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# Homelessness in Germany

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- **Abstract\_** *This report summarises the results of a large nationwide study of homelessness in Germany, funded by the German government. The overview about extent and causes of homelessness, service structures and the policy recommendations of the study are based on an online survey of more than 500 selected local authorities, Jobcenters and NGO services, 12 local case studies and 31 interviews of people who have experienced homelessness. The recommendations include among others to strengthen prevention efforts, to overcome the barriers blocking access to permanent housing and to introduce minimum standards for shelters and other types of temporary accommodation.*
- **Keywords\_** *Germany, nationwide study, extent of homelessness, policy recommendations, homeless refugees*

## Introduction

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The following report about homelessness in Germany<sup>1</sup> summarises the results of a nationwide study funded by the German Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. The *Gesellschaft für innovative Sozialforschung und Sozialplanung e. V.* (GISS) [Association for innovative social research and social planning] conducted a nationwide study from September 2017 to June 2019 examining the “causes, development and structures of homelessness and strategies to prevent and eliminate it”. The last comparable study was conducted 15 years ago. A total of 551

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<sup>1</sup> This research note is a revised and translated version of a summary first published in *Nachrichtendienst des deutschen Vereins für öffentliche und private Fürsorge* 11, 2019, pp.487–492. The translation was done by Marie-Ruth Henke.

autonomous cities, cities and municipalities within administrative districts, counties, NGO services for homeless people, and Jobcenters were surveyed in the course of an online inquiry. The 12 districts of Berlin, and the Berlin Senate Administration were included as well. The following quantitative results are based on the data provided by the 414 localities (75 per cent) that answered the comprehensive online survey. During the second half of the study, as part of in-depth case studies, experts at twelve selected localities were interviewed about the local organisation and procedures in their aid to people experiencing housing emergencies. Finally, the evaluation team reconstructed individual case histories by interviewing 31 people who were experiencing homelessness at the time or had experienced homelessness in the past.

This multi-perspective approach made it possible to establish a connection between individual biographies and circumstances of people experiencing homelessness on the one hand, and municipal and independently organised support systems on the other: What are the risk factors that result in insecure living situations? To what degree are people in Germany affected by homelessness? What are individual providers of housing emergency support doing to recognise personal or structural risk factors and prevent impending homelessness? How are they reacting to the state of the housing market, and are they successful in eliminating homelessness? And finally: Do the results suggest points of action for successful intervention by the welfare state on all political levels. The study put particular emphasis on recent developments like the impact of an influx in refugees and immigrants. Lastly the study aimed to fill gaps in knowledge regarding homelessness in the East German states. The result of this study is a current and complete overview of the problems faced in housing emergency intervention and relief structures for people threatened and affected by homelessness in the Federal Republic of Germany<sup>2</sup>; some of the crucial findings are presented here.

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<sup>2</sup> The complete study (in German) can be viewed as "Forschungsbericht 534" on the Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs website (<https://www.bmas.de/DE/Service/Medien/Publikationen/Forschungsberichte/Forschungsberichte-Arbeitsmarkt/fb534-entstehung-verlauf-struktur-von-wohnungslosigkeit-und-strategien-zu-vermeidung-und-behebung.html>) or on GISS website ([www.giss-ev.de](http://www.giss-ev.de)).

## 337 000 People in Germany are Without a Home

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It is not a new insight that the number of people affected by homelessness grows with the size of the city: homelessness has always been primarily an urban issue. The GISS study ascertained the point-in-time number of homeless people in the participating municipalities as of May 31, 2018; the survey categories were informed by the well-established homelessness statistics of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia.

In the nine surveyed large cities with a population of over 500 000 – among them the city states Berlin, Hamburg, and Bremen – approximately 8.6 out of every 1 000 citizens had no home. In cities with a population up to 500 000 the share was 5.3. In the participating small towns and rural municipalities with up to 20 000 citizens, the density was “only” 2.4 homeless people for every 1 000 residents; many small communities reported no cases of homelessness. Their everyday experience with comparatively low case numbers leads many actors in small towns and in rural areas to believe that special efforts to prevent and eliminate homelessness are expendable. But especially in medium sized cities (affiliated with administrative districts) with up to 100 000 residents, support systems showed difficulties to adequately react to the housing emergencies of their citizens. In these cities, 3.1 out of every 1 000 people were homeless. For an average city with 50 000 residents, this would mean that 155 people are without a home – too many to forgo preventative measures and qualified support.

