

# Why do people prefer to sleep on the streets rather than in night shelters?

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Why don't some street dwellers use night shelters? It is a question that has long preoccupied policymakers and social workers. A recent survey in Antwerp probed street residents themselves.

## Failure as a society

November 5, 2021. Flanders awoke to the harrowing **news** that two men died that night in the underground bicycle shed at Antwerp Central Station. Mike and Wesley did not know each other, but were both homeless.

The deaths of Mike and Wesley brought a lot of swell, sadness and helplessness. Not only among family and friends, but also among many social workers. Seeing people die on the streets made us realise in a painful way that we as a society sometimes fail.

### 'Why don't the places in the night shelter all get filled?'

That realisation sparked a lot of conversations, between care providers among themselves but also with those responsible from the city government. What could be improved in the care of street residents? One question to which no clear answer was found for the time being: why is it that so many people spend the night on the streets? In other words: why don't all the places in the night shelters get filled?

## Unique insight

To gain insight into how street residents view this, student Amber Van Wijngaarden (Thomas More Hogeschool Antwerp) conducted a field study as her final internship. For three months, she sought contact with street residents. Central question: why don't you use the night shelter?

This study has no scientific pretensions. Nevertheless, the **results** give a unique insight into the motivations of a group of people who are usually difficult for researchers to reach.

## Who was interviewed?

The student spoke to 34 street dwellers, including six women. Their average age is between 45 and 50, which is considerably older than the average age of homeless people. Over two-thirds use an intoxicant, often alcohol.

About one in three had a 'temporary shelter' at the time of the conversation. Specifically, this often involved shelter for that night. For people who are homeless, 'temporary residence' is a relative term. Only for a few does it indicate a slightly more stable living situation. For most, it means a daily search for a place to sleep that can range from on other people's seats, across car parks, metro, sleeping in a park to night shelters.

**'For people who are homeless, "temporary residence" is a very relative term.'**

Five people reported spending the night exclusively in the public domain. Fourteen were staying in night shelters at the time of the interview. A few stayed in a squat or occupied a couch with friends and acquaintances at night.

Why don't all these people sleep in the night shelter? What are stumbling blocks? Most of the barriers cited can be divided into five categories: practical objections, rules, sanctions, privacy and mental problems.

## **Practical objections**

"First my dog and then the rest. I would even rather be without dope than not feed my dog," said one man. A lot of street dwellers have a pet. Pets are important: they show affection, provide companionship and warmth. Sometimes people also talked about an instrumental utility. Begging with dog brings more than without.

Except that homeless people with dogs have nowhere to go. In every night shelter, there is a ban on pets. Consequence? People choose not to take advantage of the shelter offer.

**'I'd rather be without dope than not feed my dog.'**

Another frequently cited practical argument is the non-existent or too limited space to safely store personal belongings. Virtually everyone who brought this up had been robbed at the night shelter. A lot of street dwellers suggested that free large lockers, somewhere in the city, would solve a lot for them.

Another barrier of night shelters are the fixed opening and leaving hours. Quite a few people experience this as patronising, even humiliating. Some show understanding, but find the time slots too limited. In particular, the fact that people have to go out into the street every morning seems to be the biggest pain point. "Why can't we just stay there, it's empty anyway?"

For 40 per cent, the price of overnight accommodation is sometimes an obstacle. That cost proved not always feasible, even if it was a few euros. But cost was certainly not the biggest barrier.

## **Rules drive**

Formal requirements, rules and procedures are other major barriers for street dwellers. There are those who clash with these but do not object to them in principle. A few people were even positive about some administrative requirements.

But for another group of street dwellers, it goes directly against their aspiration to go where and when they want. They are categorical in their rejection of the night shelter: "If I wanted to, I could sleep in the shelter every night. But so I don't want that. Why do you think? You are treated like a child there. Besides, they themselves don't know why they have so many rules. No, just leave me alone, I will make my plan."

### **'You are treated like a child there.'**

Many street residents also fall out over conditions linked to the night shelter. For instance, people who frequent it are expected to take steps to put their status in order. As a result, people drop out, it sounds. Some spoke of meddling.

Some of the interviewees do not have valid residence or identity documents. As a result, they can only access the additional winter accommodation. Outside the winter months, there is no alternative for them. This is hard to understand.

## **Sanctions**

Antwerp night shelters use sanctions to manage problems, for example for people whose behaviour interferes with group behaviour. Among those who had experience of it, the sanctions policy raised a fierce fuss.

