

Research report: Gaps in reintegration – fieldwork in Utrecht and Amsterdam

This report continues the series on homelessness, moving from encounter and differentiation toward a deeper question: **what happens after people meet the system?**

Two rich cities, extensive services, and yet instability remains a constant.

This report does not examine entry into homelessness, but the **failure to move out of it**.

1. Opening: after the encounter

Over time on my street encounters, something became difficult to ignore. Many of the people I met were not outside the system. They had been in contact with services, often repeatedly. And still, they lost stability. The question shifted, not to *"Why do people become homeless?"*, but to *"Why do they not stay out of it?"*

After a broken night

Please, don't hesitate!

On a sunny day, a man is standing at
the bottom of the escalator of the
Central Station, asking people for
money.

He looks inviting. It is easy to
connect.

He talks...

His name is Roeland, it's his birthday,
he slept rough, he has no money.

And he continues to talk. About his
day,

his night, his week, his life, his
homelessness, his ex-wife...

A tough story, with cold nights and
lonely places...

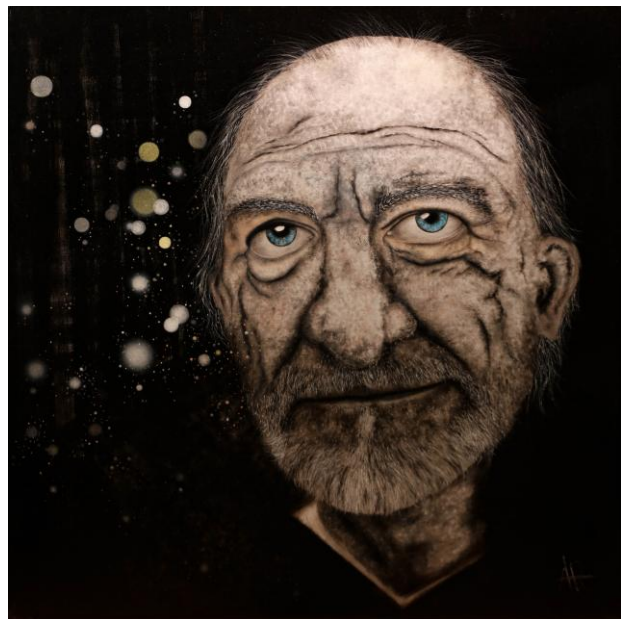
You could feel that special thrill of
being

seen, of being considered...

It lasted just a moment, a moment he
will

never forget...

A life in 10 minutes, shared and
acknowledged...



Roeland

Roxana Albu

Oil on canvas 60 x 60 cm

26 October 2022 | Outside Utrecht Central Station

Field note:

**They were already inside the
system... and still fell.**

2. Framing the issue

Amsterdam and Utrecht are often seen as cities with strong homelessness systems. And this is true. There is structure. There is care. There are resources.

But what became visible over time is not absence, but it's **fragmentation**. People move through systems, but are not held by them. This report is not about what is missing entirely. It is about what is not connecting, not continuing, not holding.

Black or white

Why is the world so heartless?

She lives in a world of her own,

Traumatized, mentally disturbed,

It is not easy to reach her, in her shell

But once you've done that, a beautiful
light

reveals itself...

She has found a soul to care for, a
bird....

She gives all her love and attention

And she receives it in return, wholly

A precious bond she hasn't often
experienced!

For society, she is strange:

She is categorized, put in a box,

Hospitalized, case number 1372...

And they took away the bird...

A woman objectified...

Not seen, not considered,

Judged, used...

But we only look after the bird...

Open your heart and see her beauty
inside...



Henriett

Roxana Albu

Oil on canvas 160 x 100 cm

1 December 2023 | Lange Nieuwstraat, Utrecht

3. Field insights — Where reintegration breaks

3.a. Fragmented service

People often had contact with multiple services before becoming homeless: social support, healthcare, debt counselling. And yet, those systems rarely meet each other.

Each part works. But not together. So the person becomes the connector.

And when the energy is low, confusion high, or trust already damaged, the system becomes impossible to navigate.

