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The Inertia of Policies for People Experiencing (or at Risk of) Homelessness in Buenos Aires: Notes on the Persistence of Precariousness

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Abstract: *For nearly 20 years, the 'Housing Subsidy 690' programme has provided economic aid to those experiencing homelessness in the city of Buenos Aires. In practice, it bridges two precarious housing situations: living on the street and living in the city's single-room occupancy (SRO) hotels. Although it was initially created as a housing programme that was intended to address the shortcomings of previous policies towards homelessness and solve a complex issue, nearly 20 years after its creation a certain inertia around the policy can be perceived, as well as fractures in its functioning. Drawing on interviews with beneficiaries and professionals involved in the administration of the subsidy, as well as a review of secondary data, this article describes the functioning of the programme and suggests that it constitutes a form of policy inertia that contributes to perpetuating housing instability and homelessness. We argue that receiving the subsidy does not resolve housing vulnerability, as it contributes to an intermittent cycle between these unstable housing conditions, thereby reproducing this vulnerability.*

Keywords: street dwellers; single room occupancy hotel; intermittent homelessness; housing policy; Buenos Aires.

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Introduction

This article analyses the scope and limitations of a government programme intended to address the housing vulnerability experienced by families and individuals living on the streets of the city of Buenos Aires. The 'Support for People in Situations of Housing Vulnerability' programme (hereinafter 'Housing Subsidy 690') provides financial assistance for housing, but the level of support falls short of what is needed to access the formal rental market in the city. As a result, it is most commonly used to pay for a room in a single-room occupancy (SRO) hotel, one of the oldest types of precarious housing in the city and generally characterised by poor structural conditions. As such, both rough sleeping and SRO hotels are common elements in the housing trajectories of the most vulnerable populations, reflecting broader inequalities in access to adequate housing in Argentina's capital.

This article is based on many years of qualitative fieldwork carried out by the authors with the aim of studying the trajectories and experiences of living on the streets and in SRO hotels.[1] Data collection was based on a qualitative approach, as the goal was to produce knowledge by interpreting social reality from the perspective of those involved. The objective was to understand social processes at the level of analysis of the subjects based on their social interactions and the meanings they assign to the city's housing policy. In this type of approach, the research process is inductive and the design is flexible and dynamic, allowing for the exploration of the new ideas or questions that arise during the process. In this way, the investigative action moves in two directions, 'between the facts and their interpretation' (Hernandez Sampieri 2014:7), on an ongoing basis.

Based on these guidelines, semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals living on the streets, residents of SRO hotels, and leaders of different community organisations. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the content of the interviews, as this technique allows themes, ideas, and concepts understood as patterns of meaning within the data to be identified and analysed. We also analysed secondary sources such as laws and ordinances, government reports, news articles, websites, and documents prepared by social organisations. This documentation was analysed in conjunction with the information gathered during interviews with the population in order to capture, from the perspectives of the actors, the meanings they attribute to the policy and its implementation in a specific scenario. The documentation was also analysed to determine financing methods, budget allocations, the definition of the beneficiary population, and the key actors in the implementation. Various reports, websites, and news articles were used to investigate the problems that emerged in the application of the policy in more general terms and from different data sources. This research proposal, which combines primary and secondary data, provides a comprehensive view of the phenomenon analysed.

Living on the street and living in an SRO hotel are both signs of the entrenched structural poverty in Buenos Aires, which has in turn been exacerbated by the periods of social and economic crisis the country has faced in recent years. As we will argue, the functioning of the programme itself – the 'housing subsidy' as it is widely known – is intrinsically linked to these two types of living situations. That is to say, in the city of Buenos Aires living on the street and living in an SRO hotel are two sides of the same coin. We also argue that the inertia surrounding a largely inadequate policy to address the needs of people experiencing (or at risk of) homelessness may in fact be perpetuating conditions of housing vulnerability and precariousness.

