Measuring Homelessness by City Counts – Experiences from European Cities

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Abstract_ *For the past few years, homelessness has increasingly been recorded at the city level. On the one hand, this is because national surveys are completely lacking or do not provide sufficient data at city level; on the other hand, cities in particular are noticing an increase in homelessness and city politicians are under pressure to act. In this context, several questions arise as regards theoretical framing of the city counts, methodological issues, conceptualising, and comparability of data and results over time and places. So far, there has been no common understanding about a city count and each city in Europe seems to develop its own approach in measuring homelessness by a city count. At the same time, international attention has been paid to mapping these experiences and methodological approaches across different European cities. This paper is a first attempt towards a comparability of the sense and the purpose of a city count. Based on city counts in four cities Basel, Bratislava, Brussels, and Budapest, the paper discusses theoretical pathways towards counts, highlights the role of stakeholders, the area of a counting and the relationship between data and political consequences.*

Keywords_ *Homelessness, city count, Europe, methodology*

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Introduction

Back in 2005 the first European cooperative attempt to operationalise homelessness resulted in the European Typology of Homelessness (ETHOS) (FEANTSA, 2005), leading to shifting the approach to the EU level; "Measuring Homelessness at European Union Level" (Edgar *et al*., 2007) and the "MPHASIS" project (2008-2009) moved towards recommending a "common definition of homelessness as well as a list of statistical variables on homelessness for European data collection purposes" (FEANTSA, 2011, p.4). In 2011, FEANTSA published a pilot study with an aim to test cross-country comparability of homelessness data collection in six European cities (FEANTSA, 2011). However, the main focus of the study was on data availability in participating cities, the variable definitions used, and the comparability of the variables. The data collection techniques were not particularly in the focus of the analysis.

In this paper, we would like to contribute to the debate on the city counts in Europe, based mainly on the data of the cities Basel, Bratislava, and Brussels, where the authors were responsible for a count. Moreover, we refer to the "Budapest count" for the sake of comparison, but actually, this is just one location of the Hungarian "February 3rd Count" initiative, which is a survey launched 21 years ago, as of today covering most of the larger cities in Hungary. To complete our argumentation or illustrate some of our theses, we included references to further city or regional counts in Europe. The main objective of this paper is to identify options that are currently available in Europe in measuring homelessness at the city level, and how the initial purpose, the landscape of actors, the places and areas selected for the count and the methodologies of data collection remarkably influence the city counts' scope (e.g. socio-political decisions). We intend to discuss commonalities and differences in city counts in Europe in recent years, and explore the potential for standardisation at least in certain aspects of measuring homelessness at the city level. In this sense, this article does not intend to present the only one and right solution for a city count. Rather, by clarifying the different approaches, a contribution is to be made to present the varieties in approaches linked with a set of different policy approaches to policy and institutional design, and to how homelessness is being framed as a social phenomenon.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first deals with the theoretical framing of city counts in homelessness research, then we take a closer look at counts in action. In section four we look for the 'largest common denominators' in the methodologies of city counts, to then describe typical stakeholders of counts, the definition of "territory", and the implications of methodologies in action. We conclude with some lessons learned.

Framing City Counts Theoretically

In the field of city counts there are only a few works that build on a distinct theoretical framework. These are mostly linked with a critical school, such as Marquardt's socio-political economy of city counts (Marquardt, 2016). She points out that data and figures have become instruments of power in modern welfare states. And where nationwide homeless statistics are missing, her hypothesis is that the difficulties to count homeless people as argued by politicians is nothing less than a case of 'ontological ignorance'. "Statistics are the knowledge of the state" (2016, p. 302) and "a form of power-knowledge" (2016, p. 303). In that sense Marquardt (2016, p.306) writes about "the ontology of modern sedentariness: streets, homes, addresses" and asks why homeless people are not counted. In referring Foucault, she suspects the state does not to want to know. In Marquardt's (2016, p.307) concept, a nationwide statistic is not just counting people, it is "an attempt to highlight the political nature of ignorance". According to her, economic rationality overlaps social reality and excluded people are banned by ignorance. In recent years, there has not only been a disregard for homelessness, but in many countries a criminalisation of homeless people. Countries like Hungary, where the constitutional amendment of 2018 prohibits living and sleeping on the streets officially, are the clearest indicator that the state perceives social groups as a threat even without quantitative data (Győri, 2018). In Croatia, for many years, NGOs have been fighting for homeless people to receive a passport and thus to achieve social rights in the first place (Šikić-Mićanović, 2010). In Poland, selective social policies, unsatisfying housing conditions, unemployment and poverty in the countryside make many people leave their home and seek a better chance for living elsewhere (Mostowska, 2014).

But there is also the other side of the state institutions, which endeavours to collect the exact numbers and profiles in order to improve the quality of the assistance and help. Metropolitan cities where street homelessness is very obvious play a pivotal role in this. Cities like Paris for example, where the National Council on Statistical Information in response to requests from a number of major voluntary organisations, established a working group to prepare a plan for the scientific study of living conditions of the homeless, the processes whereby people become homeless, and the difficulties they face in obtaining housing (Firdion and Marpsat, 2007). Paris also conducted rough sleepers counts in 2018 and 2019, launching a new wave of data collection, with refined methods (Atelier Parisien D'Urbanisme, 2018; 2019). Some larger cities frame their policies in a more strategic approach: for example the city of Manchester, where the city administration reflected the national trend in the rising number of households that have lost their home and developed a Homelessness Charter and a Homelessness Strategy 2018-2023 "to ensure that

personal circumstances are not a barrier to accessing services and opportunities, and give extra support to those who might need it to overcome these structural issues" (Manchester City Council, 2018, p.3).

