

Counting Homeless People in the 2011 Housing and Population Census

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Background

This [research](#) explores the extent to which the 2011 censuses enumerated homelessness, reviewing their methodology and contrasting the approaches used in different countries with both the EC guidance for the 2011 censuses and the ETHOS typology of homelessness, which was developed by FEANTSA and the European Observatory on Homelessness. The research does not look in detail at the data that were collected (as in most instances these were yet to be released by the national census offices), but is instead a critical assessment of the extent to which the 2011 censuses collected robust and comparable data on homelessness across the EU.

Fifteen homelessness experts were asked to complete a questionnaire on the enumeration of homeless people, and the estimation of the homeless population in the 2011 national level censuses that took place across the European Union. They also conducted interviews with staff in census offices and with homelessness NGOs and other agencies that had a particular interest in the enumeration or estimation of the number of homeless people. Questionnaires were distributed to experts in the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden, Spain and the UK.

Some EU member states have relatively rich data on homelessness. These countries all tend to define people living rough and in emergency shelters or accommodation as being homeless. However, people in precarious or unfit accommodation, or who are concealed or 'hidden' in households, for example two families in housing designed for a single person or one family, may be regarded as homeless in one country but not viewed as homeless in another. This means there is inconsistency in the size and nature of the population that is defined as homeless, and therefore in the population which is counted or estimated as being the 'homeless' population across different countries.

The 2011 censuses represented a potentially important opportunity to collect consistent and comparable data on homelessness, allowing countries to be compared and, at least theoretically, to produce a figure or estimate that was representative of at least some forms of homelessness across the EU as a whole. In some countries, the 2011 census would also be the first time that a serious national level attempt had been made to enumerate or estimate the extent of homelessness.

Some Conclusions

The research found important differences between countries with register-based and non-register based methods of census enumeration. Register-based countries employed the national level databases to produce a count of their population during 2011, which could be updated on a continual basis. As register-based systems tended to be based on a home or institutional address, any population without a fixed address could be excluded from the main enumeration conducted for the census, though practice in register-based countries varied.

Using register-based systems was not a methodology that was well suited to enumerating or estimating homelessness. Although several register-based countries undertook separate exercises to estimate or count homelessness, none drew any distinction between primary or secondary homelessness in a way that reflected the 2011 EU guidance for the 2011 census.

Countries that did not use register-based systems and which instead used traditional counts to undertake the 2011 censuses tended to have made some efforts to enumerate homeless people as part of the general population count. However, the extent and nature of attempts to count homeless people varied considerably between different non-register based countries.

There were differences in how methodologies for counting homeless people were employed for the 2011 censuses.

Definitions of homelessness for census data collection across all 15 countries only partially reflected the full ETHOS typology of homelessness.

The 2011 censuses enhanced understanding of homelessness in some countries, and in a few instances, were the first time a national level attempt had been made to enumerate homeless people. However, in other countries the census represents another missed opportunity to measure the quantitative extent of homelessness. Sustained efforts at EU level to harmonise data collection on homelessness for the 2011 censuses and more generally, have been met with only limited success. The guidance issued by the EU on enumerating homeless people for the 2011 censuses was limited and for the most part, the guidance was not followed by the 15 member states included in this research. As a consequence, it will not be possible to provide a EU level count or estimation of the extent of primary and secondary homelessness from the 2011 censuses, nor will the data enhance our capacity to contrast homelessness in one member state with another because the method of collection was inconsistent, limited or flawed.