

# Removing Local Nuisances, Arresting Masterless Strangers, and Granting ‘Nights on Request’

*The Policing of Vagrancy in Late Nineteenth-Century Antwerp and Brussels*

Margo De Koster and Ayfer Erkul\*

TSEG 20 (1): 121–152

DOI: 10.52024/tseg.13642

## Abstract

This article proposes a comparative study of everyday police controls of vagrants in two Belgian cities – a port city and a capital city – at the end of the nineteenth century, a period that was characterized by heightened mobility and social fear about the so-called ‘masterless poor’. The first section of the article looks at the annual arrest and prosecution rates for vagrancy in Antwerp and Brussels between 1880 and 1910, as well as at the daily instructions from the city authorities and police chiefs to their policemen on how to deal with vagrants and unwanted newcomers. Next, drawing on a selection of archival records of the central police divisions of Antwerp and Brussels from the 1880s, we examine if and how police controls focused on mobile groups when they dealt with vagrancy, and whether they answered the preoccupations of local authorities. In line with the findings of other scholars, we demonstrate that the notion of vagrancy was so elastic that, in both cities, many different groups were arrested and prosecuted for this offense. In addition to foreign and internal migrants, the Antwerp and Brussels police also apprehended local people, born in the city or in the surrounding province, who were not necessarily mobile and often known to them. To explain this phenomenon, we argue that, in practice, the policing of vagrancy was not only shaped by top-down repression, but also by bottom-up uses of the police by vulnerable individuals in need of shelter.

\* We would like to thank the reviewers of the journal and the members of the Social History Reading Group of Ghent University for their valuable comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this text.

## Introduction

This article proposes a comparative study of everyday police controls of vagrants in two Belgian cities – a port city and a capital city – at the end of the nineteenth century, a period that was characterized by heightened mobility and social fear about the so-called ‘masterless poor’. The link between the policing of vagrancy and the theme of migration and crime that is central to this issue is centuries-old: concerns about monitoring newcomers and the ‘masterless poor’ constituted an important driving force behind the development of police institutions from the end of the ancien régime onward. Migration control, as part of general order maintenance, was among the first tasks assigned to the ‘modern’ police – uniformed, paid, organized, and under bureaucratic state control.<sup>1</sup> In the course of the nineteenth century, heightened migration to Europe’s cities and elites’ fear of the growing classes of working poor prompted both states and cities to introduce new anti-vagrancy laws and expand police powers to enforce them.<sup>2</sup> In this article, we focus on how the Antwerp and Brussels police translated these concerns and new laws into practice, because, as Paul Lawrence puts it in his study of the nineteenth-century Paris police, ‘they did not always enforce the existing legislation as its originators intended’.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the interventions of these ‘street-level bureaucrats’ often failed to meet the official goals and instructions, because of resource issues, diverging priorities of police chiefs, and all sorts of unexpected events on the ground, such as hostile reactions by citizens.<sup>4</sup>

1 Marie-Claude Blanc-Chaléard, et al. (eds), *Police et migrants. France, 1667-1939* (Rennes 2001) 16-47; Clive Emsley, ‘The policeman as a worker. A comparative survey, c. 1800-1940’, *International Review of Social History* 45 (2000) 89-110; Leo Lucassen, ‘Eternal vagrants? State formation, migration, and travelling groups in Western Europe, 1350-1914’, in: Jan Lucassen and Leo Lucassen (eds), *Migration, migration history, history. Old paradigms and new perspectives* (Bern 1997) 225-252; Vincent Milliot, ‘Réformer les polices urbaines au siècle des Lumières. Le révélateur de la mobilité’, *Crime, Histoire & Sociétés* 10 (2006) 25-50.

2 Beate Althammer, ‘Transnational expert discourse on vagrancy around 1900’, in: Beate Althammer, Andreas Gestrich and Jens Gründler (eds), *The welfare state and the ‘deviant poor’ in Europe, 1870-1933* (Basingstoke 2014) 103-125; Margo De Koster and Herbert Reinke, ‘Policing minorities’, in: Anja Johansen and Paul Knepper (eds), *Oxford handbook of the history of crime and criminal justice in Europe and North America, 1750-1945* (Oxford 2016) 268-304.

3 Paul Lawrence, ‘The Paris police and the regulation of the poor in late nineteenth-century Paris’, in: *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* (2001) 183.

4 Michael Lipsky, *Street-level bureaucracy dilemmas of the individual in public services* (New York 1980) 13; Margo De Koster, ‘Routines et contraintes de la police urbaine à Anvers, 1890-1914’, in: Jean-Marc Berlière, et al. (eds), *Etre policier. Les métiers de police en Europe, XVIIIe-XXe siècle* (Rennes 2008) 345-362; David Churchill, *Crime control and everyday life in the Victorian City. The police and the public* (Oxford 2017).

Our examination of the everyday policing of vagrancy in Antwerp and Brussels in the late nineteenth century will start with a sketch of the context in which these police practices should be situated. The first section of the article looks at the annual arrest and prosecution rates for vagrancy in both cities between 1880 and 1910, as well as at the daily instructions from the city authorities and police chiefs to their policemen on how to deal with vagrants and unwanted newcomers. We will see that the intensity of police repression of vagrancy was many times higher in Brussels than in Antwerp, which can probably be explained by different immigration patterns and diverging local preoccupations and responses to migrants. Despite much more frequent police intervention against vagrancy in Brussels, however, it does not appear that the authorities targeted specific mobile groups.

Next, we zoom in on daily policing in Antwerp and Brussels in the 1880s to determine if and how police controls focused on mobile groups when they dealt with vagrancy and whether they answered the preoccupations of local authorities. In line with the findings of other scholars, we will demonstrate that the notion of vagrancy was so elastic that, in both cities, many different groups were arrested and prosecuted for this offense.<sup>5</sup> Next to foreign and internal migrants, the Antwerp and Brussels police also apprehended local people, born in the city or in the surrounding province, who were not necessarily mobile and were often known to them. To explain this we will argue that, in practice, the policing of vagrancy was not only shaped by top-down repression, but also by bottom-up uses of the police by vulnerable individuals in need of shelter. Similar strategic integration of formal control institutions into informal survival strategies has been observed among Belgian and Dutch vagrant colonies and at the Brussels police lockup, which had large numbers of voluntary admissions in the late nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Answering citizens' requests for assistance and engaging in

5 De Koster and Reinke, 'Policing minorities'; Anne Winter, 'Armut und Migration. Lokale und nationale Antworten in Westeuropa, 1700-1900', in: Sylvia Hahn, Nadja Lobner and Clemens Sedmak (eds), *Armut in Europa 1500-2000* (Vienna 2010) 35-56; Paul Lawrence, 'The police and vagrants in France and England during the nineteenth century', in: Livio Antonielli (ed.), *Polizia, ordine pubblico e crimine tra città e campagna. Un confronto comparativo. Stato, esercito controllo del territorio* (Manelli 2010) 49-60; Rik Vercammen and Vicky Vanruysseveldt, 'Van centraal beleid naar lokale praktijk. Het 'probleem' van landloperij en bedelarij in België (1890-1910)', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* 45 (2015) 121-161.

6 Vercammen and Vanruysseveldt, 'Van centraal beleid naar lokale praktijk', 144-145; Rik Vercammen and Anne Winter, 'Een dwalend bestaan? Mobiliteit bij veroordeelde landlopers in België (1870-1914/30)', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale en Economische Geschiedenis* 13 (2016) 71; Marian Weevers,

negotiations with marginalized groups is what Monkkonen has called the ‘social welfare role of the police’. Despite being less known, this activity has always been an important aspect of everyday police work in cities, even today.<sup>7</sup> As such police work often involved interactions with local poor or other residents who were known to the police, the question arises if the welfare role of the police was intended also for mobile, non-native groups.

## Sources

The source materials used for this research are diverse and rather fragmentary, requiring explanation. The first section of our text, which deals with the local implementation of vagrancy laws, draws on annual police statistics, published in the Antwerp and Brussels municipal bulletins, with data on all police reports (*processen-verbaal*) for offenses and breaches of municipal ordinances produced annually. Further, we make use of the ‘daily administrative orders’, registers with daily instructions from the chief police commissioner or the mayor to the different district police units, sometimes transmitting directives from the public prosecutor or the justice or interior ministers. The daily orders inform us, among other things, on planned identity controls in certain police districts, from routine checks requested by local authorities to occasional ‘crackdowns’ and other large-scale police operations. They also inform us about the regular surveillance that policemen had to provide at theaters and during fairs and public protests, for example,

Margo De Koster and Catrien C.J.H. Bijleveld, ‘Swept up from the streets or nowhere else to go? The journeys of Dutch female beggars and vagrants to the Oegstgeest State Labor Institution in the late nineteenth century’, *Journal of Social History* 46 (2012) 416-429. For the phenomenon of ‘confinement on request’ in the Brussels police prison in the 1880s, see Ayfer Erkul, ‘Stedelijke strijd tegen een ‘sociale plaag’. De lokale politie van Brussel en de controle van ‘marginale’ migranten aan het einde van de lange negentiende eeuw’, *Stadsgeschiedenis* 16 (2021) 57-65.

