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# Do Statistics Help our Understanding of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion? – Creating a Methodology for Harmonised Data Collection across a Territory

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- › **Abstract** *The fight against homelessness and housing exclusion requires a better understanding of the phenomenon, as much from a qualitative as from a quantitative point of view. On the latter, the enumeration of homeless people remains a demanding job in many European countries. In Belgium since 2008, several actors – public authorities, researchers, field operators – have gathered to create a harmonised tool of data collection for Wallonia (the French-speaking part of the country). In this article, we bring to light the challenges that arise from such an approach. The data from this first round of data collection is presented in order to give an overview of housing exclusion in this territory but especially to highlight the biases detected during the undertaking. We consider, in particular, the question of unique identification of people frequenting several services and even several territories, and the question of the inevitable time lapse between the collection, processing and usage of such field data.*
- › **Keywords** *\_ Belgium, statistics, methodology, census, results.*

From the middle of the 1990s<sup>1</sup> in most countries in Europe, homelessness became a prominent social issue (Damon, 2002). From the start, experts on the phenomenon of homelessness were faced with recurrent questions: who are the homeless people and through what processes does this type of exclusion take shape? But mostly, how many homeless people are there? Is this phenomenon in constant expansion or do current public policies manage to reduce this extreme kind of exclusion? In Belgium, these realities are even more difficult to grasp because the sector that fights against homelessness and housing exclusion is under the authority of different political bodies. The State Secretary for the fight against poverty at the national level, the Ministers of Social Welfare at the regional level and the local authorities – in particular through the CPAS<sup>2</sup> – are all involved and often seem to have differing views. However, all parties seem to agree on the need to count the number of homeless people efficiently.

In Brussels, a widespread movement for the enumeration of homeless people started in 2008 when mobile teams were sent out across the city on the same night to identify all people who were living in a public space. The visitation statistics of all temporary accommodation facilities located within the city completed the inventory made by the mobile teams. Using this method, 1,944 people were counted in 2010. 611 of those could be included in the first two categories of the ETHOS typology (329 on the street and 282 in emergency accommodations).<sup>3</sup>

In the Walloon Region,<sup>4</sup> the reproduction of such a process seemed complex, even impossible, because of the size of the territory and because of the number of institutions involved on a local level. In addition, even if a count enabled us to obtain a general number with regard to the size of the population in question, it would not provide for the inclusion of other fundamental indicators, such as family composition and health status. In fact, the conditions of this kind of count – done at night

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<sup>1</sup> In Belgium, the decriminalisation of vagrancy and begging dates back to 1993 and a programme called *Programme d'urgence pour une société plus solidaire* (emergency programme for a more consolidated society), which led to the gradual closing of workhouses and, hence, the increased presence of homeless people in public spaces. Several citizen movements and an extensive media campaign forced public authorities to finance the opening of several services for emergency accommodation in Brussels and other parts of the country.

<sup>2</sup> Public centres of social action; institutions regulated by the organic law of 8 July 1976.

<sup>3</sup> Source: [www.lastrada.brussels/portail/fr/](http://www.lastrada.brussels/portail/fr/)

<sup>4</sup> Belgium is composed of three regions and three communities. The Walloon Region covers the southern French-speaking part of the country and is the competent authority in the fields of economy, employment, agriculture, water policy, housing, public works, energy, transport, environment, spatial and urban planning, conservation of nature, credit, foreign trade, and tutelary power over 'provinces', 'municipalities' and 'intercommunales'. The area of homelessness was transferred from the communities to the regions in the 1990s. [www.belgium.be/fr/la\\_belgique/pouvoirs\\_publics/regions/competences#sthash.xzUoECuO.dpuf](http://www.belgium.be/fr/la_belgique/pouvoirs_publics/regions/competences#sthash.xzUoECuO.dpuf)

and simultaneously in different locations – limit the time that can be devoted to each individual. Thus, such an enumeration can offer a reliable answer to the question ‘how many homeless people are there?’ but it doesn’t answer the question: ‘who are they?’. Yet, this thorough knowledge is fundamental to the creation of public policies and the implementation of suitable solutions in the field.

