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# The Role of Non-profit Organisations in the Support of People Experiencing Homelessness in Brussels

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- **Abstract\_** *This paper discusses the role non-profit organisations (NPOs) play in the support of people who are experiencing homelessness or inadequate housing in the Brussels-Capital Region. A recent census of people who are experiencing homelessness or inadequate housing in Brussels shows that they turn to both formal and informal NPOs for shelter or support. However, the role of NPOs – and especially the role of informal NPOs – remains underexplored in research on homelessness. To understand the extent to which NPOs support constituents who face homelessness and inadequate housing, we administered a survey to Brussels-based NPOs deploying activities in different fields and ranging from de facto organisations to large professional organisations. Based on our results, we present a typology of NPOs that reach out to people who are experiencing homelessness or inadequate housing. The vast majority of the surveyed organisations are in contact with people living in various forms of homelessness and inadequate housing, particularly sofa surfing and overcrowding. The profiles of the people concerned vary widely, but migration is a recurring theme. Further analysis reveals intersections between the type of homelessness the NPOs encounter among their constituents on the one hand and the kind of services NPOs offer to support their constituency with housing issues on the other hand.*

› **Keywords\_** *homelessness, inadequate housing, non-profit organisations, Brussels, informal social protection*

## Introduction

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In November 2020, the sixth census of homeless and inadequately housed people in the Brussels-Capital Region took place. Based on a combination of data provided by accommodation and reception structures, a point-in-time street count, and questionnaires carried out in day centres, this biennial census aims to compile a snapshot of different forms of homelessness and inadequate housing and their distribution throughout the region.

The government agency in charge of the census emphasises that the results systematically distort reality, as some categories of the population concerned are not or only partially identified by their tools (Horvat and Striano, 2021). For example, people reliant on sofa surfing or living in extreme overcrowding remain largely invisible in the census. Moreover, the census does not receive data from all possible supportive structures. Government agencies and professional, publicly funded NPOs aimed at those experiencing homelessness are well represented, whereas data from more informal, volunteer-based NPOs, such as faith-based organisations or migrant associations, are underrepresented.

Yet, there are reasons to believe that people experiencing homelessness turn to both formal and informal structures for shelter or support. In general, social protection is not only found in formal systems, such as welfare states and markets, but also in informal systems, such as grassroots organisations, networks, families, and friends (Phillimore et al., 2021; Righard and Boccagni, 2015; Swyngedouw, 2019). The literature reveals a differentiation of actors involved in local social protection provided in different European regions and especially in cities (Kazepov, 2010; Phillimore et al., 2018; Swyngedouw, 2004; Van Dam and Raeymaeckers, 2017).

In the 2020 Brussels homeless census, 28% of the total number of people experiencing homelessness counted (5 313) resided in squats, negotiated occupancies, or non-aggregated accommodations, including faith communities (Horvat and Striano, 2021). Given the underrepresentation of such organisations in the census, their actual role in supporting people experiencing homelessness and inadequate housing is expected to be even more significant than these numbers suggest. While informal protection systems have been recognised as crucial in migration studies

and in research on social protection for people in societies with a limited or no formal welfare state, their role in supporting people experiencing homelessness is still underexplored (Mumtaz, 2021; Schrooten and Meeus, 2020; Simone, 2021).

This paper discusses the results of an empirical exploration of a diverse sample of NPOs in the Brussels-Capital Region and the support they provide for people experiencing homelessness and inadequate housing. The research questions guiding this exploration were: (1) What types of NPOs support people experiencing homelessness in Brussels? (2) Which services are offered by these NPOs? (3) Are these different types of NPOs confronted with various categories of homelessness?

NPOs' main characteristics are their relative autonomy from both the State and the market, and the fact that they transcend the family and community level (Anheier, 2005; Salamon and Sokolowski, 2004, 2016). NPOs often take up a role in service provision and advocacy, or a combination of both (Cooper, 2018; Kramer, 1981; Pauly et al., 2021). Service provision may consist of the provision of collective goods and services, especially for minorities and for people without access to the services provided by the Government or the market. Advocacy involves giving a voice to certain groups or issues that are underrepresented in executive and statutory bodies.

To document the role of NPOs in the support of people experiencing homelessness and inadequate housing in Brussels, a survey was conducted between March and October 2020 within the Brussels non-profit sector dealing with public issues at the local level. By including a broad variety of NPOs, we explicitly aimed to include a range of informal service providers that are often overlooked as relevant actors in the support of people experiencing homelessness, such as citizens' initiatives, migrant organisations, religious organisations, or sport clubs. We argue that the classification as formal or informal refers less to a dichotomy of clear separation than to a continuum that consists of numerous practices combining both formal and informal features. Based on our findings, we present a typology of six prototypes of organisations involved in the support of people experiencing homelessness and inadequate housing, allowing us to distinguish different levels of formalisation concerning the care and support for people experiencing homelessness, based on three dimensions: self-identification as part of the homeless sector, legal status, and presence of paid professionals in the NPO.

The presented exploration is part of a research project on informal support for people experiencing homelessness in Brussels (2019-2023). The project arose from the observation that many people experiencing homelessness remain out of sight of formal homelessness censuses and service providers and aims to gain insight into the diversity of living situations, needs, and strategies of people experiencing homelessness in Brussels and into the role informal social work practices take in this

process. Beside the here presented phase on NPO services, we conduct a literature study on hidden homelessness, case studies on a limited number of practices and a participatory study with people experiencing homelessness (Deleu et al., 2021).

