

## 1. Research notes



# Is it possible to know how many workers live in mobile housing?

Research notes

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Mobile housing, in its many forms, is inherently invisible in statistics. However, it is part of a way of life that has become essential for many workers in certain professional sectors. For these workers to be understood and properly taken into consideration in public policies, they must first be counted. For this, Arnaud Le Marchand combines statistical traces, observations of living spaces and interviews, in this exploration of workers living in mobile housing. Illustration : Ferjeux van der Stigghel

Research participants

- Arnaud Le Marchand

## CHANGES IN THE MOBILITY OF WORK AND HOUSING

“We’re not going to move house for a job, who has a job for life nowadays?” (Jean-Charles, itinerant worker, Rouen, 2019).

The Covid epidemic led to a sharp rise in teleworking, initially to allow employees to stay away from the employer’s premises, but thereby enabling people to actually live far away from their workplace. But even before this crisis, we suggest that because of job insecurity and general uncertainty surrounding their professional lives, people were less inclined to move house to find work, and preferred to make work trips, sometimes involving the use of some form of mobile housing. Mobile housing comes in different forms, such as yurts, staying temporarily in a hotel, long-term camping, living in a converted van, or a boat, etc. Here, we are looking at this subject not from the standpoint of the objects, but of the people who use them. The point is to consider the use of mobile housing as a phase in a kind of multi-residentiality - one that is sometimes chosen and combined with a sedentary residence - and not as a permanent way of life. The phenomenon being studied here corresponds instead to a flow of people passing through mobile or light housing, for a more or less extended period of time, whose location is

regular or fluctuating, and evolving within a network of jobs and living spaces. Retirees living in motor homes and neo-nomadic protesters that follow techno festivals or New Age counter-culture - although often very similar, even indistinguishable from itinerant workers – are not included in this study.

Trying to measure the number of employed or independent workers living in mobile housing throughout France, all year round or for a large part of it, is key to understanding the dynamics of these mobility practices. The task is difficult, the results necessarily vague, but they are not devoid of social significance, as this vagueness itself is one of the defining traits of the phenomenon.

In this article, we will proceed by combining several methodologies: the search for traces in the statistics of INSEE and CCASS (Communal Center for Social Action and Health), interviews with people living in mobile housing and surveys on social networks. The goal is to assess how significant this population is (that is workers who travel for extended periods each year), to then compare this data with what can be inferred from housing practices, and to then refine it through field studies and surveys. The locations for these surveys are constantly changing, following construction sites, seasonal activities and temporary installations, which nevertheless sketch out a network of workplaces and living spaces where these mobile workers conduct their lives. We must view these areas as forming a network, partly made up of fixed nodes (campsites, industrial sites, intensive farmland), and partly as places which did not exist before the localizations, as in the action networks of certain mobile professions that move from construction site to construction site (Rosseline-Bareille 2019).

## **NUMERICAL ASSESSMENTS WITH MISSING DATA**

We must first acknowledge that this phenomenon has an intrinsic fluidity and instability that makes it virtually impossible to fully apprehend statistically. Mobile work is not subject to any statistical recording, as Urssaf (the French organization that collects social benefits contributions from companies) does not archive the declarations of major professional trips, because they don't serve as a tax base. In addition, there is a porosity between this type of employment, and other forms of work - whether domestic, manufacturing, artisanal - including telework. For example, there are people who work partly at home and partly on the move. So how do we classify them? By default, they will be counted in statistics as working at the employer's address. Therefore, concerning workers in mobile housing, research must deal with the missing data, the unreliability of certain figures, and exploit all possible traces. This collection of fragments subsequently requires some ethnography, in order to avoid mistakes in our understanding of this social space.

## **TRACES OF MOBILE HOUSING IN CENSUSES**

### **- A problem of statistical definition**

The movements of workers in mobile housing leave few traces in censuses. We can however measure the population potentially using mobile housing, for professional reasons, through data series produced by INSEE on journeys between home and work, in particular in tables compiled from the censuses of 2010, 2015 and 2017, the NAV series.<sup>1</sup>

The nomenclature classifies people according to the distance between their home and workplace, and the mode of transport used to connect them. Three categories are of interest to us here: people who live in metropolitan France and who work in a different department, region, or country than their place of residence. The total is significant: it increased from 4,838,079 to 5,165,795 between 2010 and 2015. That is an increase of 6.7%, with this increase being greater for women (14.24%) than for men (barely 2%). It fell back to 4,961,835 in 2017, but the subgroups most likely to use mobile housing either permanently or intermittently have continued to increase, as we will see below.

From this group, we selected the number of people who report attending a workplace in a town outside their home department, on foot or without even moving, because this definition assumes that they temporarily stay there. They more than 73,000 in 2010, and more than 75,000 in 2015. In 2017, we see that they amounted to 82,496, to which we could add the 42,263 who cycle.

