Evolving research agenda on homelessness

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Structure of the presentation:
Evolving homelessness research agenda

- Starting point : avoiding the pitfall of 'assumptive research'

- Measuring homelessness: setting up local and regional point in time counts

- Understanding the dynamics of homelessness

- Young adult homelessness as an example to grasp the dynamics

Avoiding or reproducing the pitfall of "assumptive research"
(Pleace, 2019)

"Assumptive research occurs when researchers regard homelessness as a clearly defined and understood social problem – i.e., that it is people sleeping rough who are largely male and whose homelessness is linked to support needs and behavioral factors. Such research adds nothing to the understanding of homelessness because it assumes homelessness is understood, which means that questions about the nature of homelessness do not need to be resolved, beyond determining, for example, how many rough sleepers in a particular city are taking heroin. People living without their own space, without privacy and without security of tenure in Europe are not considered by such research, because homelessness means a predominantly male population sleeping rough or in emergency shelters and nothing else".

Measuring homelessness in Belgium in 2013

- Each region had its own tradition
  - Flanders: baseline measurement in 2014 (ETHOS 2-3)
  - Brussels: two-yearly count and linking of registration systems
  - Walloon region : sectoral data and coordination of registration of Relais Sociaux
  - België : Novaprima and Population Register

- Many methods, but less coordination
  - No common definition
  - No national statistics
  - Service statistics paradox
  - Hidden homelessness

- Two research projects : MEHOBEL and COST Action

MEHOBEL-study : framework for measuring homelessness in Belgium (Demaerschalk et al, 2019)

- ETHOS light as guiding definition for data collection

- Combination of methods is necessary to monitor homelessness

- National point-in-time count is a necessary and pragmatic instrument

- Numbers AND stories

- Avoid at all costs harm for the homeless persons

- Be aware of limitations of PIT counts

Point-in-time count: four guiding questions

1. **Who do we count?**
   → ETHOS Light

2. **Who is counting?**
   → A wide range of services

3. **What do we want to know?**
   → Extent and profile characteristics

4. **How can we measure this?**
   → Short questionnaire (17 questions)

OPERATIONAL CATEGORY		LIVING SITUATION		DEFINITION
1	People living rough	1	Public spaces / external spaces	Living in the streets or public spaces without a 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 time-limited and no long-term housing is provided
		4	Temporary accommodation	
		5	Transitional supported accommodation	
		6	Women's shelters 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

7   At risk for eviction within 30 days

Point-in-time counts in Belgium: from an national to a local and regional approach
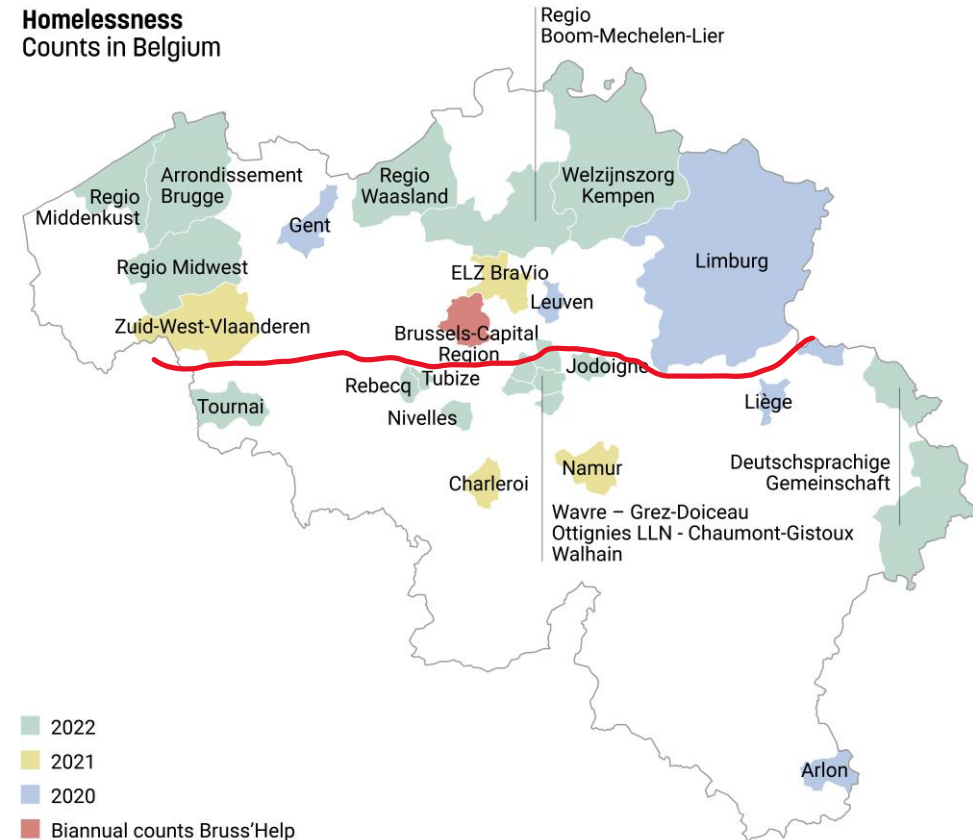
2020