### **'Sanctions policy raises tempers sharply.'**

Some call the rules or sanctions inconsistent and arbitrary. For instance, you would not be allowed to drink in certain places, but are sometimes allowed to do so with a blind eye. Others talked about how sanctions seem to depend on employees' moods. Also, some people are allowed more than others.

Sanctions often amount to denying people access to the night shelter for one or more nights. Incomprehensible, four street dwellers think: "The staff show no pity, while they do not know what it is like not to have a warm bed." Moreover, people then often become aggressive and start shouting outside. So sanctions sometimes make the problem bigger for everyone."

## **Lack of privacy**

The lack of privacy is the most cited objection. "You are not alone for a second, there is always noise and you have to constantly watch out that they are not stealing. It drives me nuts."

### **'Many street dwellers also feel a sense of insecurity in the night shelter.'**

The dormitories where people sleep six to 10 people in one room are also an eyesore for many. Besides the fact that you are never alone there, it causes annoyances such as being too crowded, too noisy, irritation at the behaviour of others and a lack of hygiene.

Many street residents also feel a sense of insecurity in the night shelter. They refer not only to thefts, but also to conflicts brought to the night shelter from the streets. One young woman mentioned that she is constantly on her guard, for fear of being part of a group with a majority of men.

We suspect that the need for privacy explains a lot of the behaviour of some street dwellers: always being alone, staying invisible as much as possible, not using shelter facilities and sleeping in a place in the public space that you anxiously keep secret. With them, more privacy and freedom always wins out over a bed.

This kind of avoidance drive, contrary to popular belief, is mostly rational behaviour, according to Scottish researcher Lynne McMordie. It is a thoughtful response to living in extreme stress. The more shelter accommodation is of poor quality, large-scale and collective, this avoidance urge would play a stronger role, according to McMordie.

## Mental problems

Particularly many street residents struggle with mental vulnerability. Mental problems can be a barrier to using night shelters.

For example, two people with post-traumatic stress told us that because of their disorder, they have the greatest difficulty being part of a group. They referred to the crowds and noise that makes staying in the night shelter unbearable for them.

**'Many street dwellers struggle with mental vulnerability.'**

Observation and conversations with social workers and street residents revealed that there is sometimes a lack of understanding or expertise about mental health problems. This occasionally leads to conflicts and misunderstandings, for example when behaviour is labelled as aggressive by the group or staff. The result is often that the person concerned has to leave the shelter.

It is important to note that there can be both a cause-and-effect relationship between homelessness and mental health problems. Uncertainty, stress and coping strategies associated with living on the streets are important factors in developing depression and anxiety disorders.

Five people reported that they never felt safe anywhere, neither outside nor inside. One woman, who can only enter the shelter in winter, slept in a tent the rest of the year. However, this attracted too much attention, so she tried to hide better. The constant alertness leads to chronic sleep deprivation and saps her mind, she told us.

## Substance abuse

Among the street dwellers we spoke to, alcohol was the most common intoxicant, whether combined with other drugs or not. Antwerp has a night shelter that also accommodates users of illegal substances: De Biekorf. Substance use is tolerated there. It is a unique approach for Flanders.

While shelters for homeless drug users undoubtedly offer advantages, coexistence with other centres that have zero tolerance policies for alcohol and drugs leads to strange situations. Discussions with street dwellers reveal this.

### **'Antwerp has a night shelter that accommodates users of illegal substances.'**

For instance, a homeless man, by his own account, had to spend four weeks at The Biekorf for observation after a drunken aggression incident. As he had no alcohol addiction, this was a very negative experience. Someone else said that when drugs are used, the regular night shelter not infrequently calls in the police. "Kafkaesque and excessive," the person felt. Some street residents who use illegal substances and want to stop doing so find it unfeasible at The Biekorf, but have nowhere else to go.

## **And now?**

Based on the suggestions of street residents, we formulated recommendations to lower the thresholds for the night shelter. These include extended opening hours, a night shelter where people can take their pets, specific attention to the needs of female street residents and individual sleeping places as an alternative to dormitories.

With these proposals and the research report in hand, we went to the night shelters and the office of Tom Meeuws, the competent Antwerp alderman for social affairs. They were fruitful discussions. Among other things, the idea of larger lockers in public places, such as in Ghent, is under consideration. There will also be discussions about a later leaving hour in De Biekorf.

There are also plans for a new building for night shelters. The topics of pets and smaller rooms are on the table, as well as safe rooms for women.