

PANEL · PLURAL PROCESSES: HOUSING AS LIVED PRACTICE

Making Housing Systems See

Participatory knowledge infrastructures for inclusive social housing governance

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LISBOA INVISÍVEL

STARTING POINT

How can we create housing policies for people who are not represented in the data used to make policy decisions?

HOUSING AS LIVED PRACTICE

Housing systems count homes. People live housing in many other ways.

What systems are built to see

Housing availability, low housing costs and secure housing, all linked to a fixed address and sorted into administrative categories.

What people actually live

Informal, unstable and administratively unrecognised residential situations, with circuits of survival across the city.

What falls in between

Hidden forms of housing exclusion that policy cannot identify and therefore cannot answer.

Our argument: safer, more inclusive social housing depends on providing homes **and** on the capacity of housing systems to identify who needs them.



CONTEXT

Lisbon’s housing crisis, and a measurement gap

60% Rents increased by 60% between 2015 and 2023

45% of low -income households spend too much on housing, one of the highest rates in the EU

2030 EU target to end homelessness (Lisbon Declaration)

Yet Portugal has limited data, and many homeless people are missing from official counts.

Sources: FEANTSA (2023); OECD (2024) · Photo: housing march, Lisbon

CONCEPT

Epistemic housing exclusion

The structural absence of marginalised people from the data infrastructures through which housing, welfare and citizenship are governed.

Institutions
record and interpret personal data

→

Databases
store and connect the information collected

→

Public policies
make decisions based on the data available

What happens when someone disappears from this chain?

Invisibility is not only a social condition. It is produced through data infrastructures, classification systems and administrative technologies.

Builds on Fricker (2007), Spivak (1988), Bourgois et al. (2017)



THE RESEARCH

Lisboa Invisível

An exploratory project that combines collaborative ethnography, citizen -generated data and co -creation to turn experiences of housing insecurity into knowledge that can inform policy and practice.

10
co-creation workshops, April to July 2026

~100
participants living homelessness or severe housing precarity

Run with civil society organisations working in social and community intervention across Lisbon.

METHOD

A participatory knowledge infrastructure

The collaborative arrangements through which lived experience is produced, validated and made legible to institutions.

1

Produce

Participants shape the categories, narratives and priorities, and point to the territories that matter.

2

Validate

Interpretations return to participants, who confirm, reject or reformulate them before anything is published.

3

Make legible

Experience becomes structured, citizen - generated data in a public digital observatory, read alongside official data.

4

Inform

Institutions gain evidence that supports earlier identification of housing vulnerability.

It complements administrative systems; it does not replace them.

Redistribution of epistemic authority: participants co -author the categories through which their exclusion is made legible

FINDING 1 · ADMINISTRATIVE VISIBILITY

Without a stable address, access to rights stops

An address becomes a condition for:

- **Housing support**
- **Healthcare**
- **Employment**
- **Social protection**

Surveys such as EU-SILC also leave out people without stable residence, so the same gap runs through the statistics.

> “Without documents, nothing moves forward.”
> “Many rights depend on having an address.”

Workshop participants. One lost their ID while homeless, which temporarily blocked access to healthcare and administrative records.

Ten co-creation workshops, Lisbon, April –July 2026

FINDING 2 · INSTITUTIONAL FATIGUE

Circulating between services without resolution

“They send us from one place to another without helping.”

