# Are homeless people "vagrants"?

## Finished research

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The image of the "homeless person" is associated with the older figure of the wandering vagrant. In reality, "homeless" is a generic term that doesn't reflect the growing diversity of situations today and that are the result of evolving forms of poverty and inadequate housing, particularly in large cities. Their specific needs and aspirations, especially in terms of mobility and anchor points, are often misunderstood by associations and other public authorities. This literature review offers an illuminating synthesis of the main works surrounding this neglected question: how are the mobilities and immobilities of people who don't have access to a private place of anchoring and intimacy (i.e. housing) structured and organized?

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### Research participants

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# 1) The project's goal

The term "homeless people" covers a diversity of situations, reinforced by recent evolutions in forms of poverty and inadequate housing: as a category, it includes very different profiles (homeless people, migrants, Roma, backpackers, mobile workers...) and

different profiles (homeless people, migrants, Roma, backpackers, mobile workers...) and equally contrasting social situations, with regards to housing access (overnight accommodation, day shelter, squat, living in a car or truck...) and income (low-income workers, recipients of minimal social benefits, people without resources, etc.). Lacking access to a private place of anchoring and intimacy implies wandering around in public spaces, but also performing trips that are made necessary by the precarious situation (administrative procedures, accessing resources, getting by...). The search for shelter and the need to find a resting place also create forms of spatial occupation: this leads to a combination of mobilities and immobilities. These practices clash with contemporary conceptions of cities as functional spaces and flow networks. Controls are then exerted on people's movements and anchor points, by multiple actors who act directly or indirectly on urban spaces: privatization and commodification, regulation, "defensive" urban planning, police controls, the hostility of local inhabitants... Homeless people also face difficulties in getting around due to a lack of financial resources, but also because of other restraints, discrimination or practical obstacles (dogs not allowed in public transport, the inability to store their belongings, etc.).

This literature review (full download available) provides an overview of the existing research on this subject in seven chapters:

"Homeless": one word, many realities
Policies that are varied but generally inadequate
The contemporary city, or the celebration of mobility
Mobility, a modern injunction and factor of inequality
The mobility of homeless people, between multiple trips and occupying public space
Bordeaux under pressure, the authorities powerless

# 2) Key results

## The analysis of the grey and academic literature reveals disagreements over the typologies and definitions applied to homeless people, which lead to inadequate public policies

Through their bibliographical research, the students analyse different ways of approaching the concept of "homelessness" and attempts to categorize it by observers, such as the ETHOS typology proposed by associations and based on housing status [1] (from a material, social and also legal standpoint) or the one adopted by INSEE, which only considers the conditions of the respondent's last night. While the status of a "homeless person" has an unequivocal definition, sociologist Julien Damon [2] points to the lack of clear distinctions between the different sub-categories of homelessness. This diversity of situations is understudied and poorly understood and is therefore the reason why public

policies are inadequately designed to manage them. The students highlight, however, that other observers of homelessness [3] point to common trends and exclusionary trajectories that constitute "patterns," both at the individual level (difficulties in childhood, accidents in life, health problems, desocialization...) and the structural level (industrial decline, increasing inequality, migrations, etc.).

## Urban geography and the sociology of mobilities allow us to analyze homelessness in the context of globalization and the injunction to mobility

Critical geography analyses cities as the product of a system of capital accumulation, in which mobility plays a central role [4] . The mobility of individuals, and more specifically of the workforce, is celebrated and encouraged, while the immobile bodies of the homeless are criminalized and made suspicious [5] . In addition, sociology analyses the mobility "skills" needed to meet society's requirements (financial means, access to information, driver's license, etc.) and allows us to analyze the specific problems of socially excluded people. The notion of inequality in the face of mobility is also important in addressing homelessness: Jean-Pierre Orfeuil's work[^6] stresses that one's ability to be mobile has become a requirement for social and economic integration. The "injunction to mobility" that is a feature of post-industrial societies carries with it several imperatives: activity (being active at all times), activation (motivating oneself to be active), participation (being involved in a collective project) and adaptation (flexibility, innovation). Mobility-related difficulties and social problems then act as mutual catalysts.

## Surveys conducted specifically on the mobility and immobility of homeless people reveal "survival itineraries" and "routines in the occupation of public space" that are far removed from the image of random and aimless wandering

The work of Djemila Zeneidi-Henry and Sébastien Fleuret [6] on homelessness in the Loire region reveals that homeless people are not very mobile – a finding which contrasts with the traditional figure of the "vagrant." Their observations reveal a mobility that isn't a random wandering but rather a purposeful, goal-to-goal mobility, with major importance placed on family and social ties. A survey conducted in Lyon by Benjamin Pradel [7] mentions complex strategies and "survival itineraries" that are strongly influenced by external elements (the seasons, the fluctuating amount of people in public places according to the times of the day, the layout of public spaces...). Other research projects selected by the students reflect the diversity of profiles, and thus the various strategies of mobility and anchoring: depending on age (young people wandering in search of a job [8] ), nationality (people in exile [9] ) or gender (through the specific situation of women). All

must contend with forms of control and management of their movements, by the police, local inhabitants, or their peers [10] . Finally, this research highlights routines in the occupation of public space, whether transitory or more permanent, in connection with survival strategies: finding shelter in order to sleep, or instead making oneself visible in order to beg, for example.

## Full document for download (in French only)

REVUE DE LITTÉRATURE

MOBILITÉ / IMMOBILITÉ DES PERSONNES SANS DOMICILE FIXE DANS L'ESPACE PUBLIC : LE CAS DE LA MÉTROPOLE DE BORDEAUX

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## Notes

①  The ETHOS typology, or European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion is established by the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA).

②  Damon, J. (2003). Les SDF en France : difficultés de définition et de prise en charge. Journal Du Droit des Jeunes, 223(3).

③  Declerck, P., Les Naufragés, 1986.

④  Mongin, O. (2013). La ville des flux. Paris, Fayard.

⑤  Rousseau, M., 2008. La ville comme machine à mobilité. Métropoles.

⑦  Zeneidi-Henry, D., & Fleuret, S. (2007). Fixes sans domicile, réflexion autour de la mobilité des SDF. Espace Géographique, 36(1), 1. doi: 10.3917/eg.361.0001

⑧  Pradel, B. (2020). Le rapport à l'espace urbain des personnes sans-abris (Millénaire 3).

⑨  Tarrius, A. (1997). Jeunes sans emploi au centre-ville, travail et errance : La pauvreté dans l'espace public perpignanais. Les Annales De La Recherche Urbaine, 76(1).

⑩  Jackson, E. (2012). Fixed in Mobility: Young Homeless People and the City. International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, 36(4), p.725-741.

⑪  Loison-Leruste, M. (2014). Habiter à côté des SDF. Paris, L'Harmattan.


### Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

More

[1] mailto:claire-marine.javary@sncf.fr

[2] https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/marks/mobility-450

[3] https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/mots-cles/sdf

[4] https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/mots-cles/immobilite

[5] https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/mots-cles/questions-sociales

[6] https://en.forumviesmobiles.org/mots-cles/politiques-publiques