7 The term was coined by Eric H. Monkkonen, *Police in urban America, 1860-1920* (Cambridge 1981). For historical research highlighting the importance of this ‘welfare function’ in everyday police practice, see, for example: Jennifer Davis, ‘Urban policing and its objects. Comparative themes in England and France in the second half of the nineteenth century’, in: Clive Emsley and Barbara Weinberger (eds), *Policing Western Europe. Politics, professionalism, and public order, 1850-1940* (Westport 1991) 1-17; Quentin Deluermoz, *Policiers dans la ville. La construction d'un ordre public à Paris (1854-1914)* (Paris 2012). For reflections about its place in police work today, see Margo De Koster and Els Enhus, ‘Eeuwig ambigu en problematisch? Heden en verleden van de verhouding politie – bevolking’, in: Margo De Koster, Guus Meershoek and Paul Ponsaers (eds), *Herinneren en vergeten in de politie. Cahiers Politiestudies* 45 (Antwerpen 2017) 13-29.

and the many other tasks the municipal police had to carry out, from calming unruly horses in the street to inspecting the quality of milk, meat, and fruits. We analyzed the daily police orders issued in Brussels and in Antwerp in the years 1892 and 1913 to examine if, and how, official concerns about the monitoring of mobile groups were translated into instructions for policemen on the ground, and whether this changed over time.<sup>8</sup>

For the second and most important section, on daily police practices of arrest and detention of ‘vagrants’, we rely on records of the central divisions of the Antwerp and Brussels municipal police. The central division, led by the chief police commissioner, was typically located in the centre of the city and consisted of the main police station and headquarters, as well as the police lockup (called *Amigo* in Belgium).<sup>9</sup> The central division handled most of the arrests for vagrancy and mendicity, even if the arrest had been carried out by district police officers: as a rule, arrested vagrants were taken to the police headquarters where a police report was made and, if referred to the police court, they were held in the police lockup. Unfortunately, records of the central police divisions have been poorly conserved: only for a few years in the 1880s such records are available for both cities, and they are different in type. For Brussels, these are the registers of the police lockup (*registre d'écrou*). We have compiled a database with information on 11,542 entries by 7,494 individuals in the Brussels police lockup in 1880 (henceforth: database Brussels police lockup). To delineate a subset of ‘vagrants’, we selected all entries for vagrancy, mendicity, breach of banishment, and escape from a vagrancy colony, which resulted in a total number of 3,343 entries by 2,070 vagrants in 1880.<sup>10</sup> For Antwerp, as police lockup registers are not available

8 1892 and 1913 were selected because these are the only years for which registers of daily orders are available for both cities. However, the Antwerp sample for 1892 does not cover the entire year but rather the period from 1 July 1892 to 30 June 1893: City Archives Antwerp – Felixarchief (SAA), Modern Archief, Politie, Centraal Bureau, Dagorders, 1892-1893, MA 3329; 1913, MA 345/1. City Archives Brussels (SAB), Police, Ordres administratives, 1892 and 1913, uncatalogued, no series and document references available.

9 There is no clear explanation why the police prison was commonly – and in Brussels still is – called the *Amigo* (friend in Spanish). In Belgian historiography it is assumed that the term results from a translation error: the prison was called *Vrunte* during the Spanish occupation. The Spanish confused the word with *vriendt*, which meant friend in Dutch, and translated it into *Amigo* (Vanhoye 1983).

10 City Archives Brussels (SAB), Police, Amigo, Registre d'Ecrou, *Vagabonds et Mendians & Ivrognes, logés, prostituées*, uncatalogued, no series and document references available. The database for Brussels was compiled by Ayfer Erkul and history students of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, and subsequently checked and corrected by Margo De Koster.

we have used registers of police reports (*processen-verbaal*) from the central police division. We have compiled a database with information from the 1,114 reports made by the Antwerp central division in 1883, concerning 958 individuals (henceforth: database Antwerp police reports). For the subset of vagrants we selected the same offenses as for Brussels, which resulted in a total number of 564 police reports for vagrancy and related offenses, involving 503 individuals.<sup>11</sup>

The divergence of the source materials complicates comparison. Police reports measure vagrancy at a different level than police lockup registers: although both basically started with an arrest, not all arrests led to an official report and not all reports led to detention. To compare the intensity of vagrancy repression in the two cities, we therefore turn to the published police statistics. Qualitatively, however, although we are looking at two different levels of police control and populations of vagrants, it is possible to sketch and compare their profiles, as both types of police records provide the same basic biographical data on gender, age, place of birth and occupation. Regarding the age categories, we defined youngsters as those under 26 and elderly as those older than 45, based on the average ages of marriage and death in Belgium in the 1880s.<sup>12</sup> The origin of the persons concerned can be determined using their place of birth, but to measure their mobility or migratory status, these data should ideally be combined with the place of residence. Unfortunately, in the cases of vagrancy, this information is generally not recorded, apart from the standard formula 'without permanent residence'.<sup>13</sup> On the basis of occupational information it is possible –

11 City Archives Antwerp – Felixarchief (SAA), Modern Archief, Politie, Centraal Bureau, Processen-verbaal, MA 450.439. The database for Antwerp was compiled by M.A. students in History at Ghent University and subsequently checked and corrected by Margo De Koster.

12 Twenty-six was the average age of marriage for women in 1880 (30 for the men), and 47 was the average age of death in this period: Eric Vanhaute, 'Leven, wonen en werken in onzekere tijden. Patronen van bevolking en arbeid in de lange 19de eeuw', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 118 (2003) 153-178.

13 Based on the distance between place of birth and the Brussels or Antwerp main police station, it is possible to infer something on the level of mobility of the persons, but we cannot determine whether they were newcomers or on the move at the time of contact with the police, or rather 'established' immigrants who were long-term residents. Conversely, those born in the city could have moved away permanently or temporarily or travelled in between cities, returning to their hometown only occasionally. For the cases of mendicity, both place of birth and residence were recorded, and here we find several scenarios like those sketched above: for example, 40-year-old Victor, arrested in Brussels but born to the south of the city in the town of Nivelles, and residing in the Walloon city of Charleroi; 68-year-old Elisabeth, born in Amsterdam but registered as inhabitant of the Brussels municipality of Sint-Jans-Molenbeek (SAB, Registre d'Ecrou, *Vagabonds et Mendiants*, nrs 11463 and 11118 resp.). We can assume that we underestimate the level of (internal) mobility when looking at place of birth alone.



Illustration 1 Antwerp central police division station at the Suikerrui, ca. 1890  
(source: City Archives Antwerp, [www.felixarchief.be](http://www.felixarchief.be).)

albeit with caution – to infer something on the level of skill and social status of the persons in question using the HISCLASS classification. Of course, this analysis strongly depends on the value of reported occupations, which were self-reported and could refer to schooling or status rather than actual employment, as far as vagrants are concerned.<sup>14</sup>

14 On HISCLASS, see Marco H.D. van Leeuwen and Ineke Maas, *Hisclass: A Historical International Social Class Scheme* (Leuven 2011); Kees Mandemakers et al., *HSN standardized, HISCO-coded and classified occupational titles* (Amsterdam 2018).

## The repression of vagrancy from national objectives to realities in Antwerp and Brussels

Neither concerns about vagrancy nor police control of mobile groups were new in the nineteenth century. However, wars, economic crises, and accelerated proletarianization created large groups of mobile poor in Europe and the UK and generated, especially toward the end of the century, fear and heated calls for action by elites. Concerns about vagrancy and crime in this period intertwined with new ideas about crime and criminals that associated many different 'irregular' and illegal behaviors with (hereditary) moral and physical degeneracy.<sup>15</sup> In Belgium, as in other European countries, controlling, detecting, and disciplining materially or morally dangerous behavior by low-status newcomers became a central concern of national and urban migration policies. By 1880, the Belgian economy suffered a depression, which heightened concern over the influx of foreign 'vagrants' and other unwanted newcomers.<sup>16</sup> Urban municipal authorities increasingly issued local ordinances and regulations targeting poor migrants, including entry regulations and passport formalities at the city gates, as well as requirements for landlords and innkeepers to inform local authorities of the characteristics and previous residence of their lodgers. New anti-vagrancy laws criminalized not only the inability to prove stable attachment to a local community and failure to register as required by law, but also lack of a steady income. Further, the developing nation-state ordered that domestic vagrants were to be incarcerated and re-educated in state colonies, while foreign vagrants were to be expelled from the country. With the new Belgian anti-vagrancy law of 1891, the question about nationality was formally integrated in the interrogation protocol to be used by the police in cases of vagrancy.<sup>17</sup>

To define vagrancy, Belgium relied on Article 347 of the Penal Code until 1993. This was rooted in the Penal Code of the Napoleonic period (1810): 'those who have no permanent abode or means of support and who do not habitually exercise any trade or profession'.<sup>18</sup> This definition was similar to that in neighboring countries and shows much continuity

