homes for the elderly, cleaning services, early child care, hospitals, etc. In addition, the PCSW are responsible for the implementation of the social assistance law which is grounded in a work first approach (law concerning the right to social integration).

The PCSW also provide specific help to the homeless. For this they use the original definition provided by the Federal Act of May 26th 2002 concerning the right on social integration. A significant number of PCSW have their own emergency and social housing stock. PCSW also have a legal role in the prevention of judicial evictions and provide housing benefits. They can also grant a reference address to

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[3]   In Flanders: Openbaar Centrum voor Maatschappelijk Welzijn (OCMW); In Wallonia: Centre Public d'Action Sociale (CPAS).

persons who no longer have an official address. As information on client's housing situation in PCSW is only available in (written) social reports and not in (countable) PCSW registration, the proportion of homeless amongst their clients remains unknown. Furthermore, it is unknown how many homeless people are in contact with PCSW. In Flanders, the first homelessness measurement study shows that 16% of the users of night shelters, 32% of the users of residential centres and 25% of users of local emergency housing hold a social assistance benefit (Meys and Hermans, 2014). As PCSW offers more than just these social assistance benefits, a number of homeless persons will be in contact with a PCSW for another type of help (e.g. a reference address or budget counselling). As the measurement study by Meys and Hermans (2014) is service based, it does not include homeless persons who are not in contact with homeless services or PCSW.

There is almost no international research available on the housing situation of social assistance users even though the link between housing and poverty has been well documented. Poverty and low income prevent people from accessing potential housing options and make others hard to sustain. In this not only housing cost, but also its quality and location are of importance.

Methodology

The first part of the two-fold research question *Are there homeless amongst the clients of Public Centers for Social Welfare in more rural municipalities?* is answered by an analysis of client files in five more rural PCSW in Flanders. To be able to answer the second part of the research question *How can their situation of homelessness be characterized?* additional interviews took place with other field workers and with (recent) hidden homeless individuals.

To study homelessness in a 'more rural' context, an in-depth exploratory study was carried out in five PCSW in neighbouring municipalities in Flanders. The European Commission uses a typology that identifies three degrees of urbanisation: predominantly rural, intermediate, predominantly urban. In Flanders, the intermediate category is the most common degree of urbanisation.

Analysis of client files in five more rural PCSW in Flanders4

The focus on Flanders is mainly out of practical reasons and the different organization of social services for the homeless between Flanders and Wallonia. In these five municipalities, the PCSW is the main provider of social support. In 4 municipali-

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4 This part of the MEHOBEL project was carried out by the first two authors of this paper. The first author is a research assistant, the second a research expert, both are experienced in qualitative homelessness studies.

ties, no specific homeless services are available. In one municipality, the only available homeless service is a women's shelter and a floating housing support service operated by a non-profit general welfare center. In three municipalities, the PCSW is the only available general welfare service. Table 2 provides some basic information for the municipalities included.

Table 2. Characteristics of the municipalities included in the study

	Diest	Scherpenheuvel-Zichem	Bekkevoort	Glabbeek	Tienen
Inhabitants on 01.01.2017	23 612	22 924	6 134	5 326	34 365
Inhabitants/km²	395	441	159	195	448
EU classification urbanisation	Intermediate	Intermediate	Intermediate	Intermediate	Intermediate
Average rent	€ 500	€ 522.6	€ 574	€ 594.4	€ 525

All five municipalities included in this study can be classified as intermediate rural. In three municipalities, the average rent is above the Flemish average of € 543.50, the other two have a rent below the Flemish average (Tratsaert, 2012).

The researchers contacted the head of the social service of the five PCSW by email and telephone. The goal of the study (to gain a better view on homelessness in more rural municipalities), the use of ETHOS Light (sent along as attachment) and the practical approach of the study (a short interview with every social worker present) was explained. All contacted social workers agreed to participate in this study. After their affirmation, an appointment was made with each of them to visit 'their' PCSW on one day. Finally, and to avoid intrusion with their daily workflow, they were asked to complete a form indicating at what time each social worker preferred to have an interview with one of the researchers that approximately would last half an hour.

