

# REFUGE BRUXELLES: BECAUSE IT'S NEEDED

Refuge Bruxelles outline their campaign for a comprehensive study into LGBTQIA+ homelessness in Europe. Refuge Bruxelles present this research as the opportunity to gain a much-needed understanding of the scale of the issue, and the intersectionality of the vulnerabilities of LGBTQI+ persons experiencing homelessness. This research would allow for greater, more productive action and the enhancement of protective measures for LGBTQIA+ persons experiencing homelessness, providing qualitative data to draw upon.



By **Marc Bouteiller**, Director, Refuge Bruxelles, Belgium

Refuge Bruxelles provides accommodation and support for young adults aged between 18 and 25 who are experiencing exclusion because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Since its official launch in 2018, the organisation has seen an exponential growth in demand that it cannot fully meet. In 2022, 32 young people were accommodated and 143 received support (mainly with looking for housing). For every request for accommodation it accepts, Refuge Bruxelles must unfortunately refuse a dozen others.

The UN has been looking into the issue of LGBTQIA+ people who sleep rough and the situation in some countries is of real concern.

In the United States, it is estimated that 40% of the 500,000 people sleeping rough identify as LGBTQIA+. This situation is not new; the first doctors to take an interest in the issue of homosexuality – in the 19th century – already recognised that male homosexuals made up a large part of the homeless population.

In Canada, the work of Dr Abramovich has already reported that 40% of homeless young people identify as LGBTQIA+, and that the number of young people from this community living either outdoors, in a vehicle, or in an empty building, has grown from 13% to 33% since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to UK organisations [Stonewall Housing](#) and [The Albert Kennedy Trust](#), the situation in England in 2016 was “dramatic”. The total number of LGBTQIA+ persons who had been rejected by their homophobic family was almost 48,000 in the United Kingdom, constituting 24% of the homeless population of the country. These figures have certainly not improved since the COVID-19 pandemic and the energy crisis. England fears the same explosion in numbers seen in Canada.

In 2020, the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) published a piece of research estimating that in the European Union, one-in-five LGBTQIA+ people had experienced homelessness. This figure was higher for trans people, at one-in-three, and intersex people, at one-in-four. The FRA also said that the lack of institutional support, rejection by society, and family disputes linked to questions around identity and gender were the main reasons for homelessness among LGBTQIA+ people. Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic, which deepened socio-economic inequality and heightened anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric, increased homelessness within communities, especially among young people.

In Belgium, little or no data is collected. The interfederal (national) centre for equal opportunities, Unia, explains that the methods used to count the number of people sleeping rough attempt to be as unintrusive as possible regarding their personal lives. Although this is a noble intention, it may actually risk making the issue even less visible, and subsequently cement adverse effects.



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Indeed, Refuge Bruxelles and its partners working on the ground in Belgium know that discrimination works in similar ways whichever country you are in. Discrimination brings with it exclusion, homelessness, sex work as a survival mechanism, manifold addictions and, ultimately, serious physical and mental health problems, which too often sadly lead to suicide.

*Alias*, the organisation that provides support for the mental and physical health and social inclusion of men working as sex workers in Brussels, highlights that a large number of male sex workers are homeless.

Young LGBTQIA+ people are more affected by suicide and addiction. The figures vary and, again, are not available for Belgium. We can, nevertheless, give an idea: according to the *Centre de ressources sur la prévention du suicide* (suicide prevention resource hub), the suicide rate is 1.5 to 3 times higher among LGBTQIA+ young people than among heterosexual young people - a Canadian study estimates that the rate is 12 times higher!

LGBTQIA+ people are also more often the victims of verbal and physical abuse than the rest of the population (in mainland France, 53% of LGBTQIA+ people have been subjected to insults, ridicule, or physical assault in their lifetime), but are also faced with a lack of knowledge and understanding from healthcare services and schools.

The personal impact varies of this; it might just be a feeling of alienation, but it can also mean fear, long-term physical and mental health problems, and suicidal ideation that may or may not be acted upon. The risk of experiencing financial hardship is higher for these young people too.

Unfortunately for *Refuge Bruxelles*, the data collected originates primarily from Anglo-Saxon countries. This absence of research and data collection in Europe plays a large part in its minimisation. At the same time, we cannot reliably prove that the situation is less alarming in the European Union and mainland Europe.

The 2021-24 national action plan for a more LGBTQI+ friendly Belgium realises that this is an important topic and there has been a considerable increase in research into LGBTQI+ issues in recent years. However, the diversity of the LGBTQI+ community makes it difficult to paint a one-size-fits-all picture of the different issues. It is therefore very important to carry out more qualitative research into the living situation of LGBTQI+ people.

The plan thus points to two concrete actions that are needed: to carry out a study into the accommodation options for LGBTQI+ people in need of international protection, and commission research on a priority theme chosen in consultation with civil society.

*Refuge Bruxelles* campaigns for comprehensive research to be carried out in Europe in order to give shape to the issue of LGBTQI+ homelessness, which has been exacerbated these past few years by the healthcare crisis associated with Covid-19 and the crisis linked to the war in Ukraine. The Ukraine crisis has brought to light the issue of LGBTQIA+ migration, and the flow of migrants from Ukraine into Poland, Hungary and Romania has underlined the urgent need to take the LGBTQIA+ dimension of migration into consideration.

But the scale of the problem is not the whole story. We also need to consider the extreme vulnerability of this community.

Rape, murder, lynching and different types of physical assault are unfortunately the reality they face.

Even though Belgium can boast of one of the most progressive legal systems, the murder of Ihsane Jarfi in Liege and the homophobic murder in Beveren in 2021 remind us that unfortunately the law does not shape people's mindsets.

*Refuge Bruxelles* thus campaigns for, in addition to a recognition of the scale of the phenomenon, an expansion of the measures available to protect these communities. These protective measures must be able to serve all groups subject to this violence, whatever their age (minors or adults) and whatever their immigration status (including those in need of international protection or those who are undocumented). These measures must be able to respond to emergency situations as well as allowing for structured support over the medium- and long-term.

In its 2021 final report on the improvement of data collection around equal opportunities in Belgium (*Improving Equality Data Collection*), *Unia* recommends the use of a data hub and for the collection of up-to-date data.

We know this is needed. *Refuge Bruxelles* wants to establish a tool to capture the realities faced on the ground - primarily to quantify the problem, but also to provide qualitative information on it.

*Refuge Bruxelles* aims to implement the recommendations by *Unia* that ensure that this data collection can take place, such as: following the law around the protection of personal data at all stages of data processing; coproduction with the communities affected; specifying the purpose of collecting the data and the methodology used to collect it; as well as respecting the principles of transparency and accountability.

Qualitative research will also allow for a better grasp of the intersectional nature of issues linked to discrimination.

Confident in the value of our frontline experience since 2018 and convinced as we are that the number of young people supported by *Refuge Bruxelles* will provide a benchmark to start from, we call on the public authorities to support the implementation of this study, which would allow us to put in place statistical tools useful for research at the regional, national, and European levels. These tools should be fit for the future and allow us to keep track of our target group over the long term.

This research would allow us to identify indicators among our target population that would help us to gauge their vulnerabilities. The fact that these vulnerabilities are multiple means an in-depth analysis of the intersectionality of these vulnerabilities is needed, and that there must be tailored tools to analyse and provide responses to it.

It is our hope that the political authorities, at whichever level of influence, will therefore promote this type of tool, which would allow them to refine the response to the issue we face.

## SOURCES

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