15 De Koster and Reinke, 'Policing minorities'; Lawrence, 'The police and vagrants in France and England'.

16 Vanhaute, 'Leven, wonen en werken in onzekere tijden'.

17 Vercammen and Van Ruyssveldt, 'Van centraal beleid naar lokale praktijk'.

18 'ceux qui n'ont ni domicile certain, ni moyens de subsistance et qui n'exercent habituellement ni métier, ni profession': *Code pénal*, 1867, art. 342-347.

with provisions from the ancien régime.<sup>19</sup> From 1848 onward, the young state of Belgium promulgated several laws based on this article in order to address the 'social plague of mendicity and vagrancy'. The law of 1848 stipulated that everyone arrested for vagrancy should be locked up in one of the provincial beggars' colonies. However, already in 1865, critiques circulated that the law was not efficient: it did not differentiate between the real, 'deserving' poor and the idle, 'undeserving' vagrants and beggars. A new law of 1866 tried to change this shortcoming by showing more tolerance toward acts of mendicity, especially when the elderly or children were involved, and by toughening the repression against able-bodied, 'professional beggars and vicious vagrants'.<sup>20</sup> In Belgium, a conviction for vagrancy or begging led, from 1866 onward, to an enforced stay in the specially founded *Rijksweldadigheidskolonies* (State Vagrancy Colonies), the minimum duration of which was raised to two years in 1891 by a new national anti-vagrancy law.<sup>21</sup>

As the growing nation-states often lacked the means and manpower for direct implementation, local authorities remained the main executors and local police the main enforcers of the newly devised national migration policies. It was no different in Belgium.<sup>22</sup> This situation raises the question which concerns and priorities shaped the everyday local enforcement of anti-vagrancy laws.<sup>23</sup> All across nineteenth-century Europe, vagrancy legislation was extremely vague and functioned, as Ocobock puts it, as a 'broad, overarching mechanism to control and punish a selective group of people'.<sup>24</sup> The vague legal

19 Lucassen, 'Eternal vagrants?'; De Koster and Reinke, 'Policing minorities'.

20 'Mendiants de profession et les vagabonds vicieux': Catharina Lis, Hugo Soly and Dirk Van Damme, *Op vrije voeten? Sociale politiek in West-Europa (1450-1914)* (Leuven 1985) 445.

21 Donald Weber, *Homo criminalis. Belgische parlementsleden over misdaad en strafrecht 1830-1940* (Brussel 1996) 130.

22 Frank Caestecker, *Alien policy in Belgium, 1840-1940. The creation of guest workers, Refugees and illegal aliens* (New York/ Oxford 2001); Ellen Debackere, *Welkom in Antwerpen? Het Antwerpse vreemdelingenbeleid, 1830-1880* (Leuven 2020); Delphine Diaz, 'Receiving, selecting, and rejecting foreign migrants and refugees in port cities. A comparison of Bordeaux and Marseille during the early nineteenth century', in: Hilde Greefs and Anne Winter (eds), *Migration policies and materialities of identification in European cities. Papers and gates, 1500-1930s* (New York/ London 2019) 153-174; Andreas Fahrmeier, 'Law and practice. Problems in researching the history of migration controls', in: A. Fahrmeier, O. Faron, and P. Weil (eds), *Migration control in the North Atlantic world. The evolution of state practices in Europe and the United States from the French Revolution to the Inter-War period* (Oxford/ New York 2005) 301-316; Gerard Noiriel, *La tyrannie du national. Le droit d'asile en Europe 1793-1993* (Paris 1991).

23 Debackere, *Welkom in Antwerpen?*

24 Paul Ocobock, 'Vagrancy and homelessness in global and historical perspective', in: A.L. Beier and Paul Ocobock (eds), *Cast out. Vagrancy and homelessness in global and historical perspective* (Athens 2008), 7.

definition of vagrancy left ample room for different interpretations according to distinct preoccupations, from urban authorities removing unwanted newcomers to destitute persons presenting themselves to the police or at the gates of the penal colonies.<sup>25</sup> Now we will investigate how all of this played out in the cities of Brussels and Antwerp.

As the capital of a highly urbanized and rapidly industrializing Belgium, Brussels is an extremely relevant case for examining police practices, particularly during a period of social upheaval. In the late nineteenth century, fear of crime and concerns about morally dangerous groups dominated local politics and media discourses in the capital.<sup>26</sup> Heightened immigration and the rapidly growing classes of urban working poor prompted the city and central authorities to tighten their grip on mobile populations and counter the ‘uncontrolled’ settlement of newcomers. The extent of mobility was unprecedented: at the end of the nineteenth century, Brussels experienced a yearly turnover equivalent to 10 percent of the population, with the city as an important place of arrival and departure in an extended transportation network.<sup>27</sup> The consecutive city mayors, already pressured by bourgeois elites and the central government to combat socio-political unrest and crime, were confronted with new phenomena such as the intensification of traffic and increasingly mobile patterns of crime. They invested considerably in the expansion and professionalization of the Brussels municipal police force: more manpower, better recruitment and schooling of police officers, modern uniforms and equipment, and specialized branches. By 1914, Brussels had the largest police corps per capita in Europe with one policeman for every 215 inhabitants.<sup>28</sup>

The city of Antwerp likewise represents an interesting case for this study. The booming port city was the largest and fastest growing city in the country and evolved from being lightly to rather heavily policed in this period. In the course of the nineteenth century, it transformed into a flourishing international seaport and trading center: in 1875, measured by the total ships’ tonnage entering the harbor, Antwerp ranked fourth in the world hierarchy, immediately after London, New York, and Liverpool.<sup>29</sup> As a port city, Antwerp was confronted with

25 Vercammen and Winter, ‘Een dwalend bestaan?’

26 Luc Keunings, *Des polices si tranquilles. Une histoire de l'appareil policier Belge au XIXe Siècle* (Louvain-la-Neuve 2009).

27 Anne Winter, *Migrants and urban change. Newcomers to Antwerp, 1760-1860* (London 2009).

28 Keunings, *Des polices si tranquilles*.

29 Karel Veraghtert, ‘From inland port to international port, 1790-1914’, in: Fernand Suykens (ed.), *Antwerp: A port for all seasons* (Deurne 1986) 279-422; P. Bairoch, ‘La Belgique dans le

distinct challenges and problems of crime and disorder, including concentrations of a rather 'rough' clientele in the vice district, large flows of people and goods to be monitored and secured, and numerous incidences of dockside theft or destruction of merchandise. This shaped specific police concerns and control in the harbor area and its immediate surroundings. In the other city districts, however, the police were mainly involved in the usual street- and neighborhood policing; mediating in fights and conflicts; arresting vagrants, drunks, prostitutes, and 'disorderly' persons; and performing a broad range of tasks of administrative control.<sup>30</sup>

Although the cities of Brussels and Antwerp experienced similar accelerated growth and a large influx of newcomers that generated new social problems and tensions, and both gave their police forces important new means and powers to intervene, they faced distinct socio-political challenges and had different economic needs. As a result, as Rik Vercammen and Vicky Vanruysseveldt have demonstrated, the intensity of vagrancy prosecution differed markedly between both cities. Figures of vagrancy convictions by Belgian police courts from the Belgian judicial statistics show that, in 1900, Brussels ranked first in the entire country with 6.8 convictions per 1,000 inhabitants, while Antwerp with only 0.5 convictions per 1,000 inhabitants was at the bottom.<sup>31</sup> The low conviction rate in Antwerp is in line with Anne Winter's suggestion that 'cities whose economic base relied heavily on immigrant labour, like the port of Antwerp, might have pursued a more liberal policy towards sojourners'. Employment in Brussels, on the contrary, focused largely on more skilled workers in small businesses in the craft sector, with important larger industrial enterprises in the suburbs.<sup>32</sup> As the capital and, in a certain sense, 'stage' of the Belgian state and main arena for socio-political struggle, the city of Brussels was much more inclined to remove unwanted newcomers: political activists whose presence might stir local subversion and/or trouble relations with other nations, on the one hand, and poor migrants who were liable

commerce international, 1830-1990', in: P. Klep and E. Van Cauwenberghe, *Entrepreneurship and the transformation of the economy (10th-20th centuries). Essays in Honour of Herman Van der Wee* (Leuven 1994) 648-649.

30 Margo De Koster and Pieter Leloup, 'Policer le port d'Anvers. Contrôles policiers publics et privés, entre complémentarité et rivalité, fin XIXe-début XXe siècle', in: Anne Conchon, Laurence Montel, Céline Regnard (eds), *Policer les mobilités. Europe – Etats-unis, XVIII-XXIe siècle* (Paris 2018) 103-128.

31 Vercammen and Vanruysseveldt, 'Van centraal beleid naar lokale praktijk', 131.

32 Sophie De Schaepdrijver, *Elites for the capital? Foreign migration to mid-nineteenth-century Brussels* (Amsterdam 1990).