Then the only option left is ... back to navigating everything alone!

The spark to a flame

Open your heart...

She lost her beautiful innocence and
the sparkle in her eyes,

Trapped by her life, trapped by her
social context.

She can't dream, and if she dreams
she wonders if someone else 'sees'
her dreaming...

It's dangerous!

She accepts her fate, resigned.

She doesn't speak, she doesn't move

Tied by invisible knots

She looks down, subdued.

But when you talk to her, when you sit
next to her,

You see a spark in her eyes,

It is there, undeniably, flickering weakly,

Until it extinguishes again...

The spark to a flame,



Lonela

Roxana Albu

Oil on canvas 120 x 150 cm

12 -13 May 2023 | Utrecht Central Station

**Field Note: Support exists. But
continuity doesn't.**

3.b. Prevention happens too late

One of the clearest patterns I observed is this: homelessness often begins **long before it is recognized**. Evictions, debts, relationship breakdowns: signals appear early. But intervention usually begins **after collapse**.

There is no clear moment where the system says: “This is where we step in before everything falls.”

And so the line is crossed quietly.

The artist soul, Vincent!

A soul's breath...

His universe is endless, and that's how
he finds his freedom.

Being free is something no one can
take

away from him, it's his reason for
living.

Expressed on pieces of paper...

And he's happy!

Deep inside, he would have liked to
show

his universe,

To give and receive...

Life has damaged him, but his kindness
is intact!

A world to be shared, a heart to be
given...

That's Wiktor!

Deep in the woods, on his own

Happy, but alone...



Wiktor

Roxana Albu

Oil on canvas 100 x 140 cm

12 January 2023 | Oudegracht, Utrecht

3.c. Access is not given, it is conditioned

Not everyone can reach support. Even in cities with available services, many people remain outside them. And those barriers include: administrative complexity, eligibility conditions, legal status, local registration requirements.

The result is paradoxical: Support exists. But not for everyone who needs it.

Don't judge, it hurts

It's cold and grey...

Feeling loneliness and pain,

Hunger and deprivation,

But most of all, a homeless person feels
judgement...

There is the pressure of life,

Of work, family and society,

Of past, present and future,

But most of all, you feel judgement...

So much judgement,

Towards homeless people,

Colleagues, family, or friends...

Judgement towards yourself...

It's easy to judge... look at someone you
don't

even know and think: She's smarter, he's

younger, she's dirty, he drinks, she uses
drugs...

Why?

Does this make you feel better? Does it
bring

light into your day, into your life?

And how does it feel to be judged?

It hurts, it rips the heart out, and it destroys
all hope...



Me, or You, ... or You (2)

Roxana Albu

Oil on canvas 100 x 150 cm

14 April 2023 | Best

3.d. Healing is not structured

Another layer is less visible.

Even when housing or shelter is provided, what often remains unaddressed is **what led there**. Trauma. Addiction. Mental exhaustion.

Support systems respond to crisis, but not always to **recovery**.

Result:

Without recovery, stability remains fragile.

We are all homeless

Have you found yourself...?

When you have everything, you
think nothing

can happen!

Abundance, joy, and happiness are
all yours!

But one day you feel an emptiness,
deeper

and deeper, stronger...

One day you realize you are
alone...

Don't be afraid to find that special
place

inside yourself...

Feel more than you thought you
could be,

feel hope, feel eternity...

See the beauty, even if outside it's
cold

and grey...



Me, or You, ... or You (1)

Roxana Albu

Oil on canvas 60 x 90 cm

10 February 2023 | Croeselaan, Utrecht

3.e. Reintegration without follow-up

Leaving homelessness is not a moment. It is a process. And yet, the system often treats it as a transition from homeless to housed.

But what happens after? In many cases: support reduces, monitoring ends, and responsibility shifts back abruptly. And within months, some return.

Angel or Demon

Are you able to not judge?

Drugs and alcohol are very present on the street, are the fuel of homelessness. They keep you going, stop you thinking, just surviving...

