

## **The Right to Live in the City Homelessness and the Challenges of Address Registration**

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**Sociologist Marie Loison-Leruste shows how address registration is for homeless persons the key to gaining access to rights. She suggests that, beyond reflecting on the question of non-take-up, the state must urgently back the professionals who support the homeless.**

The question of access to social rights is central to the implementation of public policies: How is one to ensure that the publics for whom benefits are intended are the “right” publics, that they are aware of those rights, and that the procedures they follow to access them are successful? The issue of targeting and of access to social rights, which in turn poses that of the non-take-up of rights,<sup>1</sup> raises important questions concerning the functionality and effectiveness of public policies that have been subject to greater managerial pressure in recent years.<sup>2</sup>

The literature on non-take-up mainly focuses on the difficulties encountered by the most precarious service users in our societies: those who lack capital and who, owing to their social characteristics, are assumed to be little or poorly informed of their rights. But this is to forget that these populations’ ability to access rights is intimately linked to the conditions in which they receive the support of outreach workers who fight, often in the shadows, against their exclusion. This is clearly illustrated by the issue of address registration.

In France, in order to collect benefits such as the RSA (Supplementary welfare allowance), one must have an address—a domicile—defined in the Civil Code as the place that allows for the exercise of rights (“The domicile of a French person, as to the exercise of his civil rights, is at the place where he has his main establishment,” section 102). For those in greatest difficulty, who lack a stable home or live in mobile or precarious housing, access to rights is therefore a real challenge. Address registration becomes the first step to receiving mail, and hence to accessing civil, political and social rights.

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<sup>1</sup> Warin Philippe, 2010, “What is the Non Take-up of Social Benefits?,” *Books and Ideas*, <http://www.booksandideas.net/What-is-the-Non-Take-up-of-Social.html>.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*; Dubois Vincent, 2015 (1999), *La vie au guichet. Administrer la misère*, Paris, Points.

Several pieces of legislation have sought to simplify this address registration procedure in recent years, and a reform is currently under way.<sup>3</sup> But what does this reform propose? Does it respond to the difficulties one encounters concretely on the ground? And, more generally, how is the access to rights of homeless persons<sup>4</sup> ensured by the organizations that welcome them?

To better understand how the question of address registration is posed today, we conducted research among those who are “on the front line,” in direct and daily contact with the problems of access to rights: outreach workers who operate in associations for the homeless.<sup>5</sup>

### **What is Address Registration?**

Address registration is the first condition of access to rights. It makes it possible to receive mail, to claim certain rights like the issuance of a national identity card, to register on electoral rolls, to request legal aid, and to enjoy social benefits. Moreover, insofar as it provides a spatial anchoring, address registration constitutes one of the stages in the process of social reconstruction of disaffiliated individuals<sup>6</sup> with compounded problems.

There exist three address registration procedures today. One is a standard procedure for individuals with a regular status. The other two concern undocumented persons: The first serves to collect the AME (State medical aid) and the second is intended for asylum seekers. The organizations that handle address registration applications (mainly the Community Centers for Social Action and the associations fighting against exclusion) are thus faced with a complex procedure, which the Access to Housing and Town Planning Reform Act of 24 March 2014—known as the ALUR law—aims to simplify: The procedure for claiming the AME is expected to disappear, leaving only the standard procedure and the one for the admission to residence of asylum seekers.

### **Who is Concerned by Non-Take-Up?**

In 2012, 32% of homeless persons living in collective housing, 44% of those housed in an accommodation provided by an association or living in mobile homes or hotel rooms, and 50% of those without a roof over their heads did not have a registered address.

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<sup>3</sup> Between January and May 2016, the Commission for the Assessment and Monitoring of Public Policies examined the question of access to rights, and a roundtable was convened on 3 May 2016 to discuss the reform of address registration (<http://www2.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/les-delegations-comite-et-office-parlementaire/comite-d-evaluation-et-de-controle-des-politiques-publiques/secretariat/evaluations-en-cours/la-lutte-contre-l-exclusion-l-acces-aux-droits-sociaux>).