We start this article by examining the particular framework of the Brussels non-profit sector. We then introduce two hypotheses underlying this research and discuss the sampling design. Next, we present our research findings and conclusions, to end with a discussion of the impact of these findings on current homelessness research and policy.

## **The Brussels Non-profit Sector: Between Dynamic and Charity Economy**

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In general, cities are considered fertile soil for non-profit initiatives (Frantzeskaki et al., 2018). It has been suggested that this is especially the case for Brussels (Malherbe et al., 2019). Although clear figures on the size of Brussels's non-profit sector are lacking, some research findings confirm its magnitude. In an international comparison of 32 countries, Belgium appears to have one of the largest non-profit sectors in the world (Salamon et al., 2003). In the Brussels-Capital Region, NPOs account for 11% of salaried employment (Biernaux et al., 2020). Similarly, 7.2% of Brussels's population volunteer for an NPO (Hustinx et al., 2015). Although both employment and volunteer rates are slightly lower compared to other Belgian regions, there is a relatively higher number of NPOs in the Brussels-Capital Region (Banque Nationale de Belgique, 2017; Biernaux et al., 2020). Research by Thys (2017) found about 1500 NPOs rooted in the Belgian Moroccan, Belgian Congolese, and Belgian Turkish communities in Brussels, 63% of which were entirely based on volunteers.

There are two main explanations for the scope of NPOs in cities and for the size of Brussels' civil society in particular. Firstly, according to public good theories (Weisbrod, 1986), NPOs fill the gaps left by the Government or the market, which focus on fulfilling the needs of the median voter or the median customer respectively. Thus, a society with more diversity in terms of class, occupation, needs, age, culture, etc. would lead to more minority preferences being met by a more diverse non-profit sector. Malherbe et al. (2019) argue that the social problems of the deprived population in Brussels were not addressed by bureaucratic forms of the Welfare State, which stimulated the creation of social movements. Carlier (2020) explains how a lack of arrival infrastructure for undocumented migrants, who often pass through Brussels in transit, led to humanitarian aid and practices of hospitality organised by new forms of NPOs. Some of them later received state funding and

structuring, which allows them to formalise (Vandevoordt, 2019). This confirms the interdependence theory that emphasises partnership between governments and NPOs (Anheier, 2005).

Secondly, the functioning of the non-profit sector is affected by recent reorientations of welfare state arrangements, including a bigger emphasis on private responsibilities, which may lead NPOs toward the production of so-called ‘new charity economies’ in the shadow of the Welfare State (Dewanckel et al., 2021; Kessl et al., 2020). The new charity economy describes a system in which basic goods are distributed for free or sold at discount prices to ‘the poor’, often through NPOs with voluntary helpers or low-paid persons (Kessl et al., 2020).

Scholars have been criticising mere charitable services for people experiencing homelessness, such as food distribution or providing blankets, for their lack of ambition, inefficiency, and for keeping people in a position of dependence (Lancione, 2014; Parsell and Watts, 2017). However, evidence from Germany (Kessl et al., 2020) suggests that most organisations in the charity economy provide both material assistance and a broad spectrum of social services.

Innovative in our research is the focus on support for people experiencing homelessness and inadequate housing by NPOs of various degrees of formalisation, including non-homeless sector NPOs developing services in the field of education, culture, immigration, family affairs, sports, and so on.<sup>1</sup>

## Research Design

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### *Hypotheses*

In our research, we examine the role of a variety of NPOs in supporting people experiencing homelessness and inadequate housing in Brussels. Our analysis is based on two hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1: Brussels-based NPOs in various fields of activity come into contact with and provide services to people in different situations of homelessness and inadequate housing.**

The first hypothesis is grounded in three observations. First, it has been argued that contemporary urban conditions, characterised by population pressure in a context of austerity, can increase pressure on urban infrastructures and create particular forms of vulnerability, including heterogeneous forms of homelessness

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive view on the fields of activity involved, see Figure 2.

and housing unaffordability (Gillespie et al., 2021; Zufferey, 2016). Consequently, all urban service providers, including NPOs, will potentially come into contact with people affected by homelessness (Zufferey, 2016, p.223).

Second, the Brussels-Capital Region is facing an ongoing housing crisis, characterised, among others, by an increasing number of people experiencing homelessness, high housing costs as a major factor for material deprivation, and almost 50 000 people on the waiting list for social housing (De Keersmaecker and Zimmer, 2019; Dessouroux et al., 2016; Guio and Vandenbroucke, 2018; Horvat and Striano, 2021). Third, the inability of governments to adequately respond to certain migration influxes has been documented in Brussels, particularly in the context of the refugee reception crisis in 2015 (Ambrosini et al., 2019; Carlier, 2020; Depraetere and Oosterlynck, 2017).

**Hypothesis 2: Informal NPOs reach out to individuals who, due to their profile characteristics, follow different housing strategies than the users of established NPOs in the homeless sector.**

The second hypothesis relates to the possible differences in the profile of people experiencing homelessness who make use of the services of different types of NPOs. While some individuals do not make use of any support structure, others rely entirely on the public system. Yet others only seek help from more informal providers or combine formal and informal services (Phillimore et al., 2018; Schrooten and Meeus, 2020). The same applies to the support seeking strategies of people experiencing homelessness (Metraux et al., 2016; Ogden and Avades, 2011). The places and people beneficiaries turn to for support are highly situational and contextual. However, it is clear that individual characteristics such as cultural health capital, empowerment to assert expectations, language skills, and/or legal status play a role (Pemberton et al., 2019; Phillimore et al., 2018).

