

HOMELESS AND ADDRESS-LESS? ON REGISTERING A VOTE WITHOUT BEING REGISTERED

This article discusses the challenges people experiencing homelessness face during the voter registration process, with the requirement of a fixed address frequently acting as a barrier to them accessing vital services and exercising their political rights.

The article highlights how various European countries have begun to employ alternative address systems, such as the ProxyAddress in the UK to include homeless individuals in the electoral register, but that these systems also face limitations and complexities.



By **Laure-lise Robben**, PhD student at LUCAS and Centre for Sociological Research, KU Leuven and **Koen Hermans**, Assistant Professor and Project Leader at LUCAS and Centre for Sociological Research, KU Leuven

Elections aim to represent all citizens. Yet, participating in the voting process hinges on one crucial factor: being registered in the civil and/or electoral register. In other words, voter registration often requires having a fixed address. Such voter eligibility makes it clear that, more than a location, an address is an identity: the state can reach out to citizens, identify who is eligible, and check whether you are the person you say you are. For citizens, an address allows them to access services that may otherwise be taken for granted – such as voting, or applying for social welfare or social housing. Hence, when elections are approaching, people experiencing homelessness who lack a residential address are reminded once more of their exclusion from society.

In 2023, Leo¹ became homeless. Once a holder of a modest apartment in Brussels, he found himself grappling with an escalating cascade of unfortunate events. The final straw was losing his job due to a company-wide downsizing, rendering him unable to keep up with his rent payments. Despite his pleas for leniency, the eviction notice arrived, severing his last tie to stability. While sleeping at a friend's house, the loss of his home, but also the loss of his address became palpable when he needed to apply for another job and social housing. Not having a reliable mailing address or letter collection point made it impossible for him to access vital services. The lack of a home address hinders the chances of people experiencing homelessness of ever finding a home again.² They become trapped in a Catch-22 situation called the 'Postal Paradox': homelessness persists because they cannot access essential rights and services due to a lack of a fixed address.³

1 Pseudonym

2 As mentioned in Deirdre Mask (2020)'s 'Address Book (page 250), UK, London: Profiles Books Ltd.

3 Byrne, G. (2018). The postal paradox: how having no address keeps people homeless. Retrieved from Citizens Advice in London, UK: <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/Global/CitizensAdvice/Post%20and%20Telecoms/Homelessness%20report%20-%20Final.pdf>

“Writing down ‘shelter tonight, no idea tomorrow’ in the address section is deemed too unclear.”

This lack of an address will play a vital role in the upcoming local, national, and European elections. Individuals in homelessness face unique challenges in the voting process, of which the most significant reported barrier is not being enrolled.⁴ Those who do not have a main residence are often not registered in the civil, nor the electoral register. From the election officials' point of view, not being able to identify a person by their address makes it difficult to prevent voter fraud and verify whether someone is voting in the correct district. However, from the point of view of an individual in homelessness, filling in the box of one's 'residential address' is not self-evident. Writing down 'shelter tonight, no idea tomorrow' in the address section is deemed too unclear: a local connection is required – one needs to demonstrate that they reside within the territory of a municipality a majority of the time.

4 Coram, V., Louth, J., & Hill, L. (2022). Does My Vote Matter? The Electoral Behaviour and Attitudes of People Experiencing Homelessness. *European Journal of Homelessness*, 16(2), 47-71.

Yet, this local connection as a prioritisation category has been increasingly met with criticism.⁵ In many European countries, besides voting, access to shelters, social housing, or welfare provision is also dependent on this location requirement. Meeting such a requirement is very difficult for people in homelessness, known as a very mobile group: whilst some reside temporarily with family or friends, others may switch from sleeping in shelters to sleeping rough. When moving around, finding a place to stay or sleep is prioritised above remaining within a municipality's borders. Imposing a local connection thus jeopardises 'nation-wide' access to social and political rights and does not correspond to homeless realities.⁶ Moreover, it is known to be a complex procedure: the burden of proof lies with claimants, and they often lack tangible evidence of contact with shelter or care facilities. It can also be an intrusive process: applicants may be asked to show bank statements to prove their whereabouts.^{6,7}