- Leuven, Ghent and Limburg

- Liège and Arlon (University of Liège)

- Creation of a manual

2021

- BraVio and South West Flanders

- Namur and Charleroi (UC Louvain)

2022

- Bruges district, Middenkust, Midwest, Waasland, Boom-Mechelen-Lier, Kempen

- Tournai, Walloon Brabant, German community (UC Louvain)

Homelessness Counts in Belgium

Legend:
- 2022
- 2021
- 2020
- Biannual counts Bruss'Help

Koning Boudewijnstichting
Samen werken aan een betere samenleving

Some aggregate figures 2020-2022

Ethos Light category	Adults	%	Children	%
1) Public space	662	5,6	22	0,5
2) Night shelter	489	4,2	49	1,1
3) Temporary accomodation	2532	**21,6**	1901	**43,3**
4) Institutional leaver	1394	11,9	237	5,4
5) Non-conventional dwelling	1460	12,5	312	7,1
6) Staying with family/friends	4085	**34,8**	1148	**26,1**
7) Risk of eviction	848	7,2	669	**15,2**
Unknown	259	2,2	56	1,3
Total	**11.729**	**100,0**	**4394**	**100,0**

16.123 / 4.468.459 = 3,6 / 1000 inhabitants

A more sophisticated view on homelessness

- Higher numbers as expected
- Growing awareness about (hidden) homelessness
- ETHOS light 1-2-3: only 25 % of the total population
- Homelessness is not only a reality in the larger cities
- Gender-specific survival strategies
- Homeless children
- Longer stay then needed in psychiatric institutions
- More in-depth view on homeless young adults
- Presence of irregular migrants
- Target group of housing first
- Overrepresentation of persons with a migrant background

Some lessons learned about the method

- Formal political agreement is essential : no count without local public engagement