### ***Sampling design***

In order to understand the extent to which NPOs face homelessness and inadequate housing among their constituents, we conducted a survey of organisations. Five strategic and methodological considerations led to a sample that represents at least part of the diversity of the local non-profit sector. First, inclusion criteria were broadly defined as developing any form of artistic, cultural, educational, leisure, social, or sportive activity on the territory of the Brussels-Capital Region with a focus on adults and/or families. Both registered and de facto associations were invited to participate in the survey. Second, in the first phase of the sample, different angles of inquiry were pursued, ranging from personal networks to gatekeepers and random selection from existing registers. Third, our sensitivity to contextual features of the Brussels-Capital Region, such as the two traditional

language communities (Janssens, 2008) and its majority-minority composition (Crul, 2016), meant that we added new data collection sources and sought new characteristics of participants as the research progressed. In a fourth consideration, elements of random sampling mitigated possible biases: to further ensure random contacts, we introduced snowball sampling, a method traditionally considered suitable for accessing 'hidden populations' (Noy, 2008). Finally, a telephone contact protocol was developed and applied by the researchers when inviting participants. To avoid self-selection bias, the purpose of the research was explained as the support provided by NPOs to Brussels residents, with the focus on homelessness and inadequate housing only made explicit during the survey. The actual survey consisted of 34 questions and took approximately 20 minutes to complete. Most of the questions were multiple choice, supplemented by some open-ended questions. The survey was developed in Qualtrics in six different languages, and could be completed by phone or online. After excluding invalid data, 160 responses were analysed using SPSS. This number corresponds to an overall response rate of approximately 50%.<sup>2</sup>

## Results

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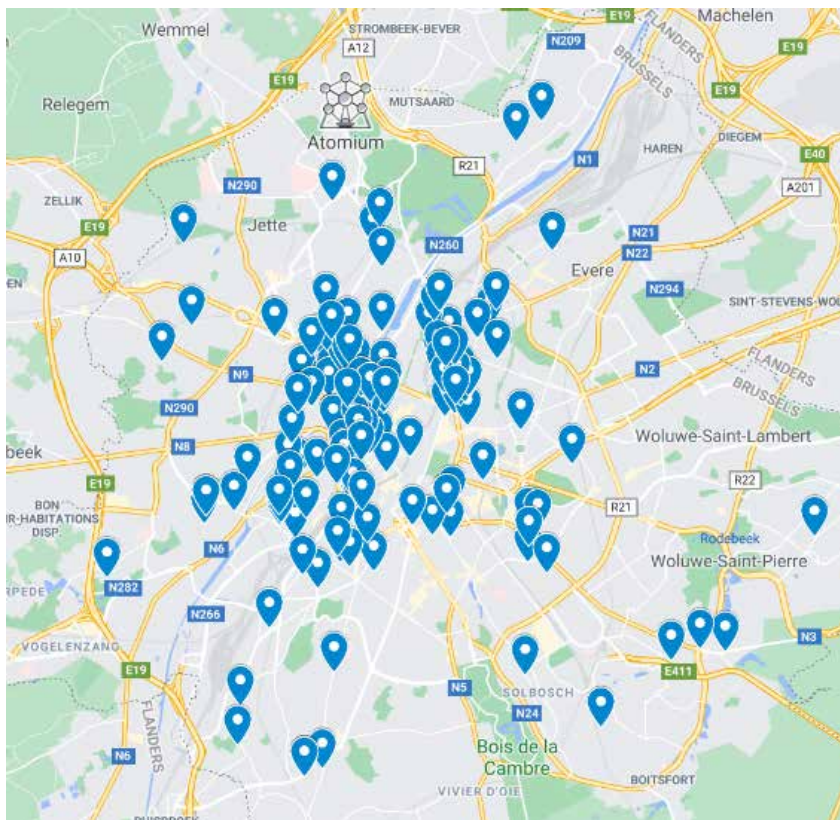
The organisations that participated in the survey were spread across the Brussels-Capital Region. A majority of the NPOs were located in the heart of the so-called canal zone, which consists of former central working-class districts. This zone is one of the areas where specific needs and characteristics such as a lower median income, a high population density, a young and mobile population, and a high share of rented housing lead to a higher representation of NPOs (Malherbe et al., 2019; Vermeulen, 2015).

The founding year of the organisations varied widely between 1931 and 2020. Fifty percent of the NPOs were founded after the year 2000 and 15% in the five years prior to the survey.

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<sup>2</sup> Of the 212 NPOs with whom there was a personal contact by the established protocol (by phone), 116 completed the survey. Besides, 44 responses were given through a more general distribution via social media and a group mailing.

