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### Navigating housing beyond arrival

*The trajectories of EU labour migrants in the Netherlands*

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## **Chapter 6.**

Conclusion

## Conclusion

Navigating housing is an important part of labour migrants' arrival experiences in a new country. As I have shown across the previous chapters, this search for home continues well beyond the moment of arrival. Not only house prices and availability shape labour migrants' housing strategies and experiences along the way, but also intermediary actors and institutions, desires and aspirations, as well as memories and traumatic experiences. Most research on labour migrant housing often paint a rather homogenous or static picture. This dissertation aimed to provide a rich, dynamic perspective by answering the following research question: ***How do the housing conditions of EU labour migrants change over time in diverse ways?***

To answer this question, I conducted a mixed-methods study of EU labour migrants' housing trajectories in the Netherlands. Specifically, I combined an analysis of population register data - using sequence, cluster, and regression techniques - with in-depth biographical interviews. I coupled life course studies on housing with migration infrastructure scholarship, cumulating in a conceptual framework consisting of three analytical lenses: temporality, relationality, and plurality. This conclusion synthesises the findings through these lenses, discussing the new insights they offer into migrant housing trajectories, as well as its limitations and areas for future research.

## Rethinking migrant housing conditions

### Temporal lens

This first analytical lens of this dissertation is temporality. This perspective was operationalised by combining both a chronological, longitudinal (Abbott, 1995; Clark et al., 2003; Coulter, 2023) and a lived and non-linear understanding of time (Hall, 2016, 2019; Hörschelmann, 2011; Van Lanen, 2022), contributing to the following three insights.

First, housing trajectories of EU labour migrants in the Netherlands reflect a spatial bifurcation. The longitudinal analysis of the geographical location of housing in the urban hierarchy (Chapter 2) showed that the majority continues to live in the same type of locality where they first arrived. Better-off migrants arrived and stayed predominantly in urban areas, while low-income, and flexibly employed migrants mostly settle in rural areas, resulting in a spatial divide. At the same time, the biographical interviews (Chapters 5 and 6) suggested that rural trajectories should not be regarded as static, as migrants frequently moved between different rural locales. Because the qualitative sample included too few rural trajectories

to substantiate such claims, this warrants further exploration. These findings complicate the more frequently documented patterns of rural- to-urban and urban migration (Burgess, 1925/1967; Konadu-Agyemang, 1999; Saunders, 2010) and call for a broader conceptualisation of migrant settlement that includes non-metropolitan trajectories.

Second, housing trajectories of EU migrants in the Netherlands are characterised by unprotected rental arrangements and precarious housing conditions that often persist over time. The quantitative analysis (Chapter 3) demonstrated that shared housing and informal registrations are common in the early years after arrival. For some migrants, these conditions serve as temporary footholds before emigration or as a steppingstone towards more secure housing, as often assumed by policymakers and migrants themselves (Ulcelușe et al., 2022; Lombard, 2023). However, for many they represent long-term housing arrangements. Moreover, shared and informal housing is often not registered and it is therefore likely that they are underrepresented in the quantitative data. In addition, the register data does not capture the lived experiences of these arrangements. For this reason, I also employed a qualitative approach. This revealed that even short-term precarious housing can have enduring effects (Chapter 5). Early experiences of severe housing stress or (the threat of) homelessness often leave emotional and embodied imprints, altering migrants' aspirations, strategies, and orientations towards the future. One of the respondents, for example, described how these experiences transformed him into a different person; once carefree and focused on living in the moment, he now seeks security and control and leaves nothing to fate. Taken together, these chapters show that rather than simply a brief transitional phase, precarious housing can have long-lasting material and psychological consequences.

Finally, the housing trajectories of EU labour migrants should be understood as multi-temporal, rather than solely chronological. The qualitative analysis (Chapter 5) examined how migrants themselves understand and navigate time. Past housing experiences influence how individuals interpret their present circumstances and imagine future possibilities. Moreover, current housing decisions are often informed by anticipated events - such as changes in employment, health, or family life - that extend beyond housing itself. For example, the decision to remain in the Netherlands and the aspiration to build a family life, rendered previously accepted precarious housing conditions increasingly difficult to endure. Migrants thus negotiate housing through non-linear temporalities that transcend simple past-to-present narratives.

### **Relational lens**

The second analytical lens employed in this dissertation is relationality, which focuses on how the housing trajectories of labour migrants are shaped through social relationships and interactions with intermediary actors. This lens, building on the migration infrastructure literature (Lindquist et al., 2012; Meeus et al., 2019), brings issues of power, dependency, and inequality to the forefront, which have been underexplored in residential mobility research (Coulter et al., 2016; Del Río et al., 2025).

