
More Than a Roof: A Statistical Profile of Homeless People in Belgium

Tuba Bircan, Ingrid Schockaert and Ides Nicaise

KU Leuven, Belgium

- **Abstract** *Better understanding of hidden groups of poor people in Belgium is highly pertinent and it is essential to collect information on the demographic profile and the living conditions of homeless people and monitor it across time. The goal of this article is to fully exploit the statistical profile and the living conditions of homeless people in Belgium, referring to a unique survey targeting those hard-to-reach groups: the SILC-CUT survey of homeless people, a pilot of a 'satellite survey' to EU-SILC among specific high-risk groups in Belgium. This paper concentrates on several aspects of the living conditions of homeless people such as their demographic profile, including nationality and education, housing situation, income, participation in the labour market, and health profile. Despite sampling challenges and the necessity to simplify and adapt the questionnaires, we can conclude that the use of 'satellite surveys' is feasible and useful. Although it was impossible to compare the full profile of homeless people with the general population, and with the population at risk of (financial) poverty, our analysis confirms the exposure of homeless people to more extreme harm from poverty in several dimensions of life: education, family life, income, work, housing and health.*
- **Keywords** *Homeless policy, satellite surveys, living conditions of homeless, demographics of homeless in Belgium*

Introduction

Despite the existence of indicators in the Eurostat database such as severe housing deprivation, overcrowding and housing affordability, none of the official EU statistics directly cover homelessness (Gosme, 2013; Eurostat, 2015), and consequently neither the number nor the profile of homeless people in EU member states are known (FEANTSA, 2012; Bowpitt *et al.*, 2014; Denvall, 2016). Methodologically speaking, estimations based on the census are not reliable as people without a fixed residence are not included in the census. In addition, homelessness is not a permanent status, with people frequently moving into and out of homelessness. High-profile European social and political debates have incrementally focused on statistics on income, poverty and social exclusion, therefore collecting valid and reliable qualitative and quantitative data with regard to homelessness is crucial.

Research methods for identifying the number and the characteristics of homeless people are controversial and remain in a developmental phase (for an extensive review, see Tipple and Speak, 2009). Key tools for acquiring knowledge about poverty and social exclusion and monitoring the progress from a national or a European perspective are the European Community Household Panel (ECHP) and its successor EU Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC). One of the major shortcomings is the under- or even non-representation of certain (vulnerable) populations in these surveys, due to non-response or because they are not part of the sample framework (Adriaensens *et al.*, 2003). These excluded groups are relevant because of their quantitative magnitude and more importantly their specific living conditions or their extreme poverty. In addition to groups that 'by definition' fall outside the sampling frame, some groups, such as rough sleepers and homeless people, rarely or never stay at their legally registered address and, consequently, cannot be reached.

Better understanding of the characteristics and the living conditions of these hidden groups of poor people in Belgium are highly relevant, as we suspect that they not only suffer from a lack of financial resources, but also from inadequate housing, limited access to essential services, mental and physical health problems, and other forms of exclusion. It is therefore essential to collect information on the demographics and the living conditions of homeless people by monitoring it across time.

The current living conditions of homeless people in Belgium are alarming, as they do not only suffer from the lack of integration into the Belgian society, but they are often faced with inadequate living conditions, limited access to necessary services, mental and physical health problems, and a precarious socio-economic situation.

This paper concentrates on several aspects of the living conditions of homeless people such as their demographic profile, including nationality and education, housing situation, income, participation in the labour market, and health profile. After briefly reviewing homelessness studies and providing some background information about homeless people in Belgium, the data source and the methodology will be discussed. Not only will the demographic characteristics and education levels of these vulnerable groups be examined, but also their housing situation, income and economic status, labour market participation and health status. The goal of this paper is to fully explore the statistical profile and the living conditions of homeless people in Belgium. We must keep in mind that we have attempted to reach as wide a proportion of the target population as possible, but we did not achieve a large sample. We, therefore, abstain from statements about the volume of homelessness. Our profile data should be considered as merely tentative too.

Statistical Studies of Homelessness

The European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) has developed a typology of homelessness and housing exclusion (ETHOS-European Typology of Homelessness) as a means of improving the understanding and measurement of homelessness across Europe (Edgar and Meert, 2006; Edgar *et al.*, 2007; Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2010). This typology distinguishes between ‘rough sleepers’ (who sleep in the open air or in public spaces), homeless people living in shelters, households in insecure housing and households in inadequate housing.

Since the early 1990s, a substantial body of literature about homeless people has emanated from most western and Scandinavian European countries, with minimal pursuit from other European countries (Avramov, 1995; Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2010). Many countries such as Italy (2000), Spain (2004), Portugal (2005), France (2012), and Slovakia (2016) have undertaken national counts of people sleeping in public places or rough sleepers.

There have been significant increases in housing exclusion and homelessness in EU Member States during the crisis. Recent data from a variety of Member States indicate “an on-going trend of increasing homelessness in many contexts” (see SPC, 2014; Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014). Likewise, FEANTSA (2012) states that during the last decade, a substantial increase in homelessness in many EU countries is recorded in the national monitoring reports. The OECD (2017) confirms that homelessness has increased in recent years in Denmark, England, France, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands and New Zealand, but has fallen in Finland and the United States, based on the data from the 2016 OECD Questionnaire on Affordable and

Social Housing (QuASH 2016) for 29 out of 35 reporting countries. Estimates of the number of homeless people (2015 or latest year available) are missing for Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Iceland, Israel, Italy, Korea, Malta, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Switzerland and Turkey.

