



Women and Children First

Looking at a Few Statistics on Homelessness in Brussels

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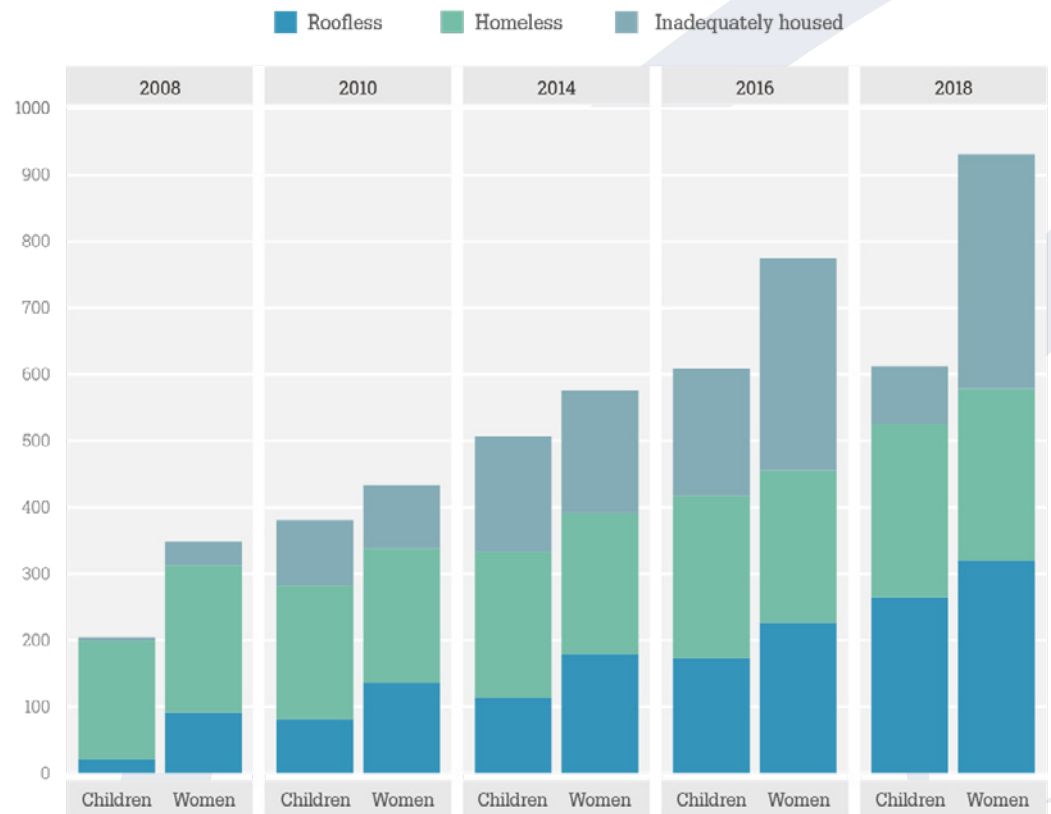
We often read in the press that the number of homeless women and children is increasing.¹ In Brussels, as in most large European cities, this subject stirs up public opinion and forces the authorities to take action. There is also a specific provision for this group: several services are devoted to supporting families and exceptional measures are put in place at certain times to make sure they do not end up on the street – especially during the winter months.

But is it really true that more families than before are forced to spend the night outdoors or in temporary accommodation? Do they make up a greater proportion of the homeless and inadequately housed population or is the increase in their numbers just part of a general upward trend? Using statistical reports produced by the *Centre d'appui au secteur d'aide aux sans-abri* (Homelessness Sector Support Hub), we would like to give a quick overview of the situation in the Brussels region.

Bruss'Help (formerly *la Strada*) is a monitoring centre, an information hub and a body that coordinates the work of the different support services. The Centre has two statistical instruments that can be used to study the situation as regards homelessness in the Brussels-Capital Region: a biennial census and a centralised database of statistics on accommodation and support services.