This situation could result from a statistical artefact that hides situations where people work from home and make occasional trips, (Zaninetti 2017), or where the person's workplace was registered, by default, as the employer's address (Crague 2003) - these cases are not taken into account in our study. But this contradiction between distances can also be explained by the use of a form of temporary accommodation, hotels, or mobile housing close to the workplace. In the same vein, in 2015, 1,834,682 people declared working in a department other than the one in which they live and using public transport to get there, and this figure dropped to 1,738,059 in 2017. Here we find people who regularly take the train, so much so that it starts to feel like a "second home" (Messonnier 2001, p. 141). These are rail commuters for whom the train is part of their life, but who do not use a form of mobile housing. On the other hand, this group also includes people staying in a campsite in La Manche, working at the EPR site and commuting there by bus, or seasonal tourism workers camping in a designated area and taking shuttles to work.

Furthermore, for INSEE, the workplace is the place where a person performs their job; however, this conventional definition is restrictive for jobs that require regular travel. In fact, in the list of definitions used by INSEE for the census, "Place of work" is defined as follows:

Certain workers, performing certain specific jobs such as "haulage driver," "taxi driver," "travelling salesman," "door-to-door salesman" or "fisherman" which require them to travel for work purposes with a certain regularity, are generally considered by convention to work in their place of residence." (INSEE definitions, metadata <https://www.insee.fr/fr/metadonnees/definition/c1832>). Consequently, not only are these workers not counted as mobile workers, but they are also considered as teleworkers (Aguilera, Lethiais, Rallet, Proulhac. 2016).

These figures thus exclude workers in some of the historical categories that use mobile housing for professional reasons, at least intermittently. They are, by convention, not counted and ultimately made invisible in the statistics, but they should be included, if only we could count them.

## **- Managers and intermediate professions**

Among people classified by INSEE as working far from their place of residence (outside their home department), the socio-professional category with the highest increase, between 2010 and 2015, was executives (+ 9%), who presumably are not those who most use mobile housing.<sup>2</sup> Their numbers increased by 4.47% until 2017, reaching 90,7131, of which only 34% were women. The number of individuals making long trips in intermediate health and education professions, which include nurses and social workers, grew from 390,877 in 2010 to 422,049 in 2015 (+ 8%), then to 435,753 in 2017 (+ 3%). The emergence of temporary employment agencies specializing in social work or hospital work (Arborio 2012) is one of the institutional changes explaining this development. During a study on a group of people living in converted vans (October 2017), I was able to meet a nurse and two specialized educators who lived year-round in their van. I interviewed another young social worker also living in a van, who chose this way of life as a rejection of sedentary dwelling and because of the constraints of her job search:

"This lifestyle represents an ideal for me in the sense that it corresponds to my mode of (non) consumption, autonomy and freedom. We are independent, live off grid (solar panels and water), we use natural and organic products (therefore no pollution) and use dry toilets. For my part, I am a social worker, initially trained as a consultant in social and family economy. We should not hide the harsh reality of access to employment in many sectors. I just got a fixed-term contract even though I've been actively looking since I graduated two years ago. My lifestyle allowed me to get by with day jobs before being able to find work in

my chosen field. For me it therefore improved my access to employment because today we are required to be versatile and mobile! It is also thanks to this lifestyle that I am in a position to take the job I'm being offered today." (Interview 2018)

New jobs are appearing in intermediate professions, such as wind turbine maintenance technicians, whose work is often mobile. A review of 359 classified adverts offering jobs as wind turbine maintenance technicians, that appeared on the Indeed website between December 28, 2019, and October 25, 2020, yielded several results: 67% of them indicated that the job involved strong spatial mobility and no fixed place of work; over 29.8% explicitly indicated that these jobs required working over a vast area. More specifically, 20 referenced work that required travel, 20 referenced "overnight stays," 25 mentioned trips throughout France, 5 to several departments (sometimes not contiguous, such as Orne and Yonne), 15 mentioned long-distance trips (beyond 150 km), sometimes for over a week, 7 were for seasonal or unscheduled trips, 10 indicated international travel or travel to Belgium, and 5 simply mentioned travelling. Some of these technicians use mobile housing frequently.

## **- Manual workers and seasonal workers**

The housing of seasonal agricultural workers has been the subject of several reports since 2005. These show the use of mobile housing (caravans, converted vans, tents) on the employer's land, on campsites or on other plots, with apparent territorial disparities: such practices are sometimes reported as "massive" (Fors 2005), in Maine-et-Loire for example, but as smaller in other departments. Several studies have shown, at the European scale, the importance of mobile housing for European or African agricultural workers (Canepari, Mesini, Murlane 2016). In 2015, 21,066 French agricultural workers declared working in a different department, region or country to their place of residence, which already represented a 7.8% increase compared to 2010, and 21,744 in 2017, i.e. + 3% in 2 years.