Belgium's homeless people should be enumerated as part of the census (FEANTSA, 2008). The results of the 2011 censuses in Belgium indicate "0" homeless. It is obvious that "0" stands for the nonexistence of numbers rather than nonexistence of homeless people in Belgium. Since 2008, there has been a biennial count of homeless and inadequately housed people in the Brussels-Capital Region by *La Strada*, which is a support centre for homeless people in Brussels. Based on the count of the night of 7 November 2016, a total of 3,386 people were counted, of whom 35% were roofless (in public spaces or in emergency or crisis shelters), 25% were homeless (in temporary accommodation) and 39% were living in inadequate housing (including squats). The total number of rough sleepers and homeless people living in shelters in Belgium was estimated to be 18,700 by the FEANTSA in 2016. They particularly pointed out a 33% increase in the number of homeless in the Brussels region in the last four years and a 96% increase in the last 8 years.

SILC-CUT: Data and Methodology

Homeless people are one of the main excluded groups from the EU-SILC (Survey of Income and Living Conditions). Therefore, as the data source, we refer to a unique survey targeting those hard-to-reach groups: the SILC-CUT survey of homeless people (2010; funded by the Belgian Science Policy, BELSPO). The Belgian data of EU-SILC for 2009 will also be referred to, to enable comparisons among homeless people and the Belgian poor.

The SILC-CUT survey was carried out in 2010 as a pilot of a 'satellite survey' to EU-SILC among specific high-risk groups in Belgium, including homeless people, using simplified versions of the EU-SILC questionnaires so that comparisons could be made with the 'mainstream' EU-SILC data (SILC-CUT project – see Schockaert *et al.*, 2012; Nicaise and Schockaert, 2014 for methodological details). The concept of 'satellite surveys' means that targeted surveys are carried out among specific subpopulations with an increased poverty risk, using questionnaires and methods that are adapted to the realities of these populations and yet as comparable as possible with the instruments of the main EU-SILC survey.

The SILC-CUT research was funded by the Agora Research Programme of the Belgian Science Policy (<http://www.belspo.be>) upon request from the "Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service" (<http://www.combatpoverty.be>), which was established by the Federal Government, the Regions and Communities

as a platform for co-ordination of the fight against poverty, insecurity and social exclusion. Simplified versions of the EU-SILC questionnaire were used in order to maximize response rates, while keeping the data from our surveys as comparable as possible with the mainstream EU-SILC data; on the other hand, we also included a few additional questions on essential topics relating to the living conditions of homeless people such as access to water and sanitary equipment.

The SILC-CUT data collection was organised with the assistance of an interdisciplinary team and finalised between 1 February 2010 and 31 July 2010. A total of 445 interviews were conducted; of those, 277 were with homeless people.

Our sample focuses on rough sleepers and people living in shelters. The sample of homeless people was drawn through non-random, stratified indirect sampling in collaboration with organisations and services working with the target group. The two-stage sampling process, beginning with a selection of intermediaries, obviously involved a risk of missing the most marginalised people in our target groups – particularly rough sleepers. In order to reach this target group, various channels were used: NGOs, street workers and the snowball method. However, the snowball method yielded only 5% of the completed interviews. Homeless people were addressed during begging or in sites where they gather such as bridges and stations. For another 15%, other recruitment channels were used, such as interventions in the streets, in stations, or in abandoned buildings. The majority of the respondents (79%) were contacted through the intermediary of a social service or community workers. Of all individuals contacted for an interview, 70% completed the interview.¹

Survey research among homeless people involves several challenges, beginning with sampling. For organisations working with homeless people, registration of such a relatively hidden group is a sensitive issue. In most cases, the information is limited to the name, gender and sometimes the age of the person, as many homeless people do not provide information about themselves even if they possess an identity card.

For the second sampling stage, interviewers were asked to select their respondents as randomly as possible. The pilot survey had revealed that the use of client lists for random sampling within organisations was either difficult due to obstacles such as mental health problems of sampled individuals, or that such lists were not available. The interviewers had to make use of a selection and communication sheet on which the contact was recorded per gender and age group, as well as the outcome of it (taking the interview, refusal or appointment) and the reason for non-response.

¹ Rates of (un)reachability could not be measured as interviews mainly occurred on the spot, or in the buildings of collaborating organisations.

Quotas were set per region on the basis of different sources that provided approximate information: for homeless people, we benefited from registers of the associations of shelters. Table 1 gives an overview of the anticipated and achieved quota per cell for the target group.

Table 1. Anticipated / achieved number of interviews

Flanders 91 / 141			Brussels 71 / 68			Wallonia 88 / 68		
Men 61 / 89		Women 30 / 52	Men 57 / 41		Women 14 / 27	Men 64 / 38		Women 24 / 30
Rough sl. 13 / 19		Shelter 78 / 120	Rough sl. 11 / 19		Shelter 60 / 49	Rough sl. 13 / 26		Shelter 75 / 42
< 30 47 / 50	30-50 31 / 66	>50 13 / 21	< 30 30 / 15	30-50 29 / 37	>50 12 / 16	< 30 37 / 17	30-50 36 / 39	>50 15 / 10

All quotas for women were exceeded, partly because women appear to make up a growing proportion of service users, but also because they tend to have less addiction or mental health problems, or simply because the response rates among women were higher.