Beating addiction is essential to get out. But that is very difficult: You feel the naked pain, you feel the trauma, you feel the hopelessness, the depression. Alcohol is everywhere, drugs are easy to get, from people who are often not much better off.

It is easy to look the other way when alcohol and drugs are involved. It feels right to walk-by: "It is their own choice. They did this to themselves..."

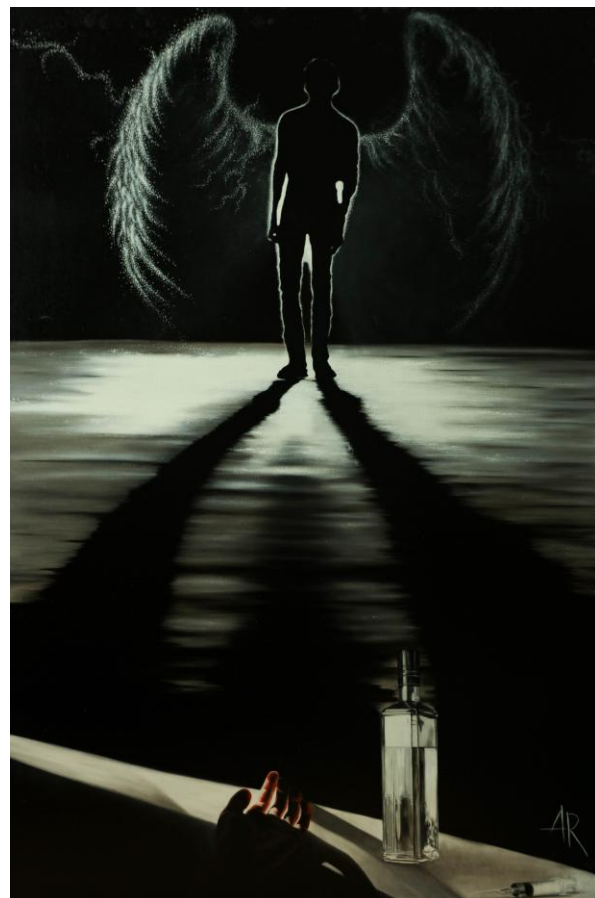
Are you up to the challenge?

"I'm beaten down, lost, but relieved! An angel saved me. I no longer feel pain and sorrow. I no longer feel fear and cold. I can feel joy and peace again..."

It's your time now: look beyond the symptoms... See the pain and the trauma...

See the person, wholly, see the soul...

Don't judge... Open your heart...



Me, or You, ... or You (3)

Roxana Albu

Oil on canvas 60 x 90 cm

10 February 2023 | Croeselaan, Utrecht

**Field Note: When housing is given,
stability is not secured.**

3.f. Outreach that depends on the individual

What the fieldwork revealed to me is a subtle but important gap: help often requires **asking for it**. Even in crisis. Outreach exists, but is inconsistent. Engagement is often reactive.

Which means that those least able to ask are often those least reached.

In a cold drizzle

Just LOOK around you and SEE...

He was sitting on a bench, in the rain,
invisible, alone in a realm of his own.

Does anyone see him?

Should I approach him, should I talk
to him?

I feel for him, broken and terrified.

I read in his eyes:

"Leave me alone, I don't need
anyone, I don't expect anything
anymore..."

I step forward, I connect...

His soul revealed itself to me...

A brief moment of divinity,

It made a difference in our lives

Dare to feel, dare to open your
heart...

Don't let yourself be put off,

Please, don't hesitate!



Anonymous

Roxana Albu

Oil on canvas 60 x 70 cm

14 October 2022 | Kleine-Gartman Plantsoen, Amsterdam

3.g. Housing as a structural limit

Even the strongest interventions face one constraint: housing itself.

Limited supply. Conditional contracts. Rising pressure. Which creates a bottleneck: systems can prepare people, but cannot always place them. Or keep them placed.

I am here

I opened my heart, I opened my
eyes

Life is a journey, sailing through
good

and bad times...

We need to experience darkness in
order to fully see the light,

The one implies the other.