Counting People Experiencing Homelessness and Housing Deprivation

The Brussels census hinges on joint working between homelessness sector organisations but also several partners from related sectors: public transport, hospitals, etc. Its aim is to be able to come up with the most comprehensive count possible of the number of people affected by homelessness and housing deprivation at a specific point in time:² this can be those who



1 See for example: « A Bruxelles de plus en plus de familles avec enfants sont sans abris », (More and More Families with Children are Homeless in Brussels (in French)) *RTBF*, 6 May 2019 ; « Toujours plus de sans-abri à Bruxelles : où dorment-ils, combien de mineurs parmi eux ? » (Still More Homeless Families in Brussels: Where Do They Sleep, How Many Under-18s Are Among Them? (in French)), *L'Avenir*, 8 May 2019.

2 The census uses the ETHOS typology put forward by FEANTSA.



spend the night outdoors or in night shelters (roofless) but also those in hostels (inadequately housed). It also tries to count, as far as possible, people who find shelter through other means (squats, licensed squatting, religious communities, etc.) because of a lack of available spaces in accommodation units or because it is difficult for them to access the services on offer (inadequately housed).³ A comparison of these studies, which are carried out every two years using the same parameters, highlights how the phenomenon has changed and how the characteristics of the population group under study have changed as well.

The census only gathers the numbers of people experiencing homelessness or housing deprivation: the study does not allow conclusions to be drawn on the number or the makeup of family units. It's only by focusing on the statistical information on under-18s and women that we can infer certain trends.

In total, 612 children and 939 women were found to be homeless or inadequately housed on the night of 5 November 2018. Although the number of children greatly increased between 2008 and 2014, increasing from 204 to 507, this number has stayed relatively stable since 2016 (609). As far as women are concerned, a continued increase in numbers can be observed since records began: the number of women has increased from 349 to 939 in ten years (+169%). These figures are alarming but do not necessarily signal a change in the population demographic: the increase in women and children in absolute numbers can be explained in large part by an increase in homelessness and housing deprivation figures in general. The relative increase is in reality too low to be indicative of the population becoming made up of more young people or more women:⁴ children and women represented, respectively, 11.3% and 19.3% of the people counted in 2008, and 14.6% and 22.4% in 2018.

Of the 265 children who were homeless in 2018, 20 spent the previous night outdoors (compared with 24 in 2016). Between 2016 and 2018, the number of under-18s counted in temporary accommodation increased greatly (+39.2%): an increase that can partly be explained by the increase in emergency accommodation capacity. The proportion of children among homeless people decreased slightly between 2016 and 2018 (from 14.6% to 12.3%). Of the 931 women counted during the first census, 34.1% were roofless (compared with 29.2% in 2016): 84 spent the previous night on the street, in a tube station or in a park (50 in 2016 and 40 in 2014). The proportion of women among homelessness people also slightly decreased between 2016 and 2018: from 19.2% to 14.9%.

The growth in the number of women and children present in temporary accommodation needs to be read in the context of an increased number of available emergency beds. By the same token, many families still manage to find somewhere to stay that is outside mainstream homelessness services. For example, in 2018, 333 people were staying in a licensed squat, and among them were 72 under-18s and their families.

As regards hostels, it is abundantly clear from the data gathered in the count that priority is given to women and under-18s. In 2018, women made up 27.8% of the people accommodated by these structures, when they only made up 22.4% of the homeless and inadequately housed people counted. This trend is even more marked when it comes to under-18s: the proportion of under-18s in hostels is 28.1%, versus 14.6% in the overall population. In the same vein, supported housing services saw the numbers of women (+43.5%) and under-18s (+14%) among their residents increase dramatically in absolute terms between 2016 and 2018.

Centralised Database

The Centralised Database (CD) gathers statistics from structures approved by the *Commission Communautaire Française* (French Community Commission) (COCOF), the *Commission Communautaire Commune* (Common Community Commission) (COCOM) and the *Vlaamse Gemeenschap* (Flemish Community) (VG). It aggregates the information gathered from two types of service:⁵ hostels and emergency shelters/crisis provision. The CD provides statistics on the use of the subsidised accommodation services on offer and on socioeconomic profiles and population movements, but not on the ways these centres are actually used. Moreover, in many services, the policy on data collection is to record only basic information about under-18s and to gather complete data on their parents. This is why less can be gleaned from data on children.