In this sense, counting is not just a technical answer to missing data, but a socio-political manifesto: people affected by rooflessness and housing exclusion call on the welfare state to take care of them in particular. This raises the question of *how* answers are constructed and then measured.

City Counts – Understandings and Implications

Clearly, the rationale behind the city counts is that national data do not exist or do not allow conclusions about the extent and the structure of homelessness in cities; moreover, the service providers lack evidence for planning and delivery of programmes for their clients. However, it is noticeable that the starting positions, procedures and understandings of what is "counted" differ widely (Perresini *et al*., 2010). In short, it has not been very clear, whether the city count has some specific meaning, and what it is. Two aspects might seem especially puzzling when seeking to address this issue:

1. Other terms than city count, such as street count, or rough-sleepers count seem to be more commonly used in the homelessness research literature (Edgar *et al*., 2007; Baptista *et al*., 2012). Therefore, clarifications are needed on whether and how they are different from city counts.

2. Having the term 'count' in its title, it might be assumed that the city count refers to a specific methodology, or at least has a potential to do so. Still, this premise should be approached with some caution.

As it comes to the first aspect, terminological clarifications and the distinction between three types of counts is needed: city count, street count, and rough-sleepers count. In homeless research, street count often refers to the enumeration of the people sleeping rough (Edgar *et al*., 2007; Baptista *et al*., 2012; Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (UK) (2019)). In terms of who is counted, street count and rough sleepers count seem to refer to the one and the same thing. In this regard, as shown later in this article, city counts usually do include enumeration (if not a census) of people sleeping rough, but their ambition is also to reach other people experiencing homelessness. Another common feature of the three types of counts is that they all generate point-in-time figures (Edgar *et al*., 2007), although and again, the time in which the count takes place can be shorter for rough-sleeper counts than city counts. Nevertheless, the data gained in all three types of counts simply inform on the stock of homeless people in the

time of the count, without being linked to the inflow or outflow of homeless people through-out a longer time period. This is a clear caveat of city counts, similar to other types of point-in-time surveys: the snapshot they create may overrepresent easy-to-reach groups and long-term homeless. Point-in- time counts underrepresent people who rotate in and out of shelters and people who have a short episode of homelessness. People who stay in shelters for shorter periods of time will be underrepresented compared to those that are long-term shelter users and these are individuals and families who use shelters for long periods of time (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), 2014, p.76). Point-in-time counts smooth out dynamics in homelessness and overrepresents the phenomenon of permanent homelessness. The duration of the count remarkably determines the stock and structure of homelessness. It makes a difference whether the census in the defined survey areas lasts a few hours or a week or whether it is continuous (using continuous administrative data).

If such data collections are applied for actual policy design, they may risk not covering all relevant groups and more hidden groups, including women, younger people, people in transit, and giving a wrong profile to homelessness in a given city – and hence an ineffective response to homelessness in general. Also, if the counts narrow down the public perception of homelessness and housing exclusion to – more or less – rough sleeping, this may distort and harm the discussions about adequate policy responses to homelessness. This caveat may be partly mitigated if counts are carried out frequently enough, using different methods of data collection and based on an extended network of providers responding to emerging needs of homeless people, to follow up rapid societal changes.

This is one of the reasons why under changing landscapes of services, needs, or at least, according to the perception of needs, initiatives and NGOs keep the providers' pool in continuous development, reaching out to extending and changing target groups. Establishing contacts with homeless people opens up new perspectives – and responsibilities – for data collections, too. Moreover, a few cities worldwide take part in a range of initiatives like the international registry week (Mercy Foundation, 2017), along with further advocacy activities to show that there is a tremendous need to effectively address homelessness – based on evidence, at the strategic level.

Concerning the second aspect of understanding, it was assumed for long that in terms of data sources, counts present a specific form of direct survey in which people are met and counted in person, although they are not necessarily interviewed, in contrast to registration or administrative records, and general population and census data (Edgar *et al*., 2007; Busch-Geertsema, *et al*., 2010). This has still been the case for most city counts – in fact, the lack of comprehensive administra-

tive data, including data which would be produced by adjoining services on homeless clients, is one of the main reasons why these counts are organised. Still, there seems to be some shift towards combining direct surveys and the administrative data. For instance, the report on the latest data on rough-sleepers in England as a country with a well-established monitoring system of rough-sleepers due to its long-lasting tradition (Edgar *et al*., 2007) notes that in 2018, evidence-based estimates, and estimates informed by spotlight street counts were used more frequently by local municipalities than street counts to provide the figures on the rough-sleepers in England (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (UK) (2019). Similarly, the city counts in Brussels and Barcelona have combined registration data with the street count (FEANTSA 2018).

Finally, for the very same reason of the lack of administrative data, contrary to the street counts and the rough sleeper counts, city counts went behind the enumeration of rough sleeping people and people in homeless provision and contained a survey based on questionnaires and interviews.