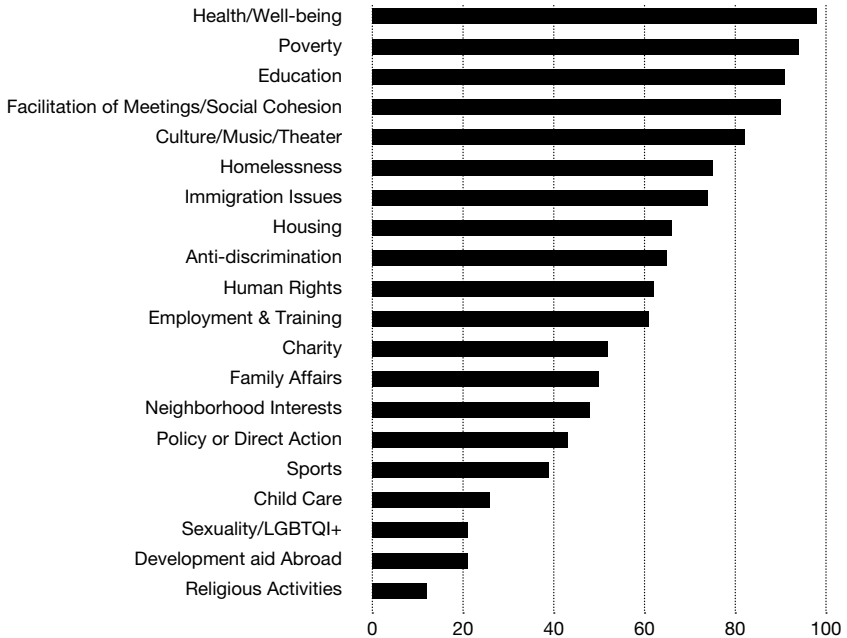
**Figure 1. The Location of the Responding NPOs Within the Brussels-Capital Region**



While 38 NPOs had no paid workers in the organisation, 122 did employ people. Of this latter group, 32 had between one and three employees, 47 between four and 10 employees, and 43 had 11 or more employees. Employees do not necessarily displace volunteers in NPOs, but often work together in the same organisation (Anheier, 2005, p.84).

NPOs also differed in their field of activity in the last year before the survey. We formulated a number of possible fields of activity (Morales and Giugni, 2011). Figure 2 shows that the most selected fields were Health and Wellbeing (98), Poverty (94), and Education (91). Homelessness and Housing were indicated as fields of activity by 75 and 66 of the 160 responding NPOs respectively, of which 55 selected both fields of activity.



**Figure 2. Fields of Activity of the Responding NPOs in the Year Prior to the Survey**

### *Developing a typology of NPOs*

In order to explore the extent to which informal NPOs reach people experiencing homelessness, we developed a typology of NPOs consisting of six ideal types (see Table 1). This typology is inspired by the three dimensions that were mentioned in the introduction. The first one is being part of the homeless sector (yes or no) and is visualised in the rows of the table. For some organisations, supporting homeless and inadequately housed people is their *raison d'être* (ideal types 2, 4, and 6), while other NPOs do not situate themselves in the homeless sector, but instead mainly pursue other goals, such as providing support to migrants or organising cultural activities (ideal types 1, 3, and 5). The second dimension concerns the status of being a legal personality (yes or no). Some NPOs acquire legal personality<sup>3</sup> and thus have full legal capacity (e.g. to open bank accounts, insure volunteers, or employ staff), while others do not register but operate as de facto organisational

<sup>3</sup> In the Belgian context legal personality for an NPO usually means a statute as *Association sans but lucrative* (ASBL) in French or *Vereniging zonder winstoogmerk* (VZW) in Dutch. The ASBL/VZW statute is relatively accessible. The articles of association, including the purpose, must be sent for publication and the proceeds of activities must be allocated to the realisation of the registered purpose (FPS Chancellery of the Prime Minister, 2010).

entities, especially in the early stages of their existence (Paxton and Rap, 2016; Thys, 2017). The third dimension looks at the presence of employees (yes or no), distinguishing between NPOs relying entirely on volunteers and those that employ paid professionals (Goldman, 2015; Moriau, 2016).

**Table 1. A Typology of NPOs That Reach People in Situations of Homelessness and Inadequate Housing**

	De facto NPO	Registered NPO with only volunteers	Registered NPO with employees
Non-homeless sector NPO	1	3	5
Homeless sector NPO	2	4	6

Type 1 consists of de facto, non-homeless sector organisations (n=5). De facto organisations are likely to be small and are often neglected in research on the non-profit sector (Toepler, 2003). They generally operate with limited budgets. These initiatives emerge from the social capital in communities (Searing and Lecy, 2021). They may be fluid, but are nevertheless essential to enable support, learning, connection, and mobilisation (Enfaltungen, 2001; Schrooten, 2021). The Type 1 organisations in our sample can be described as religious groups, two (self-)helps groups, and one squat, all of which indicated working with a constituency of people with a migration experience. All five are familiar with homelessness and/or inadequate housing. For their limited budget, usually less than €5000 a year, two of them depend on donations and two on a subsidy that counts for less than half of the total budget.

Type 2 are de facto, homeless sector organisations (n=4). The difference with Type 1 is that these initiatives identify themselves as working for people experiencing homelessness and inadequate housing. Their activities stem from an unmet need among people with housing difficulties. Again, two organisations in our sample have a religious angle, one is rooted in migration and another is an informal network aimed at commemorating people experiencing homelessness who have died. Of the three Type 2 NPOs who answered the corresponding question, two have a budget of between €5000 and €20000 and one has less than €5000 per year. Three of them depend partly on donations for their budget, two on a subsidy that covers less than half of the total budget, one on a subsidy that covers more than half of the budget, and one generates about half of the budget by selling services or goods.