[1] The fieldwork on which this article is based began with the doctoral research of both authors, which has been ongoing ever since. In the case of individuals living on the streets fieldwork began in 2007, and in the case of SRO hotel residents it began in 2010.

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The questions that guided this research were: What are the programme's operating modalities – its scope and limitations – that account for the constitution of a process of 'intermittent housing'? What consequences does obtaining the housing subsidy have on people's daily lives? How does its implementation contribute to create a 'new type' of beneficiary who represents two forms of extreme precariousness experienced daily lives in the city? And finally, what effects does the programme have on reproducing the logic of the single-room occupancy (SRO) hotels market?

Street dwellers in Buenos Aires

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the amount of people living on the streets of Buenos Aires increased. Although this was not an entirely new phenomenon, over the course of these decades this tendency grew significantly and became consolidated (Rosa 2012). This situation was the result of various institutional and political reforms at the national level, which were prompted by economic adjustment measures, that led to rising unemployment, and increasing poverty, among other consequences. Moreover, it reflected the lack of adequate, sustained housing policies capable of improving access to housing for low-income people. The persistence and escalation of this issue became evident in the changing composition of the homeless population. Alongside the 'typical' type of person historically associated with homelessness in Buenos Aires – single men, often labelled as 'vagrants' or 'beggars' – a more diverse and heterogeneous homeless population from a broader range of social groups emerged: entire families, single women, recently unemployed individuals, and unaccompanied children and young people. In this regard, a shift could be observed: 'homelessness is no longer solely associated with – and should not be confused with – the underworld of "transient drifters" of the past, even if numerous institutional, symbolic and linguistic associations continue to perpetuate such confusion' (Cabrera 1998: 88).

We use the term 'street dwellers' because 'the emphasis is not placed on what is lacking, but rather on the environment in which the person lives and carries out their daily life' (Rosa 2012: 299). This term also highlights the fact that individuals who remain on the streets for prolonged periods of time 'establish a relationship with their surroundings (appropriating and making use of that space) and develop ties and interactions with various people or groups, whether or not they are in a similar situation (neighbours, shopkeepers, passers-by, etc.)' (Rosa 2012: 299). In this way, through their everyday practices, street dwellers attribute meaning to and transform the environment in which they live. For this reason, the 'act of inhabiting' is understood as 'a process of signifying, using, and appropriating space that unfolds over time and, as such, can never be considered "complete", since it is continuously in the making' (Duhau and Giglia 2008: 22).

At present, both the number and heterogeneity of individuals living on the streets continue to grow. Taking the most recent data collected by social organisations, in 2023 a total of 8028 people living on the streets of the city were counted, including 909 under the age of 18. These data reveal a significant finding on the trajectories of those living on the street: 49.1% of respondents reported having previously experienced homelessness – the majority for over six years (32.75%) – while 48.3% indicated that this was their first time experiencing homelessness (Renacalle 2023). Official data also indicate this issue is getting worse, with a 23% increase in the number of people living on the streets in 2025 compared to 2024 (GCBA 2025).

In Buenos Aires, living on the street is intrinsically linked to living in SRO hotels. For those experiencing homelessness, collecting enough money to pay for a few nights in such