Every PCSW was visited on the agreed day in the period during June-October 2017. In all five PCSW, every available social worker present that given day was interviewed. Each interview started with an explanation of the goal of the study and the presentation of ETHOS Light. Next, the social worker was asked to anonymously go through his/her active client files. This concerned for the greatest part clients who receive a minimum income scheme and/or who are in debt counselling. Interviews lasted on average the foreseen 30 minutes. Social workers were asked only to name the housing situation of their clients. For those clients whose living situation corresponded to ETHOS Light, the exact living situation was recorded on a paper form together with some demographics: age, gender, source(s) of income and family members. In addition, it was marked whether or not these clients had a

reference address. A final space on the form allowed for any relevant additional information to be recorded. In total, 27 social workers were interviewed. In total, the social workers together with the researchers went through 953 active client files.

Interviews with other field workers

To complete the information gathered in the exploratory PCSW study, seven additional interviews were conducted with various field workers. For this part, one municipality was selected, as in this community low threshold welfare and health services are found, including a women's shelter and floating housing support. Interviews were held between June and September 2017 with social care staff and/ or employees of the following organizations: non-profit social services, non-profit medico-social care center, local police, psychiatric hospital, and the general hospital. The interviews were also carried out by the first two authors of this paper. Interviews lasted on average 1.5 hours. The goal of the interviews was to gather qualitative data on homelessness and service use of homeless persons with special attention for hidden homelessness.

Interviews with (recent) hidden homeless individuals

Additionally, interviews were held with people who are currently or were recently hidden homeless. To get into contact with these hidden homeless, low threshold organizations were contacted. In some cases, the interviewee was contacted by the social worker and asked if he/she was interested in participating in the study. The researchers also paid visits to the low-threshold center and searched for participants. Being aware that quite some hidden homeless will not be in contact with these kind of welfare organizations, attempts were made to find more interviewees through snowball sampling. Similar to the previous described qualitative work, this part of the study was carried out by the first two authors.

Seven persons were interviewed in June-August 2017, two women and five men between 29 and 62 years. Additionally an interview was held with an expert by experience living in this area. During the interviews, two main topics were discussed: their living situation and their contacts with social services. Participants were briefed about the study and informed consent forms were signed. A topic scheme was made up. Due to the potential additional threshold of audiotaping, it was decided not to record the interviews. To improve validity of the data collection and to enhance the comprehensibility for the respondents, it was decided to present a visual presentation of the topics. They were invited to make notes and write down remarks on the forms. Notes were constructed during and after the interviews and transcribed. After the first two interviews, minor adaptations were made to the questions.

Results

(Hidden) rural homelessness is a reality

Together with 27 social workers from five intermediate rural PCSW, the researchers went through 953 active client files. Amongst those 953 files, *74 homeless clients* were identified according to ETHOS Light. This means that in our study in more rural PCSW, 1 out of 13 PCSW users (7.7%) is homeless (see Table 3).

Table 3. Number of interviews, active client files inspected and number of homeless people found in each municipality in the study

	Diest	Scherpenheuvel-Zichem	Bekkevoort	Glabbeek	Tienen	**Total**
Social workers interviewed	7	6	2	1	11	**27**
Active files (N)	288	188	35	58	384	**953**
Homeless/N	21/288	16/188	2/35	4/58	31/384	**74/953**

In addition, 13 PCSW clients were threatened with eviction. A notable number, even more when taking into account the statement of several social workers not to have homeless amongst their clients. As data on the total number of PCSW clients in Belgium is not available, it is not possible to set of this number to the total PCSW client population.

Table 4. Number of active client files found per ETHOS Light category

ETHOS Light		Number of active client files
1	People living rough	6
2	People in emergency accommodation	1
3	People living in accommodation for the homeless	9
4	People living in institutions	15
5	People living in non-conventional dwellings due to lack of housing	5
6	Homeless people living temporarily in conventional housing with family and friends (due to lack of housing)	38
	Total	**74**
+	People threatened with Eviction	13