- Preparation is THE KEY
  - Inventory of services for the homeless, <u>All social services,</u> Institutions (youth care, prisons, psychiatric institutions, institutions for asylum seekers), Low-treshold services, volunteers…
  - Specific plan for street count
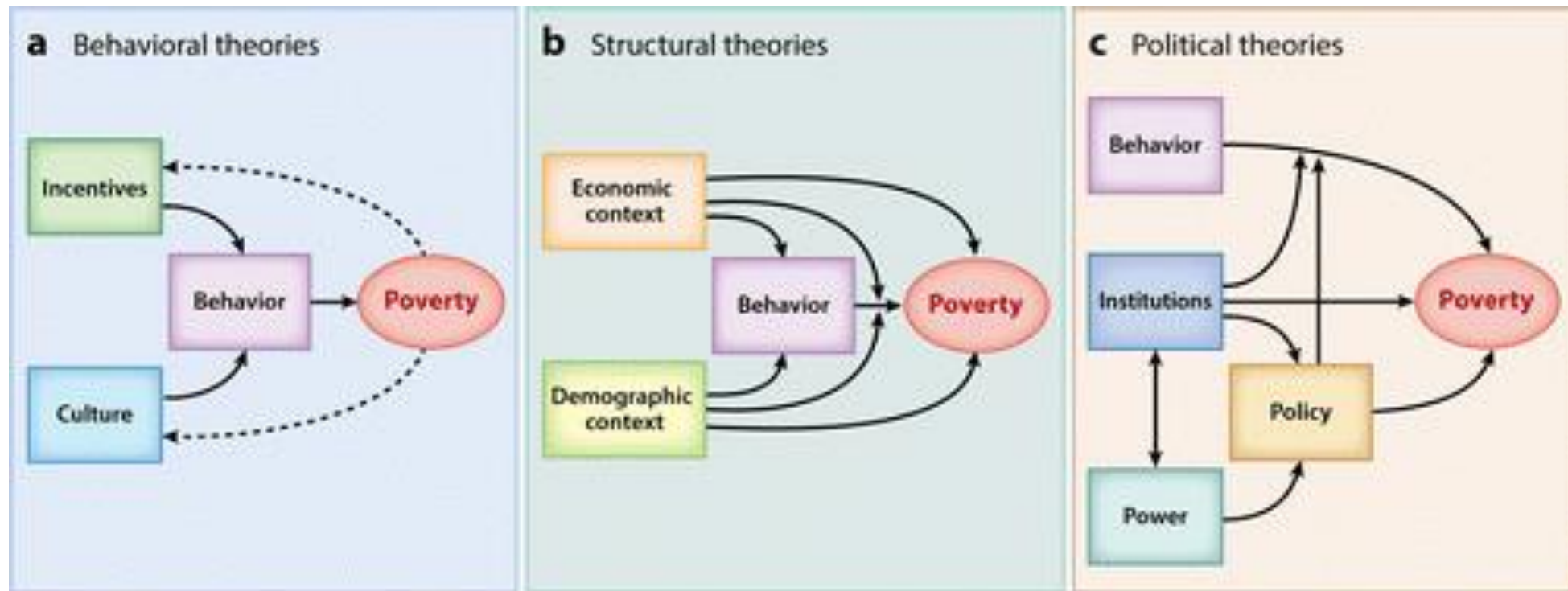
Some lessons learned (2)

- (Local) figures and stories

- Ethics and avoiding 'perverse effects' of count :
  - 'Making the hidden visible' but what if persons prefer unvisibility?
  - What is counted? And what's neglected?

- Independent research institution for data collection and analysis

BUT Limitations of counts : 'point in time' vs the dynamics of homelessness

Dynamic approach to homelessness

- Homelessness is a dynamic process, a 'moving target' (Lee, Shinn, Culhane, 2021)

- "*A housing pathways approach captures the dynamics of housing: people's experiences of movement between dwellings and location, their decision making and preferences over time and space*" (Severinsen 2013: 74)