To meet the challenge of counting the number of homeless people in its territory, the public authority of Wallonia assigned this mission to the IWEPS<sup>5</sup> and the Walloon ‘Relais Sociaux’<sup>6</sup> in close collaboration with its administration. The goal of the resulting task force was to implement a statistical tool allowing the harmonisation of data collection and the construction of indicators for the comparison and collection of local data. This work has provided an estimate of the number of people excluded from housing – taking the majority of the categories established by FEANTSA’s ETHOS typology into account – as well as a better understanding of the main features of these people, which can lead to improved direct responses in the field. While the implementation process was started in 2008, this tool was only used for the first time in the field in 2012. Since then, the collection has taken place every year. The results of this first edition will be presented in this article.

### **Implementation of a Harmonised Tool: What Challenges?**

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The involvement of the Relais Sociaux in this process can be justified by their local coordination role in policies of social assistance for homeless people and people excluded from housing in the Walloon Region. However, although participation of these groups and their partners enables a full picture to be painted of the reality of homelessness, the multiplication of viewpoints brings many challenges. We have identified two main challenges (see below). One is the definition of a common scope in the data gathered, and the other is the use of a common vocabulary when collecting and interpreting the data.

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<sup>5</sup> Institut wallon d’évaluation, de la prospective et de la statistique (Walloon Institute of Evaluation, Prospective and Statistics)

<sup>6</sup> The Relais Social (plural: Relais Sociaux) is both a coordinating body and a network of public and active associative institutions in the assistance of populations in ‘very precarious situations’ (homeless and inadequately housed people; rough sleepers; prostitutes; drug users). There are seven ‘Relais Sociaux’ in the Walloon Region, regulated by the legislative decree of 17 July 2003 on social inclusion and set up under Chapter XII of that law.

## Determining which Data to Collect

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Up until 2008 there was no harmonised data collection initiative in the region. However, Walloon operators had their own mechanisms by which to respond to the increasingly precise instructions of the subsidising authorities when drafting activity reports. During the first meetings in the IWEPS offices after the winter of 2008, rather than having to start from scratch, those involved were faced with a multitude of differing tools built according to local needs. The first step was to single out a common base from the hundreds of categories used in the existing processes.

At this preliminary stage, the task force<sup>7</sup> was faced with two imperatives. One was to maintain a link to existing tools in order not to upset field operators by introducing a totally new and unknown system. The other was to find the right balance between wanting to obtain precise information, and restrictions on the services responsible for data gathering. So, while consensus was reached on a number of categories, regular feedback from field workers obligated the task force to reconsider certain previously concluded agreements.

Two types of data were gathered: individual data linked to homeless people and collective data linked to the functioning of services. While the form for individual data is used by all field operators, the form linked to services was created taking into account the specificities of the spheres of activity in which these services operate. In fact, the legal base behind the Relais Sociaux organises its actions in four spheres of activity: night shelters, social emergency, day centres and street work. However, the types of services offered within these spheres of activity were never defined and a first pooling of data of the different Relais Sociaux showed the need to define the nature and composition of these spheres. 'Day centres' proved the most difficult to define as they include, a priori, all services operating during the daytime. Here again, establishing a common definition required going back and forth many times with field workers. The result is a very broad definition (*a service that operates during the daytime and that applies an unconditional and low access threshold*), which has led to the creation of a 'catch-all' sphere that includes very diverse services. To tackle this, sub-categories of this sphere have been created: 'day centre – low threshold'; 'day centre – food aid'; 'day centre – health'; 'day centre – social support for housing search'; 'day centre – prostitution'. This solution has proven only partly satisfying because one service could be included in different sub-categories. The decision was thus made to include each service in the sub-category representing the service's primary mission.

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<sup>7</sup> Coordinated by the IWEPS and composed of a member of each Relais Social in charge of statistics, as well as a representative of the Walloon administration and the Walloon cabinet of social action for certain steps of the process.

After defining spheres of activity, identifying the categories (the variables and their modalities) that best reflect the functioning of the services required numerous debates, particularly items within the 'day centres' sphere. So, whilst for 'night shelters' the category 'number of overnight stays' was obviously the main indicator, the category 'number of daytime stays' for 'day centres' has required more sub-categories, in particular to distinguish the simple use by a person of a room from a person who has engaged in a more in-depth interview with a social worker. The interventions practiced by the teams of street workers also raised a number of discussions. The concepts of 'adhesion', 'contact' and 'follow-up' had different meanings depending on the Relais Social involved.

