

RFAS

Revue française des affaires sociales

Call for multi-disciplinary contributions on:

‘Homelessness: experiences and policies’

For the first 2023 issue of the RFAS

This edition will be coordinated by Mauricio Aranda (CRESPPA-LabTop),
Gwen le Goff (Triangle) and Julien Lévy (Pacte).

This call for contributions is addressed to researchers in demography,
sociology, economics, political science, management, psychology,
communication, philosophy, law, anthropology, history, as well
as from the healthcare and social fields.

Articles must be submitted before Thursday 8 September 2022.

There is currently a strong rise in interest in the homelessness situation in France. On the one hand, the initial measures taken to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, especially the stay at home orders, exposed the situations of people who lived in public spaces, and who could not stay at home, unlike the rest of the population. This situation resulted in the public authorities making an exception and opening up additional places in homeless shelters. On the other hand, new statistics on the homeless have shown how the social and economic consequences of the health crisis have started to be felt (Duvoux and Lelièvre, 2021). On publication of their 2021 report, the Fondation Abbé Pierre (FAP) gave a figure of 300,000 homeless people (*'personnes sans-domicile'*)¹ (Fondation Abbé Pierre, 2021). This figure is twice as high as the one calculated by the INSEE in 2012, which was in itself twice as high as that calculated in an initial study carried out in 2001 (Yaouancq et al., 2013). Although the figures obtained by the FAP should be treated carefully, it does seem that the number of people in this situation has risen sharply since the start of the 2000s.

These two manners of publicising the situation faced by France's *'sans abri'*² (homeless people) may be considered within the context of a situation that has been developing since at least the mid-1980s. This decade was marked by the end of the *'Trente Glorieuses,'* as the French call the thirty recession-free years between 1945 and 1975. More specifically, it was marred by the appearance of economic crises, mass unemployment, the increased precariousness of work and the discussion of exclusion in public debates (Viguié, 2020). In this context, the condition of the homeless, or *'sans domicile fixe'* or 'SDF' (this acronym started to be used in everyday speech in France from 1993) has become a public issue. It is discussed at length in the media (especially during winter), is mentioned in politician's speeches, has led to large demonstrations and it has been the subject of investigation by social scientists.

Researchers have examined this question from different perspectives. They have studied life, or survival, out on the streets, as well as public policies that have been implemented for the homeless and the difference categories into which they fall (Choppin et Gardella, 2013). The *Revue française des affaires sociales*, or RFAS, has been involved in the renewed interest in carrying out research in this area. In 2002, an edition entitled *'Sans-logis et squatteurs, auto-organisation and mobilisation collective* (*'Homeless and squatters, self-organisation and collective mobilisation'*) was published (RFAS, 2002). Between the end of the 1990s and the start of the 2000s, other academic journals have also published articles on this issue or on similar subjects (ARSS 2005a, 2005b; *Espaces et sociétés*, 2004; *Politix*, 1996; *Sociétés contemporaines*, 1998).

¹ INSEE defines people *'sans domicile fixe'* [without a fixed abode] as those who stated having spent the night before the survey in an unplanned location, or in a short or long term homeless shelter. People *'sans-abri'* [without shelter] are thus a subset of the group made up of the *'sans-domicile,'* since they only include individuals who slept in an unplanned location.

² We must understand that "homelessness is not a condition, either social or psychological, to which certain people are naturally condemned to suffer. Rather, it is a process, or a chain of events which force people to live, for varying lengths of time, between public spaces and at aid organisations." (Choppin and Gardella, 2013). This phenomenon does not affect different sectors of the general population to the same degree; people who make up the working classes have a higher probability of ending up homeless.

Taking into account not just the changes to the public problem caused by the homeless situation, but also the importance of carrying our work on these questions, the RFAS has decided to once again dedicate a new edition to these persons. Twenty years after the publication of that issue, the RFAS's aim is to investigate homelessness, and where we are with regards to the knowledge gained by the social sciences on this subject.