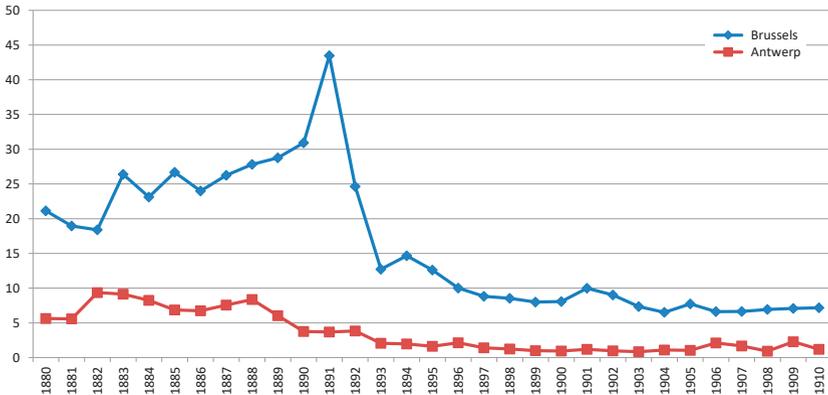


Figure 1: Number of police reports for vagrancy and/or mendicity per 1,000 inhabitants

Source: *Bulletin Communal de la ville de Bruxelles*, Brussels; *Verslag over de zakentoeestand in de stad Antwerpen*, Antwerp, 1880-1910.

to become a social burden and disrupted public decorum on the streets on the other.<sup>33</sup>

Unsurprisingly, as figure 1 shows, a similar quantitative gap between both cities can be observed in the police statistics regarding vagrancy or mendicity: throughout the entire period from 1880 to 1910, the Brussels police produced at least twice and up to ten times as many reports (*procès-verbaux*) per 1,000 inhabitants for these offenses than the police in Antwerp.

The curve for Brussels is very similar to the general picture of convictions for vagrancy in Belgium in this period.<sup>34</sup> From the 1880s onward, the number of police reports in Brussels rose sharply, reaching a peak of 43 reports per 1,000 inhabitants in 1891. As many persons were convicted several times per year, the extension of the period of detention in a vagrancy colony following the law of 1891 led to an instant and sharp decrease in the number of reports.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, this decrease was also due to attempts by the authorities of both cities to reduce the high maintenance costs they had to pay to the Colonies for the vagrants from their municipalities.<sup>36</sup> This explains why, in Antwerp,

33 Keunings, *Des polices si tranquilles*.

34 Vercammen and Vanruysseveldt, 'Van centraal beleid naar lokale praktijk', 132, table 1.

35 Although the number of police reports and convictions dropped after 1891, a high occupancy rate of more than 5,000 colonists on average was maintained in the vagrancy colonies until the early 1910s: Vercammen and Winter, 'Een dwalend bestaan?', 56.

36 Vercammen and Vanruysseveldt, 'Van centraal beleid naar lokale praktijk'.

where the figures never reached high levels, the number of police reports started to decline already from 1889 onward, to one report per 1,000 inhabitants in the 1900s, whereas Brussels stagnated around on average seven reports per 1,000 inhabitants in the same period.

Considering that, in 1892, the Brussels police still produced a high number of reports for vagrancy (25 per 1,000 inhabitants), we were surprised to find that of the 500 daily administrative police orders issued in the capital that year, only ten concerned vagrancy or mendicity.<sup>37</sup> Three of these orders involved the communication of legal rules by the public prosecutor or the justice minister, transmitted to the police force by the mayor of Brussels – Charles Buisson at that time – or the chief police commissioner. For example, following the passage of the new national anti-vagrancy law of 1891, the Brussels public prosecutor asked Mayor Buisson to communicate the most important articles of this law to his police. Article 10, for instance, which stated that foreigners arrested for vagrancy should be removed immediately from Belgian territory, as well as Article 14, stipulating that when arrested criminals were found in a state of vagrancy, it should be noted clearly in the police report and the case should be sent through for prosecution right away. On 1 April 1892, another daily order from the Brussels chief police commissioner to all district police commissioners instructed them to raid lodging houses and other suspect places in the entire Brussels region, to round up all vagrants and catch wanted fugitive suspects. Special attention had to be paid by the police to alien suspects in these dwellings.<sup>38</sup> Three other orders contained instructions for writing up police reports after the arrest of vagrants, another three instructed police officers to lock up convicts for vagrancy in the police lockup awaiting transport to the colonies, and a final order congratulated the police officers who caught a thief who was also a known vagrant.

This low number of Brussels daily orders concerning vagrancy in 1892 does not necessarily mean that the issue did not really preoccupy Brussels authorities and police chiefs but, rather, that it was not addressed by a separate set of targeted police operations. Indeed, it can be assumed that the policing of vagrancy in Brussels was simply part of the broader police activity of public order maintenance. Maintaining order in the capital was Mayor Buisson's principal concern, as social and

<sup>37</sup> These are the daily service orders from the chief police commissioner and the mayor, without the daily statements of disappearance of individuals, lost objects, and unidentified bodies that also appeared in these registers.

<sup>38</sup> SAB, Ordres administratives, order of 1 April 1892, no. 151.

political unrest grew and Brussels became the site of all the major socio-political protests in the country.<sup>39</sup> Several of the daily orders concerned order maintenance strategies, aimed in the first place at the protection of a 'neutral zone' in the first and fourth districts, where the Belgian parliament, the Royal Palace and the main theaters were located. When the newspaper *Le Peuple* announced four large protests for the month of November 1892, Buls explained in a daily order that it was not his intention to take special police measures for every large demonstration taking place in the city, if animosities around the Royal Palace and the parliament could be prevented.<sup>40</sup>

More than twenty years later, in 1913, preoccupation with migrant and mobile populations seems to have vanished almost completely from the Brussels daily police orders. Only four out of 427 orders concerned vagrants and beggars; they communicated short messages about the interpretation of laws from the public prosecutor or the minister of justice. Again, many daily orders were issued to ensure surveillance and order maintenance at large public manifestations, and apart from that, most Brussels police orders in both years concerned the deployment of police guards during theater performances, at diners and festivities in the City Hall or other venues, and around the parliament, monuments, the Royal Palace, and the National Bank.<sup>41</sup>

In Antwerp as well, both in 1892 and in 1913, only a small minority of daily police orders concerned newcomers or vagrants. However – and surprisingly given the much lower numbers of police reports written up in the port city – their relative share (19 out of 352 orders in 1892; 15 out of 168 in 1913) was higher than in Brussels (ten out of 500 in 1892; four out of 427 in 1913).<sup>42</sup> Half of these police orders concerned administrative instructions regarding residency permits, keeping statistics, which forms to use, and so forth. The other half contained more specific indications for the monitoring of groups considered as 'unruly' or 'suspect', such as gypsies, itinerant artists, sailors, foreign illegal prostitutes, and vagrants who had returned to the city after having been expelled and who thereby committed the offense of 'breach of banishment'. Most of the other daily orders issued in Antwerp concerned traffic, the harbor and the docks, roads, and railroads, which does not come as a surprise given the rapid development of the port

39 Keunings, *Des polices si tranquilles*.

40 SAB, Ordres administratives, order of 12 November 1892, no. 2183.

41 SAB, Ordres administratives, 1913.

42 SAA, Dagorders, 1892, MA 3329; 1913, MA 345/1.



- Mais enfin, robuste comme vous Pêles, vous pourriez travailler.
- Mais Monsieur je suis emputé des deux bras.
- Ah ! oui, je comprends, c'est ce qui vous oblige à tendre la main.

*Illustration 2 'Oh come on, tough as you are, you could work! / But Sir, I've had both arms amputated / Ah! Yes, I understand, that's why you are forced to hold your hand.'*  
(source: Le Pèle-Mêle (French satirical weekly magazine), 2 November 1895.)

and the high circulation of persons and goods in the city. By 1913, the Antwerp daily police orders show greater concern with the policing of public entertainment and festivities, bars and brothels, alcohol consumption, and so on, but securing the port and docks clearly remained the top priority of the Antwerp authorities.<sup>43</sup>

## Profiles of vagrants and beggars in Antwerp and Brussels in the 1880s

One initial, important observation to make concerning the persons charged with vagrancy or begging by the Antwerp and Brussels central police divisions is that most of them did not fit the stereotype of the criminal vagrant. Only one in ten vagrants imprisoned in Brussels in 1880 had also committed another crime, either theft or resisting arrest: they had given a false name or verbally or physically assaulted the police officer. In Antwerp, this 'criminal' group was even smaller, and was limited to a few individuals.

Female vagrants made up a minority, especially in Antwerp, where only 7 percent of arrested vagrants in 1883 were women, while in Brussels their relative share was 17 percent in 1880. Their low numbers can be explained in part by the fact that young, unaccompanied women who were found on the streets by the police in the evenings or at night, were likely to be arrested for prostitution and recorded as *lichtmeisje* in the police records.<sup>44</sup> This classification may have played a role in Antwerp, in particular, where the rapid expansion of the port fueled the demand for sexual services, attracting growing numbers of single foreign women, who were subjected to increasing police control.<sup>45</sup> Equally important, in both cities, is that single young women on the move had access to a relatively large network of private places of shelter, such as philanthropic almshouses, as well as commercial placement

43 SAA, Dagorders, 1913, MA 345/1.

44 De Koster, 'Girls' journeys to the juvenile court'; Mary Gibson, *Prostitution and the state in Italy, 1860-1915* (Ohio 2000); Tamara Myers, *Caught. Montreal's modern girls and the law, 1869-1945* (Toronto 2006); Alana Piper, "A growing vice". The truth about Brisbane girls and drunkenness in the early twentieth century', *Journal of Australian Studies* 34 (2010) 485-497.