Type 3 organisations are registered, volunteer-based, non-homeless sector NPOs (n=23). The fact that they have registered for legal personality demonstrates an intention for organisational continuity (Searing and Lecy, 2021). They have an organisational e-mail address, and usually also their own phone-number, Facebook page, and postal address. In our sample, this type includes an organisation for students with a migration background, several local youth associations, cultural

organisations, a self-help group, and organisations affiliated with a mosque and a church. Twenty of them reported being aware of homelessness and inadequate housing among their public, and 10 of them provide specific services to these people, mostly moral support, but to a lesser extent also material support and a place to sleep in the organisation's network.

More than half of the Type 3 organisations receive subsidies, usually for half or less of their total budget. Membership fees, donations, and the sale of goods or services supplement the total budget. Although there are some differences between the organisations, their annual budget seems to be quite low: 14 indicate that they work with a budget of less than €5000 a year.

Type 4 consists of volunteer-based NPOs that identify themselves as a homelessness organisation (n=6). Type 4 organisations in our sample provide food and clothing to people experiencing homelessness, often with a focus on a particular migrant community, share information with people in precarious situations, and/or raise public awareness of issues relevant to homelessness, such as the consequences of evictions. Of those responding to the question, two have a budget of less than €5000 per year, another two between €5000 and €20000 per year and one from €20000 to €100000. Some of them receive subsidies, which for one of them cover the entire budget. In five of the six NPOs of Type 4, donations also make up part of the budget.

The fifth type are non-homeless sector NPOs with at least one employee (n=97). Hiring employees in NPOs usually happens when a certain income level is reached (Searing and Lecy, 2021). Most of our respondents belonged to this type. Of the 97 organisations of Type 5, 55 define themselves as a socio-cultural organisation and 37 as a neighbourhood organisation. Seventy-nine of the Type 5 organisations include people experiencing homelessness or inadequate housing among their constituents. Forty-nine provide specific services, mainly by referring people experiencing homelessness to specialised services and by giving them access to their socio-cultural activities. For 62 of them, subsidies cover more than half or all of their budget. Forty-nine of them have a budget of over €100000 a year. Twenty-seven did not answer the budget question.

The sixth and last type of organisations are sectoral NPOs with employees (n=25). Traditionally, it is this type of organisations that are known as 'the homeless sector'. They are mostly established NPOs, including day centres, shelters, and accommodation structures. Most of them are involved in the Brussels homeless census which we referred to in the introduction. Subsidies are usually their main income: for 12 of them, subsidies cover more than half of their budget, and for another five, the whole budget. Of the 16 Type 6 NPOs that provided information about their annual budget, 14 manage a budget of more than €100000.

It is important to note that the position of an NPO in this typology is based on a snapshot and may change over time. NPOs are dynamic by nature and can move from one type to another or cease to exist. For instance, a de facto organisation of citizens uniting for a greener neighbourhood may disappear over time, but may also professionalise and become a registered NPO. Moreover, formal organisations can provide a platform for informal, volunteer-based activities, services, and projects, which run parallel to the formal activities and in some cases can be formalised later. In addition, there are informal organisations, for example offering food aid, which have been operating for years and are consequently considered formal by people working in the field and/or by people experiencing homelessness or inadequate housing.

### *Situations of homelessness and inadequate housing*

An important framework in the research literature on homelessness is the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) (FEANTSA, 2005). The framework is based on a broad understanding of homelessness and inadequate housing. It uses four main concepts: Rooflessness, Houselessness, Insecure Housing, and Inadequate Housing, all of which indicate the absence of a proper home (Amore et al., 2011; FEANTSA, 2005; Meert and Bourgeois, 2005).

ETHOS is used in different research projects, and an adapted version is central to the census of people experiencing homelessness and inadequate housing in the Brussels-Capital Region (Horvat and Striano, 2021). In our research, this adapted ETHOS was a main inspiration for mapping the living situations among the constituency of the surveyed NPOs. Respondents were asked whether people from their constituency were confronted with the following situations: '1. Living on the street or in public space'; '2. Regularly spend the night in a night shelter'; '3. Stay in an accommodation for the homeless'; '4. Stay in a squat (with or without an agreement with the owner)'; '5. Reside in a place not intended for habitation, for example a caravan, hut or tent'; '6. Accommodation where the person is accommodated by an individual (with friends, family members or another person)', referring to sofa surfing; '7. Stay within the network of a faith community'; '8. Stay in a Non-Aggregated Accommodation Structure (SHNA)'; '9. Stay in an accommodation that is far too small for the number of people living there', referring to overcrowding; or '10. A combination of several of the situations mentioned above'. Respondents were able to select 'yes', 'no', and 'I do not know' for each of the 10 options, depending on the situations they found among their audience.