Assuming city count as a specific methodology, so far, each city defines the methodology and analysis procedures considering their own context, circumstances and objectives of the count. Even a glance at selected cities in Europe shows how differently a city count is interpreted (see Table 1; see also Edgar *et al*., 2002, p.4; Gallwey, 2017). This is in part connected with the heterogeneity of the cities themselves, the density of services for homeless people, and the governance structures they are embedded in. In this context, it is a challenge to note that city counts should not be “inseparable from the uses to which it is put” (Brousse, 2016, p.105). This might be appropriate for the local situation, but it does not go far enough for methodologically sound research and action on homelessness (European Commission, 2004, p.89).

Table 1. City counts in Europe – examples

City / Country	Year of first / most recent count	Periodicity / No. of counts until 2019	Methods used in the latest count	Data collection tools
Barcelona (ES)	2008 / 2018	Irregular /since 2015 annually (May 17)	Point-in-time Street count Registration data: people in the accommodation for the homeless	Observation protocol
Basel (CH)	2018 / 2018	none	Point-in-time Interviews in the day-care centres Spotlight street count: observation	Questionnaire: users of services Observation protocol: street count
Bratislava (SK)	2016 / 2016	none	Point-in-time Street count: interviews Service users count: interviews	Questionnaire: people sleeping rough or at the night-shelters Questionnaire: people in homeless shelters
Budapest (HU)	1999 / 2020	Annually (February)	Survey, part of a nation-wide data collection Partly rough sleeper count	Self-filled questionnaire for service users and people sleeping rough in contact with outreach teams
Brussels (BE)	2008 / 2018	Biannually	Point-in-time Street count: observation Registration data and point-in-time data: people in the accommodation for the homeless	Observation protocol: street count Interviews with visitors of the day centres 2 weeks before and on the day after the count
Dublin (IRL)	2007 / 2019 2011	Bi-annual Street Count Quarterly	Point-in-time Street count Monitoring engagement: Housing First Intake Team (HFIT) gather demographic and support need data over time	Ongoing engagement with individual rough sleepers Monitoring: multiple interactions with an individual and store information in a Support System
Paris (FR)	2018 / 2019	Potentially annual (February)	Point-in-time Street count Interviews	Questionnaire for individuals, families and groups of more than 5 people
Warsaw (PL)	2010/2019	Biannually (February)	Street count: interviews Registration data: people from all possible places	Questionnaire for homeless Observation protocol: street count

Source: own research.

Although they are designed to enumerate homeless people, city counts need not only be understood as a specific methodological approach to collect the data on homelessness at the city level. Rather they can be approached as data collection systems at the local level, using a whole range of methodologies to measure *stock*

figures on homelessness. From this perspective, it would then be too optimistic to expect unification of data collection systems at the local level while not having it at the national or European level (Baptista *et al*., 2012; Busch-Geertsema *et al*., 2014). At the same time, it has to be avoided that as long as there is no unifying European social policy, answers will be lost even on the local and national scale (Baptista and Marlier, 2019).

Some co-ordination might be possible and welcome even in this case. In fact, such development can be observed in Hungary where the survey which originally took place in Budapest was spread to other large cities. This was possible by an exclusively bottom-up development, driven by service providers who initiated the survey. At the same time, policy makers have been picking up figures gained through the surveys, thus, making it the legitimate data collection on homelessness in Hungary. In other countries, national data elaborations – like Denmark – conclude for local levels about service needs for hidden homeless and homeless populations. There are data collections (combined, register based, or surveys) which are also conclusive for the local levels. For example, most recently, after data collections at the federal state level, Germany has developed a methodology to produce national statistics on homelessness from 2022 – first based on occupied beds, which will be then followed up with the help of research on hidden homeless and rough sleepers.

On a critical note, however, city counts vs. national data collections have a further implication, which links us back to the critical approach as formulated by Marquardt (2016): the evidence produced at *and* for the local level seems to imply homelessness could be solely and exclusively solved at local level, and basically seems to resolve the national level from policy responsibilities, which is already legally considered clearly not the case in a number of countries.

The Largest Common Denominator in the Methodologies of City Counts

Due to the heterogeneity of the counts and data in general, it is not surprising that neither a clarification nor a comparison exist about the *actual* number and composition of *homeless* people in European cities – given the different sets of policy frameworks, institutional interest and drivers, definitions, and data collection methods applied (detailed in Baptista and Marlier, 2019). None of the city counts mentioned in this paper was created for such an ambitious goal.

If we look at the current tableau of city counts (Table 1), the differences of approaches and methods are particularly remarkable. Considering all these conditions that influence a city count, and all the questions that need to be answered in detail, there is a high degree of variation and complexity in terms of city censuses.

Three dimensions of basic importance seem to emerge from the perspective of the authors: *Actor*, *Territory* and *Methods*. These dimensions act as initial conditions that each count is required to be based on and have a crucial influence on the empirical results obtained and their later impact on social policy, social planning and change. At the same time, they can be used to explain how different results about homelessness counts in European cities come about.

- Actor: Administrations and above all NGOs can be considered as initiators. They have inherent organisational goals that ultimately determine the technical and financial framework within which the census/count takes place. Typical are ethical issues like conflicting goals, as can be illustrated by the examples of Brussels and Budapest, in the latter, linked with the criminalisation of homelessness at the end of 2010, during the preparations of the 2011 Census, which lead to a complete reorientation or even the termination of a planned data collection. The attitude of actors towards a survey, especially of the institutions that deal with people without homes, has a crucial influence on the success of the study (response rate, validity of the results). Counts also differ whether homeless people are included in any phases of the counts' planning, implementation, evaluation and dissemination.

