Cleaning up the streets?
Effects of the criminalization of begging children

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Introduction

- This presentation is based on ongoing research
  → feedback/criticism/questions
  of any nature are more than welcome
- The research is funded by the internal KU Leuven research fund C2

Picture1. Bart van der Lek, *Bedelvolk* Kunstmuseum, the Hague

Content

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Introduction

- Overall, people who beg are amongst the most excluded in society, supported by…
  - ✓ The logic of informal activities
  - ✓ The proceeds from begging (Adriaenssens & Hendrickx, 2011; Reinhard, 2023)
  - ✓ Some of the survey evidence of this group
- High-income countries have a history of criminalization of aspects of the lives of the very poor: rough sleeping, mobility, begging,…

	Propor-tion	Belgian pop.
Access to medical care when needed	22%	1.6%
Women: lack of access to menstrual products	42%	
Rough sleepers	53%	

Table 1. Selection of deprivation indicators of people who beg in Brussels

Source: Own data, 2021-2022

Picture 2. Cover of Roberts (2013)

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Introduction

- We surveyed the population of beggars in the Brussels-Capital Region (BCR) in 2 waves, end of 2021 and spring of 2022
- Roughly half of the respondents (54%) ply their trade in Brussels city, the other half in the adjacent villages that are part of this urban area

Picture 2. Cover of Roberts (2013)

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Introduction

- In between the survey waves (March 2022), the Brussels city council agreed to a provision against children present while begging
- We exploit the before-after coincidence, testing whether parents went out begging less often with their children after the regulation

Content

Introduction

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I. Regulating the poor

- We theorize two aspects of the regulation:
  1. The logic of regulating and policing aspects of the poor people's lives:
     What is the overt or hidden rationale behind regulation?
  2. The behavioural response:
     How do the subjects of the regulation respond?

I. Regulating the poor

1. The rationale behind regulation

- Loïc Wacquant (2009) famously coined the phrase "punishing the poor", arguing that high-income countries developed *penalization* policies to remove this group through incarceration

- This penalization is assumed to differ from policies of *socialization* and *medicalization* (although the latter may be conducive to penalizing)

- Applied to begging, some policies aim to decrease the incidence of begging, often rationalized by a city marketing logic (Pospěch, 2021; Smith, 2005)

I. Regulating the poor

1. The rationale behind regulation (cont.)

- If we focus on begging, we do see that many policies do not fit the mould of direct criminalization, but 'manage' certain aspects or even aim at 'socialization'

- Overall, a broad range, for instance
  - ✓ Geneva: downright criminalization in 2007 (Colombo, Reynaud, & de Coulon, 2016)
  - ✓ England & Wales: many cities develop 'diverted giving' schemes, aiming to reduce the public's willingness to give alms (Hermer, 2019)
  - ✓ Sweden's policy does not ban begging, but facilitates the eviction from illegal settlements with the explicit goal to reduce begging (Barker, 2017)

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I. Regulating the poor

1. The rationale behind regulation (cont.)

- The Brussels city regulation probably is much more an outlier that is closer to socialization than these cases, but with the potential use of deterrence through fines

- As the maire stresses in his introduction (*ce règlement n'a pas pour but d'interdire ou de limiter la mendicité en général, mais plutôt de viser l'intérêt supérieur des enfants*): no intent to reduce begging, but rather to keep minors from the street

- Motivation is the children's safety and living conditions, also exemplified by the free use of day nursery for toddlers, and schools for those 6 or older

I. Regulating the poor

2. Behavioural response of subjects of the regulation

- Working hypothesis: deprivation corrodes the propensity to comply with regulations

- Rationale and mechanisms?
  - ✓Mullainathan and Shafir (2013): scarcity stresses, making the poor less responsive to complicated rules, This is rooted in the conclusion that the daily worries of poor people corrode their "bandwidth" for deliberated decision-making. This, in turn, favours choices for short-term over long-term gains.
  - ✓Gary Becker's *economics of crime* logic: poverty may boil down to a reduced ability to earn in the legal economy, reducing the opportunity cost of complying

I. Regulating the poor

2. <u>Behavioural response of subjects of the regulation</u>

- Working hypothesis: deprivation corrodes the propensity to comply with regulations

- Empirically, this gets some support:
  - ✓ In the Myeik Archipelago (Myanmar), the poorest fishers showed a higher propensity to fish for shark, which is illegal (MacKerache et al, 2021)
  - ✓ Palmer et al (2019) exploit the almost random attribution of emergency financial assistance to the very poor in Chicago: police arrests for violent crime halves for the supported ones
  - ✓ Boonmanunt et al (2020) experimentally introduce a social norm reminder to reduce cheating among rice farmers in Thailand. This reminder works when the population is richer (after harvest), not when the population is poorer (before)

