Digital Inclusion of Homeless People in Berlin:
Assessing the Current State and Evaluating Smartphone Distributions as a Policy Tool

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ETHOS Light
EUROPEAN TYPOLOGY OF HOMELESSNESS AND HOUSING EXCLUSION

A Harmonised Definition of Homelessness for Statistical Purposes

Sometimes referred to as ETHOS 'Light', this is a version of the ETHOS typology developed in the context of a 2007 European Commission study: *Measurement of Homelessness at European Union Level*. It is a harmonised definition of homelessness for statistical purposes. It is a pragmatic tool for the development of homelessness data collection, rather than a conceptual and operational definition to be used for a range of policy and practice purposes.

OPERATIONAL CATEGORY		LIVING SITUATION		DEFINITION
1	People living rough	1	Public spaces / external spaces	Living in the streets or public spaces without a shelter that can be defined as living quarters
2	People in emergency accommodation	2	Overnight shelters	People with no place of usual residence who move frequently between various types of accommodation
3	People living in accommodation for the homeless	3	Homeless hostels	Where the period of stay is time-limited and no long-term housing is provided
		4	Temporary accommodation	
		5	Transitional supported accommodation	
		6	Women's shelters or refuge accommodation	
4	People living in institutions	7	Health care institutions	Stay longer than needed due to lack of housing
		8	Penal institutions	No housing available prior to release
5	People living in non-conventional dwellings due to lack of housing	9	Mobile homes	Where the accommodation is used due to a lack of housing and is not the person's usual place of residence
		10	Non-conventional buildings	
		11	Temporary structures	
6	Homeless people living temporarily in conventional housing with family and friends (due to lack of housing)	12	Conventional housing, but not the person's usual place of residence	Where the accommodation is used due to a lack of housing and is not the person's usual place of residence

PART 1
SOME BACKGROUND

MOWO-PROJECT

Ethnography:
- Working with different organisations working with homeless people
- Development of further research tools on the basis of findings

Survey
- Current state of digital media usage – and problems encountered by people

Small-scale distribution	Large-scale distribution
20 phones, long-term qualitative research process, phone distribution as method	800 phones – phone distributions as research subject

Data Triangulation and Policy Recommendations
- Develop an idea for challenges and potentials regarding digital inclusion

Smartphones & digital media are becoming a precondition for taking part in societal life

For some groups, there is a danger of a lack of access to digital media leading to widening inequalities – research suggests that this includes homeless people ("digital divide")

Smartphones seen as key device for digital access in those experiencing homelessness

"No digital divide?" (Rhoades et al., 2017) – 58% owned smartphone

Calvo et al. (2019) systematic review: no clear picture

Difficulties with sampling, heterogeneity of the homeless, different methodologies, different focuses, … → hard to draw clear conclusions from statistics. Will return to this.

Clear from ethnography – access to digital media is an issue that concerns many homeless people greatly

Homelessness and Digital Media: An Overview

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PART 2
SURVEY & ACCESS REVISITED

Survey (April – May 2022)

- Developed in iterative process together with homeless people

- Carried out survey interviews in 5 day centres for homeless people. 141 Teilnehmende

- Only inclusion criterion: Experienced any of the ETHOS Light categories of homelessness in the past 12 months

- Convenience sample – not representative

- Carried out in German, English, Polish, Russian, Romanian, Turkish. Interpreters for Arabic and Bulgarian were available. Screen reader for those having difficulties reading. 10 Euros for participation.

- Took ethnographic field notes during interview

- Filtering method

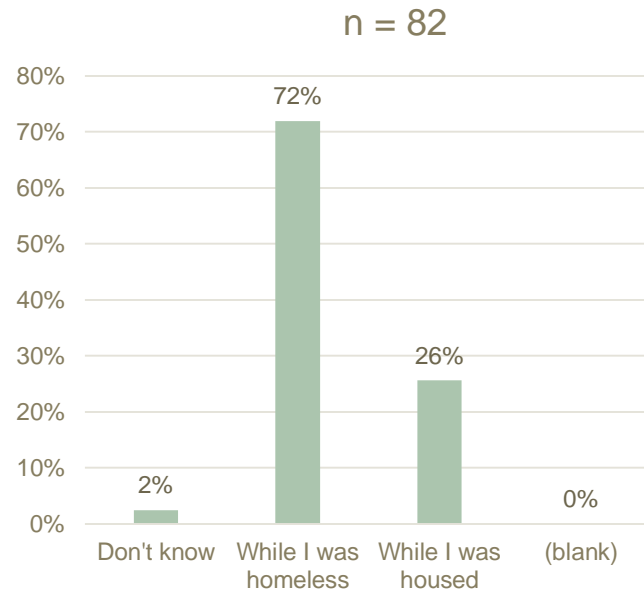# Did you use the Internet or any digital device in the last year?