The largest group of people experiencing homelessness were refugees with protection status, who had not yet been able to find independent housing (despite having full entitlement to job seekers benefits with a housing component and full rights to rent a home). Depending on the size of the municipalities, between 1.1 (small towns and rural counties) and 4.0 (large cities) refugees with protection status out of every 1 000 residents were homeless. The data in the participating municipalities also indicates that these numbers are significantly lower in the east German states when compared to the west – this can partially be explained by the fact that for a long time housing markets in the East were more affordable than those of West Germany, which at least temporarily made it easier to find housing for refugee families with protection status specifically.

Based on the empirical research in the participating municipalities, an informed estimation of the number of homeless people within the Federal Republic of Germany was possible. According to this, on 31 May 2018, a minimum of 337 000 people in Germany did not have access to a contractually secured housing situation. The people were staying in public shelters, or in an accommodation project of NGO services for homeless people in accordance with §§ 67 sqq. social code, book XII (social assistance), or they had recourse to counselling by such services, without

having housing. Refugees with protection status, who had not been able to move into independently secured housing despite recognition of their status, were counted as well. A considerable number of unknown cases remains: people not in contact with institutionalised support systems could not be counted. This is especially true for persons who temporarily stay with friends or acquaintances, women who choose dependence on a male provider of housing over governmental support, and people who live on the street without any contact with welfare institutions.

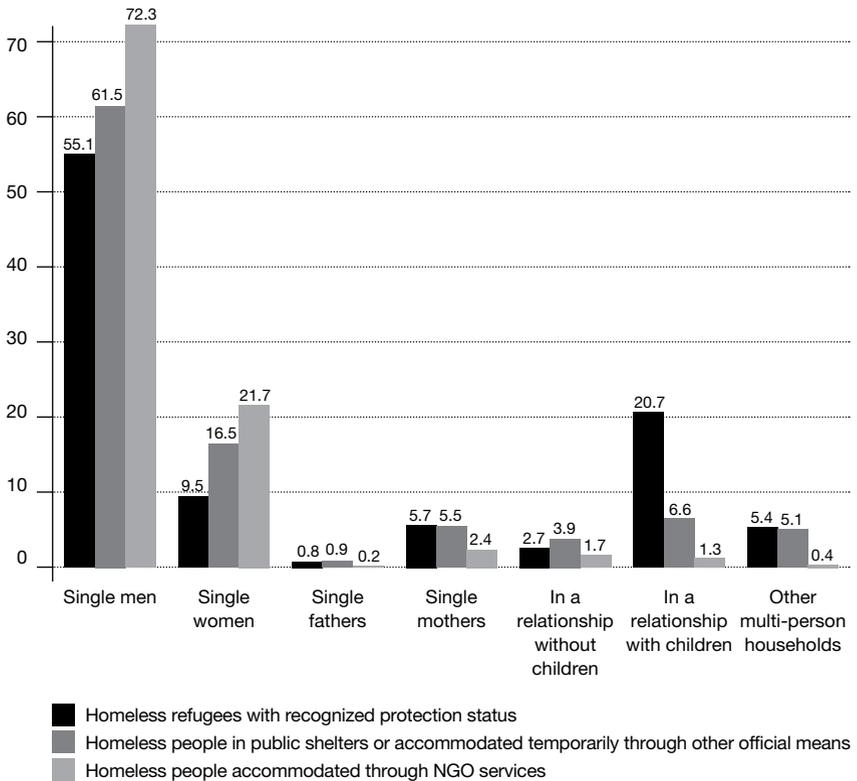
### **Singles Disproportionately Affected – A Minimum of a Quarter of the Homeless Population is Underage**

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Even though the number of multi-person households among the homeless has increased with the growth of homeless refugees with international protection status entering the housing emergency systems, single people still make up the overwhelming majority (see figure 1 below). The share of single households was especially high in services provided by NGOs (94 per cent). On the cut-off date, 78 per cent of households in public shelters were single households.