- Territory: The power to define the area of research determines the extent, and by that, the profile of homelessness. The most important question is whether the territory in which a survey takes place is defined administratively or "functionally" and how close the area of research to the reality of life of the homeless people is. This means for example, that the region surrounding the city and thus the interdependencies that homeless people have (day-night migration in/out of the administrative city) is also taken into account, or, whether forms beyond rough sleeping are also observed. By that, census data from different administrative units need to be combined. Also, inside the administrative city borders the definition of territory plays a crucial role: city counts based on direct data need to define whether private open space is relevant, or to what extend the inner-building arrangements are part of the counting. With repeated city counts it is important to take in account the point-in-time weather conditions or events such as a large demonstration with police action or a public transport strike. Such events can make rough sleepers leave their usual place and spend the night at a different location.

- Methods: Data are the basis of a scientific based political action. As in other fields of research, the choice of method influences the outcome and the image of homelessness in a city. A known limitation concerns the administration data: People who avoid homelessness services, are underrepresented in estimations of the extent and structure of homelessness based on administrative data

(Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014, p.9). Censuses at the city level can more easily complete the picture of homelessness. At first sight it seems direct approaches, asking and interviewing homeless people, are easier to implement. But a survey also presents considerable challenges that influence the results. They affect the entire interview setting, i.e. the interviewer, the place and time of the survey and the questionnaire. Under certain conditions those survey results can be combined with administrative data. According to Busch-Geertsema (2014) city counts therefore are based on a constructive approach: They use census data and combine them with other existing data sources. Many cities, however, do not have this data quality or ask questions that cannot be answered with the existing data. They follow an *indirect* approach: designing questionnaires or observation protocols.

Actors, territory and methods are not independent from each other. In particular, the method depends to a large extent on the actors and the defined survey areas. The choice of territory is in turn not only done by scientists but also by politicians, clients and other actors. The involvement and choice of the actors not only influences the results achieved, but also the subsequent acceptance and the potential for socio-political decisions that can be achieved through empirical findings.

Mapping Stakeholders, their Interests and Influences

In the previous section, actors initiating the count were identified as one of three most important factors determining the scope of the count. In fact, it seems obvious that at least due to the large areas that the counts are to cover, they are organised in co-operation of several organisations. This may happen at two stages of the count: planning and/or data collection (but not at the stage of interpreting data). As shown in Table 2, the actors landscape can be described in a typology: city counts are authority based, NGO-driven or co-designed and embed various actors.

Table 2. Stakeholders within city counts – a typology

Stakeholder typology	City	Actors initiating the count	Actors involved in data collection	Data collection actors
Authority based	Paris (FR)	City Mayor	Professional staff & volunteers (trained)	Volunteer-driven
Authority based	Dublin (IRE)	Dublin Region Homeless Executive	Professional staff & volunteers (trained)	Professional
NGO-driven	Brussels (BE)	Non-profit support Center for the homeless sector, created by public authorities, service providers	NGO staff & volunteers from service providers. Students and (former) homeless people for the interviews	Professional
NGO-driven	Budapest (HU)	Service providers	Homeless people self-fill questionnaires	Volunteer-driven
Co-designed	Barcelona (ES)	Network of organisations in the homeless sector, city council	Volunteers & professional staff	Volunteer-driven
Co-designed	Basel (CH)	Research institute, service providers	Students & NGO staff	Semi-professional
Co-designed	Bratislava (SK)	City, research institute, service providers	NGO staff & volunteers (trained)	Semi-professional
Co-designed	Warsaw (PL)	Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Policy, Office of Assistance and Social Projects of the City of Warsaw, Social Welfare Centers of the City of Warsaw	NGO staff, street-workers, trained city guards, police officers and railway security guards	Professional and Semi-professional

Source: own research.

The variety of stakeholders involved in the city count may have various implications for management of co-operation, communication of findings, or the sustainability of the counts. And sharing ownership and responsibilities is an effective way to increase engagement of stakeholders (including dissemination activities). Brussels and Barcelona represent such cities in which network organisations operate to provide support to the whole homeless sector. These are the actors with a potential to manage the count even through longer periods exceeding the elections cycles, although they may also find themselves in conflicting situations. Despite that, while in Brussels, mostly service providers were involved in designing the city count, in Barcelona the city council was directly participating as well.

Bratislava has established a partnership of stakeholders whose differing inputs were necessary to be able to manage the count. The involvement of the City Council and service providers was useful in several ways. Service Providers provided access to the field and homeless people in hard-to-reach areas could be included. The City Council provided organizational support for the study and used the findings to develop new policies to address homelessness. The research institute was respon-

sible for coordination of the count, and preparation and evaluation of the survey. On the one hand, the count benefited from this broad partnership. On the other hand, the effort and complexity to obtain such support in every count is high.

Sustaining the counts may similarly be challenging for Paris, where the key actor is Paris mayor. On the other hand, involvement of city representatives ensures a strong mandate for awareness-raising to the wide public. In fact, Paris has communicated the count as the Night of Solidarity, and has joined over 2000 volunteers. In Basel, the first impulse for a census came from the University of Applied Sciences. As part of an international networking activity, the research group there realised that Switzerland has no conception of the number of homeless people. The scholars contacted the city's service providers directly and designed the census in cooperation with practitioners right from the very beginning. This resulted in a high response rate, but at the same time questions that promised little practical relevance could only be included in the questionnaire to a limited extent.