Despite the valuable help received from the organisations working with homeless people, some restrictions were imposed in terms of time that could be spent in centres for the survey (as the presence of an interviewer might deter people from using the centre), and in terms of the selection of respondents. In some cases, the organisations arranged the appointments with respondents themselves or it was agreed not to interview respondents with acute alcohol or drug addiction problems or in a state of poor (mental) health.

Non-response can be attributed to the unreachability of targeted persons rather than refusals or failed interviews. Overall, only 29% of the contacted respondents refused to participate: either they had 'no interest', 'no time' or (most often) 'no reason'. The willingness to cooperate was higher among younger respondents. Language barriers reduced the response rates to some extent too. When interviews with non-native speakers who accepted to take part in the survey were postponed until an interpreter could be present, respondents often did not show up at the next appointment.

A final issue to be mentioned relates to the interviewer team. During the survey period, it became clear that the psychosocial aspect of the training and the supervision of the interview team were underestimated. During interviews, confrontation with the dire living conditions and the sometimes dramatic life experiences of the target groups touched several interviewers deeply and there often was a feeling of powerlessness. One interviewer dropped out, but many struggled with

the assignment. Moreover, they were faced with suicidal ideas, criminal practice, police interventions and cases of abuse by aid organizations – situations in which support and advice to the interviewer were necessary. We therefore advise other research teams to provide the necessary preparation and guidance of interviewers in future surveys.

In spite of the limitations to the research methodology which ought to be recognised, this dataset provides a unique opportunity to illustrate the characteristics and the living conditions of this hidden group of poor people and this knowledge is certainly useful for policy makers and organisations working with target groups such as rough sleepers and other homeless people.

Socio-demographic Profile

Age and gender

The SILC-CUT sample consisted of 61% men and 39% women. Although the homeless population is clearly dominated by men, the shares of women in our samples were greater than we had expected based on material from other sources. This suggests that women may be somewhat overrepresented in our studies due to higher response rates.

Table 2. Age distribution

	Min.	1st Quartile	Median	Mean	3rd Quartile	Max.
Male	18	29	41	39.84	48	80
Female	18	27	38	37.53	46	66
Total	18	28	39	38.95	47	80

The age–gender distribution is shown in Table 2. The median age is 39 years and the oldest respondent is just 80 years of age. Regarding nationalities, 73% of the homeless people we surveyed are Belgian nationals, while European Union country nationals account for 12.5% of the homeless.

Table 3. Nationalities at birth

Belgian	EU country	Non-EU country
72.9%	12.5%	14.5%

Socio-economic background

Parents' employment status is an indicator of the socio-economic status of the household in which the respondent grew up. Table 4 below provides information on mother's and father's employment status when the respondent was (approximately) 14 years old. Only 57.7% of the homeless people in the sample had a working father while more than half (54.3%) of the mothers were either housewives or unemployed. On the other hand, 65% of the institutionalised people in the sample reported growing up in a household with a working father and 50.9% with a mother staying at home.

Table 4. Parents' employment status when the respondent was 14 years old

	Institutionalised		Roofless	
	Father's employment status	Mother's employment status	Father's employment status	Mother's employment status
Employee	51.9%	28.5%	49.2%	19.6%
Self-employed	13.1%	7.5%	8.5%	8.9%
Work with family	0.5%	1.4%		
Unemployed	6.1%	4.7%	6.8%	8.9%
Retired	1.4%			
Househusband/housewife	0.5%	45.8%	1.7%	55.4%
Other	9.8%	3.7%	3.4%	
Don't know	5.6%	4.7%	11.9%	3.6%
N/A	11.2%	3.7%	18.6%	3.6%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Household composition

As the question about *household* composition in the EU-SILC questionnaire refers to 'persons living together', the figures do not take into account family members that were left behind either through separation or through migration. This may result in very complex, multiple households and discrepancies between household size and family size.

Table 5 sketches the household composition also by gender. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of the homeless respondents were single. This is the case for men and women, but the share is significantly greater for men than women (86.3% for men compared with 58.8% of women). Men seldom live in two-person households

(5.3%) whereas a quarter of the women live with another person. The remainder (8% of the total sample) live in a household with more than three people. This is the case for 16% of the women and 8.4% of the men.

In total, 14.9% of the homeless respondents have children that live in the same household. This is approximately 4% among men; however, this percentage climbs to 31.7% for women. In other words, most of the women (who are not living alone) live with their children. Needless to say, this is a particularly vulnerable group.

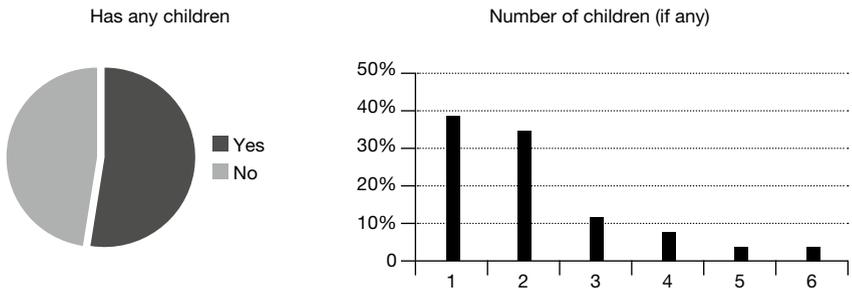
Table 5. Household composition

	Single	2 persons	3 persons	More than 3 persons
Male	86.3%	5.3%	0.6%	7.8%
Female	58.8%	25.2%	9.3%	6.7%
Total	78.9%	13.1%	2.5%	5.5%

Table 6. Marital status

	Roofless
Single	62.7%
Married	15.3%
Living together	3.4%
Divorced	16.9%
Widow	1.7%
Total	100.0%

Figure 1. Number of children (if any)



Education level

The level of education of most respondents is (very) low. There are similarities between both sexes; around 25% of men and 31% of women in the sample do not have any qualification or only possess a certificate from primary school. Another 45% of the men have a lower secondary education certificate. This is the case for 39% of the women. In other words, 71% of the homeless people (men *and* women) left school with no certificate of upper secondary education. On the other hand, we note that 9% of the men and 6% of the women have a degree in higher education.

