

DOES HOMELESSNESS UNDERMINE DEMOCRACY?

The Role of Home in Democratic Citizenship

Supervisor: Dr Lewis H. Mates (SFHEA)

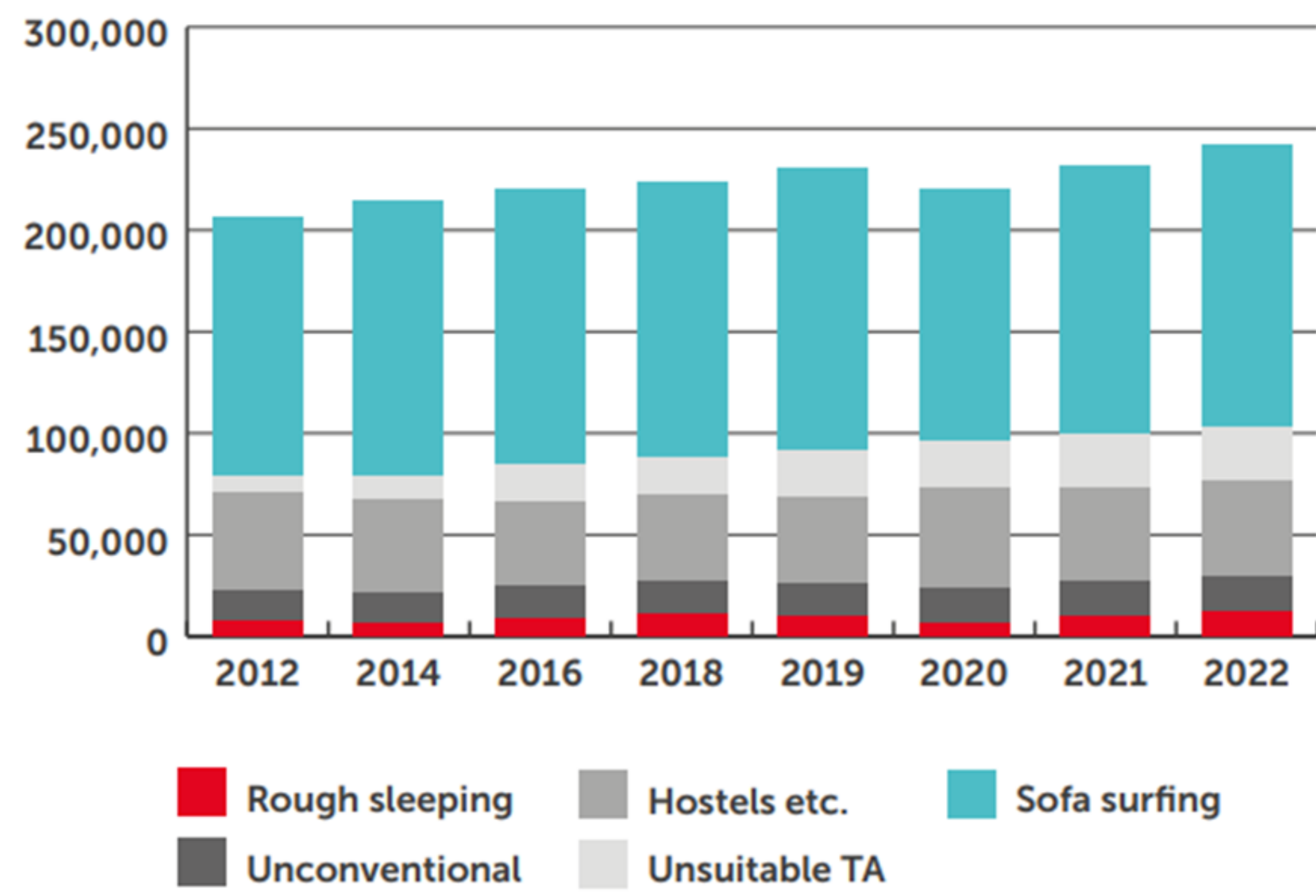
Axel A. Morgan

Contact: ax3lmorgan.mail@gmail.com
+44 7511198301

Introduction

- At least 242,000 people in the UK are homeless, with the the dual cost of living and housing crises projected to increase this number to 303,000 by 2024 (The Homelessness Monitor: England 2023). The graph below illustrates this upward trajectory.
- Most attitudes toward homelessness frame it as an issue of the individual, with little concern for the damage that homelessness causes to the wider society.
- In response to the individualisation of homelessness, I have decided to research the relationship between homelessness and democracy. Does having a significant homeless population undermine our claims of being a democracy? This research is the product of an extended literature review.
- I have utilised a model which places the legitimacy of power relations as an essential component of democratic organisation. This has enabled a critical analysis of the underlying relationship between homelessness and democracy.
- The hypothesis was that homelessness undermines democracy due to the extent that homeless people are segregated from society.