In those cases where the city count is organised by multiple stakeholders an earlier phase of negotiations about the aims of the count became necessary. This phase not only serves to sharpen the procedure about who is to be counted where and why; these multi-stakeholder conferences also generate a common view of the problem and often end in an agreement. For example, a multi-stakeholder conference in Belgium noted that measuring homelessness can't be realised by means of one method or instrument. "To monitor this social problem comprehensively, a combination of methods is needed. A second conclusion is to develop a monitoring strategy that realises a balance between available results in the short time and a long-term strategy to map homelessness comprehensively. A third conclusion is that the monitoring strategy needs to be based on 13 crucial principles which were identified together with all relevant stakeholders." (Demaerschalk et al., 2018, p. 7) The principles (Figure 1) were transferred from the consensus conference to the Brussels census. And in general, the city count in Brussels can serve as a model in various ways: Homeless people for instance were included as stakeholders in different ways: they specified the questionnaire by contributing with their daily-life-knowledge (this was also a way of informing the homeless people about the date of the city count and giving them – for ethical reasons – the option of not being counted) and the interviews were conducted by duos of (former) homeless people and students.

Figure 1: Principles of the Belgian consensus conference

Street counting as part of a monitoring …
… follows a national plan
… has a clear goal
… is part of the national and regional action plans to reduce poverty and fight homelessness
… shows clear engagement from policy makers
… uses ETHOS as a common definition of homelessness
… is based on shared ownership and shared responsibility
… aims to create a win-win situation
… avoids negative impact on homeless persons
… is based on a mixed method approach
… has a focus on prevention
… includes narratives
… gives feedback
… is coordinated

Source: Demaerschalk et al. (2018)

How the Definition of "Territory" Shapes the Topography of Homelessness

Territory is a geographical, sociological and emotional concept and refers to different types of space: in a point in time count homeless people are met or observed at a specific place that can be mapped. This is a geographical perspective of space and follows an absolute, Euclidian understanding. Territory here is equivalent to the city defined by the administration.

In the city count of New York, researchers from the Institute for Children, Policy and Homelessness (ICPH) used this understanding as a starting point to work out different neighbourhood profiles; they mapped the number of homeless people in accordance to the neighbourhood in which they stay overnight and qualified in the report the specific neighbourhood in terms of their social qualities. This is a sociological concept of territory because it follows a social space approach and look into community factors driving homelessness. According to the scientists of ICPH, it is important to study geographic patterns of neighbourhood instability and community resources to assess needs and determine if resources are being allocated to the areas in which people are the most at risk for homelessness. Their thesis in focusing on neighbourhoods in New York is that it is important to "study geographic patterns of neighborhood instability and community resources to assess need and determine if resources are being allocated to the areas in which families are the most at risk for homelessness." (ICPH, 2019, p. 1) The case of New York introduces the potential that a city count can have, for instance in combination with a social area analysis. It sensitises for the links between place, time and social structure.

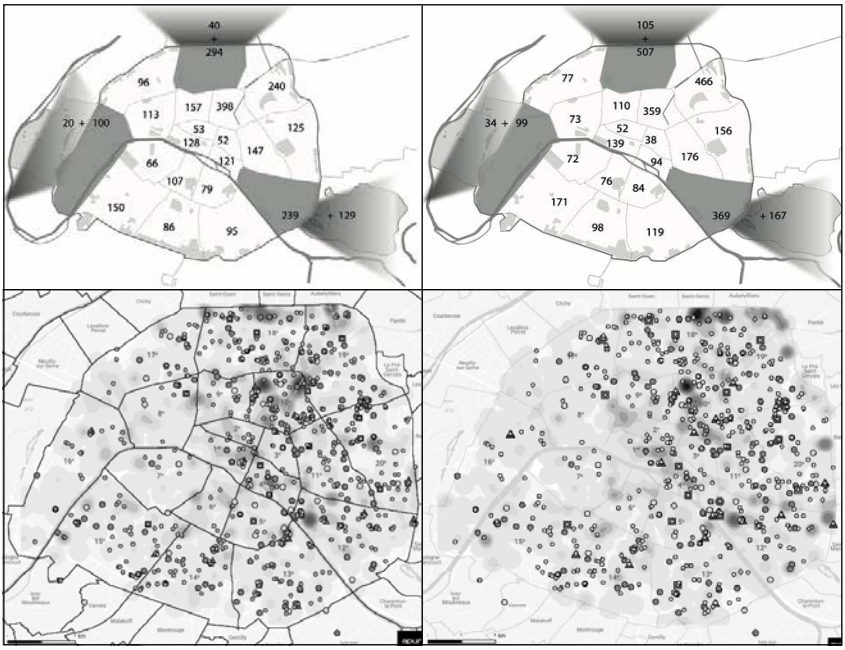
Finally, homeless persons can be asked if they want to be excluded from different spatial arrangements like institutions, social groups, specific local benefits, or even particular events at specific places – this refers to emotional geographies and the embodiment of homelessness. The Basel count combined the geographical and the emotional concept of territory by asking the interviewees' opinion "What would have to be done to make it easier for homeless people to find a place to live in Basel". In order to avoid processes of social exclusion, homeless people are asked about their relationship to special places in the city. But focusing counting on opening hours of services does not prevent the fundamental difficulties to count in the growing number of undocumented people who seek refuge in the anonymity of big cities. They do not figure in administrative databases, because their social rights are restricted. Undocumented people have the status of illegally staying residents, they often make no use (for fear of being deported) and/or have no access to social or even homelessness services. Those homeless people become invisible and thus uncountable by observation. In the same direction goes the ethnographical work of scholars using hermeneutic methods or action research (e.g. Lancione, 2003) or visual anthropology (which has been impressively documented by a team of journalists from the Los Angeles Times: https://www.latimes.com/86340416-132.html).