Among the homeless refugees with protection status, 65 per cent of households were single households. Their 20.7 per cent share of homeless families was significantly higher than for the shelter population without refugee background, and for homeless people provided with accommodation through NGO services (approximately 7 per cent each). In May 2018, approximately every fourth person in a government accommodation facility was underage (27 per cent); among the refugee population this number reached 37 per cent. Depending on the group, a quarter to a third of homeless people are women. About 6 per cent of households among the refugees with protection status and households in official shelters were single parents with their children.

**FIGURE 1: Current homeless population by type of household 2018 (in per cent)**



Source: Busch-Geertsema, V., Henke, J. and A. Steffen (2019): Entstehung, Verlauf und Struktur von Wohnungslosigkeit und Strategien zu ihrer Vermeidung und Behebung. BMAS-Forschungsbericht 534, S. 112.

## Causes of Homelessness

There are a number of risk factors that can result in a housing emergency situation. Often biographical turning points and personal crises – the death of a family member, job loss, illness, or domestic violence – play an important role. Institutional negligence like an unprepared prison release or sanctions of job seeker allowances elevate the risk of becoming homeless. But in the end there are two factors that are most decisive: low income and medical issues.

The overwhelming majority of cases of threatened homelessness reported to municipalities in the year 2017 were a result of issues with rent payments. In that year, 85 per cent of households who lost their home did so because failure to make rent payments resulted in eviction proceedings. 64 per cent of households at risk of homelessness were unable to pay rent even though they were receiving benefits

on the basis of social code, book II (SGB II, unemployment assistance for jobseekers). Households who rely on low mixed incomes and have to manage multiple and/or changing sources of income – e.g. a minimum wage pay check or alimony payments, and benefit transfers – are at a noticeably higher risk of becoming homeless. In the case studies, experts named young adults in the transition between school and work and single mothers as high-risk groups.

Risk increases when people who are already in a financially precarious situation, also suffer from health issues that impact their ability to practice self care and navigate everyday life. In the in-person interviews a significant majority of people who had experienced homelessness reported serious physical or mental illnesses as factors in the loss of their home. The interviewees described severe depression and suicidality during their crisis. Those affected broke off contact with the outside world for the most part, and could not be reached in writing, because they did not open their mail. Such cases highlight the importance of preventative measures (including home visits), since reintegrating people suffering from mental illness into a normal living situation once they have become homeless is universally regarded as very difficult. The experiences of interviewed experts confirm the high vulnerability of this group.

A majority of people who lost their homes and were not in contact with a welfare institution, initially lived in hidden homelessness, by temporarily staying with friends, acquaintances, or family members. Because of inadequate standards, misinformation, shame, or fear of stigmatisation, public shelters were (initially) avoided, even if the affected were aware of them. For a majority of the interviewees who had experienced homelessness, two years (valuable time for reintegration) passed before they sought out contact with an institution of the welfare systems.

## **Inadequate Housing Standards**

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Cities and municipalities are legally responsible for providing people experiencing homelessness with a roof over their heads. A considerable number of people accommodated this way were refugees, who, despite recognition of their international protection status, initially remained in the group homes intended for asylum seekers.

The law does not specify standards regarding the quality and equipment of public shelters for homeless people. This is one of the reasons why vast disparities exist between different localities. While cities and municipalities with access to “normal” living space use their own or rental apartments for temporary accommodation of homeless people, elsewhere these are accommodated in containers. Almost two thirds of shelters only accommodate “non-local” German homeless people for a few of days, if at all, among other reasons out of fear of attracting more people in

need. Homeless citizens of the European Union overwhelmingly are excluded from aid, and are instead directed towards the welfare systems in their country of origin. Only 17 per cent of autonomous cities and a quarter of municipalities affiliated with administrative districts indicated that they accommodate persons in this category without strict time limitations. Some cities only accept this group of people in winter emergency shelters. Especially in larger cities, transregional solutions were needed.

