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Unravelling the homeless conundrum: to obtain social rights, you need an address

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24 August 2021

Introduction

- In many EU countries, the route to obtaining and exerting social rights starts with registration in the population register
- An address is needed to e.g. obtain an identity card, to be eligible for social housing, for health insurance, to receive unemployment benefits or child allowance, to vote, etc.
- For homeless people, obtaining an address is therefore not just a matter of location: it's **de facto a means to ensure social rights.**
- European Commission (2013): *“having a basic bank account, an address, ID card and a passport are necessary preconditions for allowing homeless people to participate in economic and social life, exercise civil rights, vote or access services”.*

Introduction

- To address this minimum prerequisite, **mechanisms for administrative anchoring** are in place, such as fictitious addresses in Italy, the 'Address Point' in Ireland, the 'Main residence confirmation' in Austria, the postal address in the Netherlands, etc.
- Today: main focus on the reference address in **Belgium**.
- Poverty organizations raised concerns on flaws and challenges.

Research questions and objectives

Research questions

1. What are the **opportunities** of the reference address?
2. What are the **challenges**?

Research objectives

- ✓ To bundle existing knowledge (in the literature and on the field) on these administrative addresses
- ✓ To examine the discrepancies of the policy in theory against experiences from the field in practice
- ✓ To explore the importance of an address in the homelessness context in Belgium: in its own terms and as a basis for clarifying broader international lessons.

The reference address in Belgium

- General rule: a person is registered in the population register at their main place of residence
- A fixed address is needed for access to child allowance, unemployment benefits, health insurance, social housing, a valid identity card, to vote, etc.
- Exception to the rule: the reference address with a private person or at a Public Centre for Social Welfare (PCSW).

	Preconditions	Conditions
1. Private person	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Belgian citizen- Ex-officio deletion	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Formal consent of the private person involved
2. PCSW	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Belgian citizen- Ex-officio deletion- Local affiliation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- No sufficient means to provide for a stable accommodation- Apply for social assistance

- **Goal** of the reference address is to (re)integrate into society and guarantee rights.
 - Administrative and social inclusion
- In 2010: 5.281 persons with a reference address at a PCSW

Methodology

1. Literature review
2. Semi structured interviews with professionals on different policy levels

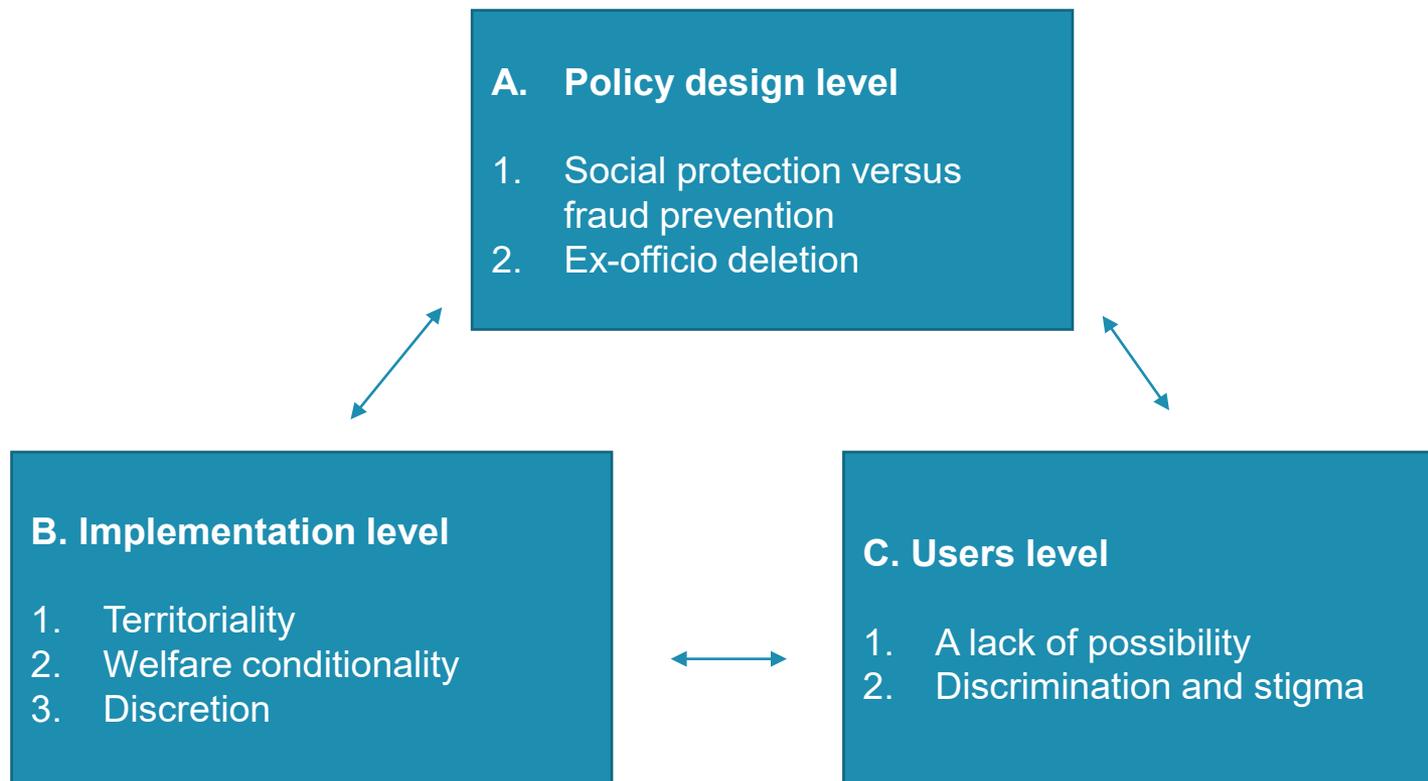
RESPONS	
National policy actors	5
Municipalities	4
PCSWs	9
NGOs, other	12
Total	30