Content

Introduction

I. Regulating the poor

II. Begging in Brussels

III. Data and specifications

IV. Results

V. Conclusion

II. Begging in Brussels

- The Brussels-Capital Region (pop. 1.2 million) is Belgium's largest access gateway for international migration

- Highest rates of extreme poverty in Belgium, including harsh living conditions and substandard housing

- The regular counts (Paquot, 2023) for instance, show a consistent increase in roofless sleeping in the public space between 2008-2022, from 269 to 809 (*3,01)

- Same goes for the broader population of all categories that were counted throughout the period in different degrees of homelessness: from 1,724 to 6,317 (*3.7%)

Picture 2. The Brussels-Capital Region and Brussels city

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Content

Introduction

I. Regulating the poor

II. Begging in Brussels

III. Data and specifications

IV. Results

V. Conclusion

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III. Data and specifications

- Standardized questionnaires for people who beg

- Two waves: November-December 2021, April-May 2022

- 4 languages: Romanian, French, English, Dutch

- Sources:
  - ✓ 2005-6 survey
  - ✓ European-level questionnaires: EU-SILC, FRA, ESS
  - ✓ International poverty questionnaires: DHS, MICS

- Topics:
  - ✓ Begging strategies and experiences
  - ✓ Income and standard of living
  - ✓ Victimization
  - ✓ Well-being and health

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III. Data and specifications

- We test whether
    1) The proportion of the target population (beggars with children under 16) begs less often with a child after the regulation in Brussels city
    2) They do so more outside of Brussels city (displacement effect)

- The design we use for this is a difference-in-differences estimation, by
    1) Comparing before and after the regulation went into effect (1st difference)
    2) Comparing the target population with those without young children

- We test this
    - ✓ in Brussels city
    - ✓ Outside of it
    - ✓ Full sample

- Base estimation: linear probability model (LPM) with robust standard errors

III. Data and specifications

<u>Robustness tests (not reported here)</u>

- DD with logit

- *<u>Potential small-sample bias</u>*:

  1. The Bell-McCaffrey degrees-of-freedom adjustment of the conventional robust standard errors (Imbens & Kolesár, 2016)
     [Stata's *didregress* command]

  2. In the logit regressions: a penalized maximum likelihood estimator (Rainey & McCaskey, 2021)
     [Stata's *firthlogit* command]

- *<u>Potential sampling bias</u>*: We also ran extra regressions weighted on self-reported begging time.
  The rationale for this is that the probability of selection into the sample is related to the average time a potential respondent passes begging.

III. Data and specifications

- It should be mentioned that we asked the respondents in the second wave whether they knew about the regulation

- Less than half of the population indicated knowing about this

- Therefore, we can only speak of an intention-to-treat (ITT) analysis rather than an actual treatment per se

	Freq.	Percent
No	50	58%
Yes	36	42%

Table 2. Proportion of respondents with children under 16 who knew about the new Brussels city regulation

Source: Own data, wave 2, April-May 2022

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Content

Introduction

I. Regulating the poor

II. Begging in Brussels

III. Data and specifications

IV. Results

V. Conclusion

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IV. Results

- Some descriptives first

- The proportion of people begging with children does decrease (bottom panel), but only so in the city of Brussels