This analysis led to two main insights. First, housing-migration infrastructures are important in mediating access to housing (Chapter 4). This is not only the case for informal housing, as is generally assumed, but also for migrants' access to formal housing pathways such as homeownership and social housing. This infrastructure includes profit-driven actors like landlords, housing brokers, employers, recruitment agencies, and mortgage advisors, as well as social ties, like friends, colleagues, and romantic partners. In these relationships, economic logics that centre around profit and social logics that centre around altruism and friendship often overlap and intertwine. For example, a migrant landlord regarded their tenants as friends, while tenants tried to foster a sense of goodwill from landlords to improve their chances of housing stability.

Secondly, migrants' engagement with housing-migration infrastructures is dynamic and extends far beyond the initial arrival phase. The biographical interviews (Chapter 4) revealed how some migrants may remain dependent on intermediaries for housing for prolonged periods, while others become intermediaries themselves; either as a facilitator, or by leveraging the infrastructure to their own financial benefit, for example by becoming a landlord to other Polish migrants. Migrants' positionality and agency within the infrastructure changed over time through developments such as deepened social ties, language acquisition, expanded knowledge of the housing system, and shifting structural conditions (e.g. housing market, employment market). This aligns with the quantitative study of arrival infrastructures (Chapter 2) which found that arrival infrastructures shape migrants' spatial mobilities, but that this operates differently for different groups of labour migrants.

### **Plural lens**

Lastly, to acknowledge the plurality of migrant housing experiences, this thesis aimed to move beyond distinctions based primarily on country of origin (Vertovec, 2007; Wimmer, 2007). This was done in two complementary ways. The quantitative analysis (Chapters 2 and 3) included migrants from all EU countries and incorporated a wide range of individual characteristics as variables to explore migrant plurality.

The qualitative analysis (Chapters 4 and 5) zoomed in on one ethnic group to further capture diverging experiences. As such, this mixed-method research is particularly useful for recognising the plurality of migrant experiences, as qualitative findings can challenge broad and sometimes oversimplified categorisations, while quantitative data can more easily include different countries of origin and is not hindered by aspects like language barriers. Combined, these findings show remarkable variation in housing trajectories amongst EU migrants.

Differences in housing conditions are already evident at the point of arrival; the lowest-income groups are more likely to settle in rural arrival areas and rely on shared and/or informal housing (Chapters 2 and 3). Over time, disparities in housing positions grow, rather than diminish. These divergent housing trajectories reflect broader social inequalities along factors like income, age, and household status. Long-term unprotected rental housing was more often experienced by migrants with lower or middle incomes, older age, and those who were single. The qualitative research added crucial depth to these patterns. For instance, being categorised as 'single' and 'older' in register data might conceal transnational family arrangements, such as a spouse and children still residing in Poland, whom the migrant supports financially. These transnational family practices made it harder to improve housing conditions in the Netherlands as savings were sent back. So, while the quantitative logistic regression analysis made clear that these are not isolated cases, the biographical interviews revealed lived experiences and responsibilities that remain unregistered in formal data. In addition, the qualitative analysis showed that not only housing conditions vary, but that seemingly similar housing conditions are experienced in very different ways. Past housing experiences and future aspirations shaped how individuals perceived and evaluated their current living situations. In particular, this dissertation showed that the experience of housing precarity is pervasive, yet not a uniform shared experience as it is fundamentally shaped by personal biographies.

## **Theoretical contributions**

These insights have both empirical and conceptual implications for the field of housing, particularly within life course research. Traditionally, this scholarship has conceptualised housing trajectories as progressive, with renting framed as a transitional phase on the way to homeownership (Clark et al., 2003; Kendig, 1984; Rossi, 1955). While recent work in the context of the ongoing housing affordability crises, focused especially on young adults (Arundel & Doling, 2017; Bobek et al., 2020; Howard et al., 2024; Lennartz et al., 2016), has challenged this model, the housing situations of other marginalised groups have received less attention. By focusing on EU labour migrants, this dissertation contributes empirically to a broader

understanding of housing trajectories. Additionally, informal registration was approached quantitatively by measuring registration at non-residential buildings, like holiday homes or industrial objects. This presents a unique fine-grained empirical picture on this type of arrangement that is rarely included in quantitative studies. The finding that as many as one in ten labour migrants are registered at such non-residential addresses suggests that the true scale of informal housing is much higher, as by definition informal housing is often *unregistered*.

