

Research report: Between belonging and refusal: temporary and chronic homelessness as diverging trajectories

This report interweaves field and research observations, system analysis, and visual narratives.

Two realities. One system. Very different human experiences.

1. Opening: the encounter

It was not easy to find homeless people in the Netherlands, at least not at first when I started this project (2021). Structure, institutions, and care create the impression of order. But by slowing down (walking, stopping, speaking, connecting), individual trajectories emerge. Over five years of street encounters, homelessness revealed itself not as one reality, but at least two.

Call to all parents

Just a dream ...

Why is the world so heartless?

He feels scared and abandoned

No peace, no safety, ...a restless mind,

A childhood with thorns pricking his soul!

Sometimes he dreams of what could have been,

Or should have been: caring parents,

Feeling protected, secure,

Simply loved and valued.

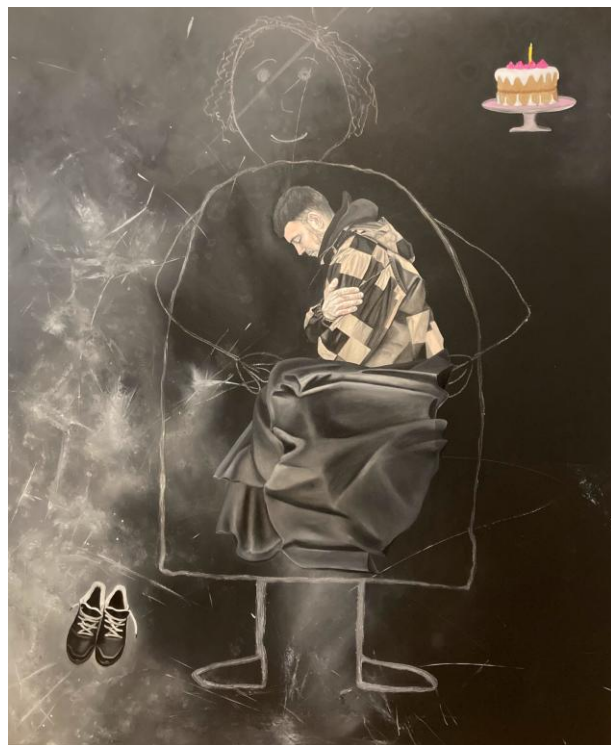
He wakes up,

The dream fades!

Losing a world that never existed,

A connection that was never there...

Back to the lonely world of his own....



Florin

Roxana Albu

Oil on canvas 120 x 100 cm

1 December 2023 | Lange Nieuwstraat,
Utrecht

Field note:

**The system is present. But
presence is not the same as
direction.**

2. Framing the issue

Homelessness is often treated as a single problem. My field experience contradicts this, because I kept encountering two very different experiences: some people are actively trying to re-enter the system; others have stepped away, intentionally or by attrition. This report is not about defining who is right or wrong. It is about asking a more uncomfortable question: Are we really understanding what we are trying to fix?

Frozen mind

Alone...

Life is hard and challenging.
Feeling

betrayed is losing all hope...

Kindness is no longer your
priority, even if

it is your most important
quality.

You need to survive, even if the
price is

to betray in your turn.

But it's not what you are, it's
not how

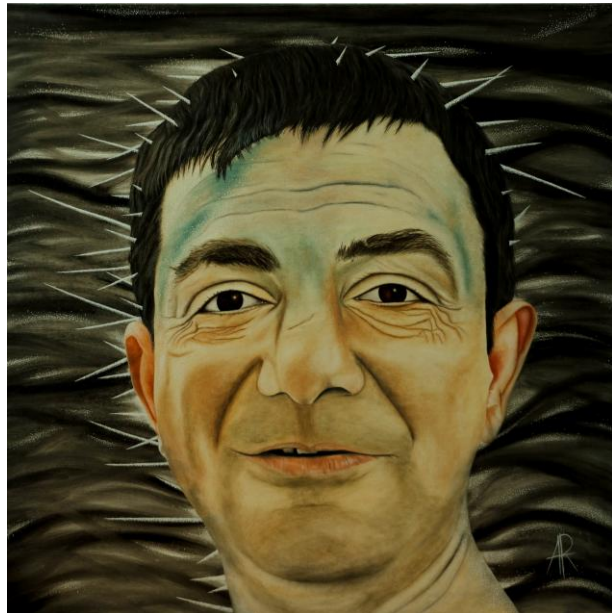
you feel...