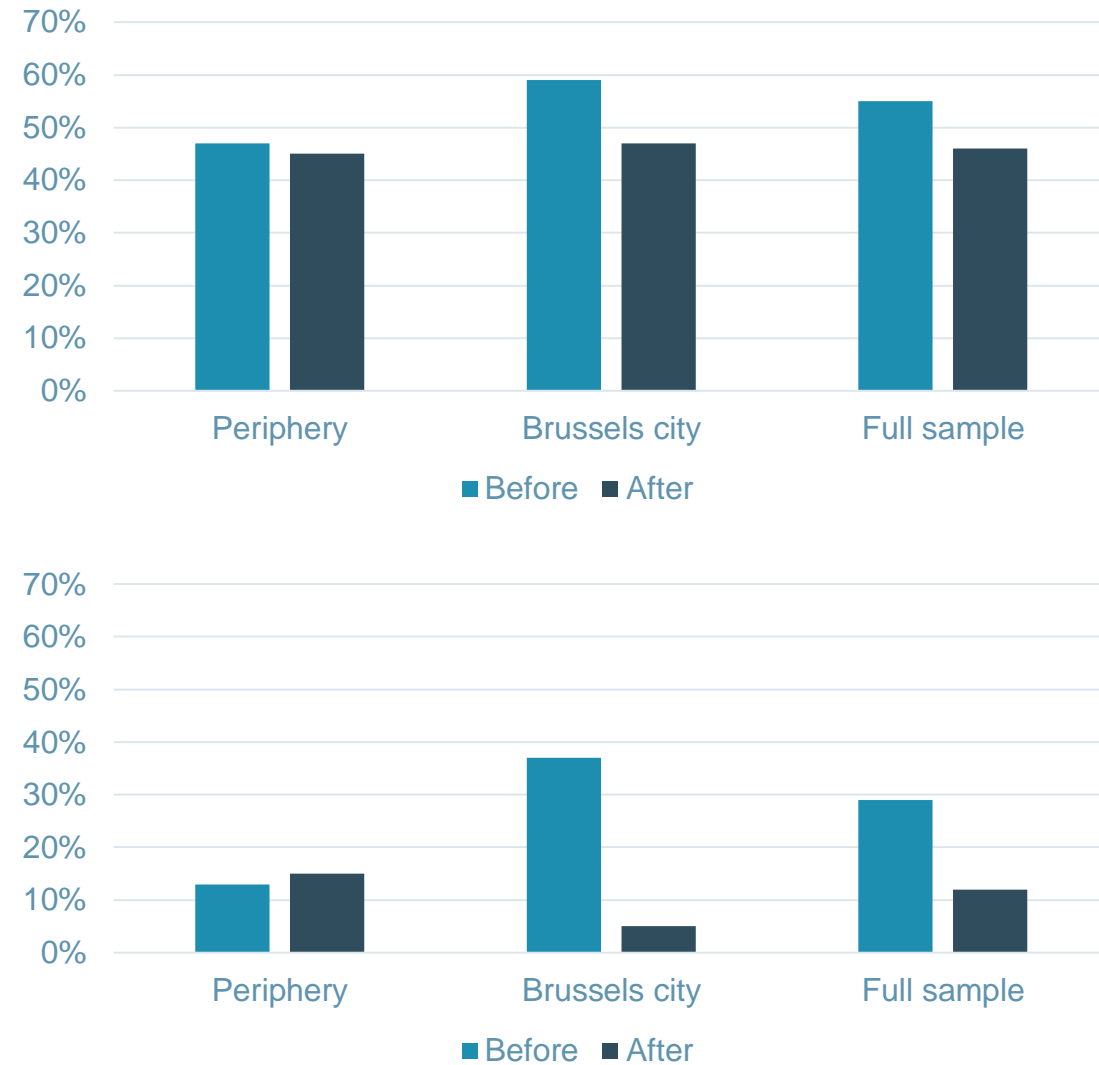- The proportion of parents with small children in the sample also seems to decrease (top)

Figure 1. Proportion of respondents who have children under 16 (top) and with begging children (bott.)

IV. Results

- This is confirmed in a series of DD estimations
- In Brussels city, the probability of a child present when begging decreases for parents with children under 16 with approximately 40 ppt.
- In the full sample, we see an overall decrease of approximately 30 ppt.

	Coeff. (SE) and sample size	
	No controls	Controls
DD: Brussels city	-.438 (.090)*** n=176	-.427 (.089)*** n=155
DD: periphery	-.027 (.110) n=180	-.074 (.113) n=159
DD: full sample	-.280 (.074)*** n=356	-.316 (.072)*** n=314

DD: LPM regressions of the presence of a child on post-regulation, parents of a child (≤ 16 yrs), (not reported) and interaction term (rep.) with and without controls, not reported (respondent gender, age, rough sleeping, average worked hours per day).
Robust SE; * p<10%; ** p < 5%; *** p<1%

Table 3. DD regressions of the presence of a child, after the regulation for parents of children under 16

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Content

Introduction

I. Regulating the poor

II. Begging in Brussels

III. Data and specifications

IV. Results

V. Conclusion

V. Conclusion

- This is very much a work in progress
- People who beg in Brussels city indeed bring their small children less often after the regulation was voted
- Overall, this dismisses the hypothesis that poor people are not sensitive to regulatory incentives
- In light of the lowish reported knowledge of the regulation, this may sound surprising
- There is evidence of a displacement effect toward the periphery of people begging with children

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Thank you
Looking forward to your questions, feedback, comments & critiques

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