Reflecting this development, the Facebook group Saisonniers en habitat mobile ("Seasonal workers in mobile housing"), that mainly contains job adverts or employment-related information, as well as highlighting parking problems for converted vans, boasted over 13,000 members in May 2019, or 61.7% of long-distance seasonal workers. By March 2021, that number had risen to 18,859. Although the majority of the members are seasonal agricultural workers, not all work in this sector: the existence of this group testifies to the construction of an identity that combines work and living arrangements, and that goes beyond certain sectoral limits (see on this matter the section on our social media survey below). On the other hand, as is the case for industrial workers, being a seasonal agricultural worker living in a mobile home does not mean that they do not have to commute. Some seasonal workers, staying in campsites or other places far from the production site (seasonal workers' interview February 2021), may have been counted in different boxes of the transport census than those including employees who work in a different city than their place of residence and who get there without having to move or by walking.

Skilled and unskilled manual workers are more often on the move. In 2010, there were 882,106 working in another department, region or country. In 2015, their number had dropped slightly to 871,815, which may have been an effect of the slowdown in the French economy, before rising again to 885,642 in 2017. These fluctuations have been accompanied by an increase in the share of these workers traveling outside their department, from 16.73% to 17.86% then to 18.43% for skilled workers, from 13.91% to 14.84% then to 15.19% for unskilled workers, and from 22.7% to 23.31% then to 23.64% for technicians. There has indeed been an increase in the distance between housing and employment, which quite probably has led to an increase in mobility, without moving house.

## **- Transport and marine professionals**

But what about transport workers? The number of truck drivers, some of whom sleep in their cabins for part of the week or even more (2.5% in the survey on seasonal workers in mobile housing), is decreasing. 21,000 jobs have reportedly been lost since 1999. But this stagnation of "French" truckers, the equivalent of 289,000 full-time workers, does not mean that European truckers who work in France

are not transient residents, using different gathering places and rest stops than French truck drivers. The evolution of road transport is therefore not immune to the changes in work-related mobile housing in France, and even less so on a European scale.

Then there are the French sailors, numbering around 15,000, plus the 1,500 boatmen. While sailors generally have an address on land, their job involves living a large part of the year on ships. Artisanal boatmen (small owners of barges and canal boats) often have no other address than the tool of their trade, but they may have employees who have a fixed address. Incidentally, the figures for freight transport show a 33% increase in full-time equivalent employment in river transport. People involved in artisanal boating, who are directly affected by mobile housing, do not feel this growth (interview with the Chamber of artisanal shipping, December 2018), even if there are newcomers, for example Romanian or Polish sailors who go back and forth between French rivers and their homeland. In so-called industrial shipping, growth is more noticeable, to the point where there are concerns about a labor shortage. But in this mode of operation, the completely homeless who lack any sort of fixed home, are exceptional: the employees of these industrial companies work alternately, 7 days on board, 7 days on land, or 4 weeks on board, 4 weeks on land (interview with an HR manager in industrial boating, 2017). As they have an address, they are therefore not counted among workers in mobile housing, even though they spend half their life on the move.

## **DOMICILIATION SURVEYS AND FIELD SURVEYS**

### **- Domiciliation surveys**

#### **o The evolution of domiciliation requests**

Among travelling employees, how many reside permanently in mobile or transient housing? We compiled the administrative domiciliation surveys to collect figures on the proportion of people who requested this solution for work mobility reasons, then, based on the field surveys, we assessed the proportion of people who do not request it and who are not therefore included in surveys. By adding these two groups together, we can thus estimate the total number of workers concerned.

Surveys on administrative domiciliation, in France's departments and regions, are carried out by the DGCS (General Directorate for Social Cohesion). As a reminder, "administrative domiciliation provides people without stable housing, living in mobile or precarious housing, with an administrative address in order to assert their civil, civic and social rights."<sup>3</sup> This group of people without a stable home contains various kinds of profiles: Travellers, asylum seekers, current prisoners and ex-prisoners. This last group may seem paradoxical, but prison is not considered to be stable housing by the administration.<sup>4</sup> These surveys therefore allow us to measure the demand from the poorest and most marginalized mobile housing communities. For 2012, the DGCS listed 214,564 people. Not all of them are relevant to our study, as the proportion of workers in mobile housing in these surveys remains to be defined.

Administrative domiciliations are unevenly distributed throughout the country and are largely concentrated in major cities. Their processing used to be managed by select associations following the DALO law of 2007, but since the ALUR law of 2014, they are taken care of by CCAS (Communal Center for Social Action and Health). The summary produced by the DGCS, published in March 2017, reveals that "in all departments, there has been an increase in the number of domiciliation requests."

<sup>5</sup>However, it is difficult to interpret this increase, as it is hard to know to what extent the increase is due to a higher output by agents and organizations processing domiciliation requests, and to what extent it is due to a growing number of people in mobile or precarious housing, or completely homeless. These data simultaneously measure the phenomenon itself and the output of the agents and associations responsible for managing the administrative requests (Briand, Chapouille, Paretz 1979). However, we will view them as traces that are likely to give us an idea of the current evolutions, albeit without great precision. For the department of Aisne, for instance, domiciliation requests have grown by 25% each