There are 1328 approved hostel spaces: 370 for males only, 383 for women with or without children and 575 accessible to anyone. It therefore appears that these spaces are generally easily accessible for families. In emergency accommodation, a policy of non-refusal (*Samusocial*) or of prioritisation of families is in operation in the vast majority of cases (85.2% – 277 of the 325 available spaces).

This proportion is even greater if we add the 800 extra spaces allocated to *Samusocial* as part of the Winter Plan. Also, *Samusocial* has set up a centre with 120 spaces specifically designed for families and funded on an annual basis.

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³ The count only gives a very incomplete picture of the number of people at risk of eviction or who, having lost their home, are staying with friends or family (not settled accommodation).

⁴ On this point see also: Lelubre, M. (2012) *La féminisation du sans-abrisme bruxellois : une évolution à mieux définir*, (The Feminisation of Homelessness in Brussels: A Growth That Needs Looking at Further (in French)) Brussels Studies 62, online: <http://journals.openedition.org/brussels/1110>.

⁵ The night shelters (*Samusocial*, *Pierre d'Angle*) are not included in the Centralised Database.

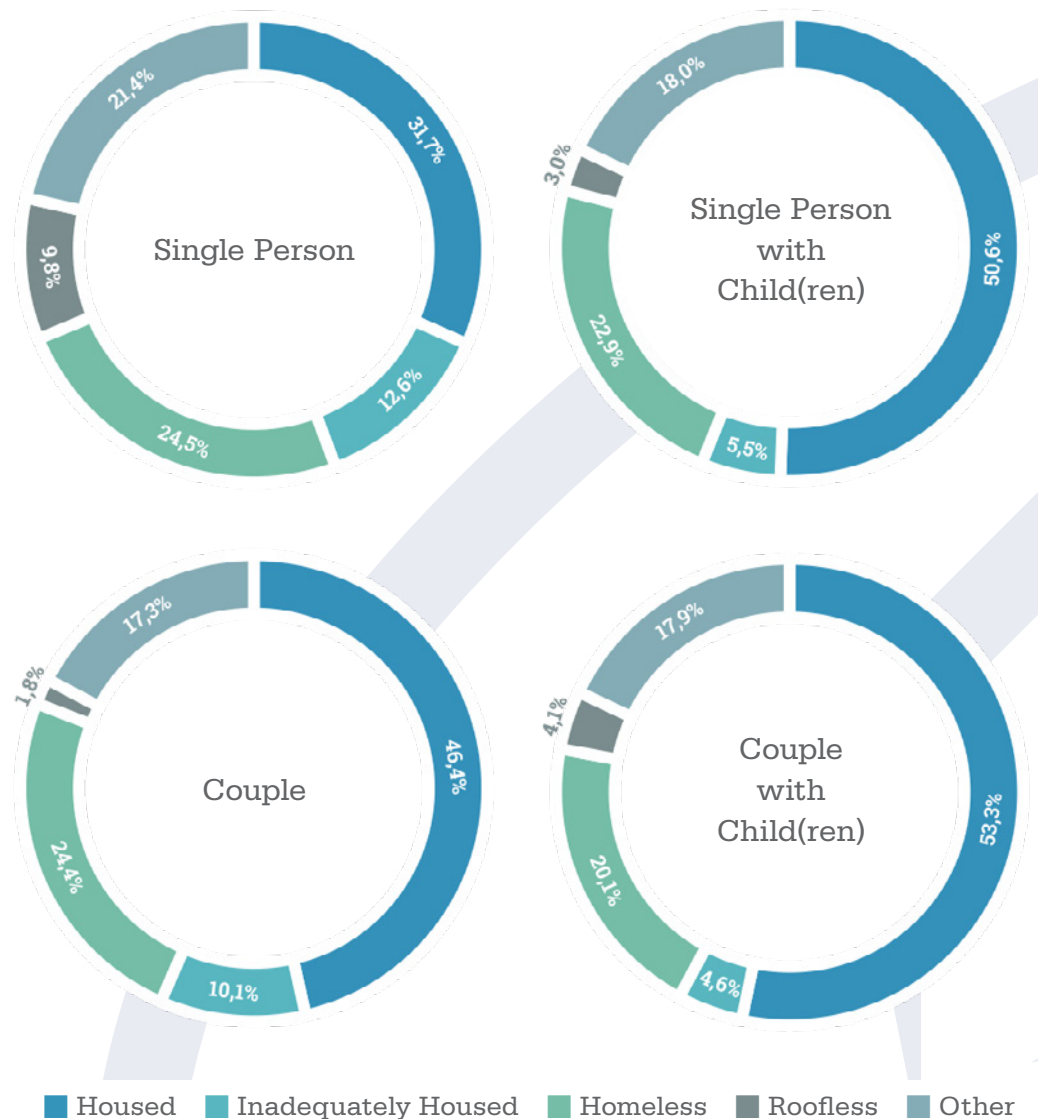


As regards to hostels, families have access to 59.7% of the approved spaces (599 of 1003). Aside from the centres for single males, only the *Montfort Centre* is not open to families because its focus is on accommodating single females only. Although two new centres have opened for women with or without children: *Le Refuge* (10 spaces) and *La Parenthèse* (24 spaces), which both belong to the *Centre de prévention des Violences Conjugales et Familiales* (Centre for the Prevention of Domestic and Family Violence) (CPVCF), the number of available spaces in hostels has remained stable for several years.

Between 2015 and 2017, the homelessness services in the Centralised Database took in around 3000 different people each year, of whom around one third were under-18s. This high proportion of under-18s demonstrates the significant number of families in emergency accommodation and hostels, given that it is rare that under-18s are accommodated on their own.

The fact that priority is given to accommodating women with children in emergency accommodation comes through clearly in the statistics around accommodation type, as there is a majority of women in emergency accommodation while there is a majority of men in hostels.

