This thesis examines which men ended up in the so-called state benevolent colonies in Belgium between 1870 and 1930 after being convicted for vagrancy or begging. In second instance, we examined both the role of the central and local governments in creating and implementing the legislation concerning vagrancy and beggary. We can not fully understand the interventions of the government though, without looking at the people who were the subject of this policy. Uncovering their individual characteristics made it possible to determine how the authorities put their objectives into practice. The novelty of this thesis is situated in the fact that we focus on the perspective of the condemned men themselves. As such, we were able to shed light on their agency.

A representative sample of 851 individual incarceration records out of more than 42,000 preserved records, from the period 1870 to 1930 formed the basis for this research. This unique source provides insight into the life of the convicts at the most individual level. This source material enabled us to investigate in a systematic way the characteristics of those men that ended up in the state-benevolent colonies. As such, we believe to have contributed not only to the Belgian social history, but even in a broader European historical context, where similar interventions by governments had taken place in this period. Furthermore, this study can stimulate further research on the comparison between the original intentions and the outcome of policies.

For this study we opted to combine both qualitative and a quantitative research methods. Concerning the characteristics of the condemned, we started with four themes based on contemporary assumptions: ‘mobility’, ‘crime’ and ‘lack of ties with family’ or ‘work’.

The thesis is divided into nine chapters. In the first chapter we discuss the specific (European) contexts in which the problem of vagrancy and begging was identified by governments. This chapter also deals with the specifics of the Belgian vagrancy legislation. In the second chapter we focussed on how men could end up in the Belgian state benevolent colonies. It concerned a ‘sorting system’ in which various actors played their part. Chapter three is the stepping stone to the actual analysis of the individual detention files. In this chapter we examine the usefulness of the source thoroughly and critically. In the next four chapters, we subsequently analysed the information from the individual detention files each time with a specific thematic approach. First mobility (chapter four), then crime (chapter five), and finally familial bonds (chapter six) and work (chapter seven) were discussed. In chapter eight we took a closer look at life within the walls of the colonies and the impact of a controlled regime that was characterized by forced labour. In the last chapter we tried to identify groups of convicts, based on certain clusters of characteristics of the convicted men. Remarkably, the life courses within these groups could differ greatly. As such, we were able to expose the specific groups that were targeted most often by the central legislation.

In this thesis we have tried to contribute to the knowledge of the people who were considered vagrant or beggar. Up till now, our knowledge about the people behind the practice of the vagrancy policy was very limited. Only a few popular publications suggested some general characteristics, albeit in a typically clichéd manner. We have demonstrated that the group of men who were sentenced as vagrants or beggars was very heterogeneous. These men possessed divergent characteristics, which were often at odds with the stereotypical assumptions. Yet they
were all brought together in the same institutions under the headings of vagrant or beggar. This indicates that the problems of vagrancy and begging that governments thought they should resolve, were not the same as the problems experienced by the people involved. Consequently, the solutions given by the government to the vagrancy problem were not tailored to the needs of the men themselves. Only if there were no alternatives, they opted for a 'voluntarily' imprisonment in a state benevolent colony.