This might appear to be a simple aim. In reality, however, it is an important update on the current diverse and complicated homelessness situation. This obviously involves the changes in the people who are affected by this, as well as in the constant increase in their numbers (for example, we may think of the increasing number of foreign homeless people). This also includes changes in public policy that have been taken in response to this phenomenon, notably through the 'Logement d'abord' (Housing First) policy at the start of the 2010s.

For this publication, we aimed to tackle the subject from several points of view, using various disciplines and methodologies (statistics, observations, interviews, archives etc.) as well as different focuses (policy definition, implementation and reception of public policy, social and health policy, the social journeys of those concerned, mobilisations etc.) We also wanted to explore the gray areas of this subject matter, in order to promote reflection on the homeless, providing information over and above that which has already been obtained. This issue can thus be used to question the different aspects of this phenomenon, by exploring its less visible or concealed characteristics.

To achieve this, we can start by asking some initial questions. Firstly, it is important to not reduce this phenomenon solely to that of contact with organisations which explicitly target persons without a personal home. They may be in contact with organisations or services which are outside the 'reception, housing and insertion' sector. It is thus important to investigate any possible relationships between the homeless and the health, food distribution, and hygiene (e.g. municipal showers) services and even penitentiary system. This is a first point of departure, which also leads us to investigate situations whereby the homeless do not use the services (whether voluntarily or not) (Lévy, 2015; Warin, 2016; Gardella, 2019). This desire to analyse the situation in a manner that does not centre on institutions may be further enlarged, allowing us to look at other, more specific, precarious living situations, such as living in other peoples' homes, squats, encampments, or sleeping in vehicles or in campsites (Pichon, 2002; Bouillon, 2009; Agier et al., 2011; Lion, 2018; Desmond, 2019). Another way to look at this problem involves the spatial aspect of homelessness. As homelessness has historically been significantly considered and analysed in the context of cities, towns and public spaces, homelessness has usually been described as an urban phenomenon. It is therefore important to think about precarious living situations in rural or peri-urban settings, as well as the solidarity or hostility found between people in those areas. An other area to think about is the international setting. The points relevant to this question, both in terms of the people involved - such as, for example, the relationship between migration and homelessness (Le Mener, 2021) - and in terms of models (namely, *Housing First*), require us to investigate this at a level that goes beyond the French situation. This last point is an invitation for people to send contributions from abroad, in order to open up the conversation and invite comparison (Pichon et al., 2008).

Generally speaking, and in keeping with these different questions, this issue aims to reflect on

the homeless situation today, without reducing - or simplifying it - to just the streets or shelters. This call for contribution aims to strengthen, or renew, the trends of this area of social science research. The **first section** focuses on the ways in which we objectify and make sense of the situation faced by the those affected. The **second section** focuses on the response given by different actors (public, private) to the homeless at different levels. The **third section** focuses on the lived experiences of the homeless, by trying to do justice to their realities, as well as to the objective conditions of their lives and survival. And finally, a **fourth section** deals with changes, especially those brought about by crises (health, economic, migratory etc.), and what they reveal to us about the above questions, including the manner in which this phenomenon is understood, the experiences of the people involved and the actions taken on their behalf. These seem to be the first, most important, steps which can be taken to understand the ruptures and continuities that exist when representing them, the treatment which they receive, and their social trajectories.

1/ Knowledge of homelessness, categorisation and definition of public action

Several investigations have shown the usefulness of taking a constructivist approach in order to understand the vulnerabilities of people living between the streets and aid organisations, who in the great majority, are people who come from precarious sectors of the working classes. This has allowed us to place the ‘homeless issue’, which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, into the context of longer time periods, going back to at least the end of the 19th century (Brodiez-Dolino and Ravon, 2016), as well as to question the sole use of vagrancy to define homelessness, leading to the creation of the first night shelters by charities and municipal authorities (Katz, 2015). In this way, we can observe the different manners in which the problem was framed, which, depending on the context may have competed with each other (and still do), and which help to shape public action with regards to the phenomenon known as the ‘public problem of homelessness’.