<sup>4</sup> Homeless persons are individuals who, during the period of observation, found a roof in emergency or longer-term housing facilities—Accommodation and Social Rehabilitation Center (CHRS), social hospitals, etc.—or slept in public spaces or in places not intended for habitation.

<sup>5</sup> Research materials are derived from previous and current field studies conducted in reception facilities for homeless men and women in Paris. They also include the results of the statistical analysis of the study performed in 2012 by INSEE and INED among individuals using free meal and accommodation services.

<sup>6</sup> Castel, Robert, 2002, *From Manual Workers to Wage Laborers: Transformation of the Social Question*. Piscataway: Transaction Publishers.

**Address registration of homeless persons according to type of housing/accommodation (%)**

	<b>Homeless persons without a registered address</b>	<b>All homeless persons</b>
Collective housing	32	47
Accommodation provided by an association, mobile home, hotel room	44	44
Without a roof	50	9

*Source: INSEE, Survey of persons using accommodation and free meal services, 2012*

*Scope: Metropolitan France, towns of 20,000 or more inhabitants,*

*French-speaking individuals aged 18 or over*

*Interpretation: 68% of homeless persons living in collective housing (in a room or a dormitory) have a registered address in an association or other organization.*

The more the mode of housing/accommodation of homeless persons depends on an organization that can provide social support, the greater their chances of having a registered address. Conversely, homeless persons who are somewhat isolated from outreach workers—like those without a roof—are less likely to have applied for address registration. Non-take-up of address registration is therefore closely associated with social support, as well as with the way in which actors on the ground implement social interventions. These actors nevertheless face three major problems.

### **Inequalities of Access According to Actors and to Areas**

There are currently no quantitative data on the number of address registrations or of associations offering address registration services.<sup>7</sup> Inequalities of access nevertheless vary between areas. Some French departments are better equipped than others. The number of address registration applications can be very high in certain areas; whereas some departments have difficulty handling all applications, others process them without problem. Public policies have taken into account this unequal distribution of address registration services and of resources allocated for address registration. The departmental schemes provided for by the ALUR law are aimed precisely at remedying this.

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<sup>7</sup> Some rare studies provide a reasonable approximation of this, but the data remain very incomplete. See the study “État des lieux de la domiciliation des personnes sans domicile stable” (The state of homelessness), conducted by the DGCS between 6 February 2014 and 31 March 2014 by means of an Internet questionnaire filled by Departmental Directorates of Social Cohesion (DDCS) and Departmental Directorates of Social Cohesion and Protection of Populations (DDCSP) throughout the country.

In addition, many actors agree that the associations that have chosen to provide address registration services perform their missions in increasingly difficult conditions, owing to an increase in demand, inadequate premises, and a lack of human and material resources to carry out the day-to-day management of services.

With a total of 300 letters received daily and distributed to the 140 persons who come each day, the address registration service we investigated welcomes a numerous and highly diverse public: alcohol- or drug-dependent service users, undocumented migrants, asylum seekers awaiting legal status or rejected and pending appeal, sick individuals on long-term treatment and followed by Parisian hospitals, salaried employees expecting housing, poor pensioners, recently released prisoners, etc.

The obsolescence and inadequacy of the premises, the situation of severe exclusion the public finds itself in, as well as the dearth of financial resources cause major problems for the personnel, while also threatening the functioning and permanence of the service. Indeed, the outreach workers who receive this public face difficult working conditions: “Those who deal with the public have a rough time, [...] because they are the ones who must confront misery head on [...]. The public we receive is the public no one wants” (Jérôme, head of an address registration service). Furthermore, they sometimes encounter economic, family, or health difficulties of their own, and perceive their conditions of work—training, status, remuneration, relations with colleagues and the hierarchy—as uncertain.<sup>8</sup> For example, the yearly renewal of authorizations to provide registered addresses, which are granted to associations by the departmental administration, implies that the employment contracts of registration service staff are also renewed each year, rendering the situation of these employees quite precarious.