Table 7. Education level

No Diploma	Elementary Education	Lower Secondary Education	Higher Secondary Education	Higher Education
10.7%	18.0%	42.6%	20.2%	8.5%

Table 8. Difficulties with reading, writing and calculation in the native language

	Institutionalised			Roofless		
	reading	writing	calculation	reading	writing	calculation
None	80.6%	72.6%	74.8%	68.4%	63.8%	62.1%
Sometimes	11.6%	18.1%	15.4%	21.1%	20.7%	24.1%
Often	7.9%	9.3%	9.8%	10.5%	15.5%	13.8%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Acquiring a lower education degree by the respondents does not necessarily demonstrate their proficiency in their native language. More than 30% of the homeless people reported having difficulties with reading in their native language. This ratio is lower for those who are institutionalised (19.5%). Problems with writing and calculation in native language are more dramatic for roofless people, 36.2% reported that they experienced difficulties with writing and 37.9% had difficulties with calculation in their native language.

Housing Situation

Most homeless respondents were contacted in a shelter (almost 80%), while we found some people who spent the night in a private home as non-paying residents, and 14% lived on the streets.² Contacts with women occurred more often in shelters than those with men. Note that this distribution is largely the result of the procedure adopted to contact the respondents, which took place via social services and associations, and therefore cannot be viewed as representative of the entire target group. Nevertheless, it is common that most homeless people usually spend nights in shelters. Rough sleeping (on the street) appears to be uncommon among women (partly for security reasons, partly because they may live with children and have better access to shelters).

Table 9. Housing situation

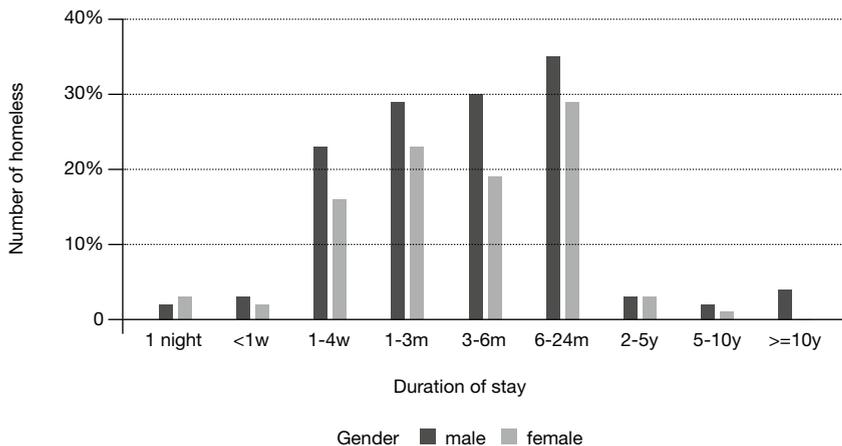
	Shelter	House	On the street
Male	73.6%	9.8%	20.1%
Female	88.9%	4%	3.0%
Total	79.1%	7.7%	13.9%

Shelters and institutions

Figure 2 shows that more than half of the homeless respondents in an institution (shelter or home) have already been residing there for over three months – with some outliers over ten years. The same distribution pattern holds for men and women. Most (86.6% of men, 89.7% of women) stay there overnight on a daily basis. However, note that the share of the homeless people who permanently reside in an institution is unavoidably overestimated, given that these people have a higher probability of being sampled than those who only stay in an institution occasionally³. Culhane and Metraux (2008) suggest that the vast majority (up to 4/5) of homeless people entering a shelter escape this situation within a few days and do not fall back into it. The majority of the homeless people (87%) pay for the night's stay; the price is less than 27 euros for 82.6%. Thirty percent of the respondents declare that they work or do odd jobs in exchange for a night's stay.

² The SILC-CUT survey offered the possibility of reporting an 'alternative' housing situation besides those defined ('in an institution', 'in a home' or 'on the streets'). When this option was selected it always concerned temporary accommodation in a property or other sheltered place or with friends. They were incorporated in the category 'home' or 'on the streets'.

³ This concerns the so-called 'stock sampling' approach. Suppose that all surveys take place in an institution on one random day in a year, and that all guests present are interviewed: a person that resides in the institution the entire year has 365 chances out of 365 of being included in the sample, whereas a person that spends just one day there has only one chance out of 365.

Figure 2. Duration of the stay in a shelter

Sleeping rough

The housing situation of homeless people outside institutions (we call them 'rough sleepers' or roofless) varies a lot: 24.6% reside in an abandoned property, 26.2% on the streets, under a bridge or in the park, and 23% occasionally with family or friends. The rest find shelter in cellars, car parks, entrance halls, the underground, stations or shopping centres. These sleeping areas are relatively stable. Approximately 20% have already stayed in the same place for at least a year and almost 60% for at least a month.

Twenty one percent of the sample 'rarely or never use a shelter'. When asked why, 26% cited a lack of places, 18% found shelters too expensive and 16% had bad experiences. Some respondents said that they were not eligible according to the regulations, that animals were not allowed or that they preferred to live on the streets rather than in an institution. 'Other reasons', including conflicts or fear of being expelled from the country, were also cited (33%).