If it is analysed from a categorical point of view, the way in which homelessness has been considered in France by the social and political spheres since the 1980s and 1990s may be thought of as a progressive process of discrimination against people who find themselves without a personal home. Firstly, the specific problem of those ‘without a home’ has been framed as being separate to other long-standing or new problematic situations. This is particularly true in the case of the ‘newly poor’ victims of the economic crisis of the 1970s, or even the ‘sans-logis’, as the homeless were called, and who have been the subject of interest for decades, as can be seen by the arguments of Abbé Pierre in the winter of 1954. The ‘SDF’ label, which came into use at the start of the 1990s, and its increasing use in documents focusing on the fight against poverty and social exclusion, as well as its use in everyday language, helped to highlight the situation of these people. We should not think of this term as having been used to divide people, or to target the homeless. On the contrary, it initiated a new political and administrative stage, which developed into a multi-faceted response to a group of people whose make-up is particularly heterogeneous (Brousse, 2006a), and which continuously affirms a need

to obtain knowledge on this group of people, in order to produce targeted responses.

As the policies to care for the homeless developed, the requirement to obtain knowledge on this group of people has persisted. This leads to questions regarding the relationship between public action and knowledge regarding groups of people. As stated by the *Haut Comité pour le logement des personnes défavorisées*, which, in their first report issued in 1993, complained of a lack of “specific studies on disadvantaged people, and of their numbers” (HCPLD, 1993), the requirement to know more about the homeless has been repeatedly reaffirmed over the years, and is still present today. Neither academic research on homelessness, nor the statistical surveys which have been developed, notably by the INED and INSEE, and especially, within the CNIS³ (Marpsat et al., 2000; Brousse, 2006b; Yaouancq et al., 2013), nor the high level of data obtained on the field and collated by the actors involved, seem to be enough to answer the recurring questions of ‘Who are they?’ and ‘How many are there?’

And so the definitions continue to be the subject of debate in France as well as internationally. This is also the case for the question regarding the ‘number’ of people affected, which is currently subject to deep analysis. A decade separates the last great statistical survey undertaken on the homeless in France from the one currently being carried out. Since that time, we have seen local initiatives to count or describe the homeless population. The famous ‘search for numbers’ (Damon, 2000) has thus been updated by these different counts (for example, during the ‘solidarity nights’) in several towns and cities of France. It is thus important to continuously pose this question, and to renew the knowledge we have on the homeless. What is the reason for these counts? What is the status of the collected data in these ever-changing conditions? Do they renew the knowledge we have on the homeless, either by framing the problem in a certain way, or by providing information regarding its size? Can we ask ourselves about any potential use of this data, either in terms of research or public action? More broadly, and going beyond these quantification exercises, we can ask ourselves about the flow of the knowledge obtained on homelessness in academia, and the manner in which it is, or isn’t used by the public policy makers.

³ INED: Institut national d’études démographiques (National Institute for Demographic Studies); INSEE: Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies); CNIS: Conseil national de l’information statistique (French National Statistics Council)

The first section opens up the way to a second one, which deals the relationship between the production of knowledge on this sector of society and its effects on the creation of policies and actions implemented for the benefit of the homeless. In France, the naming conventions developed by the INSEE to distinguish people without a home include the terms ‘sans domicile’ (without a home) and ‘sans abri’ (without shelter). Different definitions may be used in other countries. We also see how the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) has been trying over the last number of years to use a common naming convention throughout Europe, in order to standardise data and allow for comparisons to be made (Loison-Leruste, 2010). The international viewpoint also allows to identify “French categories” and to think about how these categories were formed, their limits, and their effects on developing responses. In addition to the potential risk of naturalisation which may be caused by categorising people in this way, and despite the performative nature of action or naming categories, we may also ask ourselves about the manner in which the historic construction of these categories led to specific ways in which the public homeless problem has been framed in France.

Another question may be addressed here regarding the relationship between the process of categorisation and the experiences of the people involved. Some researchers have already underlined the manner in which some homeless people place themselves into certain categories, notably, by introducing themselves as ‘SDF’, leading to feedback loops (Hacking, 2008). It is also interesting to think about the experiences of the people regarding the categories used to describe them. How do they identify themselves? Do they adopt the category? Or do they try to get away from it?