year since 2012, with the increase in requests from French or EU citizens being greater than those from asylum seekers.<sup>6</sup> However, in this department, as in others, the increase in administrative domiciliation does not entirely reflect the growth in non-ordinary housing. I was thus able to investigate the installation of a permanent home-base for travelers (seasonal participants of punk, hippy or techno culture) in this department.<sup>7</sup> In 2014, a former gas station on a forest road that had been abandoned for 12 years became a squat. It had been transformed into a concert hall and living space for “permanent” residents, at least one of whom had a permanent employment contract (CDI), and for young people in converted vans, including temporary seasonal workers. The site could host up to thirty people. In 2014, the local town hall reclassified the station as a cultural and housing facility and authorized its residents to use its address for mail and administrative procedures. As a result, insofar as these people were squatters (in the sense of not having a stable form of housing), they do not appear in the administrative domiciliation statistics. The station and the home-base were demolished on September 25, 2017, following a request from the oil company that owned the premises, without any rehousing solution offered to the inhabitants. In an interview with the newspaper L'Union on September 21, 2017, the new mayor claimed that the squat's existence had nothing to do with insufficient or inadequate housing, but that it was a matter of counterculture.<sup>8</sup> It therefore had to be considered as a space outside of normal life, yet there were seasonal workers from local businesses living there. Public authorities often refuse to see how these practices are simply ways of adapting to the mobility requirements of work.

The case of the department of Aisne isn't isolated; there was a 26% increase in requests in 2013 in Seine-Saint-Denis, while emergency accommodation in hotels grew by 64% during the same year.<sup>9</sup> In total, between 2012 and 2014, the demand for administrative domiciliation increased by 70% for this department. The Gard department<sup>10</sup> announced that figures tripled between 2011 and 2014, without providing any further explanation. This figure is interesting, because this department also has to contend with the development of illegal ‘cabins’ (a process known as ‘cabanization’ in France) and the development of light and informal housing. A report from the Laboratory for Research on Social Intervention<sup>11</sup> (LERIS) emanating from a survey carried out in Languedoc-Roussillon (and especially in the Gard department) can provide us with an explanation: people residing illegally on private plots, or camping all year round, avoid domiciliating, despite the practical drawbacks, so as to not attract the administration's attention.

The summary also notes that “in a fairly shared way in the schemes,<sup>12</sup> the main reasons for requesting domiciliation are: when staying at a third party's home, in mobile housing and in precarious housing.”<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the majority of applicants are men around the age of 25, even if the proportion of women and families is increasing (the proportion is not specified). Finally, according to the summary (p.6), these applicants are predominantly French, and the proportion of non-EU foreigners is generally the lowest. This compilation therefore combines mobile housing and other types of housing (such as shacks or other makeshift shelters). It draws a picture, one that is undoubtedly blurry but that confirms several impressions from the field on how mobile housing is progressing. Conversely, we noticed that, as part of this progression, people who stay in a form of mobile housing can then return to sedentary dwelling: indeed, more and more domiciliations are also being cancelled. The main reason for this is a return to stable accommodation or remaining absent, in which case we can infer that they left the area. This synthesis is based on those carried out at the regional level. The poor response rate to requests for information from associations and on domiciliation rejections, due to over-burdened services, suggests that the observed increase could have been even greater.

### **o What is the share of salaried employees among people domiciled by CCAS?**

The question of how many salaried employees there are is rarely mentioned. The Seine-Maritime scheme indicates that the CCAS of Le Havre<sup>14</sup> domiciles salaried employees, while the Gironde<sup>15</sup> scheme laconically remarks (p. 8): “Indeed, the domiciliation of seasonal workers in locations offering employment during specific periods does not correspond to the volume that might be expected.” This discrepancy can be explained by the presence of self-organized living bases<sup>16</sup> such as the above

example in Aisne, where some of the permanent or temporary residents use the address. Finally, in the assessment made by UNCASS, the representative of the CCASS of Charente-Maritime also mentions seasonal workers and young travelers (in separate ways, which is debatable).<sup>17</sup> A national report published in March 2015 contains a chapter on the required supporting documents for a domiciliation request (a personal connection to the town), in which UNCCAS reports that 41% of domiciliations were justified with a payslip. This figure varies from 64% in cities with more than 10,000 inhabitants to 30% in smaller towns.<sup>18</sup>

According to these surveys, out of 214,000 domiciled people, a third of them are in mobile housing, which amounts to roughly 70,000 – bearing in mind that this figure is underestimated (although we don't know by how much).

In addition, according to the Cahiers du mal-logement published by the Abbé Pierre foundation, in 2002 there were 156,282 Travellers who held a travel permit (livret de circulation).<sup>19</sup> Not all of them request a domiciliation: they may have kept their designated address (known as commune de rattachement) or registered a different address (for a plot of land, for instance). Among them, 80,000 are said to be “completely” itinerant. Generally, few are in employment: given the old law of 1969 and their collective group experience, they prefer to be self-employed. As employees were more often likely to be classified as nomads (see Le Marchand 2018), this was a barrier to being hired by a company. Salaried work does exist however in these communities, and is probably increasing (especially among women), but for the moment its levels have not been estimated.