Table 10 indicates that rough sleepers often lack the most basic amenities. Only half of the rough sleepers have access to potable water, and even fewer to a hot drink, in the spaces where they are spending the night. Half have access to a toilet, whereas less than a third have access to washing facilities.

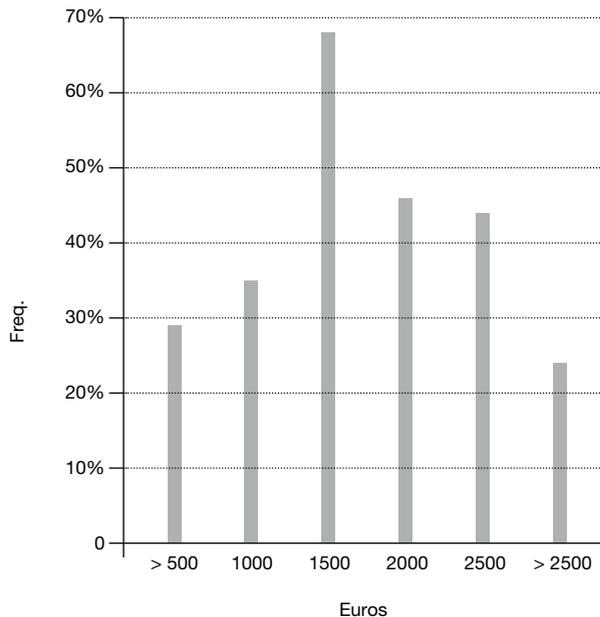
Table 10. Access to basic services

Services	% With Access
Drinkable water	53
Warm drinks	35
WC	50
Communal bathroom or shower	31

Income and Material Deprivation

For low-literate respondents, EU-SILC is extremely hard to fill out. Therefore, in the SILC-CUT questionnaire, we decided to confine the questions to monthly net income data in the month preceding the interview.

Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of net monthly equivalised income amongst homeless people. To begin with, the SILC-CUT results reveal very high financial poverty risks: 71.8% of the homeless people have incomes below the financial poverty threshold (60% of the median equivalised income in the country) – against 14.7% on average for the Belgian population.

Figure 3. Distribution of equivalised net household income (Euros per month, 2010)

Despite the fact that most homeless people draw some kind of social benefit, and despite the existence of special regulations to facilitate their access to the guaranteed minimum income⁴, the majority of the homeless people surveyed appear to live below that minimum level. This suggests either that administrative obstacles remain important, or that homeless people fear the interference of official services (such as debt management, conditions relating to activation, or compulsory medical treatment).

Table 11. Equivalised net income distribution of the sample compared with average Belgian households (Euros per month, 2010 prices)

		Min.	1 st Quartile	Median	Mean	3 rd Quartile	Max.
Homeless	Total	4	590	790	801.7	999	2,500
Belgium	Total	0	1,056	1,735	1,300	2,834	89,793

For comparison with the overall subgroup of *financially poor* households in Belgium, we selected the relevant variables for households whose total gross household income was lower than the financial poverty threshold (60% of median total equivalised disposable household income).

As seen in Table 12, the percentages of the population with an income lower than 40%, 50%, 60% and 70% of the median equivalent income illustrate the severity of poverty. We see that one in thirteen individuals (7.5% of the population) has to survive on less than half the median equivalent income and 4% on less than 40%. Of the homeless population, we find 58.4% below the 50% median equivalent income level and 31.1% has less than 40%.

Table 12. Poverty in the Belgian population and homeless people, in%

	Belgium (EU-SILC 2010)	Homeless
Population with income below 70% of median equivalent income	23.8%	85.2%
Population with income below 60% of median equivalent income	14.6%	71.8%
Population with income below 40% of median equivalent income	3.7%	31.1%
Population with income below 50% of median equivalent income	7.5%	58.4%
Relative median poverty gap (income deficit relative to poverty line)	17.2%	29.3%
Difficulties or great difficulties to make ends meet	21.6%	23.1%

⁴ Taking an official reference address at a municipal social service gives access to social assistance (including the minimum income) in that municipality.

Another commonly used indicator is the relative median poverty gap. The general population at risk of poverty has an income, on average, 17.2% lower than the poverty line. Among homeless people, this is on average 29% lower than the poverty line⁵.

The figures relating to subjective poverty stand out. When Belgian people were asked whether they find it extremely easy, easy, rather difficult, difficult or extremely difficult to make ends meet on a monthly basis, 23.1% position themselves in the last three categories. Remarkably, this is barely higher among homeless people. One possible explanation may be respondents' attempts to conceal their poverty, or adaptation to their difficult living situations.