Homeless people who were also suffering from a mental illness often could not be accommodated according to their needs. People without a full understanding of their illness, as well as people suffering from addiction were explicitly named as inadequately supported groups. Also, wheelchair accessible accommodation options could only be provided in very few municipalities. The surveyed institutions urgently called for accommodation and shelter options specifically for women, or single-sex shelter options.

## **There is No Alternative to Prevention**

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In order to protect the human dignity of people experiencing homelessness, adequate public housing options are indispensable. More important still are preventative measures aimed at avoiding homelessness before it even occurs. The German civil code (BGB) suggests a number of solutions in the case that a rental agreement is terminated due to failure to pay rent. It grants deferment periods of eviction, and in cases of a serious threat to life or health it even grants stays of eviction. According to both German social assistance code (social code, book XII – SGB XII) and to unemployment assistance for jobseekers (social code, book II – SGB II), welfare providers can, or even have to take on their clients' rental debt (usually as a loan), if said client is at risk of homelessness. If an action for eviction based on rental debt is filed with a district court, both welfare providers should be informed. Particularly during times of tense housing markets there is no alternative to preventative measures – even for economic reasons.

The findings of this study suggest that the smaller the cities and municipalities are, the weaker their support networks are, especially in regards to preventative measures. About half of autonomous cities had implemented a “central specialist unit” after the model promoted the German Association of Cities (DST)<sup>3</sup> that concentrates into one specialised administrative unit the authority to take on rental debt, provide in-person, at home counselling, shelter, and support for reintegration

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<sup>3</sup> Deutscher Städtetag (ed. 1987): *Sicherung der Wohnungsversorgung in Wohnungsnotfällen und Verbesserung der Lebensbedingungen in sozialen Brennpunkten* [German Association of Cities (ed.) *Securing Housing Provision in Cases of Urgent Need of Housing and Improvement of Living Conditions in Social Focus Points – Recommendations and Advice*], Colon.

into normal living spaces. Often municipal authorities are ill equipped to provide comprehensive preventative care, and district affiliated cities as well as county administrations that operate by a specialised scheme are the exception. In 51 per cent of autonomous cities and in only one county, rental debt relief under social code, book II had been delegated to municipal agencies, so as to bundle all prevention responsibilities in one entity.

For the included cities and municipalities, the survey established a density of 5.8 households threatened by homelessness out of every 1 000 households. With a share of 14.6 per cent, single mothers were significantly over-represented. On average, the households threatened by homelessness had 1.8 members. Every fifth person threatened by homelessness was still a minor, while about every tenth person was above the age of 60.

In about 63 per cent of cases in which the outcome was known to the responsible institutions, municipal agencies had been able to prevent homelessness. Even though rental debt is the most common cause of impending homelessness, agencies only took on debt in a minority of cases. Apparently it was often possible to find alternative solutions, for example in the form of deferred payment plans. In about a third of cases, it was either not possible to prevent the loss of a home, the impacted households found a solution independently, or the outcome of the case was unknown.

The case studies showed that the administrations charged with prevention face two practical challenges.

Firstly, despite legal provisions, responsible agencies often do not become aware of impending homelessness in time: only the autonomous cities (including Berlin) reliably received reports from the district courts regarding eviction suits due to rental debt, and reports from bailiffs regarding eviction notices and dates. The responsible agencies in counties and municipalities, on the other hand, were not always made aware of impending homelessness in a timely manner. Municipalities often were only informed when eviction was imminent and the opportunity to prevent the home-loss were very low. Jobcenters learn of potential housing emergencies significantly earlier than other institutions in the local welfare systems – directly from the affected people. As providers of financial support they are often the first to be contacted by households at risk of becoming homeless. Since the study only found few indications of preventative measures at the Jobcenters' disposal being used to their full potential, it is imperative that they be fully integrated into the local welfare systems.

Secondly, the responsible agencies work with limited resources to facilitate in-person contact with clients. Initiating contact to households, who because of the reasons outlined earlier, do not seek it out themselves, in many cases requires

regular home visits. This could not always be provided to the degree deemed necessary by the responsible agencies. Generally households facing eviction are invited one or more times in writing. When families with children are threatened, home visits are possible. Especially singles are often excluded from in-person support, and according to reports in the case studies, were often immediately directed towards the shelter system. This suggests that (preventable) shortcomings in prevention efforts could potentially be a factor in the overrepresentation of single men – a “high risk group”– among the homeless population.