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accommodation is an ever present concern. These establishments constitute a distinctive form of low-income housing in the city's central areas.[2] Formally, they are required to register as commercial enterprises and are subject to the legislation that regulates hotels. However, in practice, they rarely meet even minimum operational standards (Lorences et al. 2024).[3] They are typically found in old, poorly maintained buildings, with small rooms connected by corridors that are rented out to individuals or families. Bathrooms and kitchens are usually shared, leading to an intensified use of space. This results in overcrowding both within individual rooms and throughout the hotel's common areas. This overcrowding generates tensions in communal living, particularly around shared spaces, and contributes to a chronic lack of privacy. Although the entry requirements for these hotels are lower than those of dwellings on the formal rental market, living in them long term comes at a high cost. This is due not only to the cost of rent itself[4] but also to the precarious and unstable living conditions and constant threat of eviction that residents face. Therefore, the length of stay is determined not only by residents' ability to pay but also by their relationships with the owner or manager and adherence to the informal rules they impose.[5] As a result, residents live in constant fear of being evicted (Toscani 2018). Residents enjoy few protections, as these establishments are weakly regulated by the state and are subject to limited legal oversight, even though in practice they function as permanent housing. In this sense, residents of SRO hotels are considered to be at risk of homelessness, as they typically experience multiple forms of vulnerability – in housing, employment, and in a social sense. These households are often characterised by strained finances due to precarious employment and minimal capacity to save. When they do have some savings, they are usually insufficient to cover rent for more than a short period of time if income is interrupted. Such households have been called 'precarious tenants' (Biaggio and Verón 2008), for whom homelessness is a recurring part of their housing trajectories.

The Housing Subsidy: A limited solution to a structural problem

The Housing Subsidy 690 programme is a more recent incarnation of a series of different policies that have been implemented in Buenos Aires over the past more than 30 years. These policies can be grouped into two large categories: 1) cash transfers to private entities and 2) conditional cash transfer programmes[6] to beneficiaries (Toscani 2021).

[2] These establishments are called SRO hotels because 'while presenting the façade of hotels and meeting the minimum requirements for official licensing, in practice they do not provide the services necessary for such a classification' (Rivas 1977: 30). In particular, they conceal what in actuality is a form of private renting. They form part of the sub-market of room rentals, which also includes *conventillos* and *inquilinatos* (Rivas 1977), local terms for tenement houses. Residing in an SRO hotel thus constitutes a hidden or informal form of renting in the city.

[3] Limited oversight by government authorities results in the tacit acceptance of precarious housing conditions. As they are mostly old buildings, they tend to have poor material conditions: narrow corridors, faulty or makeshift electrical wiring, walls with moisture damage, and inadequate bathroom facilities for the number of tenants. In addition, there is a noticeable lack of spaces for children to play or study. These conditions also contribute to physical and mental health problems.

[4] Although there are no official data on room prices, information provided by social workers who work with individuals living in SRO hotels indicates that the monthly cost for a single person can range from 250,000 to 380,000 Argentine pesos (approximately USD 224 to 313). For families, prices typically start at around 400,000 pesos (about USD 358), depending on household composition.

[5] These include the imposition of rules such as set hours for entering and leaving the hotel, scheduled times for using the kitchen and hot water, and bans on receiving visitors. Children are often prohibited from playing in courtyards, among other restrictions. In some cases, hotels do not even accept families with children.

[6] These refer to all mechanisms implemented by the state that transfer income to families or working-age individuals, conditional upon the fulfilment of various requirements – ranging from ensuring that children get regular health check-ups and attend school, to attending job training or performing certain types of work (Brown 2017).

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The first category of policies dates back to 1985, when agreements between city government officials and SRO hotel owners led to the passing of Decree 91/85, which established a programme in which the latter would provide temporary accommodation for people experiencing homelessness. In 1997, a new strategy was put into place with Decree 607/97, known as the *Hotelados* programme, which introduced new social policy interventions: overnight accommodation and transitional homes for individuals and temporary hotel stays (up to fifteen days) for families in establishments contracted by the Buenos Aires City Government (GCBA). Government action was limited to covering the cost of accommodation in these SRO hotels and did not extend to regulating the social or housing conditions faced by the programme's beneficiaries. This situation was repeatedly decried by social organisations, and a number of legal actions were initiated by the City Ombudsman's Office (Arcidiácono and Gamallo 2014). As a result, the programme was terminated in 2002 through Decree 895/02, which introduced a one-time housing subsidy for beneficiaries of the *Hotelados* programme.