Results

Opportunities

- Providing an administrative address for the homeless population is vital for accessing rights and services.
- No panacea to prevent homelessness, they do prevent the exacerbation of their living situation
E.g. in Belgium, when an invitation for a job application by the National Employment Office (RVA/ONEM) does not arrive at the correct address and the individual fails to answer in time, sanctions and exclusion follow, such as the loss of the unemployment benefit
- Provides a win-win situation: it allows for the homeless to re-integrate into society, and for the administration to keep an overview (of the whereabouts) of its citizens.

Challenges (7) in three levels



A. Policy design level

1. Trade off between social protection and prevention of fraud

This address is perceived:

→ By civil society organisations and PCSWs **as a social assistance instrument** to re-integrate individuals into society

Fraud? These people lead lives of desperation, struggling to survive and make ends meet. If they get an integration income, they maybe receive 900 euros per month. No one wants to live like this. Fraud should be addressed on another level, such as tax havens in the Bahamas. (June 2021)

→ By municipalities and local authorities as an exception to the general registration rule, and therefore needs to be strictly implemented in such a way **misuse and fraud is prevented**

When you want to escape creditors, individuals who suffer from the accumulation of a mountain of debt and who have a reference address at the PCSW can disappear from the radar (March 2021)

2. Ex-officio deletion

- April, 14 – Poverty organization: *“We know people who were ex-officio deleted, and did not get a reference address. This means you suddenly do not exist in society”*.
- April, 19 – CAW: *“People do not realize what it does to a person, to not be signed into the population register. What kind of impact this has. I understand why someone who moved out, should not be registered at this address anymore, and thus should be ex-officio deleted to sign in for a new address. But I do not understand why this is the case for people who say ‘I do not have an address anymore, I want a reference address, be a part of society, and open a bank account. On average, it takes six months for them to be ex-officio deleted and get a reference address. It must be done more quickly”*.

B. Administration level

1. Territoriality

- Not all of the PCSWs provide such an address
- But, this address can only be granted when the applicants provides **proof of affiliation** with the municipality. E.g. the competent PCSW depends on the *actual* location where a homeless individual usually resides.
- De Boyser et al. (2009): 70% of the participating municipalities (n= 160) rarely or never grant a reference address at a PCSW. In smaller municipalities, this is 75%.

“The territoriality logic is very complex. Even quite ridiculous in Brussels. For example, the Brussels South railway lies on three territories. Depending on your specific location in this train station, three different PCSWs are responsible. For example, I went to the PCSW of Saint-Gilles with a person sleeping in this train station, but he was lying on the side where the PCSW of the Centre of Brussels was authorized. PCSWs do not always realize it takes a lot of strength for homeless people to take the step to the PCSW. If you come knocking, and they say ‘you have to go to another PCSW’, a lot of homeless people just give up”. (Respondent 3, Belgium, April 2021)”

2. Welfare conditionality

- First condition: 'sufficient means to provide for its own accommodation'

Wide scope for interpretation: What are 'insufficient means'? What is 'own accommodation'? How to define an individual as being 'homeless'? E.g. sofa surfers often are not perceived as homeless.