n = 141

No	7%
Only a phone without internet	7%
Yes	86%
(blank)	0%
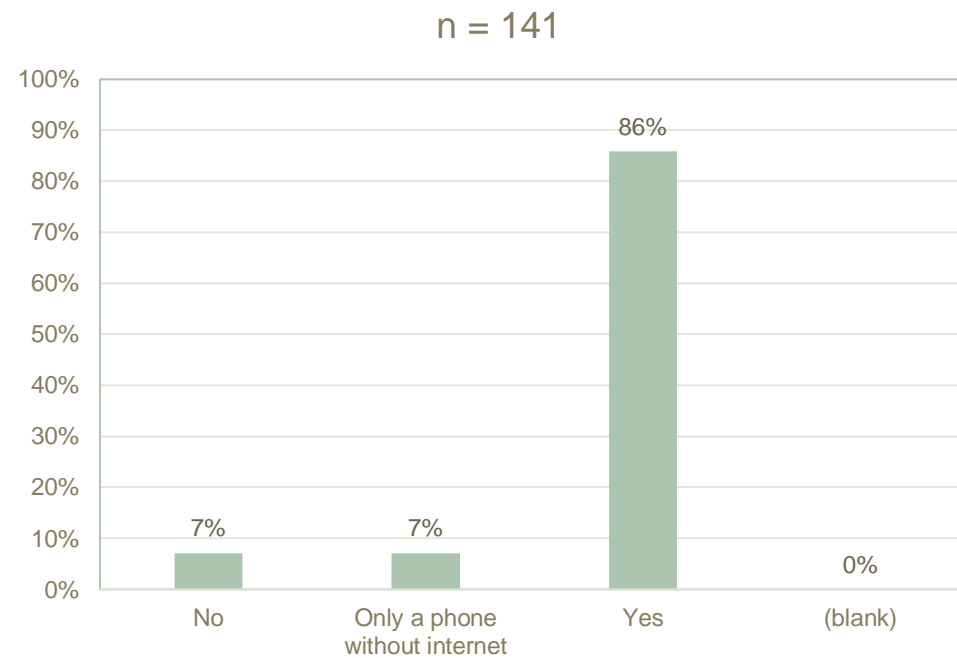
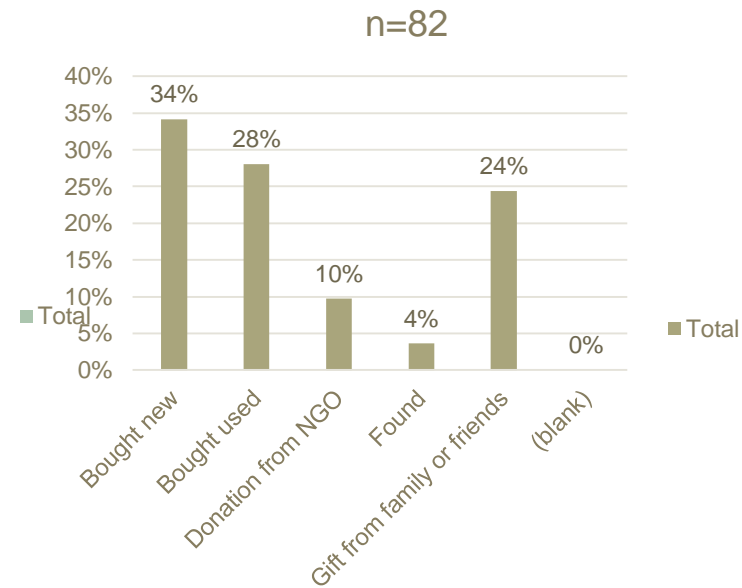# Do you currently own a smartphone?