- Role of social services is rather neglected in longitudinal research

- Large variety of methods to grasp the dynamics of homelessness

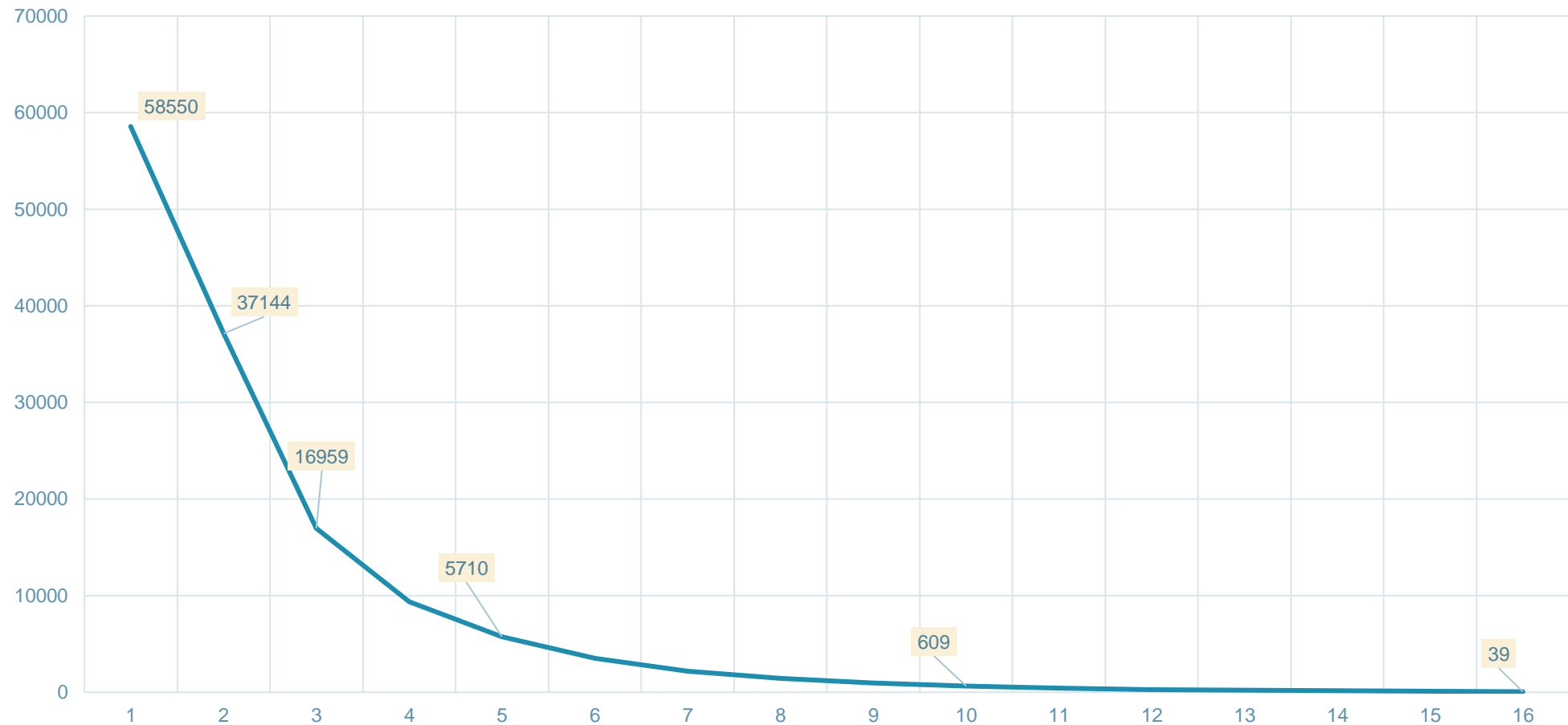# Causes of homelessness: rather linear debate and less theory development

Brady D. 2019.
Annu. Rev. Sociol. 45:155–75

Homelessness, social work and non-take up of social rights

- Non take-up : the phenomenon of people eligible for benefits, and by extension any public offer (financial services, schemes, social services), who don't receive them or who don't benefit from them (Dewanckel et al, 2022; Boost et al, 2020)

- Non take-up is not a status but an ongoing process

- Non-take-up as a consequence of a complex interaction between (Van Oorschot, 1994):
  - Characteristics / behavior of the 'target group'
  - Policy features
  - Implementation processess