45 Hilde Greefs and Anne Winter, 'Alone and far from home. Gender and migration trajectories of single foreign newcomers to Antwerp, 1850-1880', *Journal of Urban History* 42 (2016) 61-80; Margo De Koster, 'Prostitution in Antwerp', in: M. Garcia Rodriguez, J.-M. Chaumont and P. Servais (eds), *Trafficking in women 1924-1926. The Paul McKinsie Reports for the League of Nations* (Geneva 2017) vol. II, 13-19.

agencies for domestic servants, for example, especially in the capital where the demand for live-in servants was high.<sup>46</sup> Elderly destitute women as well, as Vercauteren shows in his study on care for the elderly in nineteenth-century Antwerp, were more likely to be admitted to the city's indigent shelters (*burgerlijke godshuizen*) than their male counterparts.<sup>47</sup>

Overall, however, places for elderly persons in city shelters were limited, couples were often not admitted, and those who became ill, were forced to leave. As a result, the most destitute and vulnerable elderly had to seek shelter and support elsewhere and turned to the Sint-Elisabeth Hospital in Antwerp or the Sint-Jan Hospital in Brussels, for example. Poor relief was generally limited to persons older than 70, a very high age given that the average age of death was 46 in the 1880s. Below that age, poor relief administrations expected families to take care of their elderly members, but often their children and relatives were destitute themselves and lacked the means to do so.<sup>48</sup> For the elderly and, in particular, for older men, things could thus get very difficult if they were in their fifties or sixties and no longer able to work.

Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that among both female and male vagrants, and in both cities, elderly persons were overrepresented, as shown in table 1: persons over 55 made up 15 percent among men and up to 20 percent among women, whereas the share of this age group within the overall Belgian population was 13 percent in this period.<sup>49</sup> If we also include the 46- to 54-year-olds, more than one in three vagrants were older. Their vulnerability for arrest almost certainly resulted from a lack of families and other support networks to care for them. Young men and women in their late teens and twenties were also well represented among the vagrants, however, roughly in the same proportion as within the entire Belgian population (27 percent of 16- to 30-year-olds in 1900).<sup>50</sup> A noticeable difference between the cities in the age structure of the vagrants is a significant presence of children

46 On the network of commercial and philanthropic intermediaries for the placement of foreign domestic servants in Antwerp and Brussels in the period between 1850 and 1910, see Thomas Verbruggen, *Maids on the move. The migration of foreign domestic servants to Antwerp and Brussels (1850-1910)* (PhD dissertation, History, University of Antwerp) chapter 5, 161-191.

47 Gregory Vercauteren, 'De zorg voor de behoeftige ouderen te Antwerpen in de negentiende eeuw', *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis* XXXI (2001) 253-281.

48 *Ibid.*, 253-281; J.-F. Vander Rest, *Aperçu historique sur les établissements de bienfaisance de la ville de Bruxelles* (Brussels 1860) 37-38.

49 *Recensement général de la population* (Brussels 1900) LXIII.

50 *Ibid.*, LXIV.

**Table 1 Age structure of male and female registered vagrants in Antwerp and Brussels**

	Antwerp		Brussels	
	1883		1880	
	M	F	M	F
	(n=463)	(n=35)	(n=1684)	(n=358)
≤ 15	0%	0	9%	11%
16-20	8%	17%	11%	14%
21-25	12%	11%	10%	7%
26-30	10%	3%	11%	7%
31-35	12%	9%	9%	8%
36-40	14%	11%	9%	8%
41-45	10%	14%	9%	8%
46-50	11%	9%	9%	9%
51-55	8%	6%	9%	10%
56-60	7%	14%	5%	6%
61-65	6%	6%	5%	5%
> 65	2%	0	4%	7%

Sources: databases of the Brussels police lockup and of Antwerp police reports

\*n=known ages

younger than 16 in Brussels, whereas this age group was absent in Antwerp. Many of these children in Brussels had been arrested for begging, as we will discuss in more detail below.

In terms of origin, as table 2 indicates, one initial similarity between the Antwerp and Brussels vagrants was the relatively small proportion of foreigners: it varied between 11 percent among men and 16 percent among women. Almost all came from neighboring countries, mostly Germany or the Netherlands. It is not particularly surprising that they feature less in the police records, because other studies have shown that, in practice, foreigners were often expelled without an official police report or a royal decree.<sup>51</sup> The fact that foreign vagrants were

<sup>51</sup> As Andreas Fahrmeier has concluded on the basis of several case studies in Europe and the United States from the French Revolution to the interwar period: 'From the point of view of the police, most of the aims laid down in immigration regulations, e.g. keeping foreigners from entering certain professions, from engaging in political activity, or from embarking on dubious business ventures, could all be resolved by issuing expulsion orders or by refusing to extend residence permits': Fahrmeier, 'Law

**Table 2 Places of birth of male and female vagrants registered in Antwerp and Brussels**

	Antwerp		Brussels	
	1883		1880	
	M	F	M	F
	(n=460)	(n=35)	(n=1618)	(n=345)
Locally born	25%	23%	41%	47%
Within the province	17%	17%	13%	12%
Neighboring province	35%	37%	25%	14%
Belgium other	11%	9%	10%	11%
Neighboring country	11%	14%	9%	11%
Foreign country other	1%	0	2%	5%

Sources: databases of the Brussels police lockup and of Antwerp police reports

\*n=known places of origin

nevertheless detained on Belgian territory indicates that it was not always possible to bring them to the border immediately. Several other elements played a role in this, not least practical objections. To deport someone from the country, permission was often needed from the presumed country of origin in the form of, for example, a passport that had to be applied for. This process took time, and meanwhile the person concerned had to be accommodated somewhere, which explains why they ended up with the police or in Belgian vagrancy colonies.<sup>52</sup>

Internal migrants constituted the most important mobile group among the vagrants. In Antwerp, persons born in neighbouring provinces or other parts of the country made up the single largest group (46 percent), both among men and women; in Brussels, they represented a quarter of the female vagrants and one third of the male vagrants. This situation is consistent with what we know about global migration flows during this period: the urban agglomerations of Brussels and Antwerp experienced a net inflow, to the detriment of the impoverished provinces of East Flanders and West Flanders. In addition, many also migrated over shorter distances, moving back and forth between cities and the countryside, as well as between different cities.<sup>53</sup>

and practice', 305. See also Debackere, *Welkom in Antwerpen?*; Vercammen and Vanruysseveldt, 'Van centraal beleid tot lokale praktijk', 135-136.

52 Vercammen and Winter, 'Een dwalend bestaan?', 76.

53 Hilde Greefs and Anne Winter, 'Cities in motion. Mobility, migration selectivity and demographic

Another major group, however – around 40 percent of vagrants in Antwerp and the majority in Brussels (54 percent of men; 59 percent of women) – was not necessarily mobile: it consisted of persons born in the city or its surroundings. Since we only know their place of birth and not their place of residence, we obviously cannot rule out the possibility that they moved to other places earlier in their lives. The fact that they were charged with vagrancy in their native region indicates, however, that their spatial mobility at the time was non-existent or very limited and that at least they were not foreign newcomers in the cities where they were arrested. This remarkable presence of locally born among the vagrants requires explanation; we will get back to this below.

Given the differences in the labour market structure of Antwerp and Brussels that we mentioned earlier – such as important employment opportunities for unskilled workers in the port city and the absence of such positions in the capital – it is slightly surprising that the occupational profiles of the vagrants are largely similar for both cities. The large majority, around eight in ten vagrants, were low- or unskilled laborers from the lower segments of the working classes. Lacking the skills to meet the qualifications demanded on the urban labor market, they could only occasionally secure small jobs for meager wages, leaving them in permanent, structural poverty. Both in Antwerp and in Brussels, one in three vagrants was registered either as ‘employed by the day’ (*journalier*) or simply ‘laborer’.<sup>54</sup> Many others also reported casual or seasonal trades, for example: in construction (19 percent in Antwerp, 26 percent in Brussels), the clothing sector (10 percent in Antwerp, 7 percent in Brussels), and transport (6 percent in Antwerp, 2 percent in Brussels). Trades that necessarily involved spatial mobility, such as servant, sailor, or itinerant artist, were less common, accounting for only 10 percent in Antwerp and 9 percent in Brussels.

A small percentage (15 percent in Antwerp, 12 percent in Brussels) were skilled manual laborers, master artisans, or specialized workers. Additionally, a few individuals reported non-manual trades that belonged to the higher middle class, such as merchants or commissioners, or to the lower middle classes, such as commercial

change in Belgian cities, 1846-1910’, in: Bruno Blondé et al (eds), *Inequality and the city in the Low Countries (1200-2020)* (Turnhout 2020) 88-90.