### **What are the Responsibilities of Independent Welfare Organisations?**

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Aid to overcome significant social difficulties according to §§ 67 sqq. social code, book XII is predominantly provided by NGO services. These however – despite potential individual legal entitlements to support – are not present everywhere, and there are large gaps in their networks.

In a majority of counties they only offered the most basic support: approximately two thirds (66 per cent) had a counselling office. Beyond that, the only widely implemented measure was care and counselling to clients in their own living space that about two thirds of counties (66 per cent) had access to. All other offers only existed in a minority of counties. In 40 per cent of autonomous cities and in 61 per cent of counties, there was only one NGO service to provide support to people threatened and affected by homelessness. This could indicate limited demand and specialised service, but it also means that people rarely have the chance to choose between different providers. The fact that not all organisations offer the same services additionally limits choices.

More than half of NGO services were integrated in municipal prevention efforts, about 46 per cent limited their work to people who were already homeless. In local support systems, NGO services often took on responsibilities for municipal temporary accommodation, as well as care for the people accommodated in their facilities. In 45 per cent of autonomous cities these organisations were tasked with street work. In counties, NGO services were more often charged with home visits than in autonomous cities – possibly an attempt to compensate for the fact that local offices can be hard to reach in rural areas.

## **Permanent Housing Provision – High Demand for Institutional Support**

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The people interviewed in person who had overcome homelessness had depended decisively on institutional aid and support. According to the interviewees in the municipal and independent agencies as well, there was no alternative to individual and in-person support in efforts to find housing – especially in the current condition of the housing market. In particular, prior rental debt and negative credit checks were named as almost insurmountable barriers to reintegration into permanent housing.

Eight out of ten participants of the online survey reported that reintegration of homeless people into permanent housing situations had become more difficult since 2015. A large majority of counties, municipalities, and NGO services did not have access to the tools needed to strategically provide housing for their clients. In the autonomous cities, these tools mostly consisted of access to publicly subsidised housing projects, as well as different forms of “trial living”, with and without the chance of permanency. Permanent housing for small households and (in smaller numbers) for very large households was particularly scarce.

## **Recommendations**

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The research report contains a number of detailed recommendations. One focal point is the strengthening of efforts to prevent homelessness. Municipalities are urged to implement and further develop specialist units into prevention oriented, cross-agency networks. These should ensure improved access to preventative measures (through early and data-secure information from housing providers, expansion of reporting duties for district courts, comprehensive information for affected households about support opportunities, increased home visits etc.), and inclusion of preventive measures in tenancy law. Within the framework of social code, book II (SGB II), rules and practice for service provision should also be focused more towards prevention (explicit mission to find housing, no sanctions on living expenses). In cases of prison or jail time, the existing options to secure housing during temporary detention should be used more often, and release management should be more focused on preventing homelessness.

Housing standards for the shelter system should be raised and streamlined. The municipalities are urged to fulfil their obligation to provide housing to non-local homeless people (regardless of nationality). The integration measures for citizens of the European Union in crisis situations should be improved and humanitarian aid should also be accessible to those who have declined offers of repatriation.

Another focal point of the recommendations are measures to (re)integrate people affected by homelessness into permanent housing situations (occupancy rights, quotas, social rental agencies, need based construction and remodelling etc.) and to dismantle existing barriers (poor credit reports, old debt, time spent waiting for Jobcenter approval). Rent in publicly subsidised housing projects should always be deemed “appropriate” for people who qualify for aid under social code, books II (SGB II) and XII (SGB XII) and housing benefits for households in housing crisis situations should be allowed to exceed the threshold for “appropriate living expenses”.

Finally, it is recommended to improve access to medical care for people experiencing housing insecurity, expand counselling services, and include a clear mission of prevention and reintegration in the support provided under §§ 67 sqq. of social code, book XII (SGB XII). Hostel care as well should be organised in a decentralised manner, and should ensure a secure housing situation at the end of treatment.