While harmonisation with regard to the spheres of activity was complicated, harmonising individual data from all services – regardless of the spheres of activity – has been even more complex. We present two examples to illustrate this when we talk about sensitive data later. However, we can already mention an item here that was taken out of the data collection after the first collection round. This withdrawal generated a lively debate within the task force as to the question of orientations.

The form for individual data was initially drafted to include the types of referrals that were available to each individual that showed up at a service. Because one service can't respond to all needs, these referrals were meant to show the networking of services in a certain local territory. Following the first year of data collection and data processing at regional level, this item brought up too many questions to be treated validly. A number of services questioned the relevance of this item because referrals are continuous in light of the demands of clients, while data collection takes place at a given time. It was therefore withdrawn at regional level but a number of local Relais Sociaux have maintained it in line with the agreement that they maintain a common base form but can add any additional items they desire.

Finally, setting aside the need to choose the most convincing data, the greatest difficulty relating to the collection of individual data, which has not yet been overcome, is duplication. The same individual is, indeed, likely to visit different services in the same territory, or even move from one territory to another. Yet, every service has its own database, even if they all use the same form. Currently, not many social services are willing to accept the merging of these databases. So although different ideas for the use of a unique identifier for each individual have been put forward, at this point in time it is not yet possible to gather data relating to the same individual that visits different services. In certain cities, initiatives were started for the same sphere of activity but this willingness is far from general, which hinders a valid enumeration.

Although the visual count at a given moment in time was certainly an effective way of answering the question ‘how many homeless people are there?’, it didn’t make it possible to answer the question ‘who are they?’. This second method that was developed in the Walloon Region makes it possible to paint a better picture of the homeless population and its main features, but it can only report *tendencies* because of the multiple counts inherent in the method.

## **Developing a Common Vocabulary**

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Although certain data categories, particularly at the socio-demographic level, seemed self-evident, they were quickly called into question. The determination of gender, for example, was a problem for some transsexuals who refused to be included in the dual identification ‘man/woman’. To avoid ‘gender unknown’, a new ‘transsexual’ category was added. Likewise, age caused some difficulties. A first issue was the degree of precision of this category: some called for the collection of the date of birth while others preferred to ask for the age and still others still wanted to use age groups. This last option highlighted a new difficulty – namely, that the statistical tool had to be flexible enough to answer all statistical demands from the subsidising authorities. In effect, even though age is frequently asked for in forms, its presentation in age groups is variable (five-year, ten-year...). Eventually, to tackle this difficulty, the first option was chosen for the data collection – date of birth, while the final form given to the IWEPS presented age in age groups (five-year, after a long debate in the task force). This required internal data processing by the Relais Sociaux. However, other concepts have been even more difficult to define, as shown in the examples below.

### ***Agreeing on the very notion of ‘homeless person’***

Although the ETHOS typology has made it possible to categorise the population excluded from housing in different, very precise sub-categories, the notion of a ‘homeless person’ continues to be interpreted in multiple ways, using different residential and time-based criteria. The same difficulty appears at the European level. In Belgium, the concept of homelessness as it appears in different laws is defined in more than one way. The difficulty is even greater due to the different official languages in Belgium. The mission of the Relais Sociaux is to address all people in ‘very precarious situations’. Even if all users of homeless services fit the definition of ‘homeless’ as defined by FEANTSA, day centres and social emergency services deal with populations with a much broader profile. For an analysis of the homeless population, only part of the population should be taken into account or the phenomenon will be overrepresented. On the other hand, the data collection system, as intended, only includes those people that make use of social services;

the existence of a 'dark figure' that includes those who don't use the services (/any longer) is inevitable, although it is probably marginal due to the presence of mobile teams of social workers who also participate in data collection in each territory.

### ***Sensitive data***

Two concepts in particular have raised questions: mental health issues and residency status. The very definition of mental health issues is interpreted in multiple ways. If interpreted strictly, it is limited to diagnosed psychiatric disorders, while a broader view would include states of ill-being, whether permanent or temporary. Inevitably, the choice between these two extremes has repercussions for the numbers presented and, ultimately, for the public policies that are implemented. More than an epistemological debate, in defining the notion of mental health issues in the context of this data collection, the portrayal of the population and potential sources of funding were at stake. On a practical level, the field workers felt uneasy when asked to detect a mental health problem because their professional training didn't prepare them for this. Finally, a third difficulty was that the forms were completed on a voluntary basis and a person could obviously choose not to reveal this type of problem, which is still relatively stigmatised in society. However, despite these difficulties, the item remained on the form. A definition was provided in an *ad hoc* glossary and a distinction was made between explicit mental health problems and problems observed, thus removing any onus on the social worker to make a diagnosis and leaving space for the social worker to share observations if desired. The two categories are processed separately.