In the core of city counts we seldom experience social space concepts or emotional concepts of space except when interviews or narrative dialogues are conducted during the count. Generally speaking, a city count is based on a geographical approach, which means that the location matters: where the person is observed, it is counted and this information is taken to represent the number of homeless people, and their distribution. In this sense, a point-in-time count is also a point-in-place count. Some consequences arise from a point-in-time-and-place count, which can be explained by the Paris count (see Figure 2, 1st row, highlighted by grey shadow). It is not made clear why the organisers have chosen a design of counting that goes beyond the administrative borders of the city and enlarges the territory to the regions of "La Colline" in the north, "Bois de Vincennes" (east) and "Bois de Boulogne" (west). But by analysing the map of social infrastructure for homeless people (Figure 2, 2nd row), it is obvious that not only the temporary but also the permanent structures (shelters, boarding house, contact points, etc.) are concentrated at the fringe of the city borders. With 189 out of 3035 homeless persons counted in 2018 and 305 out of 3641 homeless persons counted in 2019, about 6.2 per cent (2018) or 8.4 per cent (2019) of all homeless persons slept outside the administrative territory of the city.

There is the thesis that a count which is following the administrative city definition influences in smaller cities not only the number but the profile of homeless people counted. There is no empirical evidence yet, but information gathered from qualitative studies in Basel (Drilling *et al.*, 2020) leads to the assumption that several

homeless people cross the city border in the evening to find their sleeping place in the countryside. That might be one reason to prefer counting in smaller cities during opening hours of services.

Figure 2: Changing numbers of counted homeless person in the Paris count 2018 (left) and 2019 (right)



Source: Atelier Parisien D'Urbanisme (2018, 2019), own editing.

Another aspect of the role of territory in counting numbers is reported by Busch-Geertsema *et al.* (2019, pp.176f.). According to them, in Ireland, until 2010 it has been the practice to include as rough sleepers "only those persons who are either already asleep or bedded down on the street, in public places or in dwellings not intended for human habitation on the reference date or on the reference date night." In 2010 when the definition changed, "those who are 'about to be bedded down', i.e. sitting on a bench with a sleeping bag, for example, are also included'." Other decisions on the territorial concept are mentioned by the scholars, as following: are people in emergency accommodation or drug counselling centres counted as street homeless? Are people counted as homeless who are observed in condemned buildings, car wrecks or tents? These examples open up a further meaning of space in city counts. For even the scale level "micro-space" influences the results of a

count. Whether it is a matter of counting an entire city area or whether it is restricted to individual neighbourhoods or areas is still the easier question to answer. How, on the other hand, the micro-places that are considered to be street homelessness are defined, and even whether a person who is standing instead of lying down is included in a census, are central questions that ultimately help to determine the number of people counted.

On the Political Relevance of Data and its Influences on City Counts

The linkage between politics and social research is interpreted in different areas and for a long time as tense and ambivalent (Orlans, 1971). As Bourdieu (1991) points out, sociological research is invariably steeped in the politics of power and privilege. Politicians have recognised the high effectiveness and credibility that academic science and the "reality" of statistics radiates. With data and scientific substantiation, political decisions can be legitimised and the previous agenda setting in the discourse on social problems, e.g. homelessness can be changed (Best, 2001). Few studies discuss the influence of policy on empirical research on homelessness. Fitzpatrick *et al*. (2000, p.49) have suggested that informing social policy is the only ethical justification for homelessness research. This implies a willingness for homelessness researchers to work together with politics, also in the field of censuses and counts. Minnery and Greenhalg (2007) criticise a close relationship between politics and empirical research in homelessness research for scientific reasons. Bacchi (2009) and Farrugia and Gerrard (2016) problematise the close link between homelessness research and neoliberal forms of politics and governance. Related to the practical implementation of a city count, a directive, top-down regulated style of politics hinders forms of cooperation and hampers confidence-building between actors involved in a city count. The implementation of a count is limited if politicians (and the administration) do not have a high level of acceptance among institutions surveyed (e.g. night shelter, street kitchen, etc.). This can be learned by Brussels experiencing the "new policy" (see Figure 3). But despite close cooperation with politics, administration and the aid system from the beginning of the city count, empirically verified results can meet with rejection from political decision-makers, as the 2018 Basel homelessness count shows (Drilling *et al*., 2019).

A number of practical reasons can be argued in favour of cooperation with local government, politicians and administration: Planning and implementation of a city count together with politics and administration generates expertise, facilitates access to the field, supports the implementation process of the count and provides information on attitudes and resistance at the political decision-making level. Explicit as well as implicit knowledge of the local assistance infrastructure, its logic

and practice is crucial for the whole study, beginning with the choice of method and ending with the interpretation and dissemination of the results. For a city count or other local studies about homelessness, for the interpretation of the results and the recommendations for action, it is extremely important, whether the assistance system follows, prefers or plans to develop a 'linear residential treatment' model or a 'housing first' model (Quilgars and Pleace, 2016). Such information and considerations can easily be obtained through the political and administrative channels. What qualities do city counts need in order to find a political hearing that is in accordance with the demands made by the researchers? In order to fulfil the narrow degree between cooperation with politics and meeting the scientific and professional requirements, various considerations are appropriate.