No fewer than 139 of the 160 organisations surveyed indicated that they had constituents in situations of homelessness or inadequate housing. This was the case for 104 of the 125 organisations from the non-homeless sector (Types 1, 3, and 5). Two categories were by far the most common among respondents and

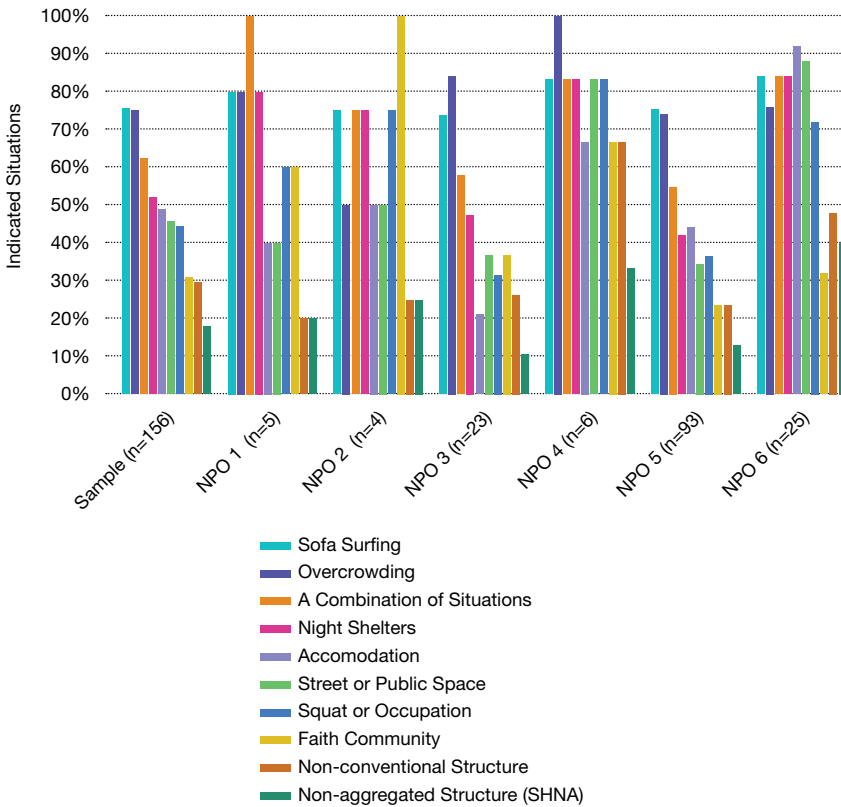
scored high across all types of NPOs, namely sofa surfing (118) and overcrowding (117). The first category is considered by ETHOS as insecure housing, while the second category refers to living in an inadequate housing situation. Respondents also recognised the interrelationship between different forms of homelessness and inadequate housing; 'a combination of several of the above-mentioned situations' was the third most frequently chosen option (96). People in emergency shelters (81) and accommodation for the homeless (77) completed the top five.

There are some similarities and differences between the housing situations that were recognised on the basis of the NPO typology mentioned above. As could be expected, sector NPOs with paid workers (Type 6) were familiar with rooflessness and houselessness, i.e., people living on the street or staying regularly in night shelters or accommodation. Some of these Type 6 NPOs offered official shelter or accommodation to people experiencing homelessness themselves. This does not mean that the offer of Type 6 NPOs was limited to these forms of homelessness. Of the 25 Type 6 NPOs surveyed, 21 also worked with sofa surfers, 18 with people living in squats, 12 with people who reside in a place not intended for habitation, 10 with people in an SHNA, and eight with people staying in a faith community. Both sector organisations and other NPOs encounter such situations of insecure and inadequate housing.

However, the volunteer-based and non-homeless sector NPOs were more often affected by insecure and inadequate housing. The 38 NPOs from Types 1 to 4, i.e., voluntary organisations, were most frequently confronted with people living in overcrowded conditions (29), with sofa surfers (27), with people moving from one situation to another (25), and people using shelters (21). Staying in the network of a faith community (18) scored relatively high, as high as staying in a squat. The fact that staying in an accommodation for people experiencing homelessness (12) and SHNA (6) scored relatively low may be related to the specific nature of these concepts, which are often not known outside the specialised homeless sector.

When comparing the relative share, the main difference between the Type 5 organisations with paid staff and the de facto Type 1 and 2 organisations is that the latter had more contact with people living in faith communities, as was the case for seven of the nine respondents. This is also the main difference between the professional homeless sector (Type 6), where staying in a faith community is the least common (albeit with a considerable eight on 25) compared to all four NPOs of Type 2 and four out of six NPOs of Type 4, both of which belong to the volunteer-based homeless sector.

**Figure 3. Chart on the Indicated Situations of Homelessness and Inadequate Housing**



***Profiles of people experiencing homelessness and inadequate housing***

Respondents were asked to indicate the profiles of that part of their constituency that is experiencing homelessness or inadequate housing. This was an open question, without any answer suggestion and not mandatory to fill in. Nevertheless, the question was answered by 111 of the 139 organisations that are in contact with people experiencing homelessness or inadequate housing.

A qualitative analysis of the results shows a mixed picture. Many respondents pointed to the diversity of the group with housing difficulties. Some of the organisations from the non-homeless sector (Types 1, 3, and 5) said that they do not have a clear view of the housing situation of their users, as homelessness and inadequate housing are not part of their scope and they therefore do not deliberately monitor such situations. The latter is particularly the case for organisations whose main field

of activity is sport or culture. Nevertheless, some clearly recurring themes were drawn out from the answers. Migration is a first topic, as 64 respondents from all six NPO types refer to migration when describing the profiles of people experiencing homelessness and inadequate housing among their visitors. Thirty-three NPOs of different types refer specifically to undocumented migrants. Nine NPOs in the sample mention people with refugee status. Some NPOs testify how refugees who are granted protection status cannot find housing, making them homeless or pushing them into inadequate housing, as two to four months is the maximum reception period provided by the Belgian Government. Two NPOs from the non-homeless sector refer to EU citizens from Central European countries who are experiencing homelessness in Brussels.