n=141

■ No ■ Yes
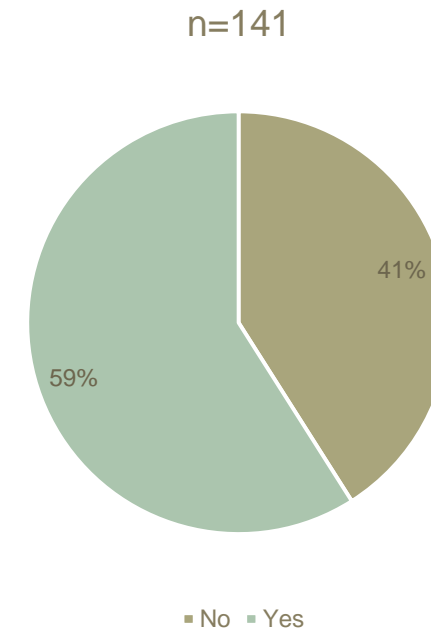
German population 2021: 78% own a smartphone (Statista)

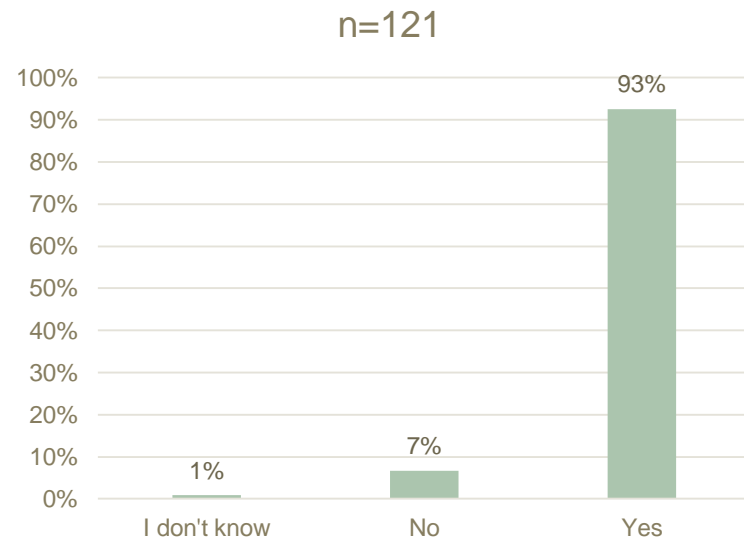**Did you receive your smartphone while you were homeless, or while being permanently housed?**

n = 82

- Don't know: 2%
- While I was homeless: 72%
- While I was housed: 26%
- (blank): 0%

How did you get your most recent smartphone?

n=82

- Bought new: 34%
- Bought used: 28%
- Donation from NGO: 10%
- Found: 4%
- Gift from family or friends: 24%
- (blank): 0%

How much did you spend on your most recent smartphone?

n=79

- Did not spend anything: 32%
- Less than 20 Euros: 4%
- 20-50 Euros: 8%
- 20–50 Euros: 1%
- 50-70 Euros: 8%
- 50–70 Euros: 1%
- 70-100 Euros: 14%
- 100-150 Euros: 19%
- 150-250 Euros: 8%
- 250-500 Euros: 6%
- (blank): 0%
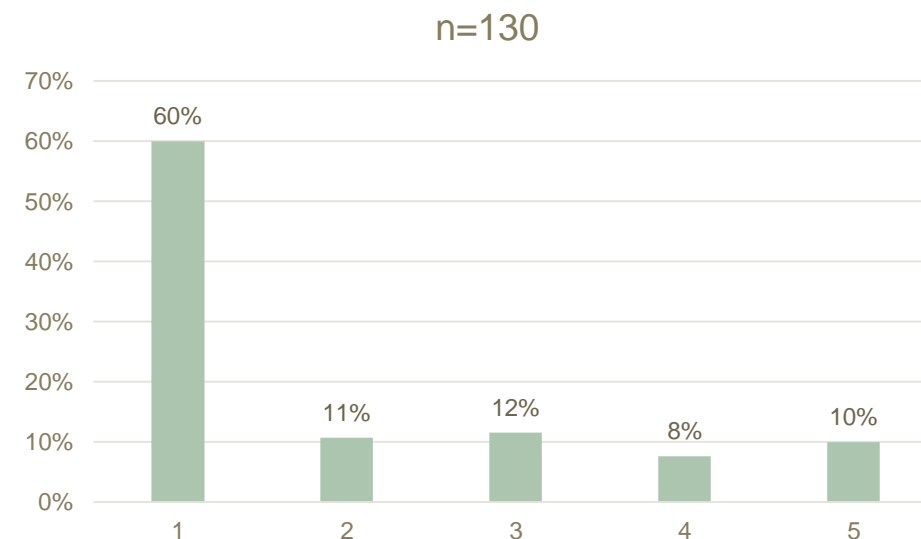
Wifi Usage in the last 12 months

n=121

Where?