Blocked feelings, frozen mind...

You, against the world,
surviving!

Isolated, betraying yourself...

Why is the world so heartless?



Ciprian

Roxana Albu

Oil on canvas 100 x 100 cm

26 September 2023 | Vredenburg, Utrecht

3a. Temporary homelessness : being trapped while trying

The majority of the people I met came from Eastern Europe (e.g., Romania, Poland, Hungary). They didn't come in the Netherlands to be homeless. They came for work. And often, they do find work, "briefly". But the conditions are fragile: 0 day contracts, dependency on intermediaries, housing tied to employment. When one falls, everything falls. And in a country where housing is already under pressure, there is no buffer for the "less qualified". This means that very quickly, they enter a loop: no job → no housing → no stability → no job. Support exists, but mostly in the moment: a bed for the night, a meal, temporary help.

And then... back to navigating everything alone!

Note: the labor market from Eastern Europe will be treated more in detail in a future report.

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,



Ionela

Roxana Albu

Oil on canvas 120 x 150 cm

12 -13 May 2023 | Utrecht Central Station

**Field Note: They are not living in
homelessness. They are fighting it,
every single day!**

What stays with me is this:

They are still aligned with society. They still believe in it.

And that is exactly what makes it so hard. Because every day it's about effort without result, hope without structure, movement without direction.

This is not just physical survival. It is mental exhaustion.

3b. Chronic homelessness : building outside the system

A different reality emerges when individuals disengage from formal systems. Life reorganizes around informal economies, routines, and street-based networks. This existence is harsh, but internally coherent. Expectations shift; adaptation replaces striving.

Those are people who, at some point, made a shift: “this system is not for me. Or I am not for it.” This switch is not always loud. Sometimes it’s quiet, gradual. But once it happens, something changes. They begin to build a different kind of life: small informal economies (selling, collecting, sometimes stealing), routines, networks on the street.

It is a hard life. No need to romanticize it. But it is structured: on their own terms.

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

Field Note: When the expectation disappears, a different kind of intelligence appears.

What stays with me:

There is something here that is difficult to admit: less visible struggles transform into more internal coherence.

Not easier. But different...

3C. The difference that matters

If I put it simply: one group is trying to re-enter a system that doesn't hold them. The other has stopped trying and started adapting elsewhere. And paradoxically, trying and failing can break you more than adapting to a harsh reality. This is where I felt the deepest tension. Because the people who still believe in the system, are often the ones suffering the most. This distinction is central, and frequently overlooked.

The struggle to get out/escape

Feeling seen...

Life on the street is often lonely. You are on guard, you are on your own. Who can you trust?

Who can you not trust?

In a gloomy morning, they sit together, sharing their friendship...

Pure loyalty and trust, a precious treasure in this insecure, brutal world.

It is special in all circumstances, but certainly on the street. Finding a soul...

Life remains tough, nights remain cold, but you are not alone...

You give and receive. You share. You support.

You trust and you are trusted...

You face the struggles of a hard life together.

But then...

One wants to get out, wants to escape...

Out of addiction, away from the street.

Does the other want that as well?

Do you strive to go out together? Or does one stay behind?

Whatever the choice is. In those difficult circumstances, on the streets, in the cold and rain,

They know how deep connection flows and feels...

You are not alone!



Tomasz and Rafel

Roxana Albu

Oil on canvas 60 x 70 cm

12 January 2023 | Outside, day and night

4. System mapping

Let's stay very real here. What is happening underneath:

- **Housing** functions as a bottleneck: scarce, conditional, slow to respond when life collapses quickly.
- **Work and income** offer entry, but not protection: especially when stability is short-term or informal. Intermediary companies (labour migration oriented) bringing more people than they can absorb.
- **Life events** (relationship breakdown, health crises, institutional exits, debt) often trigger loss without a safety buffer.
- **Support systems** are present, but fragmented: strong in emergency response, weak in continuity.
- **Access to care** is often conditional: readiness, compliance, linear progress.
- **Visibility is managed** (where people sleep, how distress appears), but root instability remains untouched.

Certain systems are not failing; they are functioning as designed, with consequences we often prefer not to see.