This observation is not as straightforward as it seems, though. It is the case that a substantial proportion of men counted are actually male children staying with their mothers in accommodation. The units for single men will tend to allocate all their beds to men while units for women and children will allocate some of their beds to male children. This goes a long way towards explaining the greater number of males staying in hostels. This phenomenon is important as, between 2015 and 2017, more than half the adult women accommodated had at least one child with them (51.9%).





Another thing to consider is that the presence of children and the existence of a family unit seems to have a significant impact on the housing trajectories of the people accommodated, both when they come into and when they leave these institutions. As couples with children and women with children are often prioritised in emergency accommodation (but not only there), they come less often from and leave less often for extremely precarious living situations, in particular on the street.

Accordingly, couples with children arrive, in two thirds of cases, straight from private accommodation that they have had to leave. If we count those who have had to spend some time in emergency accommodation, they make up more than eight out of ten couples with children. Single people with children have had more varied experiences than couples with or without children before being admitted. Still, 55% of them have been booked in following departure from private accommodation or emergency accommodation, more than two thirds if we count those who are booked in following time spent in a hostel. From this, we can

draw the conclusion that there is a real drive to make sure, as far as possible, that under-18s do not have to sleep on the street.

What is observed when people enter institutions is confirmed when they leave them. Having dependent children gives priority access to different types of structures (hostels, social lettings agencies, registered social landlords, etc.). This can explain in part families' housing pathways, be they couples with children or single-parent families. This doesn't mean the situation for families is good. In emergency accommodation units, where women are in the majority, lengths of stay are getting longer, not least because the hostel network is saturated and it is difficult to rehouse people in the Brussels rental market.

Nevertheless, the presence of a close family unit (partner, children) is an element that has a tendency to improve people's housing pathways, either because it allows them to be prioritised by some institutions or because it gives them moral support and the possibility to share the cost burden with someone.

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