

Synopsis :

LE REFUGE

(THE REFUGE)

Photographic documentary by
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Context

The number of homeless has risen by 50% since 2001, coming to a total of 141.500 people by the start of 2012, including 30.000 children. Source: French National Statistics Office, 2013.

This demographic explosion reflects the impact of the economic crisis coupled with the huge increase in house prices since 2000. For the associations defending the homeless or ill-housed, it is also the illustration of the ineffectiveness of seasonal management of the problem without a long-term strategy.

While the State did make an effort in 2013 by opening extra beds in shelters, the system for emergency shelter is still completely overwhelmed by the explosion in demand. Two thirds of calls to the emergency shelter number, 115, go unanswered.

Winter housing plans keep the homeless in a system of rotating doors and short-term lodging without any perspective of finally obtaining proper housing. Such systems – still operating in many municipalities – leave people stranded when the temperatures rise again in spring.

Le refuge

Le Refuge is **the oldest structure** of the Association Les Œuvres de La Mie de Pain. Opened in 1932, Le Refuge is the biggest Emergency Shelter (CHU) in France. It accommodates the homeless, exclusively adult males, offering lodgings and a hot meal. Basic urgent services are also available: doctors, lockers, showers. Social workers are present and help the residents with administrative procedures or access to healthcare.

This documentary was made between March and December 2013 in the historical Le Refuge building. This building was closed in January 2014 and the residents are now housed in a recently completed, modern centre.

The cliché of the crazy alcoholic homeless man

A third of this population is affected by “severe psychological disorders”, a proportion three to five times higher than in the general population. Psychotic problems, (13%, of which 8% are schizophrenic), chronic anxiety (12%) or severe depression (7%) are the most prevalent. In these cases, it is the illness that led to a loss of the home.

Today one homeless person in three is addicted to alcohol, drugs, or a medicine used contrary to indications.

The majority without serious problems

But two-thirds of the homeless show little enough difference from the general population. Contrary to those suffering from severe psychiatric problems, these people have never run away, have never known sexual abuse, conflicts between parents nor housing problems in their youth. For them, depression or addictions are more a consequence of their life without shelter.

Source : Inserm and l'Observatoire du Samu social, Paris, 2009.

Principal pathologies

The principal pathologies of the homeless are linked to malnutrition and especially to a lack of vitamin C and calcium: anemia, hemorrhages, neurological or cardio-vascular problems, fractures. Lack of regular medical check-ups prevents treatment of easily cured illnesses such as diabetes or high blood pressure. This is further compounded by excessive consumption of alcohol and tobacco, leading to cardio-vascular diseases, cancers and liver disease.