## - Field surveys

The Facebook group Camtars aménagés (“Converted Vans”), which is used by seasonal workers, artists, performers, temp workers and occasional users, for professional or recreational purposes, had over 69,000 members in March 2021 (compared to 63,000 in July 2019). This figure is interesting in the sense that, according to its administrators, its rapid growth is the result of algorithms which suggest the group to other Facebook users. While this population may be hard to grasp in a census, it may yet be quantifiable. A study was carried out on a “gathering” of converted vehicles, organized by the group's administrators in October 2017. Out of the 25 people questioned, 13 only used their vehicle occasionally (from a few weekends to almost half the year), while 12 lived in theirs permanently. Of these 12, only 4 used an administrative domiciliation, while the others used their relatives' or friends' home address, where they were staying free of charge.

This was later confirmed by a second survey carried out in August 2019, during a festival called Les Vers Solidaires in Saint-Gobain. The festival was founded by the local Gaia association over fifteen years ago. Its organizers also created a co-operative (in French, a SCOP) that manufactures, rents and sells dry toilets for festivals throughout the north of France – a successful part of the pre-Covid cultural economy. I signed up as a volunteer, on parking lots and campsites, and this turned out to be a good way of meeting festivalgoers who travelled or lived in converted vans.

I was able to meet two couples - a man and a woman, and two women - living year-round in a van. They came from the same nearby town, in the Oise department, and while the first couple lived in their van 6 months a year, the two women moved around regularly. In the first van, it was the woman who had driven this lifestyle choice: she was a part-time nurse and liked working in social affairs within organisations helping the homeless. Her partner was a long-distance truck driver – a true itinerant. They were not domiciled together, but with relatives. And this was causing some problems: in his case, his mother, with whom he registered his address, could no longer claim certain benefits because of his added income. They were thinking of changing their official domiciliation that year, but were unsure because CCAS procedures are sometimes tricky and only provide domiciliation for a given period.

In the second van, the two young women were on a gap year. One was planning to go back to her job as a special-education teacher, while the other was going to start her first teaching post. Their choice was motivated by a desire to travel, to live outdoors, and also to experiment with a sort of pleasantly

sober and restrained lifestyle. For them, one of the advantages of their vanlife was disconnecting from the Internet and mobile phones. The special education teacher received unemployment benefits which they lived off, but they also worked during the grape-picking season around Bordeaux. They registered their address with third parties.

These two young women, who were on a coming-of-age journey of sorts, then introduced me to their neighbors in the parking lot. This was a couple living in a former bookmobile, now refurbished and measuring 24 square meters. They did not travel much but lived there all year round. Their profile was less typical: while he was a pro kayaking teacher - which in itself isn't surprising as many kayakers and surfers often spend time living in vans - she had studied at Sciences-Po Lille and was in charge of recruiting IT developers for a company based in Lille. She had a good salary. They lived on a public nautical base in Hauts-de-France, where he was employed. They were thinking of taking a gap year (in French, "année de césure") before having children. They were nicknamed "bourgeois gypsies" - a term they did not object to (I pointed out to them that a similar expression - "gitans bourgeois" - had reportedly been used for big fairground industrialists since the beginning of the 20th century). Mobile housing can therefore be used by young executives, regardless of professional constraints, who then make it part of a residential itinerary rather than a professional one.

The next day, I changed environments and met a couple in their forties, who were between lifestyles: they came to the festival in a van but were not yet ready to make the leap and fully commit to the change. I never learned what the woman does; but he was a part-time paramedic, in other words he was often on the move. He had often visited the Ubu station in Chavignon, the former service station turned into a base camp and concert venue, which I had visited twice and whose occupants were evicted the year before. He believed the experiment was cut short because it had become a disorganized mess. For him, without individual self-control, none of this can work, even though he was also opposed to public grounds managed by the authorities. A friend of theirs was there. A city councilor, she also planned to go on the road, or manage a plot of land to host people: "In my job, I see a lot of people being evicted at the moment, but they don't have a driver's license, so vans are not an option for them." She was an executive assistant and about to start training; she was therefore at a crossroads. The paramedic suggested I add a question to my survey: "Would you agree to say that the French government is pushing you to live in a van?" They only gave me a postcode as an address, in the Aisne department, which covered over twenty towns.

Finally, I met a couple of retired workers from the area. They knew how to find designated locations in which to park, on specialized websites for motorhomes such as France Passion. The wife took care of this research. A younger friend of theirs was there too. He lived in a van until the Loppsi law arrived in 2011 and scared him - something he only told me at the end of his interview.<sup>20</sup> He showed a vague interest in the current debates about vehicle safety inspections. He had seen converted vans that were so unsafely fitted that everything in the back threatened to go flying forwards at the slightest touch of the breaks. According to him, people with a background in manual labor are more aware of safety issues. The husband, for instance, had seen hazardous and faulty gas installations on construction sites. Also, they were the only ones to mention Travellers as an example of people living in mobile homes in their hometowns.