This first incarnation of the housing subsidy marked a turning point towards a second group of programmes that would institutionalise a new approach to addressing the needs of people experiencing homelessness by means of Conditional Cash Transfer Programmes. In the context of Argentina's economic, political, and social crisis – characterised by worsening structural poverty and the impoverishment of middle-income sectors – the 'situation of homelessness' began to be understood as a persistent and structural problem in the city. In this regard, housing subsidies were granted for longer periods, and the regulations proposed progressive tools to resolve the housing crisis, though they were not effectively implemented in practice (Ávila and Pallares 2014).

Following these short-lived initiatives, Housing Subsidy 690 emerged. This programme was established by Decree 690/06, and its primary target population comprised families or individuals living on the street. The office charged with its implementation (currently the Ministry of Human Development and Habitat) was granted the discretion to include also people considered to be 'at risk of homelessness'. The programme provides a financial subsidy – currently of up to 225,000 Argentine pesos, approximately USD 200 – adjusted according to the size of the family/household and their socioeconomic characteristics. Beneficiaries must have resided in the city of Buenos Aires for two years or more and have an income below the poverty line. When applying, applicants must verify their homeless status through a social report prepared by a social worker from a public institution and submit numerous documents (an estimated budget for the place to be rented, a photocopy of identity documents, and proof of payment of municipal tax). After recent changes to the programme, the subsidy is now granted for a period of 12 months and may be renewed for an additional 6 months, contingent upon the presentation of various health certificates (nutritional check-ups for dependent children on a biweekly, bimonthly, or quarterly basis depending on age; pregnancy check-ups if applicable; or elderly health checks) and educational certificates (school attendance certificates every three months for minors under 18) in order to continue receiving the subsidy. Although this policy has existed for some time, official data on its implementation and evaluations of its effectiveness remain scarce.

Research on this programme has identified various concerns regarding its implementation. The government provides the housing subsidy only once the right to housing has already been jeopardised; that is, it is aimed at people already experiencing homelessness and is not accompanied by preventive measures. The response times of the Ministry of Human Development and Habitat (the agency responsible for the programme) do not match the urgency of people's needs, and the number of appointments available for applicants to apply does not meet existing demand. From early in the morning, long queues can be seen outside

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the Ministry, as doors close at 3 PM and no appointments are issued after that time. Even the necessary steps to initiate an application involve navigating multiple barriers to access: security personnel at the entrance, an initial window for document control, and then an interview with a social worker in a large room divided into numerous cubicles. At each stage, applicants are required to repeatedly prove their 'poverty' and their 'worthiness' to receive state support (Hopp and Lijterman 2018).

Once beneficiaries receive the subsidy, in most cases they use it to rent a room in an SRO hotel, given the difficulty of accessing housing on the formal rental market. However, more often than not the subsidy does not fully cover the cost of a room. Beneficiaries frequently report delays in receiving payments, which once again leaves them vulnerable to the threat of eviction by hotel managers (Toscani 2021). Another common issue is that room prices tend to rise more rapidly than the value of the subsidy. Moreover, whenever the subsidy is increased, the cost of rooms tends to rise significantly as well. This places intense financial pressure on recipients and subjects them to a constant state of uncertainty, as they do not know how long they will be able to stay in the hotel or when they might find themselves back on the street once again. In this regard, although the programme is ultimately a cash transfer scheme, economic vulnerability persists. Beneficiaries are generally unemployed or work in the informal sector and thus continue to rely on the same networks of social assistance that they used while living on the street, such as community kitchens (Rosa and Toscani 2020).

Finally, it is worth noting that once the subsidy period ends, beneficiaries lose the possibility of continuing to receive this government assistance. This has led beneficiaries to pursue another strategy: initiating a legal procedure (called an *amparo*) that would allow them to continue receiving the subsidy (Archidiácono and Gamallo 2014). This strategy is frequently suggested by professionals from the health centres that provide the social reports required for the subsidy, as well as by legal aid organisations and even hotel managers. What this effectively involves then is 'taking the state to court' for failing to uphold the right to housing guaranteed by Article 31 of the Constitution of the City of Buenos Aires. For many beneficiaries, this legal recourse amounts to the judicialisation of the right to housing (Marino 2015) and reveals the shortcomings of state intervention. However, it also subjects individuals to yet another round of bureaucracy: new procedures, timelines that do not align with the urgency of their situation, and repeated interviews where they must once again recount their circumstances.