Another recurrent theme in the answers relates to family composition, which is mentioned by 31 respondents. According to them, three main groups appear to be particularly vulnerable to homelessness and inadequate housing. The first group consists of large families who have difficulty finding suitable housing. Several respondents also mention grandparents permanently living with the family, which can lead to overcrowding. The second group consists of single-parent families, often mothers with children. Third, five respondents from Type 3 and Type 5 NPOs specifically mention singles among those experiencing housing difficulties.

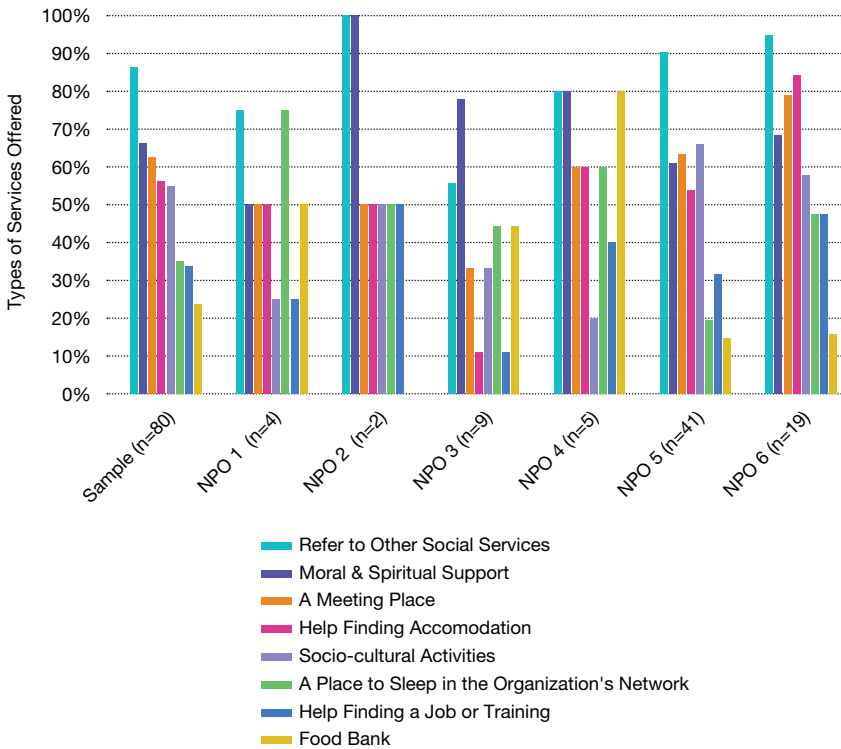
Fourteen respondents from Types 3, 4, 5, and 6 reported mental health problems among their homeless constituents, ranging from stress to psychiatric disorders. Six mentioned problems related to alcohol or other drug use. Getting lost in administrative procedures, and hence the non-take up of social rights, was another recurrent theme. Population characteristics mentioned once or twice were people marginalised because of their sexual orientation or gender identity (LGBTQI+), sex workers, artists, people with disabilities, and homeowners in substandard housing. Incidentally, 10 respondents of various types also highlighted the strengths of people experiencing homelessness, describing them as strong, courageous, and resilient.

### ***NPO services***

All the 35 surveyed organisations that are part of the homeless sector logically develop services aimed at people experiencing homelessness. Of the 125 organisations outside of the sector, around half (66) offer specific services to people experiencing homelessness among their public. Of the voluntary based non sector organisations of Type 3, 10 of the 23 organisations do so. Four of them provide food and look for places to sleep in their own network. When taking into account the surveyed voluntary based organisations (Type 1 to 4), about half of them look for sleeping places in the organisations network.

However, the services that NPOs provide to the people experiencing homelessness and inadequate housing are not limited to material support. On the contrary, the main services offered address intangible needs, such as referral to appropriate services, socio-cultural activities, social contacts, and moral support. These four kinds of support score the highest among the 49 professionalised non sector organisations of Type 5 that provide services to people experiencing homelessness. Nevertheless, the results seem to indicate that the more informal NPOs offer a wider range of services. For example, compared to other NPOs, the rather informal NPOs of Type 1 and 4 offer food aid more often. A place to sleep in the organisation’s network was also provided relatively more frequently by NPOs of Types 1, 2, and 4. ‘Help with finding accommodation’ was in the top three of services offered by Type 1, 2, and 6 NPOs, suggesting that this service is provided by organisations at both ends of the informality-formality spectrum.

**Figure 4. Chart Showing the Types of Services Provided to Homeless and Inadequately Housed People**





## Conclusion

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The aim of our study was to investigate the role played by a diverse sample of NPOs in supporting people experiencing homelessness and inadequate housing, including the support offered by informal NPOs and NPOs outside of the homeless sector. It distinguishes six types of NPOs, which vary in terms of sector, legal status, and level of professionalisation. The Brussels-Capital Region served as a research context.

A first hypothesis suggested that NPOs, through their service role, encounter people in various situations of homelessness and inadequate housing and provide them with supportive services. The results of our study confirm this hypothesis. Out of the full sample, 139 NPOs (or 86.9%) identified the presence of at least one homelessness situation among their constituents. Overcrowding and sofa surfing are the two most commonly identified situations. As a consequence, most organisations provide supportive services aimed at people experiencing homelessness and inadequate housing.