How can countries attempt to electorally include people experiencing homelessness without an address? Some European countries have legal protocols allowing address-less persons to register to vote, by using alternative forms of identification or registration methods. In Belgium, homeless and address-less people can apply for a reference

address at a local welfare agency.⁸ This is an administrative address that allows them to receive postal mail, to vote or to use when applying for benefits. It is a unique alternative to registration systems around Europe,⁹ however, recent evidence has highlighted its restricted availability, with administrative burdens¹⁰ and a myriad of other factors affecting its non-take-up.⁷ Claimants need to meet entitlement and eligibility criteria, such as demonstrating one is actually experiencing homelessness and is so within the municipality's borders, e.g. through a statement from a local shelter. Not meeting these requirements means they remain un-registered which can cause a 'cascade of exclusion':¹¹ administrative exclusion inevitably leads to the exclusion of welfare and services¹², thereby keeping them off the radar. Investigating this reference address, Robben, Pierre and Hermans (2023)¹³ concluded that, in theory, it may have been designed to avoid the exclusion of citizens who do not meet the registration criteria, yet, in practice, there is still a significant number of people who remain administratively

-
- 5 For instance, see May, J. (2003). Local connection criteria and single homeless people's geographical mobility: evidence from Brighton and Hove. *Housing Studies*, 18(1), 29-46; Baptista, I., Benjaminsen, L., & Preece, N. (2015). *Local Connection Rules and Access to Homelessness Services in Europe: EOH Comparative Studies on Homelessness No. 5*.
- 6 Planije, M., & Tuynman, M. (2013). Homelessness policy in the Netherlands: nationwide access to shelter under pressure from local connection criteria? *European Journal of Homelessness*, 7(2), 183-202.
- 7 Robben, L.-L., Roets, G., Wagener, M., Van Lancker, W., & Hermans, K. (2023). Including the Most Excluded? A Qualitative Study on the Address Registration for People Experiencing Homelessness in Belgium. *Administration & Society*, 55(6), 1093-1117.

-
- 8 See also Robben, L.-L., & Hermans, K. (2021). "Zonder adres heb je geen rechten". 25 jaar het referentieadres bij een OCMW voor dak- en thuislozen in België. *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Sociale Zekerheid*, 2021(4), 545-576.
- 9 European Commission. (2019). Peer Review on 'Access to social assistance and rights for homeless people'. Belgium, 3-4 October 2019. Synthesis report. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1024&newsId=9436&furtherNews=yes>
- 10 Robben, L.-L., Peeters, R. & Widlak, A. (2024, forthcoming). Burdens on the gateway to the state: Administrative burdens in the registration of people experiencing homelessness in Belgium and the Netherlands. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 2024.
- 11 Chudnovsky, M., & Peeters, R. (2022). A cascade of exclusion: Administrative burdens and access to citizenship in the case of Argentina's national identity document. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, 88(4), 1068-1085.
- 12 Peeters, R., & Widlak, A. (2018). The digital cage: Administrative exclusion through information architecture – The case of the Dutch civil registry's master data management system. *Government Information Quarterly*, 35(2), 175-183.
- 13 Robben, L.-L., Pierre, A., & Hermans, K. (2023). 'Without an address, you do not exist': the administrative invisibility of people experiencing homelessness in Belgium. *Citizenship studies*, 27(5), 566-583.

“An alternative address therefore needs to ensure that people in homelessness can access both social and political rights, thereby encouraging them to access voting centres.”

invisible. Another practice is that of the fictitious addresses in Italy. For instance, more than 19,000 persons live on the Via Modesta Valenti in Rome, yet, local residents would not be able to pinpoint this location. It is a ‘via fittizie’ or fictitious address that individuals experiencing homelessness can apply for at a municipality, which gives them access to rights such as social assistance, social security benefits, and the right to vote.¹⁴

