

Universitatea din București
Școala Doctorală de Asistență Socială

Summary of the Habilitation Thesis

"Housing as a dimension of social vulnerability. Theoretical perspectives and directions of intervention in social assistance"

Field of habilitation:
Social Work

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Bucharest, 2026

“Housing as a dimension of social vulnerability. Theoretical perspectives and directions of intervention in social assistance”

This thesis presents a nuanced examination of the critical role of housing within the landscape of social vulnerability and exclusion in Romania. Drawing from over three decades of academic and empirical research, I develop a comprehensive program of investigation that links theoretical constructs with extensive fieldwork, aiming to deepen understanding and influence policy and practice in social work.

The work begins with an overview of my academic journey, which spanned more than thirty years and was characterized by consistent thematic focus and progressive development. The early stages of this journey coincided with Romania’s post-communist reconstruction of social policies and the emergence of a new social assistance paradigm. My initial academic formation in sociology at the University of Bucharest—obtained during the early 1990s—was motivated by a profound interest in the social transformations arising from Romania’s transition, especially concerning vulnerable groups. The initial research efforts concentrated on analyzing the sources of poverty during this period, notably the structural changes that generated new forms of social exclusion.

Throughout subsequent years, the research emphasis shifted towards understanding social policies—particularly those related to housing—and their impact on marginalized populations, including homeless individuals and the Roma community. This progression of research was motivated by the recognition that housing issues could serve as a microcosm of broader social inequalities, revealing mechanisms whereby social exclusion is reproduced and reinforced.

My engagement with empirical studies began during his tenure at the Institute of Research on Quality of Life of the Romanian Academy—where he worked from 1995 until 2008—enabling active participation in national and international projects. These investigations explored phenomena such as homelessness, residential segregation, and the socio-economic conditions of vulnerable groups, providing valuable data that informed theoretical insights. The research methodology was diverse, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods, which allowed for multifaceted analyses of housing conditions, social policies, and their effects.

A central theme throughout this academic trajectory is the recognition of housing not merely as a property or a legal right but as a core social resource that influences individuals’ capacity for social participation, well-being, and integration. Early research efforts viewed housing mainly through the lenses of economics and law; however, over time, a paradigm shift occurred—placing housing as an essential dimension within the broader framework of social exclusion and inclusion. This reorientation was encouraged by international literature, which increasingly conceptualized housing problems as reflections of systemic social inequalities, manifesting through mechanisms such as precarious housing, homelessness, segregation, and discrimination.

Building on this foundation, the thesis develops a theoretical framework that considers housing as a multidimensional construct. It emphasizes that social vulnerability is perpetuated by mechanisms operating within a society marked by economic instability, social discrimination, and institutional neglect. Crucially, the research demonstrates that housing deficits contribute to a cycle of social marginalization—limiting access to education, employment, health, and social services—and that addressing housing issues is vital for fostering social cohesion and reducing inequalities.

The thesis also offers an innovative conceptual contribution: the positioning of housing exclusion as a distinct, yet interconnected form of social exclusion. Previously, research in

Romania often fragmented housing from other social issues; this work advocates for an integrated approach that situates housing as a central component of social welfare and well-being. This perspective allows for a more comprehensive analysis of phenomena such as homelessness, residential segregation, and the marginalization of Roma communities, linking them through mechanisms of social exclusion that are reinforced by policy failures, economic transitions, and socio-cultural discrimination.

Empirically, the research examines the realities of vulnerable populations, revealing the complex processes that reproduce housing precarity. For example, the conditions faced by homeless individuals and Roma communities are characterized not only by material deprivation but also by social stigma, institutional exclusion, and limited access to affordable, adequate housing. These phenomena are often interconnected with broader social dynamics, including demographic changes, economic instability, and the evolution of social policies.

The thesis underscores the importance of understanding housing as a vital infrastructure for social well-being and an essential component of social protection. I advocate moving away from viewing housing solely as a market commodity or legal entitlement and towards recognizing it as a social resource whose accessibility and quality are fundamental for individual and collective resilience.

Furthermore, the thesis emphasizes the role of social work and social policies in both understanding and addressing housing-related vulnerabilities. Over the years, my research has contributed to developing an integrated approach that combines theoretical insights with practical interventions—aimed at prevention, social inclusion, and exclusion reduction. The work stresses that effective social interventions require a multidimensional perspective, considering the economic, familial, community, and institutional factors that influence housing conditions.

The latter part of the thesis explores strategic recommendations and future research directions. Recognizing the fragmented nature of existing research—focused mainly on specific vulnerable groups or sectoral policies—I propose a unifying conceptual framework. This framework treats housing as a fundamental element of social well-being, embedded within a broader analysis of social exclusion and inequality. It aims to integrate various themes—such as homelessness, Roma social integration, urban segregation, and the impacts of demographic aging—within a systematic, interdisciplinary research agenda.

The work also advocates for strengthening the connection between academic research, education, and policy development. It emphasizes the need for fostering interdisciplinary collaborations, training new generations of researchers and practitioners, and participating actively in international networks. These efforts are essential to develop innovative, evidence-based policies capable of addressing emerging social vulnerabilities exacerbated by ongoing demographic, economic, and social transformations.

In conclusion, this habilitation thesis makes a significant contribution to understanding the critical importance of housing in the context of social exclusion and vulnerability in Romania. Its long-term empirical investigations, combined with original theoretical developments, demonstrate that housing is a social resource fundamental to individual well-being and societal cohesion. The thesis advocates for a holistic, integrated approach—both in research and in social practice—that recognizes housing as a key element in reducing inequality and fostering social inclusion.

This work underlines the necessity of continuous research, training, and policy innovation to respond effectively to the evolving challenges posed by social vulnerabilities, especially those related to housing. It aims to contribute to building a more equitable society where access to adequate housing is recognized and pursued as a fundamental social right.