
Editorial: Measuring Homelessness in Europe

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This special issue of the *European Journal of Homelessness* is produced by the members of the COST Action 15218. COST provides networking opportunities for researchers and innovators in order to strengthen Europe's capacity to address scientific, technological and societal challenges. COST implements its mission by funding bottom-up, excellence-driven, open and inclusive networks in all areas of science and technology. Researchers from 33 countries participated in the activities of this COST Action on *Measuring Homelessness in Europe* between 2016 and 2020. The purpose of this COST Action was: (1) to bring together the expertise and knowledge with regard to measuring homelessness; (2) to map current measurement methods; (3) to facilitate a common understanding of existing measurement approaches and to assess their transferability to other welfare systems and countries; (4) to identify and tackle specific measurement challenges (such as hidden homelessness, homelessness pathways and the diffusion between homelessness and migration), and (5) to contribute to a coherent European approach on measuring homelessness given differences in welfare systems and national data collection systems.

Measuring Homelessness in Europe: State of the Art¹

Building on the work of the European Observatory on Homelessness (Busch-Geertsema et al, 2014), the researchers in the network made an inventory of the methods to measure homelessness in the participating countries. A first essential step is the definition of homelessness. There are various sources and levels of legal regulations of homelessness, like regional or national level legislation, programming documents, or local by-laws. Across the participating countries, legal definitions have at least five substantive elements: (1) lack of tenancy right/status, (2) income sufficiency to cover the cost of housing, (3) actual living situation, (4) a risk of

¹ This paragraph is based upon: Busch-Geertsema, V., N., Teller (2018), *State of the Art: Measuring Homelessness in the European Union (and in Israel)*. Working paper COST Action.

becoming homeless, and (5) administratively defined (lack of registered address). In some countries there is no legal definition, thus, any definition of homelessness would be research driven. However, some countries lack research on homelessness or have had only a short history in conducting research on homelessness, which limits the available pool of research-based definitions. Thus, based on the mapping exercise, basically these five elements which proved to be essential for legal definitions would stand also for the definitions applied in practice, in research (and policy).

In the network, we decided to use ETHOS Light as guiding framework. ETHOS Light distinguishes between 6 living situations. In comparison with the broader ETHOS typology, those staying temporarily with friends and in non-conventional housing (such as garages, garden houses) are considered homeless, while in ETHOS these living situations are considered as inadequate housing. ETHOS Light also drops persons that are threatened by eviction, since not every evicted person ends up in the streets. In ETHOS, there is one category that explicitly refers to centres for migrants, namely category 5 'people staying in institutions for immigrants', but specific reception centres for immigrants are no longer mentioned as part of category 3 ('people living in accommodation for the homeless') of ETHOS Light. Given the large diversity of living situations covered by ETHOS and ETHOS light, one specific measurement strategy is not feasible.

Concerning the specific methods, we can distinguish between the following approaches: (1) administrative databases, (2) recurrent national surveys (with individual and aggregate data), (3) one-off surveys at national level, (4) regional and local surveys (recurrent and one-off). In a number of EU countries **recurrent national** surveys on homelessness are conducted. Usually they are aiming at covering a complete picture of the homeless population at one point in time (or a specific week of the year), as a snapshot. Some of them are carried out every year, every second year or at longer time spans. One of the positive effects of these surveys is that they allow to monitor trends. In this special issue, Benjaminsen et al (2020) describe the recurrent national surveys in the Nordic countries.

One of the shortcomings is that they leave out those people who were not homeless at the day or during the week of the count, but at some other stage during the period in between. As a consequence, short-term homelessness is systematically underestimated and long-term homeless people have a much higher probability of being captured. We can distinguish here between those recurrent national surveys, which are collecting individual data and those which are collecting aggregate data. While it might sometimes be difficult to reach a national consensus on how to define and enumerate homelessness, especially in countries with a federal system, there are some interesting examples of recurrent surveys in certain **regions or at the local level**, which provide

relevant information on trends and profiles of homelessness in those specific areas. In this special issue, Drilling et al (2020) analyse the city counts of Basel, Bratislava, Brussels, and Budapest. Each city develops a tailor-made method using instruments based on local context. They involve a broad range of actors (street outreach workers, services for homeless people but also for other sectors with contact to homeless people, like physical and mental health, youth, migration and addiction etc; also, public transport and street cleaning agencies etc) and a large number of volunteers and help raising awareness among the general public.