2/ Thinking afresh about the management of the homeless

Analysis of the long-term history of the discourse on extreme poverty, shows the changes that have occurred in the assistance provided to those most affected (Damon 2007; Gueslin, 2013). The previous, repressive historical discourse, which spoke of ‘vagrants’, evolved into the provision of services to the ‘SDF’ in the 1980s and 1990s. The tools used to focus on the homeless (whether they are described as ‘without sanctuary’, ‘vagrant’ ‘antisocial’, ‘without a fixed home’, ‘very excluded’ etc.) have become more and more varied, especially during the last decades of the 20th century. They include: social reinsertion homes (CHRS in French), emergency shelters (CHU in French), day centres, family accommodation, the 115 telephone number, on-street work, integrated reception and orientation centres (SIAO in French), social hotels, *Chez soi d’abord* (French version of ‘Housing First’), etc.

Research into public actions has also shown the crucial role of medical moral entrepreneurs (Gardella, 2014; Levy, 2021) and of philanthropists and charities (Aranda, 2019), in framing and responding to the homelessness situation. This work may be extended. The decisions and their implementation could be analysed in order to try and describe both of these elements.

Firstly, questions may be asked on the range of tools and approaches available when carrying out public acts focusing on the homeless. How did the idea emerge that a new tool is required for assisting people who are not assisted by others? Who are the actors working on these questions, or who receive a permission from the public authorities to implement their initiative?

To what extent does the expansion of social assistance rely on the accumulation, rather than the adaptation, of tools which already exist, or on the non-stop differentiation by the public, and the specific answers to provide them with? These questions may notably focus on the tools which, by being a part of the current *Logement d'abord* policies, try to change the paradigm of public action aimed at the homeless. This is still highly structured around emergency accommodation, in a context in which social shelters and lodgings have been over-saturated for decades.

At the same time, questions may be asked either at the level of single organisations, or of all actors involved, about the manner in which professionals from the 'social worlds' (social, health, education etc.) work together (Uribelarra, 2020), focusing not only on shelters, but also health, employment, etc. What are the aims of sharing jurisdictions between professional groups in the areas relating to homelessness (Schlegel, 2021), as well as in other areas which often go hand-in-hand with homelessness (drug addiction, migration, access to healthcare and social rights etc.)? It may be useful to study a tool like *Un Chez Soi d'Abord (Housing First)*, due to its multi-disciplinary nature, its aims ('lodgings before assistance,' and its multi-layered targeting methods (the person must be homeless and suffering from diagnosed psychiatric disorders).

The last point above also allows us to consider further questions. Is it possible to consider the provision of assistance to the homeless in some way other than in terms of providing shelter or lodgings (even if these are rare)? In other words, is it possible to think about this in a manner that goes beyond public descriptions (of the 'homeless' or 'SDF'), which focus mainly on the lack of shelter and which lead to responses to those specific issues (shelter or lodgings). What do we learn from the tools providing access to healthcare and social rights (permanent access to healthcare - PASS), the right to hospitalisation (beds, healthcare), mental health (mobile health care-precarious teams - EMPP), risk reduction (reception centres and support for reducing the risks to drug users - CAARUD), or even to the workplace ('*Premières Heures*' tool) in order to respond to the issues facing the homeless? Can the situation be reconsidered using the above-mentioned tools, which do not necessarily focus explicitly on the homeless? Could they reveal blind spots in the main public actions towards homeless people? Additionally, which citizens' responses (not part of public actions) emerge as an alternative to institutional responses?