Under these conditions, many associations close their address registration services or frequently suspend registrations, even though the possibilities for redirecting homeless persons are reduced.

### **Inequalities of Access According to Publics**

Not all homeless persons live on the streets, on public benches, or on the ground. They can also occupy places not intended for habitation (car, cellar, parking), or they can stay in collective facilities or at the hotel. Moreover, the institutional support system sometimes forces them to alternate between different housing solutions: one night with friends, two nights in an Accommodation and Social Rehabilitation Center (CHRS), one night in a hotel, etc. Successive changes of address result in the loss of mail and slow down, or even interrupt, the process of access to rights. Thus the CAF (Family allowance fund), which provides homeless persons with a housing allowance to pay for their stay at the hotel, takes about two months to record a change of address. During this period, homeless persons may cease to be entitled to benefits and may no longer be able to pay for their accommodation costs.

The women here, they've changed addresses ten, fifteen times, they've been registered left and right, with a girlfriend, with some guy, and so on. [In the past] you would

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<sup>8</sup> Loison-Leruste Marie, 2015, “Au cœur de l'exclusion. Enquête auprès des salariés d'Emmaüs,” *Sociologie*, 6(4), pp. 359-376.

make a phone call to the CAF to report where the person was, you would sometimes send a housing certificate, they took note of it over the phone and that was that. Now it takes... You'd better calculate the time to make sure you do this before the last payment date, they want a transfer certificate, they want always more, it takes weeks. As a result, people are left with nothing. This leads to disasters. (Barbara, shelter counselor)

In addition, address registration services apply very disparate criteria to assess and process registration applications. Different reasons can be put forward to justify refusing to register an address: the mode of housing (squat, slum, mobile home, car), an insufficient connection to the municipality (which concerns mainly travelers, but also people forced into mobility by the very organization of support), a lack of social support, as well as irregular status. Thus, some address registration services select publics in defiance of the law and refuse to register slum dwellers, Roma, and irregular migrants. These publics are referred to associations that, for the most part, favor unconditional reception.

Thus, the scarce material and human resources allocated to address registration services combined with the specific problems face by the homeless explain the difficulties in obtaining an address registration. And once this registration is effective, access to other rights is not guaranteed for all that.

### **The Refusal of Access to Other Rights**

Sometimes third-party organizations (CPAMs [Health insurance funds], banks, tax offices, police stations, departmental administrations, etc.) do not recognize the address registration certificate, or else demand one before granting certain rights (to health insurance or to the AME) even when it is not required by law. Certain heads of associations must on occasion accompany persons housed in their reception facilities to these organizations. "I would sometimes go with the person to reassure her, but also to guarantee the PSA (Social reception office) that social support would be maintained [in the association] even if the address was registered in their service" (Sylvie, outreach worker in a Solidarity and integration area). In general, outreach workers observe the administration's distrust of those who reside in emergency services and shelters: "We are seen as charity cases," claims Sabine, a shelter counselor.

### **The Difficulties in Accessing Rights in Everyday Life: A Challenge to Social Work**

Thus address registration, which is the first step in accessing rights, illustrates the contradictions and difficulties encountered daily by outreach workers in providing support to this public: "It's Kafkaesque," "it's a tall order," "you struggle," "we don't know where to go," "formalities keep adding up," "it's become very technical." But the next steps (applying for the RSA, requesting social housing or the CMU [Universal medical coverage], filing a DALO application [Enforceable right to housing], etc.) are equally problematic and sometimes even challenge the practices of professionals in these associations.