Administrative data are used for measuring the extent and the profile of the users of homelessness services. This kind of data reflects the homelessness statistics paradox, referring that the presence and use of services influences the number and profile of those counted. The paper by Thomas and Mackie in the special issue provides an analysis of 50 different data collection systems. Most often, these systems have other purposes than measurement, mainly operational purposes. The paper distinguishes between 6 design characteristics that need to be taken into account when developing such systems. However, very few systems combine all elements because of the tension between operational and research goals. In addition, the current GDPR laws complicate the collection of this kind of data.

In many EU countries progress has been made in recent years in measuring homelessness or achieving at least some regional or local trend data. It is not easy to reach a national consensus on the definition of homelessness and there is still some distance to go to have European wide comparable data on homelessness. But the European Typology on Homelessness (ETHOS) and ETHOS Light are providing a useful grid for clarification which types of homelessness are included in the definition and which aren't. In most EU countries not all categories of ETHOS LIGHT are included in the data collection and many countries the legal definition of homelessness is not in line with the ETHOS Light. For instance, people soon to be released from institutions and people sharing with friends and relatives are particularly contentious. Also, women who are in refuge centres for victims of domestic violence are often not included in statistical counts. Another contentious category are persons living in reception centres for asylum seekers.

It is difficult, too, or perhaps even impossible to cover all homeless people in regular homelessness statistics, but as Benjaminsen et al (2020) show in this special issue, comprehensive and recurrent national homelessness surveys are feasible, if the political will exist and the necessary resources are provided. In several other countries and regions (e.g. in Ireland, the UK, in the Netherlands, Hungary, in regions of Germany and Spain) promising examples of recurrent data collections may also be found, in other countries important steps towards progress have been made.

Hidden Homelessness

Hidden homelessness seems to refer to two specific realities. On the one hand, it refers to be not counted in official statistics, counts or administrative databases. Often, these figures are based in the use of specific services for the homeless. If persons don't make use of these services, they remain hidden. On the other hand, hidden homelessness refers to two specific living situations. Hidden homelessness is used to describe a state of lacking a dedicated physical living space (your own bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, living area), lacking the privacy of your own home and having no legal rights to occupancy, i.e. no protection from eviction. Hidden homelessness includes people without their *own* address. This means people whose current address is not their own, settled home, but is housing they are unwillingly sharing, that is owned or rented by someone else, and which they have no legal right to occupy. Hidden homelessness involves a state of housing *insecurity*. Their housing is precarious, because households have no legal right to occupy the place they are living in. People in this situation *must* live in someone else's home, because they have no other choice, and other housing options are not available. This definition of 'hidden homelessness' is used in countries like Denmark, Finland, the UK and the US, where the term 'doubled-up' is employed (because two or more households are unwillingly sharing housing designed for one household).

Hidden homelessness may also be defined as including people living in housing not fit for habitation. Housing can be 'unfit' because it lacks basic amenities (no electrical power, no heating, no bathroom, no kitchen) or because it is so overcrowded that living conditions are intolerable. Definitions of whether housing is suitable for habitation are not universal, some countries have laws that require housing to be of a certain basic standard, others may have less precise regulations or laws, or lack a single standard defining what constitutes adequate housing.

Thus, hidden homelessness seems to refer to category 5 and 6 of ETHOS light. However, when taking a closer look to both living situations, some fundamental questions can be formulated. First, the duration for which someone must be in a situation of hidden homelessness before they can be regarded as being homeless, is one question. This centres on the point at which, for example, temporary 'doubling up' of two families sharing housing designed for one family, becomes 'homelessness', determining whether homelessness exists after a matter of days, weeks, or months. Defining people who are precariously housed – insecure sharing arrangements with no legal rights to occupancy – as hidden homelessness is relatively straightforward. Second, these definitions have a Northern European and North American underpinning, societies in which it is usual for families and adult couples to have their own, exclusive, adequate, safe home with at least some legal security of tenure. They are also societies in which it is not usual for multiple generations of

the same family to share a home. This kind of approach can also be criticised because 'extreme' overcrowding or 'unfit' housing definitions are not consistent between countries, nor is there necessarily consensus regarding what constitutes adequate housing. Third, categorising someone as hidden homeless can have a strong stigmatising effect. This raises two questions: (1) who decides that someone is homeless and (2) to what extent do we consider the subjective experience of the person him/herself. In this special issue, Pleace and Hermans (2020) argue that exclusion from the physical and social domains is recognised as constituting a state of homelessness, so that living (unwillingly) with family, friends and acquaintances, because there is no other housing option, constitutes homelessness. Incompatibilities with all other mainstream definitions of homelessness, i.e. around asylum seekers and people living in institutional settings, also need to be modified.