Despite the legal changes brought about for the homeless through the de-criminisation of vagrancy and begging, the situation for certain people living in precarious homes (such as slums, encampments, squats etc.) which are constantly torn down (Lion, 2015), and 'deterrents' which exist in towns (Soutrenon, 2001; Terrolle, 2004) are a reminder of the historical ambivalence (Geremek, 1987) which continues to form part of the response to this sector of society. This is especially pertinent to foreigners who are homeless - they have been victims of hardened discourse and migratory policies for a number of years now. Could this lead us to question the coexistence of assistance and repression, or at least deterrent, measures, with regards to sectors of society who are considered to be vulnerable? Is it possible to revisit, through these situations, the distinction between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor people, which nowadays works to the detriment of migrants and the homeless? What is the role of

socially-owned property in the treatment received by these people? Are the actions of certain actors (prefectures, town halls, etc.) in keeping with those of others (charities), or do they contradict each other (Bourgois and Lièvre, 2019)? On top of this, while the decentralised state manages the distribution of shelter spaces, the public areas in which the homeless sometimes live are managed by the municipality. Does multi-level analysis of public actions (from decision makers to street-level bureaucrats) and of the different types of public territories (national, departmental, municipal; urban and rural) do justice to the differences and similarities between assistance and deterrents?

3/ Experiences, personal stories and vulnerabilities

This section aims to examine the many ways in which homelessness is experienced. It is important to analyse the factors leading to precarisation, and to identify what people use as resources, especially in terms of social support. Contributions may describe the stories behind people living in highly precarious situations, as well as their lives. They may discuss the many types of precarious living spaces (the street, squats, encampments, slums, etc), and of their effects on people and their environment.

Analysis of ‘breaks’ could be proposed; notably, with regards to existing tools and their adaptation - or non-adaptation - to the situations discovered. We could therefore dig into why dysfunctional asylum policies or the removal of social help in childhood lead to homelessness (Dietrich-Ragon, 2020). In addition to this, in a political and institutional context (especially Logement d’Abord) in which the methods used to help the public use person-centred management, how can the tools and practices be adapted to these principles, taking into account the requirement of people’s life aspirations? This interest in human wellbeing has become prevalent among numerous actors, both in academia and in social or healthcare settings. Nowadays, there is a strong interest in reporting the experience of homeless persons (Besozzi, 2021), either through the use of personal accounts, or in collaborations with universities (Pichon and Torche, 2011; Brunetaux, 2016), charities or professional projects which aim to produce knowledge through experience, such as mutual aid. For this issue, contributions could document, or provide information which comes from experience, on severe precarisation and the hardships which are associated with it.

With regards to social intervention, the change from working ‘on others’ to working ‘with others’ was formalised with the law of 2 January 2002, extending the rights of service users and the implementation of mandatory tools to link them with the functioning of establishments. The personalisation of the support provided to people in social interventions and the encouragement for the service user's social autonomy, could be documented or discussed.

Contributions could also discuss the categories used in social or healthcare settings, notably that of ‘vulnerability’. The use of this has risen sharply over the last few decades, and today, it is a manner of ‘describing people who are targeted by the social and healthcare sectors’ (Brodiez-Dolino et al., 2014). If the concepts of social exclusion or poverty are defined by concrete aspects (for example, economic criteria), vulnerabilities underline the failing aspect of the environment as well as the possibility for action. This invites a reflection on fragility in terms of its social dimension; risky situations, ‘to be isolated’, ‘without abode’, ‘without an income’, ‘without legal papers’, ‘elderly’, ‘disabled’, all while taking people’s individual abilities and

their resilience into account. Some authors think ‘in terms of social vulnerability rather than exclusion, in order to take into account current phenomena which lead to fragility and the marginalisation of certain individuals, and thus to understand the required interventions’ (Soulet, 2005).

Who are the people who are nowadays considered to be vulnerable? If recognition of ‘vulnerability’ involves external help or assistance, do these individuals see themselves as belonging to this group? Nowadays, people in ‘specific’ categories are thought to be vulnerable. Can we therefore speak of vulnerable social groups? For example, women currently make-up a significant percentage of the homeless population. They are not visible in the public space, and they were only the subject of very sparse studies in the human and social sciences until some ten years ago. Gender is either not considered at all, or it is considered as being a fringe institutional issue. Discussions surrounding assistance tend to focus mainly on interventions (Maurin, 2017). Contributions could therefore question the categories of vulnerability, be they social or healthcare-related.