54 In Antwerp in particular, many men were registered as ‘labourer’, which could imply more stable employment as factory worker, for example, but as this was a period of rapid port traffic and, as a consequence, rising employment opportunities in the port, this probably referred to the myriad of casual occupations in the periphery of the docks, in warehouse work or transport: Greefs and Winter, ‘Cities in motion’, 95.

clerks or shop assistants. In Antwerp, these middle classes were better represented (4 percent) than in Brussels (2 percent) and almost exclusively of foreign origin, mostly German, in line with global immigration patterns in this period.<sup>55</sup> Finally, among the female vagrants, the middle classes and skilled manual laborers were entirely absent: all the women arrested or imprisoned reported low- or unskilled occupations such as domestic servant, dressmaker, cleaner, or waitress.

*Female beggars and vagrants*

In Brussels, a third of the female vagrants were charged with begging, whereas it was rarely the case for men. In Antwerp, only one police report was written up for begging, and it concerned a German man (we will get back to it below). The oldest woman imprisoned for begging in Brussels in 1880 was 83-year-old Elisabeth, born in Brussels and residing in the heart of the poor Marollen district.<sup>56</sup> In addition to elderly women lacking support networks – even though young women often had access to alternative places of shelter as we mentioned earlier – the largest single group of female vagrants in both cities was between 16 and 21 years old. Many were domestic servants who had just lost their jobs and needed a roof over their heads. These cases show that many single young women crossed the line between (prosecution for) vagrancy and prostitution.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, they were vulnerable to arrest as they were at the center of moral panics over white slavery in this period, which portrayed these girls as easy prey for male predators in the outside world. A crucial feature of these concerns about the possible victimization of young, single females on the move is that they were coupled with anxieties about the threats posed by ‘masterless’ young men and ‘loose’ migrant girls, who were viewed as extremely prone to illegality and crime – the boys ending up as thieves, the girls as prostitutes.<sup>58</sup>

25-year-old Marie-Claire, an unemployed maid born in Antwerp, was arrested in April 1883, when she left a soldiers’ guard post at five o’clock in the morning. After being questioned by the officer, who clearly suspected her of prostitution, she confessed that she had spent the night there. This confession was confirmed by a soldier who stated

55 Greefs and Winter, ‘Cities in motion’, 94–96.

56 SAB, Police, Amigo, Registre d’Erou, *Vagabondage et mendicité*, nr. 480.

57 De Koster, ‘Girls’ journeys to the juvenile court’.

58 Margo De Koster, ‘Girls’ journeys to the juvenile court, Antwerp, 1912–1933’, in: Jean Trepanier and Xavier Rousseaux (eds), *Youth and justice in western states, 1815–1950. From punishment to welfare* (New York 2018) 279–310.

that Marie-Claire had arrived around 11 p.m. and asked if she could 'warm up for a few moments' and left at about midnight. 'At about one o'clock in the night, this same woman came back to the guard and stayed there until five in the morning. However, I must tell you that no one used her.' Marie-Claire declared that she had come from Brussels the previous evening to look for work, but had not found any and had therefore asked for shelter at the guard post.<sup>59</sup> In August 1883, she was arrested again for vagrancy after being found on the street at night, and this time the police recorded *lichtmeisje* (prostitute) as her profession.<sup>60</sup> Exactly the same happened in Brussels in August 1880 for 22-year-old Josephine, born in Brussels and imprisoned for vagrancy, but registered as a prostitute.<sup>61</sup> These cases, along with the low numbers of female vagrants in general, were in line with the dominant image of vagrancy as a male problem and prostitution as a female problem.

*Young men on the move and stuck in between jobs*

In both cities, the mobile groups of internal and foreign migrants who got arrested for vagrancy consisted mainly of males under 40 who were on the move looking for work. Some of the younger laborers compensated their lack of a steady income by committing crimes: in December 1883, three textile workers from Ghent, all in their twenties, who had escaped from the vagrancy colony of Hoogstraten the day before, were arrested for vagrancy and attempted burglary. They had smashed the window of a watch shop late in the evening with a piece of iron but were spotted and caught with the help of an Antwerp coachman who was parked nearby.<sup>62</sup>

Others were skilled laborers or belonged to the lower middle classes: the youngest came from neighboring provinces or the Walloon industrial region, whereas among the 26- to 40-year-olds there was a significant presence of foreigners.<sup>63</sup> 25-year-old Karel, for instance, a carpenter from Sint-Niklaas, was arrested twice by the Antwerp police in 1883, just like 27-year-old Arthur, a French commercial clerk coming from the city of Metz in northeastern France.<sup>64,65</sup> For these young male

59 SAA, Politie, Centraal Bureau, Processen-verbaal, 1883, nr. 502.

60 SAA, Politie, Centraal Bureau, Processen-verbaal, 1883, nr. 1880.

61 SAB, Police, Amigo, Registre d'Ecrou, 1880, *Vagabondage et mendicité*, nr. 1952.

62 SAA, Politie, Centraal Bureau, Processen-verbaal, 1883, nrs 1368, 1369 and 1370.

63 Most foreign men arriving in Antwerp in the 1880s were well-off newcomers and more specialized and skilled middle groups: Greefs and Winter, 'Alone and far from home', 61-80.

64 SAA, Politie, Centraal Bureau, Processen-verbaal, 1883, nrs 447 and 1281.

65 SAA, Politie, Centraal Bureau, Processen-verbaal, 1883, nrs 1284 and 1285.

labor migrants, the (unsuccessful) search for work and the mobility – though usually limited to migration between neighboring towns and provinces – and visibility that went with it appear to have spurred their arrest as vagrants. The fact that several had skilled and specialized occupations meant that they did not fit the stereotype of the ragged and work-shy tramp but, rather, that of the ‘masterless stranger’. Some got completely stuck ‘in limbo’ between two jobs but had no intention of asking the police for help. In 1883, a 29-year-old gardener of German descent was found in Antwerp, according to the police report,

listening at the doors of several houses ... Being on watch in these streets, we noticed all these movements, which appeared to us most suspicious ... He declared that he had been a deserter for four years from the German army, that he was sometimes in Brussels, sometimes in Antwerp, that he had no permanent abode, that he had no money, no work, and that he lived by begging ... During the interrogation, this defendant answered one of the questions of the chief police commissioner with the following crude expression: ‘Mister Police Commissioner, you can kiss my ...!’<sup>66</sup>

*Sedentary vagrants: local nuisances and local poor*

As mentioned before, many arrested vagrants – in Brussels even the majority – did not belong to mobile groups and can be called sedentary locals, born in the city or in the surrounding province. One primary, important group to be discerned among these locally born were young men under 40, who in principle could have a family and were still strong and healthy enough to work. Some of the Antwerp police reports suggest how their presence can be explained: like Vercammen and Winter, who examined the profile of inmates in Belgian vagrancy colonies in the period 1870-1914, we assume that the police used the vagrancy legislation not only against undesirable newcomers but also against known local ‘nuisances’, who often already had a history of minor offenses. In this scenario, rather than mistrust of unfamiliar strangers, it was the familiarity of these men with their local authorities that proved the root cause of their conviction.<sup>67</sup> A quarter of the arrests in Antwerp in this age group were cases of recidivism, and most were

66 SAA, Politie, Centraal Bureau, Processen-verbaal, 1883, nr. 1239.

67 Vercammen and Winter, ‘Een dwalend bestaan?’, 69-70. For similar findings, see Frode Ulvund, “A deterrent to vagabonds, lazy persons and promiscuous individuals”. Control and discretion in the Norwegian workhouse system, 1845-1907’, *Crime History & Societies* 16 (2012) 29-54.

low- or unskilled casual laborers. 22-year-old dockworker François and 26-year-old casual laborer Jacques, for example, both born in Antwerp, were caught stealing at the docks in November 1883, and had already been convicted repeatedly for theft and vagrancy.<sup>68</sup>

The largest group of locally born vagrants consisted of elderly men and women. Their share only increases further as we move up the age pyramid: most of the male vagrants aged 65 or older were born in the city or the surrounding province, and one in three was arrested for vagrancy several times in the same year. For instance 62-year-old Josephus, an Antwerp-born blacksmith, was arrested by the Antwerp police in May and again in November 1883; unfortunately, information about the circumstances is missing from the police report.<sup>69</sup> Even without detailed information, however, it still appears that some, with a history of recidivism, institutional confinement, and banishment, had nowhere to go. Pierre, for example, a 52-year-old shoemaker from Schelle, was accused of 'breach of banishment' and ran away from Hoogstraten in August 1883. He:

presented himself asking for accommodation. Pressed with questions, he declared that he had left the colony of Hoogstraeten and then went to Nivelles where he should have presented himself to the mayor ... Instead of going to the latter commune, he headed for Antwerp.<sup>70</sup>

In general, beggars were also locals, and in Brussels we see a notable presence of local children under 12, who accounted for one third of all imprisonments for begging. One notable exception to the local profile of young beggars was a group of five girls and five boys between eight and ten years old, all from villages near Naples, some of them brothers and sisters, who were imprisoned several times in Brussels in the autumn of 1880. They were probably members of more professional gangs of beggars, because in some cases they were arrested together with older siblings or with their parents.<sup>71</sup> Most young beggars were locals, however, which is remarkable because neighborhood communities generally tolerated local poor living off alms, especially children. Moreover, local