The question of residency status is also problematic from an ethical perspective. Although most services that stem from the Relais Sociaux offer unconditional access and/or accommodation, the continuous increase in demand has forced certain providers to review their access policy. Due to the structural organisation of Belgium, the question of residency permits has emerged. In effect, funding for the care of homeless people and funding for those without residency rights fall under two different levels of power: regional and federal. In practice in the field, however, these two populations mix and frequent similar services. Although updating on the presence of people with no residency rights in homeless services highlights the need for co-financing, such data may also lead to the tightening of access in a context of growing demand. This category is also very difficult to define and collect data on, as providing the exact residency status implies very precise legislative knowledge.

### ***A tool not fixed in time***

A third challenge concerns the temporality of data collection. Whereas homelessness is a dynamic process, data collection is done at a given moment and doesn't allow for follow-up over time, which hinders our understanding of the complexity of the homeless person's experience. While a unique identifier would make it possible to eliminate duplicates, it would also make it possible to carry out long-term follow-up. However, in addition to technical difficulties inherent in such follow-up, ethical concerns arise. Likewise, the processing of such a large amount of data requires a lot of time, which entails an inevitable time lag between data collection and the presentation of the data to field workers and public authorities.

### **The Data Collection: A Network of Actors**

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We have highlighted the work conducted by the team in charge of the tool's construction. However, this work has only been possible through close consultation with the social services in the field who, ultimately, are in charge of the data collection for their service users.

Although creating a list of the common and most relevant categories turned out to be a difficult task, it was only the first step. In fact, the forms constructed by the task force were destined for a final encoding; construction of the raw data collection tools was left to the different Relais Sociaux, who were responsible for finding the tools most suitable to their services, taking into account the material realities (available IT tools, for example) and the training and availability of the teams (minimal statistical knowledge, case load per social worker...). In the early stages of data collection, most social services opted for paper forms, which were completed when first meeting the users. These paper forms sometimes differed greatly from one service to another, especially their layout, because the goal was to collect information on all the categories selected at regional level while using forms that remained quite similar to the original data collection forms used in the services. Over time, most sheets have been harmonised, at least at the level of each Relais Social. Furthermore, different services have progressively taken over the encoding of these sheets in their own databases (in Access or SPSS, according to available resources). Here again, these databases differ from one service to another. However, crossovers would be possible if a common identifier could be implemented. The processing of this data is done by the local Relais Social, while processing of the aggregated data is done at the Walloon Regional level by the IWEPS.

These different steps generate a time lapse between the collection of data and their availability for the social workers in charge of collection. This time lapse has sometimes been discouraging for social workers who don't see the fruits of their



work immediately. To counter this discouragement, local feedback has been given by the Relais Sociaux to their services, and at regional level, study days have been organised to present preliminary results, but mainly to enable exchanges between field workers. These have resulted in the improvement of the common data collection tool for future years, notably thanks to the more precise breakdown done within the services, which take local realities and social work more into account. The appropriation of the statistical tools by field workers is essential to the success of such an undertaking. In fact, as they are dealing with multiple difficulties that need to be overcome urgently – the users of these services live in great material and social misery – the professionals can get the impression that this data collection is a waste of time. We therefore have to make sure that the collected data can be useful within their daily jobs, notably by generating a debate around the data (by linking it to its interpretation) but also by showing its importance in arguments presented to the public authorities. In the next section we will present the most important results.

## **Homelessness in the Walloon Region**

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Obtaining a precise count of the number of homeless people and people excluded from housing is a difficult task. The method that is currently implemented did not aim to do this and consequently involves a certain bias. However, this method makes it possible to determine certain tendencies and estimates of the number of people frequenting the services of the Relais Sociaux. 2012 was the first year of harmonised data collection at Walloon level. For this first year of data collection, we will mainly present information on the prevalence of homelessness and its characteristics. As will be shown, the profile of homeless Belgian people shares many similarities with other European countries.