We can also ask ourselves about whether immigrants constitute a specific group of vulnerable people. Professionals, charities, and volunteers are seeing that new arrivals to France are facing increasingly precarious situations. According to a survey carried out in establishments and centres for adults and families facing difficulties (ES-DS 2016), in 2016, foreigners made up of 49% of those living in social reinsertion homes (CHRS).

These people are administratively, socially, and psychologically vulnerable (Chambon and Le Goff, 2016). For example, for non-French speakers, language is an additional barrier, as it makes it harder to recognise certain vulnerabilities which would have led to different reception and support (directives on vulnerability have been introduced into European Law in 2011 and 2013, and adapted into French law through the Asylum Law of 2015).

‘Psychologisation of social relationships’ (Castel, Enriquez and Stevens, 2008), ‘sanitisation social problems’ (Fassin and Rechman, 2011), ‘sociologisation of psychological interventions’ (Ravon, 2006) are some of the numerous ways of describing the connection between the social and healthcare fields. Vulnerabilities, if they have a social dimension, also impact on healthcare. Nowadays, the growing recognition of psychological trauma highlights the need to take into account the psychological effects of social events, especially for people who live in highly precarious situations. Contributions could thus discuss healthcare-related vulnerabilities faced by people living in highly precarious situations. Contributors could also discuss the practices and therapeutic interventions used to respond to these problems.

4/ Crises and reconfiguration of public action

This last section questions the adjustments, changes or readjustments made to public actions with regards to the experience of homelessness during times of ‘crisis’. Economic crises, or those related to accommodation or the management of public spaces may have practical implications on the public concept of homelessness, the organisation of responses as well as the paths taken by those affected. Some authors have discussed the erosion of salaries and the increased precariousness (disassociation) experienced by people, leading to economic hardship

since the 1970s (Castel, 1995). More recently, ‘migration crises’ in Europe, and specifically in France, have led to an continuous increase in the number of asylum seekers who live in France, without having the right to remain, and who are faced with over-saturated institutions which are meant to support them (reception centres for asylum seekers, CADA). Considering this ongoing process in which mobility factors (Wihtol de Wenden, 2010) will not be disappearing anytime soon (conflicts, differences in human development, climate change etc.) in what way can these needs be best met? Contributions to this edition could provide a social and historic account of the effects of different types of crises on homelessness. In what manner do these times, involving the ‘desectorisation’ (Dobry, 2009) of social spaces, contribute to the transformation of our ideas regarding the phenomena and policies which need to be addressed? They may also take into account the journeys of individuals or groups of people who use private solutions to the problems which they face (squats, staying with friends and family etc) in France or in other countries.

In 2020, the health crisis completely changed the manner in which people lived throughout the world. The Covid-19 pandemic had a very severe effect on the homeless, especially during the periods of lockdown. Those periods highlighted the precariousness of the situations experienced by many families, especially with regards to food security. This ‘health’ crisis had major social consequences, and it is important to discuss the different aspects of this. Practically speaking, the confinement of homeless people became an issue. What were the responses given by the public sector? During this exceptional period, the crisis also provided the opportunity to offer emergency shelter to the largest number of people possible. This strong increase in the shelter spaces, unthinkable a year previously, came about due to the emergency. How have professionals, charities, and those affected handled this acute crisis? Contributions would be especially welcome if they describe this adaptation, the support which continued to be given, the support which stopped, and the effects of that period in time. Did the responses become permanent? Or were they exceptions? The effects on the homeless themselves could also be analysed in the articles; both in terms of the direct consequences of the crisis (lockdown, management of the virus, loss of revenue etc.), as well as the more long term effects. The digitalisation of services, the low circulation of cash, the inability to obtain care in some areas, and hostile urban settings make the most precarious situations even more difficult. Contributions could propose an analysis of these conditions, as well as some potential solutions.

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For further information on the content of this call for contributions, please contact the coordinators at the following addresses:

mau.aranda@gmail.com

gwen.legoff@ch-le-vinatier.fr

julien.levy@umrpacte.fr

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