There is no clear confirmed intersection between the types of NPOs on the one hand and the presence of support for people experiencing homelessness and inadequate housing on the other. More than half of the sampled organisations not identifying as an organisation for the homeless still develop services for people experiencing homelessness, including organisations in all surveyed fields of activity.

In terms of the kind of services they provide towards people experiencing homelessness and inadequate housing, the results show that these services are mainly focusing on social, psychological, and moral needs. Food banks for people who are experiencing homelessness often seem to operate on a volunteer basis. Offering sleeping places in the organisation's network is also quite common among the voluntary based organisations. Yet, the assertion that those small charity oriented interventions are drawing vulnerable individuals away from existing professional services is partly contradicted, as several of them indicate that they refer people experiencing homelessness toward specialist support services.

A second hypothesis argued that different types of NPOs could be confronted with various categories of homelessness. We find this only partly true. First, as could be expected, NPOs with paid staff and defining themselves as being part of the homelessness sector (Type 6) are more familiar with traditional forms of rooflessness and houselessness: people in an accommodation, using night shelters, or living on the streets. Second, some of the more informal NPOs reach proportionally more individuals residing in faith communities. Yet, the second hypothesis is largely contradicted by the observation that for both formal and

non-formal, and for both the homeless sector and non-homeless sector NPOs, sofa surfers and people in squats make up a significant proportion of the people experiencing homelessness they reach.

The descriptions of profile characteristics of the reached people experiencing homelessness were diverse. However, migration-related aspects are mentioned most frequently by the respondents. Various categorisations of migration homelessness (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2014) are made, including people with foreign backgrounds, intra-European migrants, people with a refugee status, and, especially, undocumented migrants. The results of this research suggest that the latter are part of the visitors of all types of NPOs. Both informal and formal NPOs support undocumented migrants in precarious living and housing conditions.

## Discussion

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The originality of this exploratory study is its inclusion of both NPOs outside the traditional homeless sector and informal NPOs, beyond faith-based organisations and squats (Lancione, 2014; Mudu and Chattopadhyay, 2018; Sanchez, 2010). In particular, the functioning and service role of de facto and non-homeless sector organisations remain underexplored in research on homelessness.

As we cannot guarantee that the NPOs reached constitute a representative sample of the broader NPO landscape in Brussels, and due to the relatively limited number of respondents, the results of this survey cannot be generalised to the entire Brussels-Capital Region or beyond. Nonetheless, our sample allows us to draw up a theoretically representative typology of the NPOs that reach people experiencing homelessness and inadequate housing, both individuals and families, the type of activities they offer, and the support they provide.

An important point that emerges from our research is how Brussels's housing crisis widely affects the constituencies of NPOs. While organisations focusing on sport or culture are less focused on the housing issue, they also notice an increased presence of people that severely struggle with housing issues. They consequently develop various forms of support to people experiencing homelessness and inadequate housing. In this way, the detection and support of people experiencing homelessness goes beyond the traditional homeless sector. We distinguish at least two consequences.

A first relevant consequence concerns the reliability of the census of people experiencing homelessness and inadequate housing that is biannually organised in the Brussels-Capital Region. The data provided by homeless sector reception structures is accurate and given the thoroughness of the point-in-time count, the number of

people on the street also reflect reality. Yet, the current study shows that the involvement of only a few informal and non-homeless sector NPOs among the accommodation and reception structures affects the reliability of the census. Our study confirms that it is not possible to involve all relevant NPOs in the count, given the enormous magnitude of this sector. A possible solution may be to work out a sample of a large number of organisations in different fields of activity and of different types, with attention for voluntary-based organisations. In addition to squatting collectives, this sample could include sports clubs, religious organisations representing different traditions, poverty organisations, family services, etc. The figures from this sample can be presented separately from the more precise figures gathered from formal reception structures and by the point-in-time street count.

Second, for coalitions tackling homelessness it may be relevant to involve NPOs that previously remained out of their sight. These informal and non-sector NPOs may be important in preventing rooflessness and houselessness, since informal social protection often precedes street based sleeping and possibly also access to the formal homeless sector NPOs.

Involving these informal and non-homeless sector NPOs in censuses of homelessness and strategies to combat homelessness would add value, as they identify aspects of homelessness that often remain out of sight of policymakers, social services, and the general public. Yet, any form of involvement should happen after careful thought and there might be ethical objections. While some NPOs are eager to broaden their network, they are often reluctant to be instrumentalised for processes they cannot control. The services they provide are often ad hoc and sometimes improvised. Cooperation with more powerful government structures and formal organisations could break these fragile dynamics, preventing organisations from taking up their informal but essential roles. Moreover, NPOs sometimes see their services as a way of exposing the gaps left by the Government. As a result, they are reluctant to get any official recognition, because that would mean accepting the current state of affairs.

To end with, charity directed at people experiencing homelessness has been criticised for “being with people who are homeless, but without ambition or activity to end their homelessness” (Parsell, 2019, p.16). While the findings suggest that some small voluntary based organisations do refer people to more specialised organisations, this remains a point of attention that deserves further empirical research. Here it is relevant to consider to what extent the considerable presence of undocumented migrants among the Brussels homeless population impacts the possibilities of NPOs to guide toward more sustainable housing-oriented solutions. Our

study confirms the intersections between migration and homelessness (Hermans et al., 2020). Brussels-based NPOs keep their finger on the pulse of these phenomena that shape contemporary homelessness.

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