Other European countries also provide alternative registration options for people experiencing homelessness seeking to access voting centres. In England for instance, people experiencing homelessness can demonstrate a temporary proof of address (e.g. an occupancy agreement of a hostel), a PO Box Address (e.g. if you have experienced domestic abuse and are not in the capacity to share the address of the

refuge) or register to vote at an address where they spend the most time, e.g. a shelter.¹⁵ However, the latter, like the Belgian reference address, requires the demonstration of a local connection: the application form¹⁶ states that they may be contacted with the question of how much time they have spent at this given address. In Ireland, for instance, only people who are placed in emergency accommodation for over six months can receive such a proof of address¹⁷ - therefore excluding a group living in short-term accommodation. The requirement of a fixed address has therefore become much more than just a means by which municipalities reach out to citizens residing on their territory; it has become a personal identifier that decides who can be included as a member of the municipality and who cannot.¹³

¹⁴ More information: <https://www.avvocatodistrada.it/faq-la-residenza-breve-guida-pratica-per-le-persone-senza-dimora/>

¹⁵ See: <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/voting-and-elections/who-can-vote/other-registration-options/people-experiencing-homelessness>

¹⁶ See: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f9fdf268fa8f57f35ea0996/Register-to-vote-if-you-havent-got-a-fixed-or-permanent-address-England.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://dublininquirer.com/2016/01/13/for-dublin-s-homeless-a-precarious-right-to-vote/>

How then can alternative address systems be designed to include homeless people in the electoral register, and make them more likely to vote? Outside of Europe, Marinho¹⁸ asked the same question. By studying the residents of favelas – who often do not have traditional street addresses and may be at risk of housing exclusion –¹⁹ in Brazil. She investigated the effect of providing an alternative (albeit a digital algorithmic) address on registration turnouts. By means of a field experimental survey, favela residents were offered three solutions to encourage them to vote: 1) information about online voting registration; 2) the provision of a digital address through an algorithmic proof of address designed by a private agency; 3) the provision of a similar digital address designed by a public agency. They found that all three options increased the registering and voting intentions of residents; yet interestingly, there was a tendency for these individuals to have more trust in private agencies than in public services. This raises the question of how such alternative addresses should be designed, by whom, and for what purposes.

Another digital alternative can be found in the UK. The so-called ProxyAddress²⁰ links the address to an individual, rather than to its location. Through a database of existing and unused addresses, it duplicates these addresses so that people can obtain a ‘proxy’. In this case, the local connection criterion is not a requirement: claimants can choose and quickly modify an address or collection point. Whereas

18 Marinho, M. O. (2023) “Addressing the unaddressed”: the effects of digital applications on the burden experienced by vulnerable citizens. Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/10438/34490>

19 See https://radicalhousingjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/RHJ_Issue-4.1_10_Update_Forte_151-157.pdf

20 Chris Hildrey (2019) ProxyAddress: using location data to reconnect those facing homelessness with support services, *The Journal of Architecture*, 24(2), 139-159.; more information: www.proxyaddress.org

the Belgian reference address could be a recognisable address (e.g. ‘City Centre 1’), the ProxyAddress prevents the potential risk of stigma or discrimination by using existing ‘neutral’ street names. However, in contrast to the Belgian practice, people experiencing homelessness need to actively look for social support themselves – instead of being automatically placed on the social assistants’ radar, as is the case in Belgium. Whilst alternative addresses offer innovative solutions to help people experiencing homelessness access various services, the complexity of voter registration rules can complicate their practical use.

An alternative address therefore needs to ensure that people in homelessness can access both social and political rights, thereby encouraging them to access voting centres. Casting one’s vote is not only important for empowering individuals in homelessness to raise their voice; it also deters sanctions such as the issuing of fines for failing to vote without providing a valid reason. For policymakers, including ‘homeless’ and ‘address-less’ people in the electoral register is important in ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to participate in the democratic process. Allowing flexibility in allocating voters without a fixed address can contribute to the general electoral participation of homeless people.⁴ Its importance, however, goes beyond political rights. Lacking an address perpetuates a cycle of instability. Alongside alleviating root causes of homelessness, policymakers need to address and deal with this cycle of the ‘Postal Paradox’.³ Prioritising universal access to the electoral register is important, yet, a more effective and structural approach would be to ensure that everyone has an address in the first place.