## Between Quantification and Description

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### *Emergency accommodation*

To simplify the presentation of the results of the report drafted by the IWEPS on 2012 data (Deprez and Simon, 2015), we primarily focus on the subject of emergency accommodation, complementing it with data from the other spheres. Indeed, as mentioned previously, the users of emergency accommodation<sup>8</sup> do not represent the whole phenomenon of homelessness; a significant part of this population opts for alternative solutions like staying with family and friends, in reception centres,<sup>9</sup> on the streets or in a squat. However, to concentrate on this fringe element of the population gives an overview of the phenomenon in the French-speaking part of Belgium, across the different cities of Wallonia. The more structures a city has, the more likely it is that the issued figure includes a significant number of duplicates, or people included several times in the count, as they frequent several services at the same time.

At the level of Wallonia as a whole, we counted 58,629 overnight stays in 2012; the majority, 47,260 overnight stays were by males, followed by females (9,767) and children (1,602). This result can be linked directly to the available services: in emergency accommodation, there is a higher number of beds available for men than for women/children in the whole territory of Wallonia, although local disparities exist. The difference in the number of overnight stays between localities is also linked to the density of the population and to the socio-economic characteristics of each of these territories.

Beyond the link with services offered, this male overrepresentation can also be explained by one of the dominant socio-demographic characteristics of the homeless population. Although media discourse and the feedback of social workers points to a feminisation of homelessness, the available figures tend to show that the ratio of men to women remains stable in the homeless population of the French-speaking part of Belgium, at 80% male (Lelubre, 2012).

Besides the need to quantify the phenomenon of homelessness, the statistical data collection makes it possible to deconstruct and objectify observations mentioned by field workers in the sector, which are mostly based on perceptions and impressions.

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<sup>8</sup> For more information on the services that are part of the 'emergency accommodation' sphere, please see the IWEPS report and the activity reports of the different Relais Sociaux.

<sup>9</sup> Not all reception centres are included in the data; only certain cities include this data in their databases.

**Figure 1. Number of overnight stays and number of people in 2012 according to the cities depending on the Relais Sociaux. Numbers from the IWEPS report, Working paper, April 2016.**

	Number of people and overnight stays of children, men and women							
	Children		Women		Men		Total	
	Overnight stays	N	Overnight stays	N	Overnight stays	N	Overnight stays	N
<b>Charleroi</b> (4 services)	938	122	3,213	207	17,262	1,252	21,413	1,581 <sup>10</sup>
<b>Liège</b> (4 services)	0 <sup>11</sup>	0	2,104	182	16,929	1,682	19,033	1,864
<b>Mons</b> (1 service)	1	0	835	76	3,315	220	4,154	296
<b>La Louvière</b> (2 services)	277	12	2,120	74	2,261	175	4,658	261
<b>Verviers</b> (3 services)	386	139	571	117	144	339	1,296	531
<b>Namur</b> (1 service)	0	0	924	61	7,206	329	8,130	393
<b>Total</b>	1,602	/	9,767	/	47,260	/	58,629	/

With regards to the number of people frequenting accommodation services, the big cities of Wallonia (Charleroi and Liège) host the majority of the homeless population. This observation is linked to the services being offered – both accommodation and access to social services, which is greater in the big urban centres.

### **Street work**

A portion of the population does not frequent night shelters or any other social services. Establishing how many people this might be is a complex task that takes a substantial amount of time, also accepting that this number is only an estimate. However, the data collected by street workers gives a first overview, with two caveats. First, not all people encountered in the context of street work are exclusively homeless or can be included in one of the ETHOS categories; in fact, certain street work services have specific missions like working with prostitutes or drug users. In those cases, the people encountered can belong to a broader population than those excluded from housing. Secondly, a significant number of people encountered in the context of street work also frequent night shelters. Consequently, these people are recorded twice.

<sup>10</sup> The number in the chart excludes duplicates thanks to data-sharing among all accommodation services at the local level.

<sup>11</sup> In Liège, the number of overnight stays of children is included in the gender distribution but remains marginal (45 overnight stays).

**Figure 2. Number of people encountered in the context of street work in the different cities of Wallonia where there are Relais Sociaux. Numbers from the IWEPS report, Working paper, April 2016.**

	Number of people			
	Women	Men	Not communicated	Total
<b>Charleroi</b>	137	412	10	559
<b>Liège (partial data)</b>	32	80	0	112
<b>La Louvière</b>	60	202	0	262
<b>Mons</b>	32	130	0	162
<b>Namur (partial data)</b>	11	74	0	85
<b>Tournai</b>	71	111	0	182

Because it is the first data collection based on the harmonised tool, the coverage rate and the quality of the data means that caution is required in the comparison of different territories, particularly in Liège where the figures presented are largely underrepresentative.