As can be seen in Table 4, the most found category is ETHOS Light 6: people staying temporarily with family/friends. This is the case for more than half (38 out of 74) of the homeless PCSW clients. Eight persons moved in temporarily with one or both parents, two found shelter with a sibling, and three with another family member. Nineteen persons are staying with a friend and four with their ex-partner. Remarkably, two persons living with their partner were identified as homeless by the social workers. They clarify their decision explaining the client is living in a new and very unstable relation-

ship. Living together is in both cases an emergency solution because of lack of other housing. For these two clients, their social workers regard their current housing situation unstable as defined by ETHOS Light, category 6. The second most common found category is ETHOS Light 4: persons due to be released from an institution but who have no housing available prior to release. Thirteen cases relate to persons residing in a psychiatric hospital, one man is staying in a local hospital and one is due to be released from prison. Five persons are living in a non-conventional dwelling: a squat, a B&B, a caravan, a garage and a 'space' above a shop without permission for renting. Out of the nine persons staying in homeless accommodation, six are staying temporarily in emergency housing provided by the PCSW; one woman stays in a women's shelter and one in a safe house for women, one young man is living in a residential centre for homeless youngsters. The safe house and residential centre for homeless youngsters are located in nearby cities. Six PCSW clients were identified as sleeping rough (ETHOS Light 1). All of them are living on the streets of the largest municipality without specific homeless services. The only PCSW client staying in a night shelter attends this shelter in a larger city. As the PCSW of one's last official place of residence remains responsible, they are paying his night shelter bill.

There are more homeless men (52/74) in the client files than women (22/74). Young people are overrepresented as 41 persons are 35 or younger (55%), fifteen of whom are 25 or younger (20%). The source of income of the homeless persons varies: 28 have a guaranteed minimum income, 15 a sickness/invalidity allowance, 13 an unemployment benefit, 12 have no income, 3 work, 2 receive a pension benefit and 1 is unknown.

Interviews with field workers and persons who experienced hidden homelessness point out that the number of homeless PCSW clients will be an underestimation of the actual number of homeless persons in their municipalities. They tell that a significant number of homeless do not apply for PCSW help for reasons such as bad prior experiences, fear of stigma and prejudice about the help they might (not) receive and/or feeling unable to cope with the conditions often attached to help (such as being prepared to work). Others ask for help but never become registered PCSW clients.

ETHOS Light broadens the social worker's view on homelessness

In our contacts with more rural PCSW, social workers often stated beforehand not to be in contact with homeless persons. When discussing their client files on the basis of ETHOS Light, several social workers were surprised by the number of homeless amongst their clients. One of the reasons can be the significant share of hidden homeless persons. In our interviews with hidden homeless persons and other field workers we find that several hidden homeless do not label themselves

as homeless (yet). Two intertwined reasons for this are 1) that for some young people it is a widely used strategy, a part of their 'way of living' and 2) that staying temporarily with family/friends is often only a first step into homelessness.

The living situations and experiences of hidden homeless persons

Our qualitative research with social workers from PCSW and field workers from other organizations (in citations labelled as 'P' for professionals) and hidden homeless (in citations labelled as 'HH') show that even though a lot of informal solidarity can be found, staying temporarily with family/friends and living in non-conventional housing is not that rosy.

Our results document the **instability** of the housing situation (not always having a key, not being sure until when they can stay,..):

> *A friend convinced me to move in with her. I didn't want to at first, but I eventually did when my landlord didn't do the necessary housing renovation. I couldn't put my address at her place, so I lost my sickness benefit really fast. I paid her 300 euros per month, didn't want to take advantage of her. At first I had my own key. But suddenly my friends' husband wanted the key 'to make an extra copy'. He never returned it. So I no longer had a key. In the morning I dropped my daughter off to school. In the beginning you go to the city center, or visit one of my other daughters. But you cannot do that for hours. In the evening, I stood waiting in front of her door. Once my friend texted me 'we don't know what time we'll be back home'. Leaving me no other option than to sleep in my car with my daughter.* (HH4, 60 year old woman)

The housing situation of hidden homeless is often just a sleeping arrangement, they do **not** have a place they can call **home**. This is very clear in the next examples:

> *First I went to the PCSW. As I don't have a Belgian ID, they didn't want to help me. The day after I went to the police. They were very sweet and helped me with a list of shelters and places to eat and have a shower…. Every evening around 24h I go to my room, I put a sleeping bag there. I only go there to sleep. At night, I hang around at the station. I don't like being alone.* (HH1, 29 year old man)

> *My client left her house unfit for habitation and moved back in with her parents. They have a small house so my client sleeps in the living room with her 2 children, one of them is a 1 month old baby.* (P18)

Instability not only relates to the insecurity of the housing situation but also to the relationship with the host. PCSW workers often refer to unstable relationships of their hidden homeless clients, not only intimate relations, but also to fragile parent-child relationships, for example:

This client is a 28 year old man who has lived with his mother his whole life. The mother is addicted to alcohol and regularly throws him out on the street. At the moment, their relationship is again going through a tough time. (P1)

A young man was homeless when he ended up in a psychiatric hospital. During his admission, he meets a girl. When his stay is over, he moves in with her. Their relationship is so short and unstable. It can go wrong any time. (P6)

Couch surfing also has a significant **effect on social relationships**. Not only with the host and (potential) partners, but also with their own children, as can be noticed in the story of a hidden homeless man:

You have shelter but you cannot be yourself. I feel at home there but cannot do what I like to do or for example invite someone. You don't have privacy…. What I fear most is alienating from my son. He is 13 years old. Sometimes he stays over. He then sleeps with me in my single bed, a sofa pushed against it. But my hosts don't like it too much when he stays over, a child makes a lot of noise. (HH3, 42 year old man)

Professionals as well as people who experienced hidden homelessness describe how hosts sometimes **take advantage** of the vulnerable situation of their guest. As is described by one social worker:

An elderly man of 84 lived with a family. He paid monthly 300 euros for a small room with a camp bed. The family abused him also financially. Due to a physical problem he was admitted to the hospital bringing into light his appalling living situation. We were contacted by the hospital and are now helping to find him a place in a home for elderly. (P2)

In our interviews with hidden homeless, social workers from PCSW and other field workers, we notice that hidden homeless persons do **not** always receive the professional **help** they need or ask for. Some social workers from PCSW admit that referring clients to family members or friends is common first advice they give when a person has no place to sleep. Emergency houses from the PCSW are sometimes left free for 'unpredictable homeless' for example in case of fire.

Our study points to **several additional thresholds** for hidden homeless to seek professional help. A first reason is financial. Social workers of PCSW consider living together with others is often as advantageous. Fearing income breakdown for themselves or for their host can be a reason not to seek PCSW help when couch surfing. It can also be a motivation for people not to host others, as is explained by this PCSW worker:

> *My client and her boyfriend moved in with a friend of them after they were evicted. When the local police found out they were living there, they wanted to register that place as their official place of residence. As their host is afraid this will lower his unemployment benefit, he gave them one week to find another solution.* (P10)

One option to avoid losing social benefits is asking for a reference address with a private person (for example the host) or PCSW. Several PCSW workers state to be wary of 'social fraud' when granting a reference address and state not to grant it when they assume the client only wants to outrun bailiffs or avoid income breakdown.

A second reason is the fear of losing the host's social (rental) housing. One of our interviewees who not only experienced hidden homelessness herself but also hosted a few others throughout the years describes her experience:

> *I was living in a social housing with my seven children. I had hosted a friend with her seven children in the past and got a warning from the social housing company. The day the girlfriend of my eldest son was thrown out on the street by her mother, she came to live with us. I really enjoyed her company but had to appear in front of the board of the social housing company, again. As I did not want to kick her out, we were evicted. It was the period before Christmas, they gave us two additional weeks.* (HH6, 52 year old woman)

Negative opinions about the help from PCSW or homeless services they might (not) receive can also influence help seeking. As is described by the next interviewee:

> *I was 18 the first time I was homeless. My mother kicked me out just after I received my high school degree. My stepdad was harassing me. My mother did not believe me, said I was harassing him, and put me on the street. I left for Antwerp and slept on the street. I did not want to go to a shelter as I was afraid they would send me back to my mother. I found a job in a bar, very badly paid. I could stay with a woman with four children. I stayed there for ¾ year, in a real shack.* (HH6, 52 year old woman)

Structural spatial characteristics of (intermediate) rural areas in Flanders

In our study we identify some specific spatial characteristics of intermediate rural areas in Flanders that relate to homelessness. The rural housing market contains little or no studios or small apartments, leaving less affordable housing options for single households. Compared to urban areas, the housing market in more rural areas is less adapted to (the growing number of) single households.

As more rural municipalities have no or only a limited housing offer for homeless persons, common first advice from PCSW social workers is for people to seek shelter with family/friends. But it also leads to dynamics with other (surrounding) municipalities. As almost no homeless services are present in the municipalities

visited, PCSW workers state they have to send people to larger cities when in need of housing. This is done not only because of the presence of specific homeless services but also in order to find a cheap sleeping place such as hostels. Even though several PCSW workers indicate how people are not keen on moving (temporarily) to bigger cities, because these are too far (not only moving away from family/friends but also from school and work), too expensive and having to share (living room/kitchen/bathroom) with others.