Homeless Trajectories

Over the past 20 years, homelessness is more and more considered as a dynamic process instead of as a stable state. Current measurement methodologies are often point-in-time, which leads to an overestimation of those experiencing chronic or long-term homelessness. However, homelessness manifests itself on a temporal continuum as situational, episodic, or chronic, as was shown by the ground-breaking study by Kuhn and Culhane (1998). Over time, homeless individuals may experience changes in housing status that include being on the street, shared dwelling, emergency shelter, transitional housing, and permanent housing and hospitalization and incarceration in correctional facilities. Episodes of homelessness result in individual and social consequences, which are commonly detrimental to individual wellbeing and negatively affect social interactions within the community (Nooe and Patterson, 2010). Different homeless pathways need different kinds of policy measures (Culhane and Metraux, 2008).

As shown by O'Sullivan et al (2020) in this special issue, within the broad family of research into homeless trajectories, a number of distinctive traditions can be distinguished, such as a interactionist strand with an emphasis on qualitative and mostly ethnographic methods of research; a strand that develops the concept of housing / homeless careers, theoretically influenced by postmodernism, Critical Realism, risk society and utilizing qualitative interview research methods and survey data; a strand, which is (sometimes) more positivistic in orientation and utilises Randomised Control Trials to evaluate the efficacy of Housing First approaches or interventions to end family homelessness or quantitative longitudinal studies to grasp the dynamic nature of homelessness. These longitudinal studies are based on the collection of survey data (for instance, the G4 CODA study in the Netherlands, Journeys Home in Australia), on the linkage of large-scale administrative databases

consisting of information from social, health, and criminal justice services, or combining data sets from various household surveys. Based on an analysis of the evidence generated by these studies in the special issue, O'Sullivan et al (2020) conclude that the majority of those experiencing homelessness experience short term episodes, and that only a minority experience entrenched or long-term homelessness. In addition, these studies also show that persons with complex needs are not the majority of the total homeless population and that these persons can be successfully housed.

Homelessness and Migration

Migration is considered as a new structural factor causing homelessness, next to more traditional structural factors such as the housing market and social welfare system. Given the growing superdiversity of European societies and the various migration channels, analysing the specific relationship between homelessness and migration is complicated but essential, as is argued for by Hermans et al (2020) in this special issue. Although migration processes differ between places, cities and countries, we see the same trends in homelessness statistics. On the one hand, a growing share of homeless service users have a migrant background. This trend is highlighted in the data offered by social services, since most of these services register nationality and/or country of birth. On the other hand, especially in larger cities, the reality on the streets is changing tremendously, not only because of the presence of irregular migrants but also because of the accessibility criteria of night shelters.

Given the insecure permit of stay of some categories of migrant persons, administrative databases don't offer much information about them. This implies that counts and surveys seem to be a more valid approach to measure migrant homelessness. The success of counts depends mainly on the cooperation with services which are in contact with these groups, especially if more specific information is gathered by means of a questionnaire. Given the ongoing criminalisation of persons with a temporary permit to stay and persons without a permit to stay as a consequence of the European migration agenda, this raises important ethical questions. What are the possible consequences for these groups, when the services they make use of, are included?

Towards A Common European Framework?

At the European level, both the European Commission and FEANTSA have put homelessness on the policy agenda of the member states. A number of countries have made progress with regard to fighting homelessness on the one hand and measuring homelessness on the other hand. In the past, the development of ETHOS, the Mphasis-study and the studies from the European Observatory on Homelessness were important drivers to contribute to a common European framework to measure homelessness. This COST network brought together experienced and new researchers interested in measuring homelessness to share their knowledge, to initiate new projects and to reflect upon current developments in homelessness research. However, the further development of a common European framework to measure homelessness is only possible if a broad array of societal actors, such as policy makers, researchers, representatives of services for the homeless and organisations of homeless persons work together.

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