The risk of instrumentalisation and manipulation by political actors increase if a city count is established. This is why an institutional embedding and establishment of the study is so important. Experiences in different European cities (e.g. Dublin, Brussels) show, that a city count established on a legal basis and financed in the long term are good conditions to support professional cooperation between study makers, politicians and other actors and stakeholders involved in the count.

Figure 3: How data influence politics: the case of an NGO in Brussels

Part of the new policy (2014-2019) and the reorganization of the homeless sector in the Brussels region, is the dissolution of the non-profit organization la Strada, Support centre for the homeless sector in May 2019. The mission of data collection on homelessness, analysis and research is assigned to a new regional public institution Bruss'Help. Important here is the shifting of the focus of the data collection from extent to trajectories of homeless people who make use of the official service providers, to analyze the causes of homelessness in order to devise a preventive approach.

However, successive counts indicate that with each edition the proportion of people staying the night of the city count in these (emergency) shelters and temporary accommodation decreases (from almost 60% in 2008 to less than 40% in 2016)[2]. There is a good chance that the diversity of the living situations of the homeless people in the Brussels Region will become underexposed.

The homeless sector welcomed some points (structural financing of day care and Housing First), but at the same time opposed certain innovations as one single entry gate and a centralized dispatching, and the prohibition of anonymous access to assistance with the introduction of a digital social file and data sharing between homeless and general service providers. The field workers fear for an uniformization of care and exclusion of the most vulnerable homeless people.

The strong opposition of the sector forced the policy makers to modify some minor aspects of the legal framework, delayed the reorganization and the creation of the new institution. The long transition period creates uncertainty within the sector and among the homeless. The impact on stakeholders and the results of the city count of 2018 are clear. Due to the lack of sufficiently experienced researchers, volunteers and partners, the methodology could not be applied rigorously and the territory for the street count was restricted. The underestimation of the number of homeless people who avoid the homeless services is therefore even greater than in the previous editions of the city count.

Gemeenschappelijke Gemeenschapscommissie. *Ordonnantie van 14 juni 2018 betreffende de noodhulp aan en de inschakeling van daklozen, Gemeenschappelijke Gemeenschapscommissie* [Joint Community Commission. Order of 14 June 2018 on emergency aid for and the integration of the homeless, Joint Community Commission]

[2] la Strada, *Telling van dak- en thuislozen in het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest –november 2016/2017*, Brussel: Steunpunt Thuislozenzorg Brussel – la Strada, 2017 [*la Strada, Census of homeless people in the Brussels-Capital Region – November 2016/2017, Brussels: Steunpunt Thuislozenzorg Brussel – la Strada, 2017*]

Which research approaches and self-image of the people and institutions conducting city counts can ensure the quality of a city count? In the following, we outline a technocratic-oriented, a social-theory-driven and a justice- and human rights-oriented approach to city counts.

1. The *technocratic paradigm* follows pragmatic and feasibility-based considerations. The design and implementation of the study is based on personnel, technical and financial aspects. Pragmatic approaches give less emphasis to theories as it ignores theoretical framings. On the one hand, this reduces the quality of the study ignoring theoretical knowledge. On the other hand, a technocracy-based approach can also be an advantage for breaking up dogmas in disciplines and proceeding in a feasible and solution-oriented way.

2. It is often overlooked that behind empirical research, which includes counting and measuring homelessness, there are *theory-based concepts*. Regardless of whether the research process is linear or circular-cascade, theory is incorporated into the whole and entire empirical research process (Outhwaite and Turner, 2007). Social theory enriches the process to learn more about the phenomena of homelessness, to formulate and test hypotheses of the causes for and consequences of homelessness. Theory-based priorities can support further development of measures. This includes theories on needs and vulnerability, social inclusion and social integration, prevention of homelessness and also the effectiveness of existing assistance. Translating such theories into city counts is challenging, but important in terms of the output they can generate not only for scientific community but also for policy and practice. Finally yet importantly, theory driven counts protect the autonomy of academics and professionalism from political interests.