Among these people, who were being put up at third parties' homes or domiciled in a normal way (as was the case for the retired couple), the mobility and lightness of their dwelling was sometimes associated with strong local roots, such as local political allies - i.e. parents or acquaintances who were elected officials and who could facilitate the process. Insofar as the use of mobile housing can only be directly connected to a truly itinerant job in one case here (the truck driver), it is perhaps difficult to draw conclusions as to a direct link between employment and mobile housing overall.

The results of these field surveys were compared to studies revealing the multiplicity of ways in which people find lodging with third parties (Béguin, Lévy-Vroelant 2012). The lodged person in this situation is not necessarily present at the host's home, as he may be using a nomadic home. Yet, the practice of



lodging with a third party is also evolving (Marpsat, Peretti 2009), which makes it an indirect indicator of the spread of mobile housing.

These people are left unaccounted for in the administrative domiciliation statistics studied above, which therefore only offer a partial view of mobile housing. Considering the very low number of respondents registered in this way, domiciled people may represent less than 50% of all the people living in converted vehicles. Given the 70,000 people living in mobile housing who are domiciled at the CCASS according to our assessment above, the total population would be double or triple that figure, i.e. between 140,000 and 210,000 people.

Another possible proxy is the postal system. One couple used a poste restante service (i.e. general delivery service), while another used the lot's address. Some also mentioned a service provided by a private company called Le Courier du Voyageur (which translates to 'The Traveler's Mail'). Initially, this company was meant for expats, but it then expanded its service to people living in mobile housing. This is something that does not always sit well with those concerned: one of the users told me that using a service originally intended for expats makes him feel a bit like a migrant. Unfortunately, the company can't provide statistics on how many of its customers are living in mobile housing, because from its standpoint, it provides the same service to all customers. Its turnover grew by 124% between 2012 and 2017, combining expats and van-dwellers in France.

## **PARKING ON AND NEAR CONSTRUCTION SITES**

### **- What accommodation is available for mobile workers?**

Among people in employment who use mobile housing, what proportion lack a stable home, has no other option or uses it as a non-continuous form of accommodation? What is their distribution between formal places (hotels, campsites, etc.) and informal locations (car parks, etc.)?

A 1995 occupational medicine study (Donio-shaw, Huez, Sandret 1995) on temporary workers in the nuclear industry, who lived in campsites, going from one site to the next, estimated that 10% of them lived in caravans while working, and 5% were completely without a stable home or pied-à-terre. However, another study from 2013 (Barbat et al. 2013), the proportion of subcontracted nuclear workers using caravans or motorhomes had increased to 12.8%, to which we can add 1.9% sleeping in a tent (not reported in 1995). But above all, the proportion of workers who slept in a lodge or a mobile home (not a hotel), and therefore at a campsite (a category that did not exist in 1995), amounted to 28% of the sample, while those staying in a hotel went from 31% to 41.5% in 2013.

In the survey carried out on rope access technicians (workers who access difficult-to-reach locations without scaffolding), while less than 5% of the sample in 2016-2017 lived exclusively in a mobile home while working on construction sites involving travel, 50% of employees interviewed used this type of accommodation on a temporary basis: 25% in converted vehicles, 25% at a campsite (Vignal, Soulé, Rogowski 2017, p. 14).

The figures are similar in the survey carried out on the working conditions of professional deep-sea divers in 2018: 26.83% of them declared sleeping in their car on site, 39.47% in budget or economy hotels, and the rest using various "usual means of accommodation," including caravans (diver interview Fécamp, March 2021). The survey, its methodology and its results were published on the Scaph blog, <sup>21</sup> and discussed in specialized media.

### **- Predominantly economic motives**

At this stage of the investigation, a site visit in September 2017 served as a case study. It is a construction site for a port silo for storing sugar. Several caravans are parked on the site, literally at the foot of the silo. The employees are therefore on site. The workers who live in these private facilities are