Figure 4. Ownership of durables

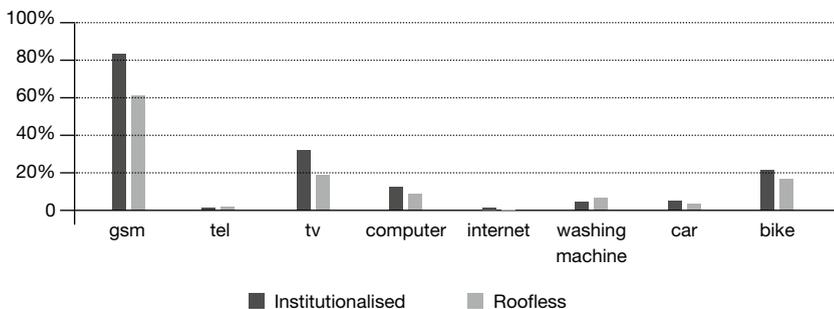
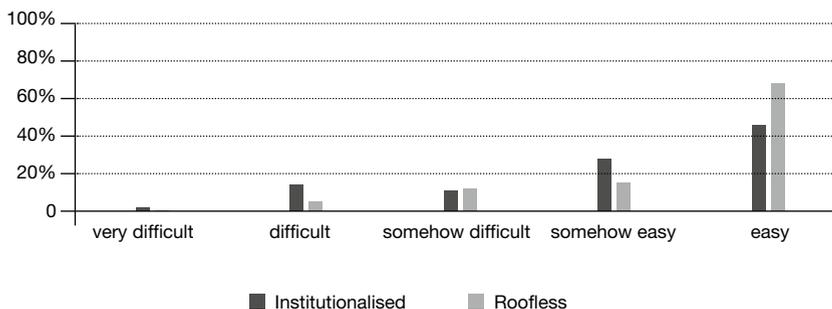
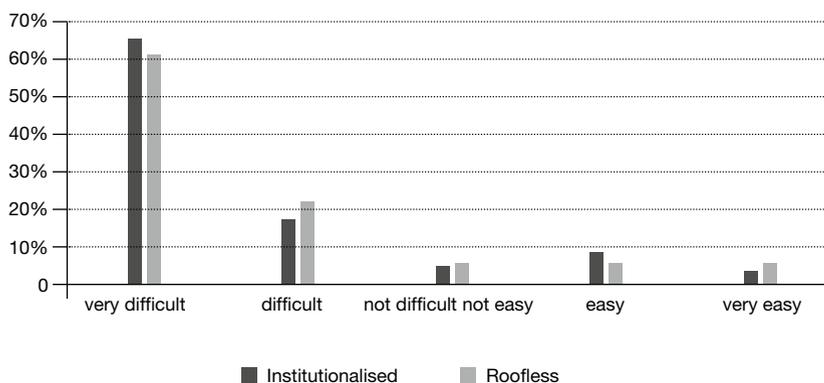


Figure 4 reflects the ownership status of durables for the homeless people we surveyed. Highest percentages (83.2% for institutionalised, 61% for roofless) are mobile phones, followed by TV (32.2% for institutionalised, 18.6% for roofless) and bicycle (on average 20%). Considering the lack of basic amenities such as water, the low rate of washing machine ownership (around 5%) is not unexpected.

Different perceptions of making ends meet and paying off debts can be seen in the two next figures. Figure 5 demonstrates the difficulty experienced by the homeless people surveyed to make ends meet with their current household income. Almost half of the homeless people in the sample reported that either themselves or a member of their household had to pay off debts in the previous month. Figure 6 shows the level of difficulty to pay off debts with the current household income (only among those who had debts in the previous month). The struggle with paying off debts is apparent and the contrast of the trends between two graphs is striking.

⁵ The relative median poverty gap is calculated as the difference between the median equivalent income of the persons below the poverty line and the poverty line, expressed as a percentage of the poverty line.

Figure 5. Difficulty level to make ends meet with current household income**Figure 6. Difficulty level to pay off debts**

Labour Market Position

Among the homeless people we sampled, one in five men and almost one in twenty women performed paid labour in the previous week. Approximately a third of those in employment have a standard fixed-term contract or a contract for an indefinite period; approximately a third participate in a training course to retain their benefits, work under Article 60⁶ or another subsidised employment scheme. Another third has a job in the informal economy (undeclared work). These jobs concern part-time work for over half those in employment. The monthly median income is 400 Euros, whereas a quarter of the respondents earn even less than 120 Euros a month.

⁶ Article 60 of the law on municipal welfare centres enables the centres to employ their minimum income clients for as long as necessary to get access to unemployment benefits. The minimum income benefit is then converted into a wage subsidy.

Additionally, it appears that 18% were sometimes not paid any wages. Of the respondents who do not work, over half have been unemployed for over two years. On the other hand, just 10% have been unemployed for less than six months.

Table 13. Paid work status in the previous week

	Yes
Male	20.2%
Female	6.0%
Total	15.0%

In Belgium as well as other European countries, employment offers considerable protection against poverty. Nevertheless, slightly more than 12.5% of the Belgian population aged between 18 and 59, live in a household with no paid employment. This rises to 84% among the homeless respondents. The poverty risk for people in employment in Belgium is very low (4.8%). However, homeless people in employment are subject to a poverty risk of almost 47%, which confirms once again the precariousness of their jobs.

Health Situation

General health situation

Table 14 gives an impression of the general health condition of the respondents. The respondents' subjective assessment of their own health needs to be interpreted carefully, as the respondents often tend to underestimate their problems. Yet, almost one in four homeless persons consider their general health to be in a poor or extremely poor condition. Moreover, 37% have a disability or long-term illness and 39% felt limited in their daily activities during the past six months due to health reasons. The health profile of women appears to be worse than that of the men.