68 SAA, Politie, Centraal Bureau, Processen-verbaal, 1883, nrs 1220 and 1195.

69 SAA, Politie, Centraal Bureau, Processen-verbaal, 1883, nrs 565 and 1223.

70 SAA, Politie, Centraal Bureau, Processen-verbaal, 1883, nr. 932.

71 SAB, Police, Amigo, Registre d'Ecrou, 1880, *Vagabondage et mendicité*: children beggars: nrs 1022, 1293, 2130, 2352, 2372, 2484, 2565, 2567, 2606, 2607, 2608, 2645, 5399; adults: nrs. 2291, 2075, 2077, 2076, 2566



Illustration 3 Jacob August Riis. *Police station lodgers in Oak Street Station, 1890*  
(source: MoMA Online Collection.)

residents could actively resist police action, as an Antwerp police report of December 1883 for insults to the police shows. In this report, two 11-year-old beggars appear because 51-year-old Marie, together with other women from the neighborhood, had resisted the arrest of the boys and had snapped at the police: ‘Let go, you rascal, you secret police, you should be hanged, you will not get them!’. In the end, they were all taken to the police station, but no police report was written up for the boys, who were probably admonished informally and chased away.<sup>72</sup> Such informal handling of very young offenders by the police was the rule on the ground, and one can thus assume that many other children involved in begging remained invisible in the police reports.<sup>73</sup>

72 SAA, Politie, Centraal Bureau, Processen-verbaal, 1883, nr. 1411.

73 Margo De Koster, ‘Negotiating controls, perils, and pleasures in the urban night. Working-class youth in early-twentieth-century Antwerp’, *Criminological Encounters* 3 (2020) 32-49. doi:10.26395/CE20030104; Vercammen and Vanruysseveldt, ‘Van centraal beleid tot lokale praktijk’, 135-136; David Wolcott, *Cops and kids. Policing urban America, 1890-1940* (Columbus 2005).

## From vagrancy to a night's shelter and back, and back again ...

In earlier research, Erkul has demonstrated that, in 1880, the police lockup of Brussels did not only contain vagrants, prostitutes, and drunk and disorderly persons awaiting trial by police courts, but also considerable numbers of persons who had requested and been granted a night's shelter. They were recorded separately as 'lodged for the night' (*logé pour la nuit*) in the registers of *Ivroignes, logés, prostituées*.<sup>74</sup> Comparison between the entries and names in this register with those in the vagrancy and mendicity register for the year 1880 reveals that nearly one third of the vagrants imprisoned in Brussels also spent at least one other night in prison on their own request in the same year. Most combined a night for vagrancy and a voluntary night only once, but more than one third was 'lodged for the night' at least twice, some even up to ten times, with only a few weeks intervals in between admissions.

On 20 March 1880, Joseph Janssens, a 25-year-old construction worker born in Forest, a neighboring municipality of the city of Brussels, presented himself at the main police station of Brussels requesting to be lodged for the night in the police lockup. Janssens had been confined in the vagrancy colony of Hoogstraten and had returned to his hometown after being released but had no place to stay and needed a roof over his head. It was not Joseph Janssens only stay in the police lockup that year. On 28 March 1880, he spent another night in prison after having been arrested for drunkenness and disorderly behavior. On 17 April, his name appears again in the police lockup registers, this time for another 'night on request', but the police also noted that he was 'held on charges of vagrancy'. Yet another night on request followed on 25 April, but on 8 May he was held for three nights on charges of vagrancy. He was sent to the colony of Hoogstraten again and did not return for several months, but as soon as he got out of the colony, on 11 October, he came back to the Brussels police station and asked to be lodged for the night again. Unsurprisingly, this additional night of shelter was a very short-term solution, and Joseph clearly did not have relatives or friends who could offer him a place to stay for a longer period, because only two days later he was arrested for vagrancy again, being 'without permanent residence'.<sup>75</sup>

74 Ayfer Erkul, 'Stedelijke strijd tegen een "sociale plaag"'.  
 75 SAB, Police, Amigo, Registre d'Ecrou, 1880: *Ivroignes, logés, prostituées*, nrs 1740, 1878, 2310, 2477, 6329; *Vagabondage et mendicité*, nrs 994 and 2487.

Although as we explained earlier such cases were not registered separately, in the police reports on vagrancy in the records of the Antwerp Central Police Division we find similar stories of persons coming to the police station and asking to spend the night in the police lockup to be sent to a vagrancy colony. In April 1883, for example, 26-year-old Mathias Coolen, a shoemaker from Maastricht, had 'presented himself at the station and asked us to be lodged for one night'.<sup>76</sup> Joseph Maes, a 40-year-old cigar maker, was charged with vagrancy by the Antwerp police in June 1883, because he had fled the Hoogstraten colony. About six months later he was back at the Antwerp police headquarters: he had gone to Leuven but left again because, as he himself explained: 'I could not get work there and have come to Antwerp to look for it. Since I have no means of support, I am forced to put myself in your hands.'<sup>77</sup> Besides such explicit testimonies in the police reports, another indication of voluntary arrest and confinement for vagrancy was the period of the year. For example, the two oldest male vagrants in Antwerp, 81-year-old Adriaan, a weaver from the East Flanders village of Waasmunster, and 82-year-old Johannes, a weaver from Lier, a town just outside Antwerp, appeared at the main police station in Antwerp in the cold winter months of November and December 1883.<sup>78</sup> It can therefore be assumed that such requests for shelter in Antwerp were not exceptional and that many others were hidden behind official charges of vagrancy.

The examples above illustrate well that the vagrants who combined arrests with nights on request were often recidivists who returned to the Antwerp and Brussels police stations multiple times during the same year. On their trajectories, their status shifted from that of victim (in need of shelter) to that of offender (vagrant). For Brussels, the police lockup registers allow us to delve a bit deeper and sketch a profile of this group. First, they were almost all men: women were even fewer here (8%) than among the entire group of vagrants in Brussels. As we already suggested earlier, they probably had more options for finding alternative shelter than just the police lockup. Second, apart from being almost exclusively male, this group also shared a longer history of institutional confinement and/or care: they had been in a vagrancy colony before, had just left a hospital, or were returning from a prison or

76 SAA, Politie, Centraal Bureau, Processen-verbaal, 1883, nr. 452, 16 April 1883.

77 SAA, Politie, Centraal Bureau, Processen-verbaal, 1883, nrs 686 and 55.

78 SAA, Politie, Centraal Bureau, Processen-verbaal, 1883, nrs 1260 and 1001.

shelter. Many of these men had not stayed in just one but in all of such institutions before.

It is no surprise that we find older people, in their fifties and sixties, in this group, such as the 63-year-old Jean-Baptiste from Tournai, who, during the cold winter days of early January 1880, came to request a night's shelter twice after a stay in the vagrancy colony of Hoogstraten.<sup>79</sup> 55-year-old Henri, from the province of Liège, returned no fewer than eight times, three of them after a stay in Hoogstraten.<sup>80</sup> Among the handful of women we find elderly as well, such as 56-year old Josephine, born and registered as a resident in Brussels, though sent to Hoogstraten twice. Each time she left the colony, she came to ask the police for a night.<sup>81</sup>

On the other end of the age spectrum, teenagers and youngsters, between 16 and 25 years old, were also remarkably well represented among the vagrants who combined arrests with nights on request, and many also returned several times or had stayed in an institution before. They too seemed to lack families or other support networks – not surprisingly, as institutional placement meant separation from your family – and to have been left to their own devices. Charles, 18 years old and from the West Flanders village of Koolkerke, returned three times after being released from Hoogstraten.<sup>82</sup> The record holder was 19-year-old Alexandre, born in Brussels, who returned to the police station eleven times in a few months' time, coming now from one colony, then from another, now from a hospital, then from a prison.<sup>83</sup>

Overall, the persons who combined nights for vagrancy with nights on their own request in the Brussels police lockup in 1880 were mostly male, locally born, and shared a history of recidivism and institutional confinement. These qualities suggest that (voluntary) arrest, prosecution, and a stay in the vagrancy colonies functioned as a last resort in the subsistence strategies of the laboring poor, as has also been observed by other scholars.<sup>84</sup> As many were recidivists, the question arises: why were these persons sent to a vagrancy colony one time and given shelter the next? Our hypothesis is that they were regular 'clients' or at least known to the police, as many were born in Brussels or residing there. The police very likely gave them shelter for the night,

79 SAB, Police, Amigo, Registre d'Ecrou, 1880: *Ivrognes, logés, prostituées*, nrs 176 and 6226.

80 SAB, Police, Amigo, Registre d'Ecrou, 1880: *Ivrognes, logés, prostituées*, nrs 2375 ff.

81 SAB, Police, Amigo, Registre d'Ecrou, 1880: *Ivrognes, logés, prostituées*, nrs 2172 and 6508.

82 SAB, Police, Amigo, Registre d'Ecrou, 1880: *Ivrognes, logés, prostituées*, nrs 1077, 1440, 5964.

83 SAB, Police, Amigo, Registre d'Ecrou, 1880: *Ivrognes, logés, prostituées*, nrs 557 et seq.

84 For example, Vercammen and Winter, 'Een dwalend bestaan?'; Weevers et al., 'Swept up from the streets?.'

provided they promised to look for other solutions, but they arrested and prosecuted them again as soon as they found out that nothing had changed. Alternative ways to ‘manage’ this vulnerable group were probably not available.