It's only in tasting it all, that we
feel

truly alive...

I went deep into the darkness and
suddenly saw light,

There were stars, shining in the
sky...

I went to the surface, admired
them,

cherished them:

Precious souls, all connected,
joint destinies...

Experiencing this fully, that is what
life is about!



Eu

Roxana Albu

Oil on canvas 100 x 120 cm

6 January 2024 | Vredenburg, Utrecht

3.h. The missing layer: LIFE reconstruction

Across all systems, something remains underdeveloped: not survival, but reconstruction of life. What is often missing: community belonging, identity rebuilding, meaning beyond crisis, non-clinical recovery spaces.

Systems stabilize the night. But do not always rebuild the LIFE.

Give to receive and

receive to give

You are not alone!

Do you know how to recognize an
opportunity? An opportunity to give...

Give your time, give your kindness,
give your attention, give...

After a simple, bright day,

A woman with a bike asks for money,

She offers him the opportunity to give.

He is not hesitating,

A small gesture of kindness...

At first sight, nothing fundamentally
changed,

But meanwhile, love expanded and
magic happened...

You'll be amazed to feel divinity
in the moment,

Your senses sparkling, your being
awakened...

Give to receive and receive to give...



Woman with bike

Roxana Albu

Oil on canvas 60 x 70 cm

23 November 2022 | All through the city

3.i. What remains unseen

Not all homelessness is visible.

Many people: move between temporary spaces, stay with others, avoid formal systems.

They are not counted. Not registered. Not fully seen.

And so: the problem appears smaller, and the response remains limited.

I see you...

Everything starts with seeing...

Seeing what happens around you...

Seeing the other...

Seeing who YOU are...

And what if you were to start seeing
the homeless people?

Belonging to no one and nothing, they
feel unnoticed, ignored, invisible...

Everybody deserves to be seen,
don't you think?

In this world we don't see each other.

We don't feel anymore, or not
enough...

We lost the connection to our joint
human energy.

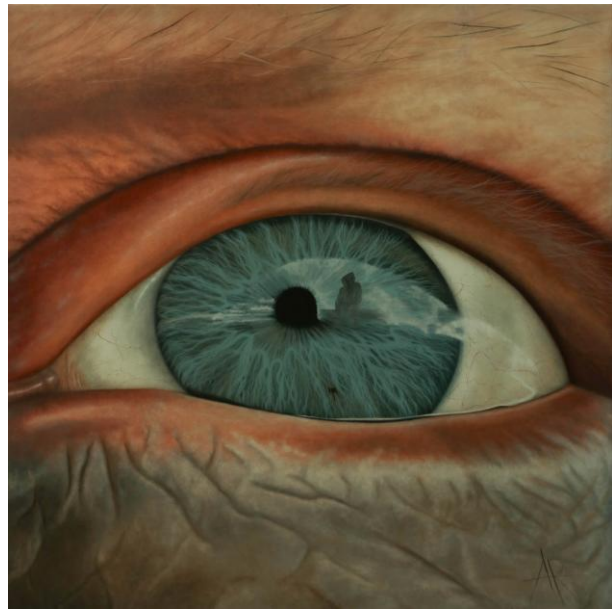
We accept that as being normal, but
this

is simply not true.

Open your eyes, open your heart.

There is nothing to fear, there *is*
nothing to lose...

Just LOOK around you and SEE...



Call to everyone

Roxana Albu

Oil on canvas 100 x 100 cm

21 March 2022 | Croeselaan, Utrecht

4. System mapping : What is operating underneath

What emerges is not a failing system, but a misaligned one.

A system where:

- Services exist, but are fragmented
- Prevention is possible, but delayed
- Access is structured, but conditional
- Care is provided, but not continuous
- Housing is central, but limited
- Stability is expected, but not supported

Structural Observation

Some systems here are not “failing.” They are working exactly as designed, but toward managing instability, not preventing it.

Result:

People move through the system without being held by it.