electricians who install a dust handling and evacuation system inside the tower. First piece of information: they are all on permanent contracts. So caravans are not only used by people in insecure employment. During discussions on their working and housing conditions, three of them, as well as the site manager, shared how they viewed the evolution of their job sector. They are all young men: the site manager is in his forties, he has been traveling for twenty years, first in the construction industry, then in the building and installation of silos. Their main reason for sleeping in a caravan is the cost. Their travel bonus is around 60 euros per day. However, the nearest "cheap" hotel room costs 55 euros per day. If they travel a few kilometers, they can find rooms at 45 euros. But since they also have to pay for their meals, staying in a caravan is the best solution to offset the hardship of traveling far from their families, by saving some extra cash. Caravans also respond to their need to travel to find new markets beyond the area where their company is located, namely the Moselle and its river silos. Poor harvests in the previous years delayed investments in grain storage equipment, so they had to shift their activity towards sugar, and travel from port to port. They previously travelled exclusively in the north-east of France and after this construction job they had to go to Dunkirk. The oldest employee explains that when he started, he stayed at a hotel. However, while travel bonuses have not changed, the price of economy hotels has risen. For instance, twenty years ago, a room in a F1 hotel (formerly called Formula 1) offered rooms for 99 francs (approx. 15 euros), and now they cost 35 euros. This price is set by an algorithm which, ever since this hotel chain was created by the Accor Group, seems to have been indexed against the legal travel allowance (Mangin, 2010), in anticipation of business trips being made towards commercial areas. In 2017, this allowance for accommodation and breakfast had risen to 48.90 euros per day for the departments outside the Paris region (where it was higher). This base rate, which is tax free, could be supplemented with negotiated add-ons. However, collective agreements in the metalworking industry provide for smaller travel allowances than in the construction industry, where our respondent began his career, even though in the construction industry, bonuses have not increased either. Finally, according to these employees, the budget hotel industry is quickly becoming saturated, as it is being used more and more for emergency accommodation, thus reducing room vacancies for travelling employees. Indeed, these hotel rooms are used as an adjustment variable: the number of hotel nights available for emergency accommodation rose from 9,802 in 2007 to 41,044 in 2016, according to the Senate's report <sup>22</sup> on this sector. In March 2017, Accor sold 62 F1 hotels to the SAMU Social (an emergency medical service organization operating in French cities), before launching a new collection of dormitory-style accommodations. It is therefore a struggle to compete for space in these facilities, to the extent that travelling workers partly explain their decision to opt for mobile housing on an unfavorable rationing (whether real or perceived) of available hotel rooms. As a result, according to them, workers will keep using caravans for the foreseeable future. Under these conditions, the site manager considers that living in a caravan on site is "awesome" because it is even cheaper than camping. One of the workers even lives on site with his partner and children. They have a stable address and accommodation, but they live in a caravan most of the year.

This choice of mobile housing, which is the result of the industrial system, is therefore not unrelated to the economy hotel industry. Travel is justified as an attempt to compensate for a decrease in activity near a place of residence, and caravans are chosen, partly due to the fact that economy hotel rooms are rationed. These workers did not request any administrative domiciliation, but they thought that it could be a solution if they had to make long trips to places too far from their homes to allow for frequent commutes.

There are spatial regularities: these silos are close to grain silos which were meant to be destroyed three years later, and replaced by a production site for blades and offshore wind turbines, thus attracting a large number of workers.

### **- Camping: a growing solution that is hard to measure**

Finally, we must mention how work and tourism can become intertwined in some statistics. In 2016, 112,000,000 overnight stays were recorded in campsites, with professional organizations (Favre, 2017, p. 4) estimating that 9% of those were in the off-season (i.e. from November to March). Stays during this period are less connected to tourism or agriculture: here we find employees on temporary migrations for

other business sectors, people in training, etc. In the so-called residential campsites, which offer more than 200,000 pitches per year, some inhabitants are also workers on extended travel, for example in the campsites around the Flamanville site, including the one in the town where the EPR is based, but also those in Pieux, Siouville, Saint-Germain-le-Gaillard and Surtainville.

According to Rodolphe Dodier, who has studied the motorhome population, the number of retirees is largely overestimated (Dodier 2018, p. 7), as authorities underestimate how mobile housing is connected to the labor markets. He also notes that the significant increase in vehicle registrations (more than 22,000 in 2017/2018, more than 23,000 in 2018/2019) does not include self-converted vans, and therefore falls far short of the real figure.

## **A SURVEY ON SOCIAL NETWORKS TO CAPTURE THE PROFILE OF SEASONAL WORKERS IN MOBILE HOUSING**

We can study virtual communities on Facebook using surveys. We tested this mainly on the Facebook group mentioned earlier, “Seasonal workers in mobile housing.” But other general groups, like “Camtars peinard” (“Chilled-out vanlife”), or highly specialized ones (for rope access technicians or deep-sea divers), provided useful information (and respondents). Although the response rate was low (1.5% response rate to messages sent to members and to the advert posted on the group) some trends emerged. A total of 111 responses were provided on the Google Form link, 42 by direct contributions, and 3 by phone interviews.

The average age of respondents was around 30, with a few in their forties, fifties and sixties, still working. While mobile housing therefore mainly concerns young people and retirees, this isn’t always the case. Some enter this kind of life after their forties, even though in the sample, the average age is 24 years. It is worth noting that the administration has seen a recent evolution: the arrival of seasonal agricultural workers aged over thirty (Depeyrot, Magnan, Michel, Laurent, 2019). This challenges the view that mobile housing is all youth and retirees. Between these two extremes, people opt for mobile housing at other stages of their life, for similar reasons. While the vast majority started their neo-nomadic lifestyle when they got some seasonal or temporary work, 23% already held such a job, while 10% were nomadic beforehand. Agriculture and tourism represent just under two-thirds of the seasonal workers who answered the survey, but manufacturing, social work, transport and construction are also represented, as well as circus performers and street theatre artists. This finding confirms the link between housing, mobility and temporary work, since working without a fixed workplace usually leads to entering a nomadic lifestyle. But people can become nomadic if they are unemployed or without income, or for other reasons even, hence the increase in mobile housing even when temporary work is decreasing, in periods of economic contraction, as we had already seen when studying laundromats (Le Marchand 2016).