Table 14. General health condition

	Male	Female	Total
Bad to very bad general health	20.9%	28.3%	23.8%
Disabled or long-term ill	31.7%	46.2%	37.2%
Limited or very limited in daily activities	35.7%	43.2%	38.7%

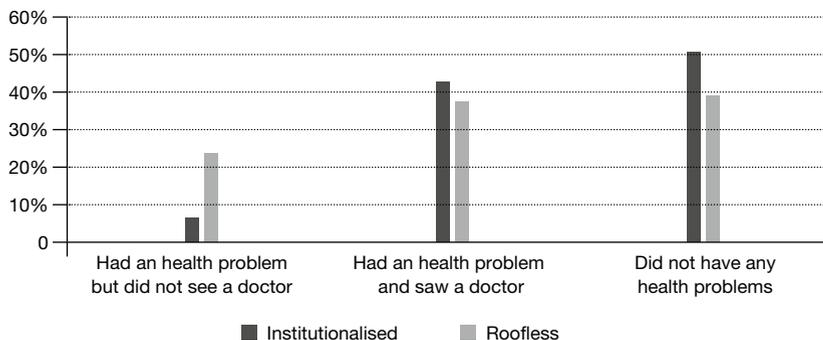
In addition to chronic diseases such as asthma, rheumatism, cardiovascular diseases or diabetes, mental health issues constitute a major problem among people living in poverty. Table 15 analyses some of the common mental health issues. Lack of sleep is typical of homeless people, given their harsh living condi-

tions, which in the case of rough sleepers combines with stress from insecurity. A significant share of the homeless population (29.5% of the men and 26.6% of the women) sleep just five hours or less a night; 39% of the men and over half the women also report frequent or extremely frequent sleep problems. Nervousness and loneliness are also issues, experienced frequently by 40% and 45% of the men, respectively. Both issues are experienced frequently by 55% of the women.

Table 15. Common health issues

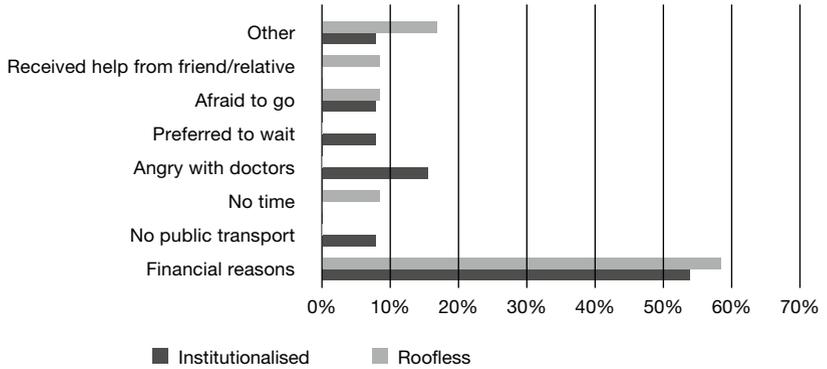
	Male	Female	Total
Sleeps less than 6 hours	29.5%	26.6%	28.2%
Often or very often sleeping problems	39.2%	51.4%	44.8%
Often or very often nervous or tense	40.4%	55.1%	46.1%
Often or very often lonely	45.2%	55.1%	49.1%

Figure 7. Need of medical treatment in the last 12 months



Affordability of healthcare is measured by the percentage of respondents who had to postpone or forego necessary care within the last 12 months due to financial reasons. In 2010, this was the case for just 0.5% of the total Belgian population and 1.5% for households with an increased poverty risk. For homeless people, the corresponding percentage was 10.5% and the details are illustrated in Figure 7 above. With regard to the main reasons for not going to a doctor in case of a medical need, Figure 8 lists the most common reasons given by the homeless people in the sample. Financial restrictions constitute the main rationale for not visiting a doctor despite the need of a medical treatment.

Figure 8. Reasons for not seeing a doctor in the last 12 months when a medical treatment was needed



Mental health

Table 16 analyses the use of sedatives, alcohol and narcotics. A fifth of the homeless men and women use sedatives often to very often. Excessive alcohol consumption (3 glasses a day or more) applies to 24.3% of the men and 3.8% of the women. Narcotics are rarely used by the women (2.8%), but more often by the men (13.6%). The use of sleeping pills, alcohol, drugs and psychiatric problems indicates the prevalence of major mental health issues among homeless people.

Table 16. Use of sleeping pills, alcohol and narcotics

	Male	Female	Total
Often to very often use sleeping pills	21.5%	20.5%	21.1%
Three or more glasses of alcohol a day	24.3%	3.8%	16.4%
Often to very often use narcotic drugs	13.6%	2.8%	9.4%

Another indication is the fact that more than 25% of respondents reported having stayed in a psychiatric institute.

Conclusions and Implications for Policy and Research

Research shedding light on the potential causes of homelessness and the main characteristics of homeless people (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2009; Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2010; Jones and Pleace, 2010) has recommended a more structural analysis acknowledging that, as with poverty, homelessness needs to be interpreted as a dynamic and a multifaceted phenomenon. The main goal of this paper was to sketch the socio-demographic profile and the living conditions of homeless people who are not represented in official poverty statistics in Belgium. Nationwide socio-demographic data on homelessness in Belgium is very scarce. Specific 'satellite surveys' were carried out to collect data on groups excluded from the statistics, that should be comparable to the mainstream EU-SILC data. Despite the sampling challenges and the necessity to simplify and adapt the questionnaires, we can conclude that the use of 'satellite surveys' is feasible and useful. Although it was impossible to compare the full profile of homeless people with the general population, and with the population at risk of (financial) poverty, our analysis confirms the exposure of homeless people to more extreme damage from poverty in several dimensions of life: education, family life, income, work, housing and health.