5. Insight synthesis

I will be clear and honest:

- 1. Reintegration is not a step, it is a trajectory.** Treating it as a moment guarantees fragility.
- 2. Systems are built around response, not anticipation.** Intervention comes after collapse.
- 3. Access remains conditional.** And conditional access always excludes someone.
- 4. Care is present, but not continuous.** And without continuity, stability dissolves.
- 5. Housing remains the bottleneck.** Without it, all other efforts remain partial.

What stays with me: Myth vs. Reality

Myth: systems are missing.

Reality: systems exist, but do not align.

Myth: housing solves homelessness.

Reality: it stabilizes one dimension, not the whole.

Myth: people fall out once.

Reality: many cycle through repeatedly.

7. Implications & opportunities

For society

Again, maybe the question is not: “How do we fix homelessness?”, but: “How do we build systems that hold people before and after crisis?”

For institutions

- Move from fragmentation to integration
- Shift from reaction to prevention
- Extend support beyond housing to into continuity

For the Museum of Life

This work becomes even more necessary. Because what remains missing in systems can be held differently in culture:

- space for community
- space for reflection
- space for recognition
- space for rebuilding meaning

9. Closing Reflection

What stays with me is not only the gaps. It is the pattern. People do not fall because nothing exists. They fall **between what exists**.

And somewhere in between, another question emerges: **Are we building systems to support LIFE or systems to manage its breakdown?**

Annex

This annex does not explain individuals. It interrogates the systems surrounding them.

Homelessness systems are not absent. They are active, structured, and highly present. But they are designed to respond and manage, not to prevent and sustain.

What research confirms

Fragmentation of services

People often have prior contact with multiple systems (social, medical, financial) before becoming homeless.

Prevention signals exist

Eviction, debt, and instability are visible early and predictable.

Access gaps are structural

A significant portion of people never reach support due to eligibility, status, or complexity.

Mental health needs are high

Trauma, addiction, and psychological strain are widespread across homeless populations.

Reintegration is non-linear

Repeated homelessness within 6–18 months is common.

Where the system breaks

Systems do not connect

Services operate in parallel, not as one trajectory.

Intervention happens too late

Action begins after collapse, not at early warning signals.

Access is conditional

Support depends on compliance, status, and administrative thresholds.

Care is episodic, not continuous

Crisis is addressed, but long-term healing remains insufficient.

Reintegration lacks follow-through

Support drops after housing, increasing risk of relapse.

Outreach is uneven

Support often depends on individuals actively seeking help.

Housing is a limiting factor

Shortage of affordable housing constrains all interventions.

Recovery requires more than housing

Social integration, identity rebuilding, and belonging are key.

Homelessness is partly invisible

Many remain outside statistics.

Outreach is passive rather than active

The burden to engage remains on the individual.

Housing bottlenecks the system

Even functioning systems cannot place or sustain people long-term.

Life is not rebuilt

Systems stabilize survival, but not meaning, identity, or belonging.

The invisible remains unaddressed

Uncounted realities lead to misaligned policies.

Selected research :

- Van Straaten, B. et al. (2016) — *Pathways into homelessness* (Demonstrates that many individuals had prior contact with services before losing housing)
- The Lancet Public Health (2023) — *Homelessness in Europe: Time to Act* (Frames homelessness as a systemic public health issue rather than an individual condition)
- Nijhawan, A. E. et al. (2019) — *Pathways and prevention strategies* (Identifies eviction and debt as primary triggers, with weak early intervention)
- Aldridge, R. W. et al. (2018) — *Morbidity and mortality in homeless populations (The Lancet)* (Highlights structural exclusion and severe health inequalities)
- Fazel, S., Geddes, J. R., & Kushel, M. (2014) — *The health of homeless people* (Confirms high prevalence of mental illness, trauma, and addiction)
- Wolf, J. et al. (2018) — *Long-term outcomes of homelessness interventions* (Shows high rates of repeat homelessness due to weak reintegration follow-up)
- Boersma, S. N. (2019) — *Housing the homeless in the Netherlands (VU Amsterdam)* (Demonstrates housing shortages as a structural constraint on all interventions)