Conclusions and Discussion

Our results confirm previous international research and demonstrates the existence of homelessness in more rural municipalities in Belgium. Similar to international findings this study confirms that a large group of rural homelessness concerns hidden homelessness and that a large proportion are men and young people.

To our knowledge, this is the first study focussing on homelessness amongst clients of a general social service. Finding one homeless person in every 13 PCSW clients is a remarkable number, even moreso when considering the prior statements of social workers to have no homeless people amongst their clients. This observation not only has important research implications, but is crucial for homelessness policies and measurement practices. As these focus above all on larger cities and on the use of residential or floating services for the homeless they fail to include an important part of the homeless population.

Even though the housing situation of their clients is known to the social workers of PCSW, they underestimate the impact of their unstable housing situation. This is partly due to their shared perception that staying with a friend/family is a 'good' (first) solution when a person ends up homeless. It is crucial to raise awareness of the presence and situation of hidden homelessness in more rural municipalities. ETHOS Light proved to be a useful tool not only in identifying and 'counting' homeless clients but also to raise awareness that a homeless person is not only someone who sleeps rough or is staying in a residential homeless shelter. In other words, ETHOS Light is a useful tool to describe the living situation of users of social services, to stimulate critical self-reflection of social workers, and to influence local policy actions to fight rural homelessness.

It is reasonable to assume that the number of homeless persons in those rural municipalities surmounts those in contact with PCSW. Based on our interviews with hidden homeless individuals and field workers we identify three groups of homeless persons. A first group are the homeless persons who seek and receive PCSW help. These are the 74 persons identified in the PCSW files. These persons are PCSW clients and can as such be identified in the PCSW registration. The second group are those persons

who do contact PCSW when in need of housing but only receive limited help. They often have no other (pressing) question than their housing need. The reason for only receiving limited PCSW help is often related to the restricted housing offer of the small PCSW. Some have no emergency housing, others have emergency housing but all places are occupied, or housing is available but PCSW prefer to keep this free for what they label as 'unpredictable' homelessness (e.g. in case of fire rather than an eviction). Subsequently, support for homeless people in more rural PCSW is restricted to referring people to homeless care in larger cities, suggesting cheap temporary sleeping places (such as youth hostels, B&B's, camping) or referring to (the waiting list of) social rental agencies. Several social workers state that they first advise people to seek shelter in one's own social network. As these help requests are generally not registered, estimating the size of this group is difficult. The third group are the homeless persons not (yet) in contact with the PCSW. Our interviews show that additional barriers in help seeking can be perceived for people who are staying with family/friends as they might fear (partial) income breakdown for them or their host or the loss of social (rental) housing when identified as 'living together' and 'forming one household'. Also included in this third group are the homeless persons who left their rural reality to find help in a larger city, taking this step themselves or advised to do so by the PCSW. Our exploratory study only gives an idea of the size of the first group of PCSW clients, the size of the other two groups remains unclear.

By pointing out additional barriers for hidden homeless, our study brings into light their help seeking behaviour. A behaviour that not only depends upon their own situation, past experiences and expectations but also on their hosts'. Being hosted by a person who receives a social benefit and/or lives in social housing will affect the help seeking behaviour of the hidden homeless person. As couch surfer can fear to harm not only himself but also harm his host. These additional barriers in help-seeking should be clear to social workers so that they can reach out to this vulnerable group and take actions before the situation gets out of control. One option to do so is by being more flexible in granting a reference address at PCSW.

Our study sheds a first light on homelessness in more rural municipalities in Flanders. This exploratory study demonstrates the importance of not solely focusing on large cities in research and policy and on focusing on users of general social services to detect homelessness. Still little is known about the number of rural and hidden homelessness and their effects of this (temporary) solution and hereby possibly underestimated. More research is needed to clarify the effects of hidden homelessness and the trajectories of persons in this situation. Specific attention needs to be paid to current users of local social services and especially social assistance beneficiaries. Although they are receiving support for specific issues (income, debts), this doesn't imply that the social workers of these services are aware of the client's housing instability.

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