The study of EU labour migrants also offers important conceptual contributions. First of all, it deepens our understanding of 'alternative' tenure forms for labour migrants, demonstrating that renting encompasses a wide variety of arrangements, including shared and informal tenures. By choosing to adopt a mixed-method approach, this thesis demonstrates that such housing conditions are not only common, but often persist in the long run for labour migrants. Moreover, it sheds light on the temporal experience of these housing states. It showed how precarious housing can leave lasting marks as it shapes how people perceive their current living situations and altering their strategies, aspirations, and ways of life over time. Housing precarity is thus not merely a temporary material condition, but a deeply felt and enduring experience that continues to shape lives even long after the circumstances have changed. The experience of housing precarity seeps into the body in unequal ways, depending on positionality and the life course context.

In addition, the case of EU labour migrants proved particularly well-suited to expand the understudied relational nature of residential mobility. Existing housing literature has focused primarily on the role of close personal ties, such as parents, children, or romantic partners. These social networks are often geographically distant for EU labour migrants, meaning they are especially reliant on a broader range of actors and institutions for their housing. This study has shown that such dependencies are both varied and dynamic. For some migrants, they facilitated greater agency and access to more secure housing. For others, they led to long-term entanglement in exploitative or problematic relationships with housing intermediaries. Relational dependencies in housing should thus be understood as shifting, negotiated, and shaped by both structural conditions and individual life courses.

Finally, the mixed-method design adopted in this dissertation brought together distinct understandings of time. Quantitative approaches typically rely on chronological conceptualisations of time and longitudinal analysis, emphasising housing events and transitions (Abbott, 1995; Clark et al., 2003; Coulter, 2023). In contrast, recent qualitative contributions to life course research have introduced more fluid temporalities, highlighting experiences of waiting, gradual change,

and non-sequential effects (Hall, 2016, 2019; Hörschelmann, 2011; Van Lanen, 2022). By drawing on both temporal ontologies, this dissertation fosters a rare dialogue between divergent strands of life course scholarship. This synthesis reveals how seemingly stable periods, such as years of shared rental housing, can involve subtle yet meaningful transformations, including increased personal autonomy or small changes in living arrangements that significantly shape the lived experience. Choosing one's own roommates, having outdoor space to grow flowers and vegetables, or even being allowed to paint the walls in a preferred colour were, for instance, experienced as important improvements. The mixed-methods design was crucial in revealing that housing trajectories are not governed by a single chronological logic. While sequence analysis captured ordered patterns over time, the qualitative interviews uncovered how individuals interpret and navigate these timelines differently, revealing layered temporalities that would remain invisible in a single-method study. Moreover, what is categorized as precarious in the quantitative analysis was not always experienced as such by migrants themselves. *Visa versa*, when material consequences improved, the experience of precarity did not necessarily disappear. This highlights that external housing conditions and the subjective experience of housing do not necessarily align. Such nuance would not be apparent in either the quantitative or qualitative data alone. Together, these insights challenge homogenising assumptions often embedded in migrant housing literature and underline the need for more flexible, temporally-sensitive frameworks to understand migrant housing trajectories.

While these findings are grounded in the specific case of EU labour migrants, they raise the broader question of whether the patterns observed are unique to migrants or might also be found among non-migrant households. A more comparative research design would be required to address this question in more depth, yet some conceptual reflections can already be offered. It is reasonable to assume that, to some extent, these findings are not exclusive to migrants and may also resonate with other groups facing insecure housing. Migrants' disproportionate exposure to precarity renders these dynamics particularly visible. The thesis therefore carries implications for housing studies beyond this specific case, underscoring the importance of attending to the multi-temporal and relational dimensions of housing.

## Limitations and future research

This thesis inevitably leaves out certain perspectives and raises questions that warrant further exploration. The first set of challenges and avenues for future research emerges from the temporal perspective. The retrospective nature of the research brought forward many longitudinal and dynamic processes and enabled respondents to reflect on housing conditions from a temporal safe distance. However, time also shapes experiences and alters memories. This is not necessarily problematic when the topic of interest is the lived experience of long-term housing trajectories, yet it does conceal emotions that are felt in the moment. In addition, by interviewing respondents retrospectively and specifically by including respondents who have remained in the Netherlands for a long time, this thesis misses the perspectives of people who left. Yet their stories also include important insights on the housing system, especially as some might have re-migrated precisely because of housing struggles. Future research could follow housing trajectories through multiple interviews over time incorporating experiences as they are lived, including those of migrants who returned to their country of origin or moved on to another country. Similarly, while the quantitative component of this study was limited to a six-year observation window to include recent migrant groups, extending this period, potentially spanning multiple generations (e.g. Van Gent and Zorlu, 2024) could provide a more comprehensive view of migrant housing trajectories and long-term change.