Figure 5.1: Core homelessness estimates by category and year, England 2012-2020 (number of households)



Democracy

The Dual Nature of Democracy

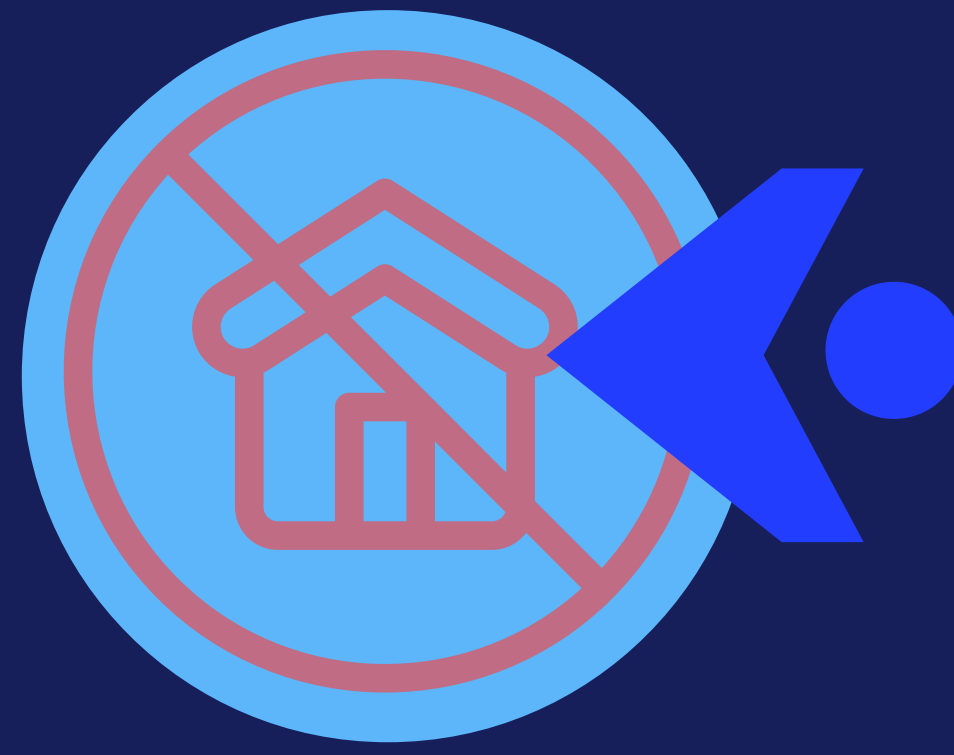
Democracy has a dual nature which is often in conflict. On one hand advocates of democracy as a philosophical position rigorously argue for particular institutions, values, and social contexts as the preconditions of democratic organisation. On the other hand, those who wish to use the idea of democracy to legitimise their position of relative power may work against actual democratic reform (Fierlbeck, 2013). The power relations of a society are important in determining the outcome of this conflict; what we view democracy as being, what we associate with it, and how we engage with it.

Legitimate Power Relations

As power relations are an intrinsic part of democracy, it is vital that they are coherent with democracy, or legitimate. Power concerns our ability to change the world as we see fit. Broadly speaking, this can be achieved through our own actions, convincing or coercing others to act, or stopping others from acting. In a democracy, it is important that the power that people hold and exercise is legitimate, particularly at the extremes of power relations. Acts such as electing leaders legitimises the vast power needed for government of a whole nation. However, the legitimacy of powerlessness is often neglected.

Democratic Citizenship

Powerlessness negatively affects our ability to conduct our own lives as well as authorise our governance. David Held's 'Principle of Autonomy' makes for a coherent limitation on the minimum power required to legitimise democratic governance. This principle suggests that members of a society must have a fundamentally equal ability to specify the conditions of their own lives, both personally, and politically (Held, 2006, p. 264).



Homelessness vs. Democracy

Homelessness is a term used to describe those without a home. In many societies, home is closely related to norms of housing and property ownership. Those who are homeless therefore find themselves outside the norms of life in their societies, with a significantly diminished ability to voice their issues, or pursue their ends.

The little power which homeless people can wield is often in conflict with the property owning 'homed', meaning homeless people are likely to have their efforts frustrated. An example of this is the implementation of hostile architecture, which directly curbs the ability of homeless people to pursue comfort and sleep.

Powerlessness, segregation, and conflict carries through to homeless people's ability to engage in the wider political system.

Homeless people do not meet the requirements that democratic citizenship demands.

But what duty do aspiring democracies have to reduce homelessness? See what you think about these three common approaches on the right.