"If you request a reference address at a PCSW, you have to proof you are homeless. The burden of proof lies with you" (April 2021).

- Additional conditions are imposed

"They have to show up every two weeks: to collect their mail, to discuss social assistance with the social assistant, to show they are actively looking for stable housing, etc. [...] We grant this for six months, assuming they get their things in order by then. [...] If they do not meet these criteria, this is a reason to terminate the reference address for them" (March 2021).

"Different PCSWs impose different conditions for granting the reference address. In my opinion, they formulate criteria that are hard or sometimes even impossible for our clients to meet, such as looking for a job or staying sober" (April 2021).

- Increased conditionality? E.g. in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Brussels (since 2017).

"After the terrorist attacks, it got harder for homeless people to get a reference address. There were a lot of political voices to make the requirements stricter, and to exercise more control on this instrument" (June 2021).

3. Discretion and local variation

- Interpretation varies from PCSW to PCSW, but also from social assistant to social assistant.
- Ambiguity of the legal framework leads to difference in reviewing the living situations → Discretionary power = arbitrary power?
- Role of the individual social assistant

“Today, it depends too strongly on the social assistant. If it is someone who strictly follows the procedure, or someone who really listens to your story. What people do not understand is this is an extremely vulnerable group, not easy to reach or to make plans with. If they do not show up on an appointment, this can be an honest mistake because they do not have a calendar, or they lost the charger of their phones to reach out” (April 2021).

C. Users level

1. A lack of possibility

- In theory, a homeless person can choose between two reference addresses: at a private person's address or at a PCSW
- In practice, an address with a private person is rarely granted due to fears of the impact on the benefits of the natural person

→ 'Cohabitation status' : the benefit level depends on the household situation: when more people live on the same address, there's a reduction of certain welfare benefits.

2. Stigma and discrimination

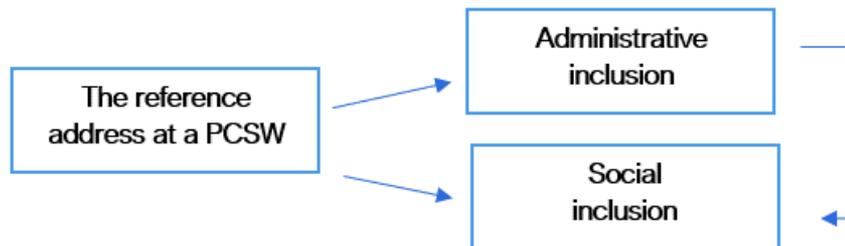
- Claimants who fail to meet the conditions, e.g. individuals who refuse social assistance because of negative experiences with social assistants
- Specific groups are being excluded, such as undocumented migrants
- The use of this address can exacerbate stigma, e.g. 'Market Place 1'

"I am sure feeling shame is an important component. It is not easy to step to a PCSW. We already see individuals experiencing shame when they visit us. And we are one of the most low threshold organisations there is" (April 2021).

"When a homeless person gives up an address such as 'Market Place 1' or 'Rue du Centre 1' when applying for a job, this may become a ground for discrimination" (July 2021).

Conclusion

- Providing an administrative address for the homeless is a *minimum minimorum* of social protection the homeless need.
- The reference address combines capacitating and constraining elements.
- Our evidence suggests:
 - ✓ It reflects and reinforces social exclusion of the beneficiaries through (1) disproportionate punitive consequences when not complying, (2) their subjection to arbitrary power of the administration, and (3) their stigmatization.
 - ✓ It defeats the purpose of administratively (and socially) including the most excluded
- Administrative and social inclusion: all or nothing? E.g. claimants that refuse social assistance are excluded.



Discussion

- There are different systems in place for administrative anchorage, but there is little to none existing evidence on the effectiveness of these systems
- These restraining elements raise complex issues in terms of social justice that need to be tackled on a theoretical and an empirical level
- Overall **chicken or egg dilemma**: to what extent should having a fixed address be linked to social rights?
- Knowing the access to specific rights is bound to having an official address, the imposition of conditions for accessing an address poses **a serious challenge in the homelessness context.**

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