n=121
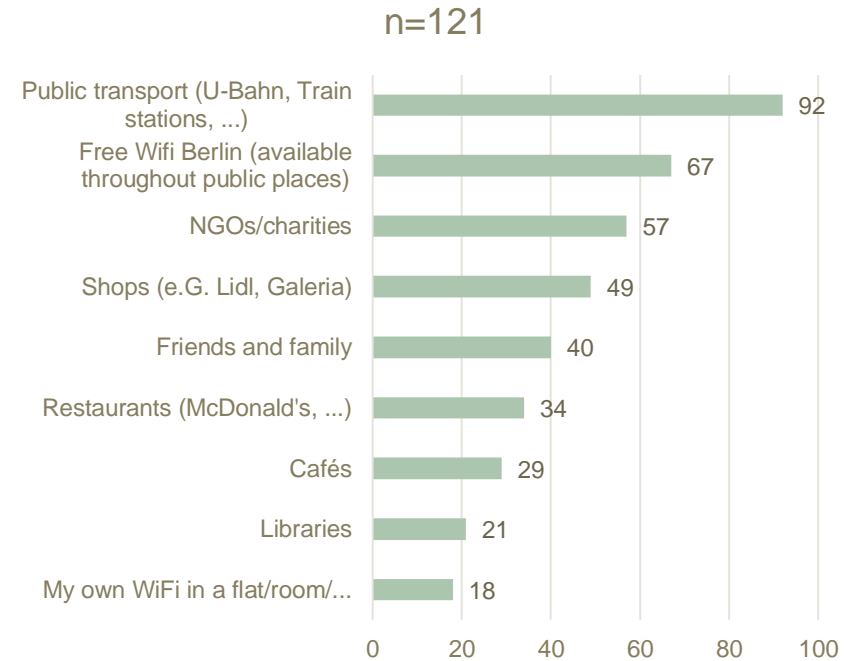
How difficult is charging a phone?
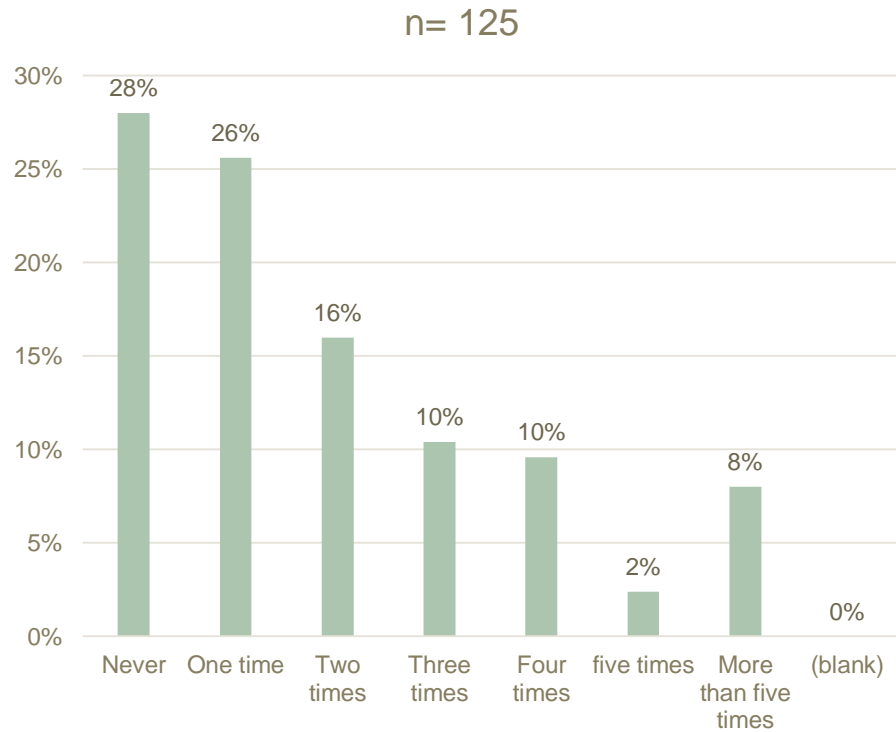
n=130
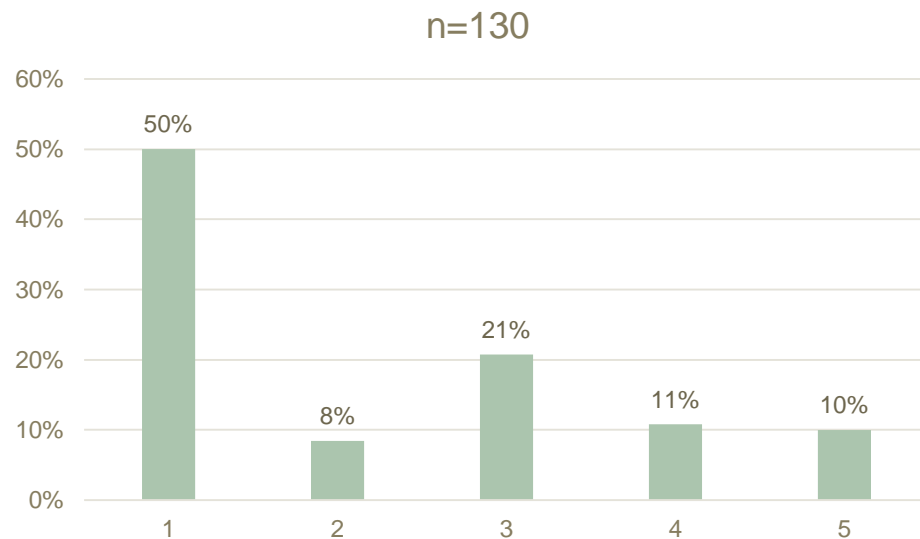
1 = very easy
5 = very difficult