Duration of homelessness in Belgium : administrative data on reference address (2004-2020)
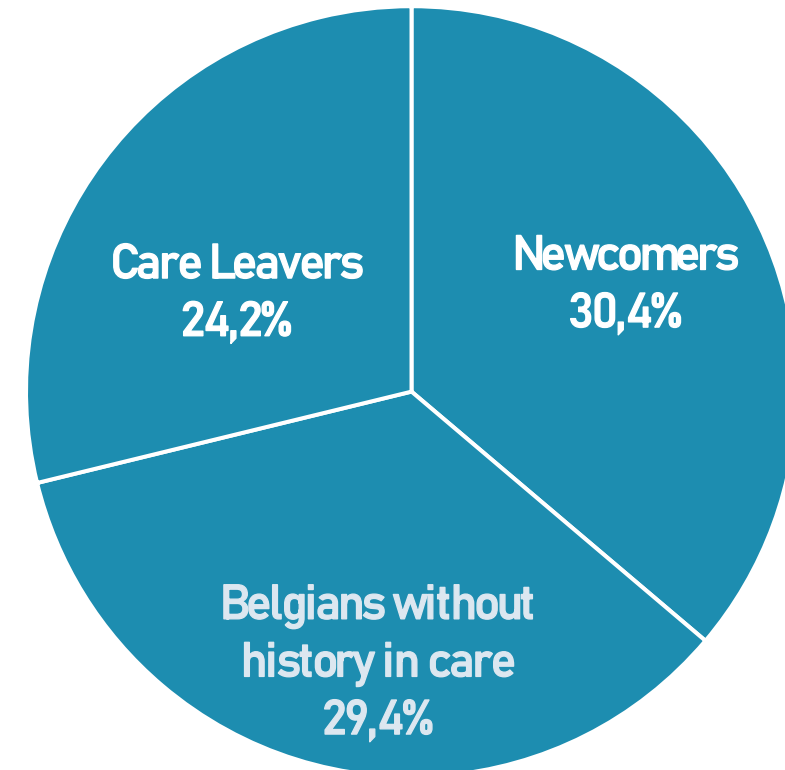
Diverse trajectories based on PIT counts

Three different subgroups with different profiles

- Care leavers

- Newcomers

- Young adults without history in care

Complexity of trajectories behind these figures by means of biographical research

Care Leavers 24,2%

Newcomers 30,4%

Belgians without history in care 29,4%

Biographical research to reconstruct the pathways of young homeless adults into homelessness

Common factors in trajectories

- Insecurity and instability during the lifecourse ("displacement") (Samuels et al, 2022)

- Growing up in poverty

- Unstable school career

- conflict with parents, loss of parents, homelessness of parents,…

- Negative experiences with social services

- Limited access to housing market

Young adult persons and exit from homelessness

Back on Track:

- A new support program for young adults, implemented by vzw Oranjehuis in Belgium
- An intensive, one-year guidance program that responds to challenges related to housing, income and activation, network, self-sufficiency and the risk of recidivism.
- The program is based on the principles of Housing First for Youth (HF4Y).

Targetgroup:

Young adults between the age of 17 and 25 year:

- Young adults leaving detention (1/3 of the target group)
- Young adults on a waiting list of the Centre for General Welfare (homeless youth), without income and housing (2/3 of the target group)

2.1 Evaluation study with mixed methods

1. Quantitative methods: measuring the impact of the program with at the start and the end of Back on Track:

- Survey about the 4 Key Performance Indicators (KPI): housing, network, income, activation and recidivism (youngsters)
- Survey about life domains (youngsters)
- Self-sufficiency-matrix (professionals)

Impact

Survey (M0) → Back on Track → Survey (M1)

2. Qualitative methods

- Interviews with 5 youngsters at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of their trajectory: expectations, progress, experiences, perspectives on the future…
- Focusgroup with the professionals (once a year)

3. Timing: 3 project years (March 2020 – March 2023)

Structural and institutional challenges

➢ Housing discrimination and/or self-preservation of landlords

➢ Lack of affordable housing

➢ Limited access to social housing given the very long waiting lists in Belgium

Some conclusions

- Counts diminish, but can also enhance assumptive research

- PIT Count is succesful method to raise awareness and to develop research agenda

- Grasping and understanding the dynamics of homelessness

  - Mixed methods approach

  - Impact of services, informal resources and structural barriers on entries and exits

- Homelessness at the intersection of complex societal changes and developments