### *Day centres – low threshold*

Lastly, to finish the quantification test, it is important to mention some data relating to the day centres. The category 'day centres' is multifaceted and consists of a great number of services with different objectives. To concentrate on the homeless population, we only present data here from services classified as 'low threshold'. These services have users whose residential situation mostly matches the two first categories of the ETHOS typology. By contrast, there are no services listed in this section for Namur or Tournai, which is likely to give an incomplete view of reality.

**Figure 3. Number of stays and number of people encountered in low threshold day centres in the Relais Sociaux cities. Numbers from the IWEPS report, Working paper, April 2016.**

	Number of stays	Number of people			
	Total	Women	Men	Not communicated	Total
<b>Charleroi (2 services)<sup>12</sup></b>	18,673	158	676	425	1,259
<b>Liège (3 services)<sup>13</sup></b>	33,599	134	738	/	872
<b>La Louvière</b>	3,681	35	120	/	155
<b>Mons</b>	3,442	40	160	/	200

In total, 59,395 stays were recorded in the four cities of Wallonia. Liège and Charleroi account for 88% of these, which was also the case for night shelters.

<sup>12</sup> People frequenting both services are included in the total.

<sup>13</sup> People frequenting both services are included in the total.

## Description of the Homeless Population

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Rather than quantification, the goal of this harmonised collection is to be able to outline the main socio-demographic characteristics of people who are homeless or excluded from housing – who they are, family composition, means of support.

To do this, we draw exclusively on the profiles of people who frequent night shelters in Wallonia – the sphere of activity with the most complete individual data. In terms of age, they are largely aged between 25 and 54 (67%) and predominantly male. The predominance of men in the homeless population is a phenomenon that we can find at European level; women tend to be less visible as they use informal solutions, including family, friends and acquaintances (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014). The majority are single (at least 65%), while 13% are accompanied by children, in monoparental or biparental families. In terms of nationalities, the majority are of Belgian origin (53%) and 36% are of foreign origin, of which 29% are non-European. Data relating to residency permits are not sufficiently complete to be taken into account for the analysis.

We know that this population is faced with many difficulties on a daily basis, but three problems appear to be the most common. These are: administrative difficulties (19%), addictions (18%) and financial problems (16%).<sup>14</sup> In addition, mental and physical health problems account for 9% and 8% of the difficulties reported, respectively. The item 'housing' hasn't been included as a difficulty because we can assume that this is a problem for all people in a night shelter. However, all respondents are asked for details on residential status and the subsequent period of data collection has introduced the field 'housing' in the list of difficulties. In terms of revenue, 35% of people in night shelters don't have any source of income, 46% have some resources and we have no data on 18.6% of people. Income type is mainly reintegration income (16%), unemployment benefits (9%) and welfare payments (9%).

The above description of the homeless population in Belgium is similar in many respects to other European countries, particularly the proportion of men in emergency accommodation and the data on age groups. In terms of income, the welfare state is relatively strong in Belgium, unlike other European countries, which explains the number of people benefitting from reintegration income.

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<sup>14</sup> Several difficulties can be collected for the same individual. The percentages presented include all the listed difficulties.

## Conclusion: Recent Debates in Europe on Measuring Homelessness

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Although the statistical analysis of homelessness appears to be a difficult task for the field workers in charge of data collection, the institutions responsible for the processing of this data and the users who are more and more regularly asked to complete – sometimes long – questionnaires before obtaining any assistance, it remains an essential component for the comprehension and better handling of the phenomenon. The experiment conducted in the Walloon territory shows that there are many obstacles to such an undertaking but that these can be overcome. Although the tool presented here still contains numerous flaws, it is a first essential step aimed at the development of efficient public policies to fight homelessness and exclusion from housing. Although the Belgian public authorities now seem convinced that a count is indispensable,<sup>15</sup> we are in favour of one that is not a simple enumeration but a real improvement in our knowledge of the inherent characteristics of this changing and not easily accessible population.

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<sup>15</sup> In 2016, several Belgian universities were mandated by the federal State to implement a coherent counting tool for the whole territory.