As most ‘logés’ in the Brussels police lockup were sedentary locals, the question arises whether mobile groups could also benefit from this ‘welfare’ police activity. Our evidence suggests that foreign and domestic migrants were less likely to obtain shelter but were not excluded from it either. With a share of 20 percent, foreign migrants were even better represented among ‘logés’ than among arrested vagrants. Many appeared to be in transit, as the Brussels police often mentioned ‘de passage’ in the prison register. Among them, first we find families with small children, who possibly came to ask the police for shelter because they got stuck in the capital due to transport problems and had not been able to find a safe place to stay. The Burke family from Manchester, for example: John, a 49-year-old merchant with his wife Anne and their 9-year-old granddaughter Helen, and the Desailly’s from France, Marie and César, with their three children aged five, six, and ten.<sup>85,86</sup> Other (grand)parents came alone with their children: 38-year old Louis, for example, a laborer from the Walloon city of Hainaut, and his 8-year old (grand)daughter Camille were also ‘de passage’.<sup>87</sup> Some seemed to be stranded adventurers from far away, such as a 36-year-old Brazilian – registered as ‘Georges’, so probably called Jorge – who came to ask for a night’s lodging twice in January and February 1880, first coming from Antwerp, and the next time from Ostend.<sup>88</sup>

Most mobile persons who were granted a night’s shelter in the Brussels police lockup, however, were labor migrants, mostly Belgians moving in between Belgian, Dutch, French, and German cities, and some foreigners. The only young women who combined an arrest for vagrancy with a night’s shelter in the Brussels police lockup, for example, were two German domestic servants in their early twenties.<sup>89</sup> Among the men, 35-year-old Leopold from East Flanders returned three times to the police station to ask for a night’s sleep, the last time coming from Lille.<sup>90</sup> 23-year-old Matthijs from Maastricht presented

85 SAB, Police, Amigo, Registre d’Ecrou, 1880: *Ivrognes, logés, prostituées*, nrs 4164, 4165, 4166.

86 SAB, Police, Amigo, Registre d’Ecrou, 1880: *Ivrognes, logés, prostituées*, nrs 6537-6541.

87 SAB, Police, Amigo, Registre d’Ecrou, 1880: *Ivrognes, logés, prostituées*, nrs 5574 and 5575.

88 SAB, Police, Amigo, Registre d’Ecrou, 1880: *Ivrognes, logés, prostituées*, nrs 589 and 760.

89 SAB, Police, Amigo, Registre d’Ecrou, 1880: *Vagabondage et mendicité*, nrs 125 and 762; *Ivrognes, logés, prostituées*, nrs 3054 and 4188.

90 SAB, Police, Amigo, Registre d’Ecrou, 1880: *Ivrognes, logés, prostituées*, nrs 958, 972, 3172.

himself at the police station twice, the last time coming from Ghent.<sup>91</sup> Others, such as 21-year-old Guillaume and his 28-year-old brother Pierre, both from Leuven, and 22-year-old Philippe, born in Namur, who was passing through on his way back from France together with his 62-year-old grandfather Jean-Baptiste, passed by only once.<sup>92</sup> To explain why these young labor migrants were granted shelter while others with a similar profile were arrested as vagrants by the Brussels police, further in-depth examination of these cases is required.

## Conclusion

The increased concern about the issue of vagrancy at the end of the nineteenth century does not seem to have been translated directly into the daily instructions of the urban authorities in the cities of Antwerp and Brussels to their police forces. In any case, we find no evidence of systematic targeting of migrants and other mobile groups. This is not surprising for Antwerp, as the intensity of prosecution there was among the lowest in the country due to the port city's strong growth and high demand for casual labor. In Brussels, too, the fight against vagrancy and surveillance of mobile groups was rarely mentioned in the daily police orders, even though several thousand people were arrested there annually as vagrants in the latter decades of the nineteenth century and Mayor Buls was very concerned about the image of 'his' capital and curbing riots. It is probable that the policing of vagrancy was simply part of these larger strategies of order maintenance in the Brussels streets and squares.

Our findings concerning the profiles of the persons arrested for vagrancy or begging in both cities are in line with those of other studies. There were many more males than females, the latter being charged more often with prostitution and having greater access to alternative, private shelter and care facilities. One primary, important group among arrested vagrants and beggars in both cities examined here were young male labor migrants, some foreigners but mostly internal migrants, and among them also skilled and specialized laborers, who got stuck in between jobs. Their profile matched the figure of the mobile, 'master-

91 SAB, Police, Amigo, Registre d'Ecrou, 1880: *Ivrognes, logés, prostituées*, nrs1685 and 3812.

92 SAB, Police, Amigo, Registre d'Ecrou, 1880: *Ivrognes, logés, prostituées*, Guillaume and Pierre: nrs 3596, 3599; Philippe and Jean-Baptiste: nrs 1869 and 2913.

and rootless stranger', who had always been at the center of elites' fears since the early modern period.<sup>93</sup>

Many of the arrested vagrants cannot be characterized as mobile groups, however. They were locally born, either poor and elderly people, whose families could not provide for them, or local troublemakers whose social capital was completely exhausted. Whether they were local poor or local nuisances, they were not mobile newcomers, so their prosecution for vagrancy cannot simply be attributed to mobility. As such, they did not fit the image of the roaming, 'rootless' outsider. This incongruence suggests that the status of outsider, which De Koster and Reinke and others have identified as major source of vulnerability for arrest and prosecution for vagrancy, was not necessarily determined by mobility or being of foreign descent but, rather, by a cluster of public visibility, lack of social capital, and insufficient local belonging. These features suggest that at the local level, the repression of vagrancy continued to be shaped by similar concerns as in the *ancien régime*.<sup>94</sup> Persons who combined these characteristics were much more likely to be perceived as 'unruly' and burdensome outsiders by the authorities and local communities alike. The erosion of social capital could not only result from weak or lacking family networks, but also from repeated problem behavior, especially when both conditions were combined. We saw that one in three male vagrants shared long trajectories of repeated convictions and institutional confinement (in prisons, vagrancy colonies, hospitals, etc.); their local social networks had simply evaporated.

However, our evidence suggests that this situation is only one side of the everyday policing of vagrancy in Antwerp and Brussels in the 1880s. The high numbers of locals and elderly, as well as traces of explicit requests for shelter in our sources, suggest that many of the apprehended vagrants had sought arrest or confinement themselves. In Brussels, we found an important group of mostly locally born individuals who returned multiple times to the police lockup, switching from the status of offender (vagrancy) to that of victim (night on request). Knowing that the local poor, who wandered the city streets every day in search of food, money, or a job, could not be contained with a repressive approach, the police provided them lodgings in the police lockup. At the same time, the registration of all these vulnerable locals and migrants in the police records became an additional instrument to

93 A.L. Beier, *Masterless men. The vagrancy problem in England, 1560-1640* (London 1985).

94 De Koster and Reinke, 'Policing minorities'.

control these ‘irregular’ marginal groups. Thus, as De Koster and Vrints have also suggested, this social function of policing should not merely be interpreted as means of tackling poverty but also as part of a strategy of managing the ‘dangerous classes’.<sup>95</sup>

The many different profiles of arrested or voluntarily confined vagrants sketched above clearly indicate that vagrancy was not a fixed condition but, rather, an extremely elastic label. There was not only a thin line between mobility and vagrancy, like other scholars have also noted, but also between poverty and vagrancy (or illegality in general), as we found that mobility was not always a key feature. Gaume thus summarizes it well when he states that the nineteenth-century policing of vagrancy was ‘la police des existences irrégulières et incertaines’.<sup>96</sup>

## About the authors

**Margo De Koster** (1976) studied history and sociology at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and is Assistant Professor in Social History at Ghent University and in Historical Criminology at the VU Amsterdam and the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. She conducts social and historical research on social problems and social control, crime and deviance, and policing and justice in urban contexts during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. E-mail: margo.dekoster@ugent.be

**Ayfer Erkul** (1969) is a historian and journalist for the weekly magazine HUMO. From 2017 to 2021, she was affiliated with the History Department of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, where she conducted research, under the supervision of Anne Winter and Margo De Koster, on police practices and mobility control in Brussels, focusing on daily interactions between policemen and ‘marginal’ migrants in the late nineteenth century.

E-mail: ayfer.erkul@gmail.com

95 Margo De Koster and Antoon Vrints, ‘The new police as agents of class control? Urban policing and its socio-geographical focus in nineteenth-century Antwerp’, in: Blondé et al., *Inequality and the city*, 345-358.

96 Pierre Gaume, ‘Le vagabondage, ou la police des existences irrégulières et incertaines. Sens et usages d’un délit (France, 1815-1850)’, *Crime, History & Societies/Crime, Histoire & Sociétés* 21 (2017) 79.