For instance, the dematerialization of administrative procedures, which is supposed to simplify the daily life of service users and to foster the efficiency, modernization and rationalization of administrative and public services, further complicates the task of outreach workers when it comes to guaranteeing the confidentiality of information and to handling the individual e-mails of all the people who receive support in the reception facilities. It also presumes that volunteers and employees, who support homeless persons in accessing their rights, are proficient in computer technology. Finally, it poses a real problem for the homeless, not only because they do not always have access to the Internet, but also because they most often come from the working classes,<sup>9</sup> they sometimes have a poor command of the French language (whether orally or in writing), and they have difficulty going through formalities on a screen without being in contact with a person who might help them. Moreover, the material absence of documents makes the formalities for obtaining rights very abstract, and hence very distressing for some individuals who are in a situation of exclusion:

Still, the administrative paperwork is extremely complex, rough and cumbersome [...]. This is what I am working on with Sonia at the moment. And this is very stressful for Sonia [...]. I got her a nice binder with dividers, plastic sleeves so that we can file her pile of papers bit by bit in the binder. And you should see how she is at the beginning and how she is at the end. But at every meeting we must start all over again, we must start from scratch. She reads a document, and what is very stressful for her is not filing it but what's written on it. So there are papers she can't let go of, papers she can throw away, others she can't throw away, papers that are painful to her, papers that are comforting... It's crazy what can happen at that level, you see. Putting one's life in order... [...] That takes a really long time. We don't have time to do all this. So often we do it in their place and that's not good [...]. The work is done but quality of support is lacking. (Barbara, shelter counselor)

Lastly, the dematerialization of administrative procedures calls into question the social support practices of professionals in associations that welcome the homeless. While the objective of support in accessing rights is to favor the autonomy of individuals and to go through the formalities “with” them, it may be that the complexity of these measures, the inequalities of access, and the dematerialization of procedures prompt outreach workers to act “in the place of” the persons they support.

### **Taking into Account both Publics and Professionals**

“It's increasingly time-consuming, it's becoming more and more complex, even explaining things to women.” This is how Barbara analyzes the support she provides to homeless persons in accessing their rights.

When we talk about access to rights today, we often think of the question of non-take-up and focus our reflection on the beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries of social assistance. Yet

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<sup>9</sup> According to Olivier Schwartz, the working classes share three characteristics: “low professional or social status, limited economic resources—without this necessarily meaning precariousness—distance from cultural capital and above all from school [...]” Schwartz Olivier, “Peut-on parler des classes populaires?,” *Lectures*, <http://lectures.revues.org/6326>, put online 09/15/2011.

when it comes to individuals in a situation of exclusion, we should also take into consideration the professionals who support them and are themselves often disadvantaged. In a context marked by ever-increasing social emergency, the “front-line” workers who are in direct and daily contact with this public are fragile professionals, and this for two reasons. First, they support “disqualified” publics<sup>10</sup> with compounded social and economic difficulties (in terms of housing, employment, and physical or psychological health). Second, they work in places that are often unwelcoming and inadequate: They lack means and resources, and their employment status is often precarious and uncertain. Moreover, professionals who work with very precarious persons often evoke the lack of available benchmarks and information, the accumulation of formalities, and the lack of time to provide high quality support. In this context, many are those who speak of “institutional maltreatment.”

Thus, the problem of access to rights is clearly posed in terms of non-take-up,<sup>11</sup> whether when knowledge of benefit systems is lacking (individuals do not know that they are entitled to rights), when demands are not made (individuals do not know how to claim their rights), or when demands are rejected (individuals renounce claiming their rights). But the problem also stems from the way in which the state coordinates benefits and backs professionals in the field. The latter, who often face great difficulties in supporting the homeless, are not sufficiently protected by public policies, as they lack recognition, time, and financial and human resources. If very precarious persons are to have access to their rights, we must facilitate procedures and take the characteristics of these persons into account, but also, and most importantly, we must back the professionals who support them on a daily basis.

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<sup>10</sup> Paugam Serge, 2000 (1991), *La disqualification sociale, Essai sur la nouvelle pauvreté*, Paris, PUF, coll. “Quadrige.”

<sup>11</sup> Warin Philippe, 2010, “What is the Non Take-up of Social Benefits?,” *Books and Ideas*, <http://www.booksandideas.net/What-is-the-Non-Take-up-of-Social.html>.

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