Result:

Homelessness persists not outside the system, but inside it.

What stays with me:

There is something uncomfortable here: certain economic mechanisms generate instability and other parts of the system are then missioned to manage it.

This is not accusation, but a structural observation.

5. Insight synthesis

I will be clear and honest:

1. Homelessness is not one condition. But if we treat it as one, we will keep missing the point.
2. “Care” is not the same as “path” . Helping someone survive today, is not the same as helping them move forward. Both are needed, but they are not interchangeable.
3. We may be funding the consequences more than questioning the causes. And this leads to a very simple and uncomfortable question: what are we actually choosing to sustain?

What stays with me: Myth vs Reality

Myth: homelessness is mostly about personal failure.

Reality: many (to not say all) are structurally pushed into it, especially temporary cases.

Myth: providing beds solves the issue.

Reality: it stabilizes the night, not the life.

Myth: all homeless people want to reintegrate.

Reality: some do, some don't. And that difference matters.

6. Artistic interpretation : the Museum of Life

I personally believe that art allows an understanding that reports alone cannot. It lets the viewer feel the difference between being trapped and choosing to stand outside.

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

7. Implications & opportunities

For society

Maybe the question is not only: “How do we fix homelessness?”, but also: “What kind of system are we continuously reinforcing?”

For institutions

Rethink dependency between work and housing. Look beyond emergency care and invest in continuity.

For the Museum of Life

Combine report + artwork /exhibition+ field fragments

Create a safe space of conversations between public, institutions, lived experience.

8. Mini Logframe

Goal

Understand homelessness through human connection, not through simplified stories or categories; by staying present long enough to see what breaks, what endures, and what diverges.

Outcomes

- Homelessness emerged not as lack of any kind of abilities, but as a condition where many people remain capable yet broken by repeated failure
- Loss of trust, both in oneself and in society.
- A clear divergence became visible:
 - some still try to re-enter
 - others have stepped away, out of exhaustion rather than indifference

Activities

- Walking the streets, initially alone, later with Salvation Army social workers
- Building relationships through listening, presence, and occasional practical help
- Translating encounters into paintings
- Organizing exhibitions and workshops to open public dialogue
- Maintaining contact with people over time

Indicators

- 3 exhibitions organized
- 15+ paintings produced
- Multiple inclusive art workshops
- Collaborations with Municipality of Utrecht, Domkerk, or Rabobank

9. Closing Reflection

What stays with me is not only the hardship, but also the contrast. Between those who are still trying to belong and those who have stopped asking for permission.

And somewhere in between, there is a question that concerns all of us: do we want to keep managing the visible consequences or are we ready to look at what creates them? **Temporary vs. chronic homelessness.**

Two realities. One system. Very different human experiences.

Annex

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

What research confirms

Homelessness is a trajectory, not a condition

Homelessness research consistently rejects a single, static definition. The European ETHOS framework defines homelessness as multiple housing situations and trajectories, not one condition. Longitudinal studies show that most people experience homelessness temporarily, while a smaller group follows long-term or recurrent paths requiring fundamentally different responses.

Temporary homelessness & labor migration

European studies document how precarious labor migration, short-term contracts, and employment-linked housing create rapid transitions into homelessness when work ends. Emergency shelters reduce immediate risk, but without continuity they do not stabilize housing or employment trajectories.

Where the system breaks

Chronic homelessness as adaptation

Ethnographic research shows that long-term homelessness often involves the development of informal economies, routines, and peer networks. Disengagement from formal systems may reduce the psychological strain of repeated institutional failure, even as material hardship persists.

This supports the field observation that adaptation outside the system can be less destructive than repeated failure within it.

Care vs. continuity

Systematic reviews consistently find that emergency care mitigates immediate harm but rarely alters long-term outcomes. Interventions associated with sustained housing stability are those that restore continuity, not those that expand emergency capacity alone.

Selected research :

- FEANTSA — *ETHOS: European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion*
- European Parliament (2023) — *Homelessness in the European Union*
- The Lancet Public Health (2023) — *Homelessness in Europe: Time to Act*
- Munthe-Kaas et al. (2018) — *Effectiveness of Interventions to Reduce Homelessness*
- 't Hooft et al. — *Pathways to Homelessness among CEE Labor Migrants in NL*