Discussion and reflections

Over the twenty years since the Housing Subsidy 690 programme was introduced, homelessness has intensified, the conditions in SRO hotels have deteriorated, and the formal rental market has become increasingly difficult to access. Yet, the state's response has remained virtually unchanged. The longevity of this programme reflects a marked deepening of means testing in housing policy. Although the programme targets people experiencing homelessness, it does not reach everyone who needs it. At the same time, this intervention is generally insufficient to guarantee access to adequate housing because it fails to consider that most beneficiaries are only able to afford a room in an SRO hotel, given the rising costs and increasing barriers to entry to the formal rental market.

Based on our analysis of the logic underpinning the subsidy, it can be argued that it contributes to the formation of a specific sub-group of people who alternate between living on the streets and temporarily residing in SRO hotels. We call this group 'intermittent street dwellers', which refers to 'adults and/or families who live on the streets in a sporadic and

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erratic manner, alternating with the rental of a room in an SRO hotel located in the city' (Rosa and Tosani 2020: 10). This sub-group is produced (and reproduced) by the very logic of the programme, thanks to its lack of oversight regarding the housing conditions it tolerates and its failure to adapt to the real needs of its beneficiaries. These shortcomings result in delays, increased public expenditure, and heightened vulnerability for these populations. Furthermore, during the period in which the GCBA grants this subsidy, people are expected to find a housing solution, while are virtually no other policies in place that would help to provide that solution. Similarly, practically no support work is being done to assist the beneficiaries of this subsidy. In this regard, it is difficult for them to change their housing and economic situation during the 12 or 18 months in which they receive the subsidy. Therefore, we argue that this programme contributes to perpetuating (intermittent) homelessness rather than constructing a viable solution to this issue. Moreover, our analysis suggests that insufficient or inadequate local policy approaches can be understood as an underlying cause of the chronic nature of homelessness.

To improve the scope of this programme, it is necessary to evaluate and generate public information on the subsidies granted. It is important to know the number of beneficiaries, their socio-economic profile, their place of residence, any changes in housing they have undergone, their current conditions, and their needs beyond housing. It is important to coordinate with various employment and educational programmes, among others, to comprehensively address the situation in which these individuals and families find themselves. Although targeted policies for this vulnerable sector are necessary, their impact is limited by the existence of structural policies related to access to permanent housing. These policies, in turn, require more investment and budgetary resources.

The case of the Housing Subsidy 690 programme has broader implications for housing policies intended to address the needs of people experiencing homelessness Although this programme is intended to address housing issues, in practice it deepens the housing vulnerability of its target population, at most acting as a temporary palliative measure. For SRO hotel owners operating within this segment of the housing market, it guarantees a steady (and captive) clientele through the cash transfers provided by the local government to cover the cost of a room. Once they receive the subsidy, the owners of these properties often increase the rent, which results in continued economic and housing vulnerability. Thus, a subsidy that involves public-private coordination requires greater oversight and controls to prevent this speculation. In this sense, this policy reveals how a government programme can in effect camouflage forms of precarious housing and housing vulnerability under the guise of a policy to tackle homelessness. The logic of the subsidy, the informality of the single-room rental market, and the constant threat of eviction faced by tenants in SRO hotels collectively reproduce the precarious and nomadic housing conditions of this population. Despite a specific policy designed to prevent homelessness that has been in existence for over twenty years, beneficiaries remain permanently at risk of returning to life on the streets. Therefore, if access to housing is not part of a structural-political and economic agenda, both in the city of Buenos Aires and in other cities around the world, where all links in the chain are taken into account, this programme, like others of its kind, will continue to be merely palliative or, even more complexly, will reproduce inequalities.

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