Another important theme for future research is the lived experience of labour migrants in rural and suburban areas. Quantitative findings from this study showed that migrants often remain, on the long-term, in non-metropolitan areas with fewer and less diverse resources. The qualitative component focused on the Noord-Holland region, and although some respondents had experiences in more isolated locales, this was insufficient to discuss rural experiences in depth. Moreover, rurality and suburbanity were treated here as relatively homogeneous categories, whereas in reality they are not that clear-cut. Future research should explore differences between non-metropolitan areas in more detail, something which could also be pursued through quantitative methodologies. In this thesis, I aimed for using a quantitative approach to arrival infrastructures, which yielded promising results but calls for further in-depth analysis. Additional elements of arrival infrastructure could be incorporated more precisely; for example, migrant facilities, local population composition, transportation options or the landlords of labour migrants. Finally, while I focused on the effects of arrival infrastructures on spatial mobility, it would be valuable to quantitatively examine their long-term effects on social mobility, including impacts on employment trajectories and income levels.

Finally, this thesis included a brief period of fieldwork in a homelessness shelter for EU migrants. Studying individuals in such extremely precarious conditions requires extended engagement to build trust and fully understand the complexities of their situations. For this reason, homelessness research is often treated as a separate field and rarely integrated into broader housing studies, which can render these experiences invisible or frame them as exceptional rather than as an integral part of the housing system. I have therefore chosen to include some of these experiences, while simultaneously acknowledging that EU migrants facing homelessness deserve far more in-depth investigation than was possible here. Future research, particularly long-term ethnographic work or detailed policy analysis, is needed to capture both their lived experiences and the structural vulnerabilities shaping them.

## **Policy implications**

Despite years of policy attention, the conditions of EU labour migrants in the Netherlands have seen little improvement, as evidenced by multiple government reports and academic research (Baalbergen, 2024; Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, 2023; Roemer, 2020; Timmerman, 2025). This thesis does not claim to have the silver bullet, but two important policy implications stem from its findings. First, EU labour migrants are not merely temporary workers. The assumption of temporariness in the Dutch debate around labour migrants has served to legitimise substandard housing arrangements (Baalbergen, 2024). It is also reflected in recent policy directions that emphasise short-term accommodation, such as large-scale 'hotels' located outside municipalities or on employers' premises (Manting et al., 2025). However, this study demonstrates that many EU labour migrants in fact settle long-term in the Netherlands, moving into the social housing sector, purchasing homes, or, in some cases, remaining in precarious housing for extended periods of time. Significantly, even short-term hardship can have enduring effects on housing trajectories and life chances. These findings therefore challenge the logic of temporary lodging as a sustainable housing solution. They call for serious reflection on migrants' access to the regular housing stock and participation beyond the work force. Labour migrants cannot simply be seen as cheap labour; many become long-term residents and citizens who need housing that supports not only material needs but also enables social participation and wellbeing.

Secondly, this dissertation and its findings reveal that the housing challenges faced by EU labour migrants go beyond the oft-cited role of mala fide employment agencies and are rooted in broader structural dynamics within the housing system and labour market. While the findings of this research show that the common practice of tying employment and housing together is indeed problematic and can result in long-term

dependency and vulnerability, it also found that housing instability persists even among migrants not working through such agencies. The extreme flexibilisation of employment, extending well beyond the realm of employment agencies, makes it difficult for labour migrants to secure stable contracts and sufficient income. Combined with an increasingly unaffordable housing market, this exacerbates housing insecurity and reinforces the role of intermediaries in accessing housing. In order to address EU labour migrant housing precarity, a comprehensive vision is thus required that also addresses broader housing accessibility and migrant labour market conditions.

This thesis has advanced a temporal and relational perspective on migrant housing, recognising diversity rather than assuming a single path. In doing so, it challenges teleological notions of the migrant housing career. Its findings reveal that housing trajectories can be progressive, stable, and at times even profitable, but also non-linear, messy, and persistently precarious. Such differences are not only material but also lived and felt; the same housing conditions can be experienced in profoundly different ways, depending on where one stands and aspires to go. Housing ties together past experiences, present circumstances, and imagined futures not yet lived. Crucially, these conditions are shaped not only by individual strategies, but also by the need to navigate an infrastructure built towards employment and temporariness yet rarely makes room for migrant housing stability.