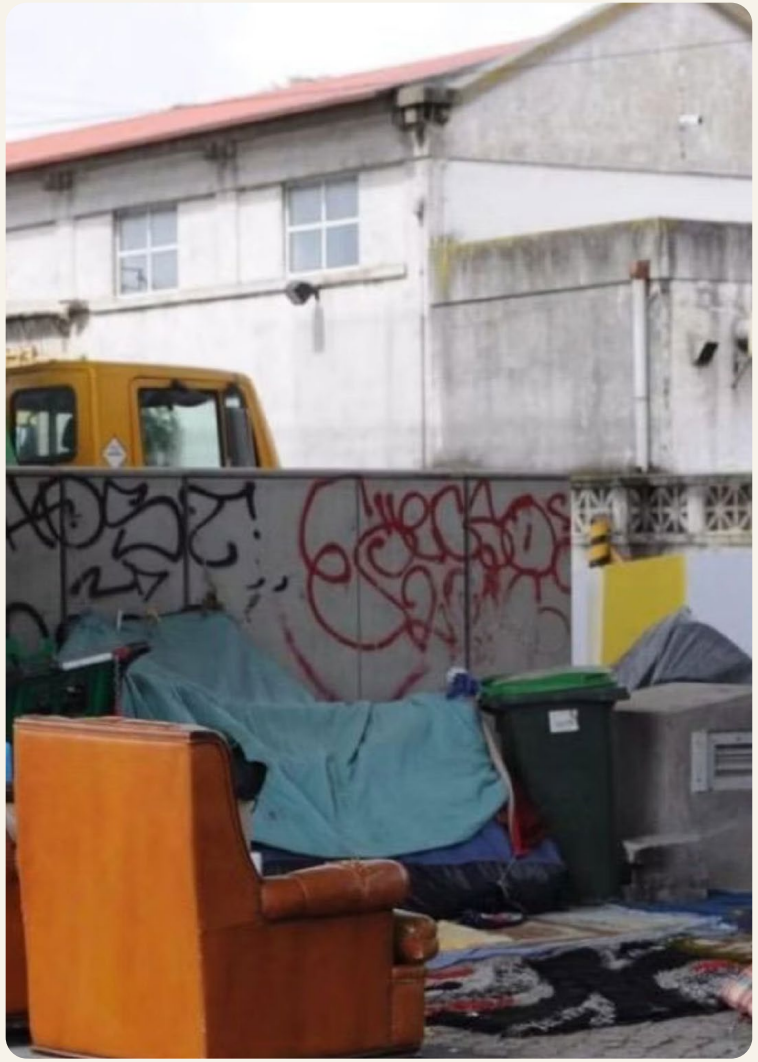
Workshop participants called this “dystonia”.

Reported in every workshop
Participants mapped institutions across five domains.

Some marked as “red zone”
Opaque, slow and ineffective.

Repetition without resolution
Staying in the system is itself invisible work.

Cf. Auyero (2012) on the politics of waiting; Lipsky (1980) on street -level bureaucracy



FINDING 3 · HOUSING AS LIVED IN THE CITY

Unequal geographies of visibility

Collective mapping, led by participants, showed that visibility is unequal distributed across Lisbon.

Territories of survival

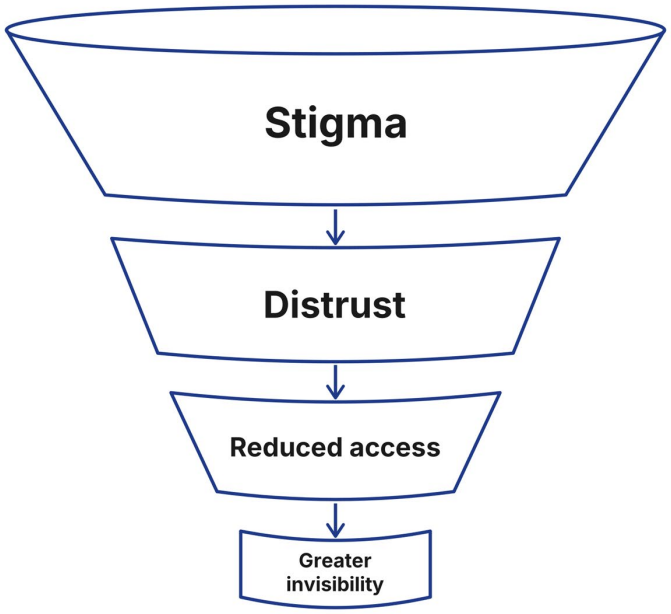
Care, solidarity, food, shelter and informal support networks.

Territories of exposure

First experiences of homelessness, violence, insecurity and dehumanising services.

Urban space works as an infrastructure of recognition, survival and political visibility.

Territories for fieldwork were identified by participants, not chosen by the research team



FINDING 4 · TRUST

Suspicion, pulling away and a self-reinforcing loop

Participants describe permanent suspicion and a presumption of fraud when they seek support.

Distrust reduces use of services. Lower use looks like disinterest from outside and makes people less visible.

Institutional trust is social infrastructure.

Women also reported greater exposure to violence, less visibility of their trajectories and heavier moral judgement.

Cf. Link & Phelan (2001); Corrigan & Watson (2002); Tyler (2020)

IMPLICATIONS

More adaptive and inclusive social housing governance

Count beyond the address

Add non-address-based methods to national and international housing surveys.

Reduce procedural burden

Create single entry points to social services, so people stop re-proving their situation.

Recognise local ecosystems

Design welfare around the territories of support that people already use.

Bring lived experience into decisions

Use validated, citizen-generated evidence to identify housing vulnerability earlier.

Housing exclusion calls for redistributing visibility and epistemic power, as well as material resources.

Preliminary, theory-informed findings from ongoing participatory action research

TO CLOSE

Who produces the data?
Who defines the categories?
Who can be counted?
Who can speak?

Housing systems can only respond to what they can see. Participatory knowledge infrastructures help them see.

Thank you · ana_luisa_melo@iscte-iul.pt
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