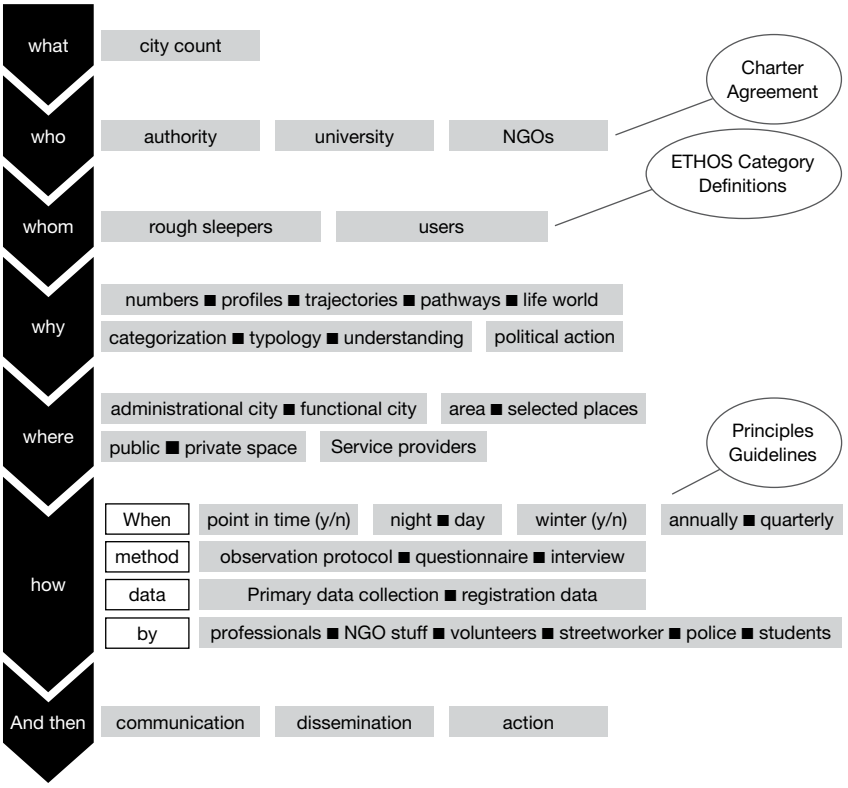
3. A third focus is based on *justice and human rights*. Social work scientists often favour such a normative mission. A justice and human rights based approach refers to the fundamental perspective that the city counts stand not for themselves. The rationale of the count is the person behind the numbers. It is about empirically based proposals for changes in assistance, so that human rights are respected, elementary needs linked to housing can be met (health, safety, protection and intimacy), perspectives for those affected are created and a just coexistence is opened up. In accordance for example, with capability approach (Sen, 1999), social factors and individual potential interact in such a way that homeless people's chances of achieving a good life increase.

The function of city counts vary between politicians, scientists, practitioners, and homeless people. Politicians have recognised that scientifically based figures on homelessness produce high credibility in the population. High political relevance of data and city counts contains risks that can discredit a study, their implementation, results and interpretation, but also creates opportunities for such a study and its impact. To overcome this dilemma a concept of constructive cooperation and collaboration with political parties takes into account when the count is conceptualised, conducted and the results are disseminated. Although a political effect is desired with the tool of a city count, it is important to comply with scientific standards and principles, and the fundamental scientific criteria of validity, objectivity and reliability in measuring homelessness should be obtained. Social research has the obligation to stand up to all ideological and political considerations and to emphasise the independence of its claim to knowledge. Likewise, studies' authors need a clear commitment to scientific criteria, an openness to theory-based censuses, a critical but constructive attitude towards pragmatism, and a professional mission that the study should primarily serve homeless people.

Lessons Learned from City Counts – A Comparative Perspective

As explained in this paper, a universal strategy for planning and implementing a city count does not exist. Each city develops a tailor-made method using instruments based on local context. Despite that, there has been potential for some harmonisation and methodological soundness. Lessons and practices were identified from the experiences of the examined city counts (see Figure 3). From the experience of the authors, a city count is expected to ask specific questions that need to be discussed at the beginning of the project. After all, every answer to one of the questions has consequences for further planning. To sum up with some guiding experiences:

Figure 4: Towards a common understanding of a city count



Source: own research.

(1) A city count is a point in time and place head count or survey asking questions, or a combination of both. When choosing between the three options, the most far-reaching distinction is the database that is available prior to the city count. The different databases open up the entire methodological spectrum, ranging from the use of a wide variety of census data to the collection of one's own data.

(2) The conduct of city counts or studies on homelessness is not justified only by scientific reasoning. The interests of the various actors who commission, finance or otherwise support the study can remarkably influence such research.

(3) In terms of specifying who is counted, all city counts referred to the ETHOS or ETHOS Light typology of homelessness and housing exclusion. The use of the ETHOS-typology with a focus on the living situations helps to avoid being dragged into political discussions on administrative status to define homelessness.

(4) Despite hardly any mutual co-ordination, each of the presented city counts has its value added also from a broader perspective of potential future harmonisation. Basel might be inspiring for those cities which mainly face hidden homelessness. Budapest is unique for its longitudinal experience, promoting the survey for two decades and spreading it to other cities in the country. Bratislava and Brussels have managed to establish a partnership of stakeholders which made it possible to collect the data on homelessness including rooflessness for the first time in the country and the city, and opened up space for further co-operation in ending homelessness.

(5) The choice of the survey area outlines consequences for the extent and structure of homelessness resulting from the choice of the survey date, the survey area and possible influences by actors.

(6) Data are the basis of a scientific based political action and the choice of method influences the outcome and the image of homelessness in a city. The data collected and analysed can enrich discourses on homelessness, change the previous agenda setting in the discourse on homelessness and the handling of social problems. Figures on homelessness can also clarify the situation and sensitise the population towards social problems.

(7) City counts are vulnerable to personal and political interests, claims and demands. Because figures on homelessness legitimise or question social policy decisions, they are susceptible to criticism and misinterpretation. The crucial question is how city counts can be carried out on a scientific basis despite their high political relevance?

(8) The research literature has provided a number of contributions on the advantages and disadvantages of different research designs and methods (Smith *et al*., 2019; HUD, 2020; The Innovation and Good Practice Team, 2020). The overall picture makes it clear: No golden standard on conducting a city count and measuring homelessness exists, and this has an impact on the political handling of data and findings from city counts and other studies on homelessness.

(9) If there is a high level of political public and media interest, it can be observed that the interpretation of the results made by them greatly differs from the results and interpretation of the people who implemented the study. Overall, a high political relevance of city counts not only creates opportunities for social change, but also contains risks that can discredit a study, their implementation, results and interpretation.

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