In 2015, an insider researcher (she was living in mobile housing), who was training to become a special education teacher, was a member of one of the Facebook groups under the username Mârii Kâ. She carried out a similar survey on social networks, which revealed that people had already been living in mobile housing for an average of three years. In 2021, the sample showed that this average has gone up to 6 years. The sample sizes are still too limited for these figures to be highly reliable (this is a provisional result), but the fact that nomads are tending to extend the period of their lives that they spend in mobile housing is a hypothesis that could also explain the growing number of people concerned. Indeed, nomads seem to be staying longer in this way of life and working - and entry flows alone cannot explain these group dynamics, we must also consider how long this period of life lasts.

Meanwhile, one other question that often comes up is this: how many members of these Facebook groups are actually seasonal neo-nomads? Of the respondents, 16% did not fully fit into this group: 9 had left this way of life after a few years, 10 were seasonal but not in mobile housing, 3 were neo-nomads but not seasonal workers (they had permanent contracts), and 3 more were friends or relatives of others group members. Here again, this finding is a fragile one, but it suggests that the non-nomadic

members of this virtual community are nonetheless involved in it in the real world, constituting a network around the population of seasonal workers living in mobile housing.

This entry point via social networks therefore makes it possible to look at group dynamics, at the intersection of several professional worlds.

## CONCLUSION

While these observations still largely need to be consolidated, the upward trend is clear. It is explained by newcomers and longer periods of life being spent in mobile housing. Can we estimate a population of employees in mobile housing? If we follow the data from the CCAS, the official figure of 70,000 can only be a fraction of the true total population, given how little this form of domiciliation is used. But it is simply impossible to give a proportion, to know if this figure represents, say, half or one tenth of the total number of people concerned.

What then of the attempt to estimate the potential mobile housing population, by way of the transport survey?

As noted previously, in 2017, 82,496 people declared working outside their home department and accessing the site on foot, and 42,263 by bicycle, making a total of 127,459.

While there may be errors in these figures (default registration of employer's address), some employees may be in mobile housing and commuting to work by public transport or by car, and they must be added to the total.

There are 885,642 workers, skilled and unskilled, working outside their home departments. If we look at surveys on occupational accidents, or produced by ourself, which provide data on mobile home practices, they ranged from 50% (rope access technicians) to 15% (nuclear maintenance). The average between the low rate and the high rate gives a figure of 287,833, to which we must add employees classified in intermediate professions (nurses, wind turbine maintenance technicians), and even executives, who also use this type of housing.

Under these conditions, the figure of at least 300,000 people living in a permanent or temporary form of mobile housing for professional reasons does not seem to be an overestimate.

These practices create temporary living spaces, which can have a seasonal existence. It is also possible that some of these places become part of a long and discontinuous history of temporary migrations, whether in the industrial, agricultural or tourism sectors. The contemporary form could be that of the special economic zone (SEZ, zone économique spéciale). As such, this phenomenon would have spatial contours, partly shifting, according to the job sites and the seasons. While special economic zones in Europe were first analyzed as tax exemption areas, with more or less defined institutional limits to attract international investments, they also emerge from the current practices and changes underway in the world of work. This is why they can be defined by the rules of remuneration, recruitment and the social groups that are present there. Nathan Lillie compares the special economic zone to a merchant ship, as both operate as workplace and living space (Lillie 2010), citing the example of the nuclear site in Finland, entrusted to the Areva/Siemens consortium. The Flamanville campsite, near the French EPR site, is used by Portuguese and Ukrainian workers, just like we might see onboard a merchant ship. From this angle, the special economic zone can become a space for mobile and light housing, more or less tolerated, justified by economic imperatives, where "floating populations" live. The Covid crisis, with lockdowns and rationing, has had many consequences on the people living in these areas, often poorly protected and not benefiting from reduced working hours or furloughs (Le Marchand 2020). But this pandemic has also revealed how important their contributions are to economic and social life, a fact that becomes especially salient when they are absent.

# INTERVIEWS AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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They were carried out at: Urcel July 2015 and July 2017 Le Havre sugar silos construction site Sept 2017 Creuse Department (Gathering of self-converted vans) October 2017 Galati (Romania) May 2018, Paris, CNBA, December 2018, Vers solidaires festival in Saint Gobain, August 2019 Telephone and internet interviews with seasonal workers: November 2017 February 2021

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## Notes

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## **Mobility**

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

En savoir plus x

## **Teleworking**

The remote performance of a professional activity away from the company by means of telecommunication tools, at home or in a telecentre.

En savoir plus x

## Lifestyle

A lifestyle is a composition of daily activities and experiences that give sense and meaning to the life of a person or a group in time and space.

En savoir plus x

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Associated Thematics :

### Lifestyles

- Diversity of lifestyles
- Housing
- Digital technologies
- Rhythms of everyday life
- Work

### Theories

- Methods
- 

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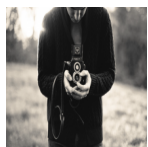


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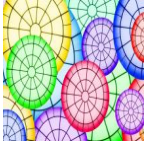
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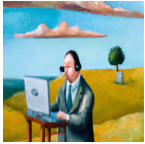
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