With regard to the housing situation we can conclude that roofless people are deprived of more than just a roof: often they have no access to the most essential amenities such as drinking water, a toilet or washing facilities. They also report obstacles in the access to shelters, as well as persistent difficulties obtaining a reference address (which is crucial to access other rights). Homeless people living in shelters also face the latter obstacle. Further measures to improve their access to shelters, as well as reference addresses, are therefore needed.

Poverty and material deprivation and housing circumstances are interweaved. With respect to income, our analysis confirms that all homeless people experience severe financial hardship. The figures suggest that more than 7 out of 10 homeless people live below the financial poverty threshold, and approximately half of them below the guaranteed minimum income level in Belgium⁷. The existing legal arrangements concerning reference addresses, designed to ensure access of homeless people to the minimum income benefit, appear to be ineffective.

One in six to seven homeless adults (mainly men) is '*in work*'. It goes without saying that their jobs are highly irregular and precarious. Poor education and health appear to be the main causes of this marginal position of homeless people vis-à-vis the labour market. This also means that simple activation schemes will remain ineffec-

⁷ Depending on the household type, the guaranteed minimum income level in Belgium lies 23-28% below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold.

tive unless they go in pair with investments in literacy and numeracy training as well as health care. Enforcing decent minimum standards and fighting discrimination are equally needed.

Another key dimension of the living conditions of homeless people is their *health status*. Twenty four percent of the interviewees estimate their general health to be poor to extremely poor (with a higher incidence among women than men). The fact that 37.2% of them are disabled or chronically ill suggests that their subjective assessment must be viewed as an underestimation. Moreover, our survey also suggests that homeless people tend to suffer more from stress and mental health issues. Given that the health insurance system in Belgium is far less generous in reimbursing expenses for mental health care, this is an important point of attention for future policy.

Despite the small sample size of this 'satellite survey' and some doubts concerning its representativeness, our findings do provide useful insight into the relative severity as well as some key dimensions of poverty among this hidden high-risk group. They also demonstrate the feasibility of such satellite surveys, using simplified, multilingual and more flexible questionnaires. We would, therefore, recommend a systematic replication at regular time intervals. Whereas qualitative research can provide a more detailed and deep understanding of poverty issues, statistical surveys allow for comparisons between groups and countries, and for monitoring of the effectiveness of policies over time.

► References

- Adriaensens, G., Passot, L. and Peña-Casas, R. (2003) De Ondervertegenwoordiging van Arme Mensen in Databanken [The Underrepresentation of Poor People in Databases], *Belgisch Tijdschrift voor Sociale Zekerheid* 2/2003 pp.379-398.
- Avramov, D. (1995) *Homelessness in the European Union – Social and Legal Context of Housing Exclusion in the 1990s* (Brussels: FEANTSA).
- Bowpitt, G., Dwyer, P., Sundin, E. and Weinstein, M. (2014) Places of Sanctuary for 'the Undeserving'? Homeless People's Day Centres and the Problem of Conditionality, *British Journal of Social Work* 44(5) pp.1251–1267.
- Busch-Geertsema, V., Benjaminsen, L., Hrast, M. F., and Pleace, N. (2014) *Extent and Profile of Homelessness in European Member States: A Statistical Update* (Brussels: European Observatory on Homelessness).
- Busch-Geertsema, V., Edgar, W., O'Sullivan, E. and Pleace, N. (2010) *Homelessness and Homeless Policies in Europe: Lessons from Research* (Brussels: FEANTSA).
- Culhane, D. P. and Metraux, S. (2008) Rearranging the Deck Chairs or Reallocating the Lifeboats? Homelessness Assistance and Its Alternatives, *Journal of the American Planning Association* 74(1) pp. 111-121.
- Denvall, V. (2017). Evaluating Homelessness – A Comparative Analysis of Top 10 Articles from the US and Europe, *European Journal of Social Work* 20(5) pp. 724-740.
- Edgar, W. and Meert, H. (2006) *Fifth Review of Statistics on Homelessness in Europe* (Brussels: FEANTSA).
- Edgar, W., Harrison, M., Watson, P. and Busch-Geertsema, V. (2007) *Measurement of Homelessness at European Union Level* (Brussels: European Commission).
- Eurostat (2015) *Living Conditions in Europe. 2014 Edition* (Brussels: European Commission).
- Fitzpatrick, S., Quilgars, D. and Pleace, N. Eds. (2009) *Homelessness in the UK: Problems and Solutions* (Coventry: Chartered Institute of Housing).
- Gosme, L. (2013) The Europeanisation of Homelessness Policy: Myth or Reality? , *European Journal of Homelessness* 7(2) pp.43-61.

Jones, A. and Pleace, N. (2010) *A Review of Single Homelessness in the UK 2000–2010* (London: Crisis).

Nicaise, I. and Schockaert, I. (2014) The Hard-to-Reach among the Poor in Europe: Lessons from Eurostat's EU-SILC Survey in Belgium, in: Tourangeau, R., Edwards, B., Johnson, T., Wolter, K. and N. Bates (Eds.) *Hard-to-Survey Populations*, pp.1246-1279. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

OECD (2017) *HC3.1. Homeless Population* (Paris: OECD Publishing).

Schockaert, I., Morissens A., Cincinnato S. and Nicaise, I. (2012) *Armoede tussen de plooiën. Aanvullingen en correcties op de EU-SILC voor verborgen groepen armen* [Poverty Between the Folds. Additions and Corrections to the EU-SILC for Hidden Groups of Poor People] (Leuven: HIVA).

Tipple, G. and Speak, S. (2009) *The Hidden Millions: Homelessness in Developing Countries*. (London: Routledge).