Approach 1 - Neoliberal

- Proponents of Neoliberal policies often emphasise individual choice as the defining feature of homelessness. As such, it isn't the business of a democracy to have an ethical concern about the outcome of the 'free market'.
- "Those shares are the outcome of a process the effect of which on particular people was neither intended nor foreseen by anyone when the institutions first appeared... to demand justice from such a process is clearly absurd." (Hayek, 1976, p. 65)

Approach 2 - Liberal Democracy

- On the softer side of liberal democracy, academics such as Jeremy Waldron advocate for an increase in the rights of the homeless to use public spaces.
- "The question that remains is whether we are willing to allow those who are in this predicament to act as free agents, looking after their own needs, in public places" (1991, p. 304)

Approach 3 - Pluralism

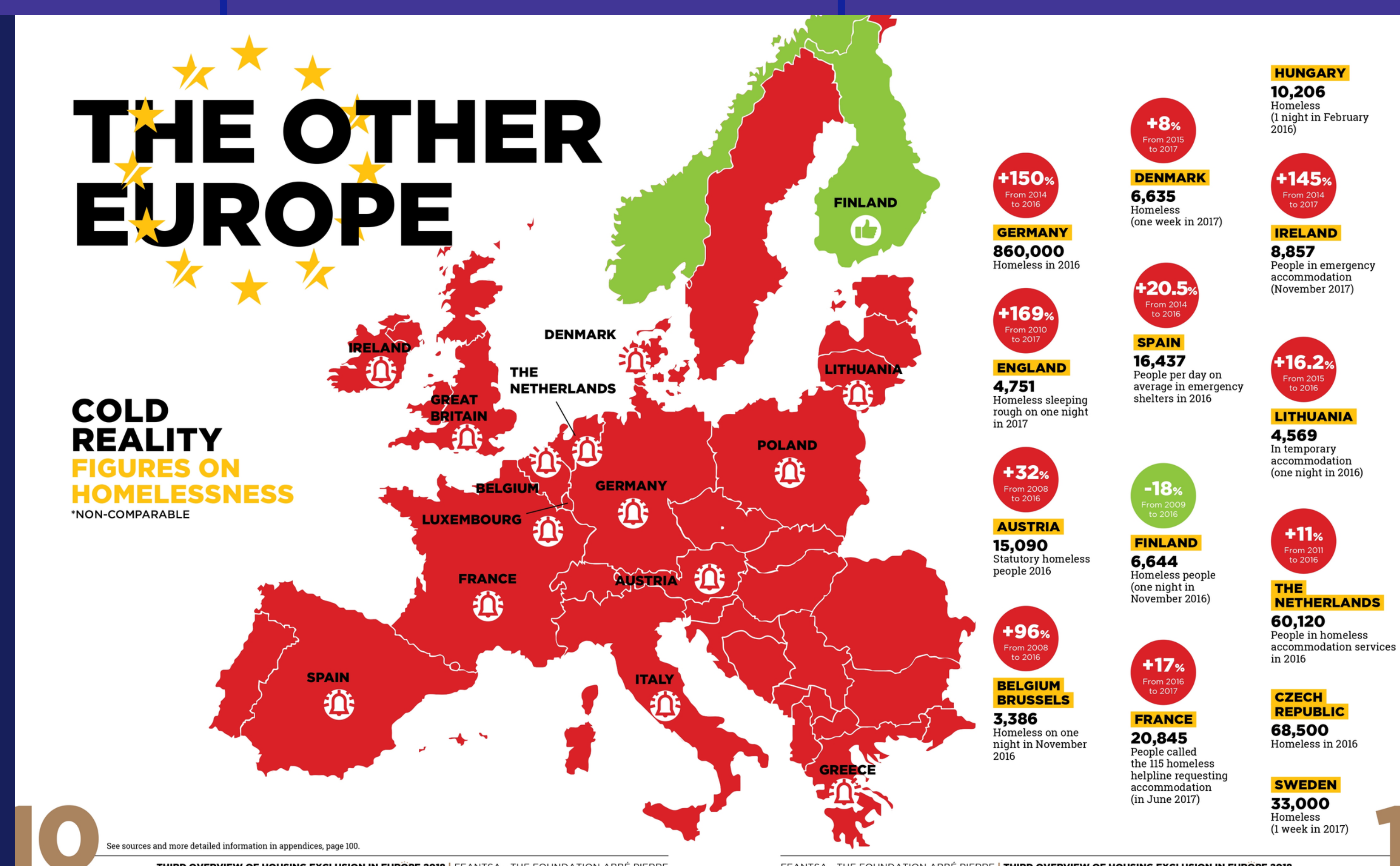
- Another popular approach is to 'pluralise the home'. They argue that by eroding the borders between the homed and homeless, the issues of segregation and isolation can be addressed.
- "Home should not lead to an exclusive type of territoriality but rather coexistence and mutual respect" (Arnold, 2004, p. 172)

Conclusion

It is clear that homelessness doesn't allow for development of democratic citizenship and is therefore in contradiction to the requirements of a democratic system. The three approaches above do little to remedy this issue due to issues of powerless, segregation, and unfeasibility. In order to have any chance of developing democratic citizenship, people must be within the constraints of legitimate power relations, of which the homeless almost always are not.

Societies claiming democratic status ought to make greater efforts to resolve homelessness, particularly considering the growing levels of homelessness across Europe, as illustrated by the infographic to the right.

Further research ought to be conducted on the extent to which homelessness undermines democracy, as well as how the duty of resolving homelessness ought to be allocated.



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