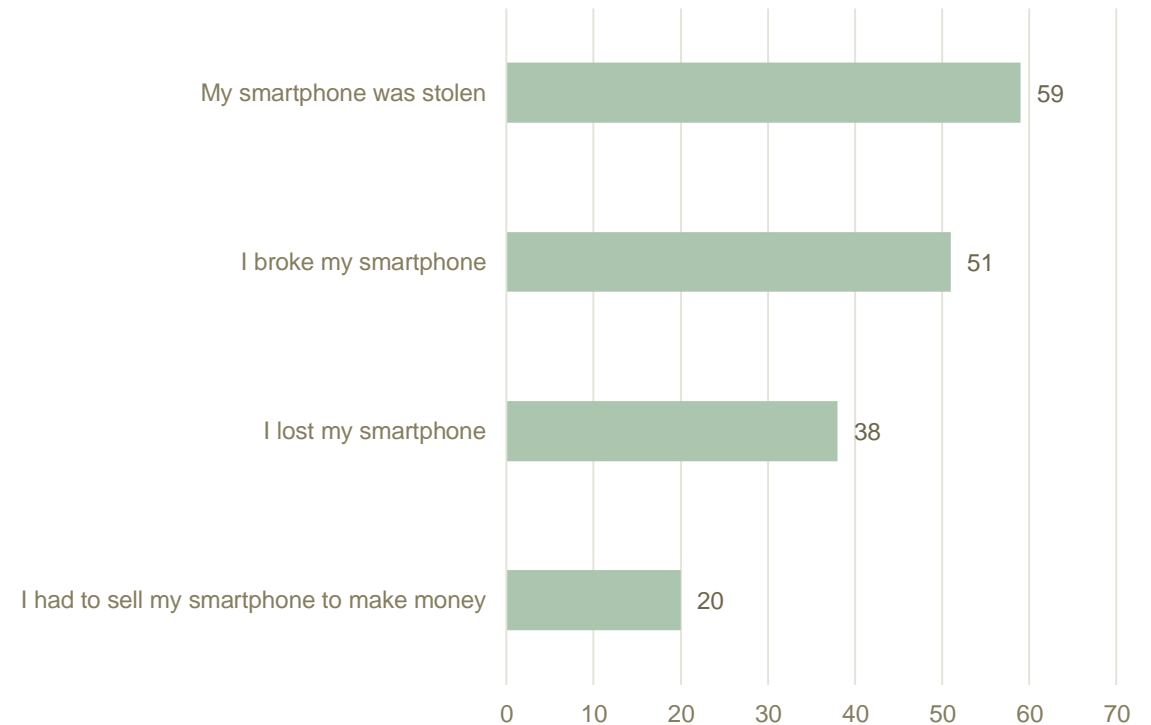# How difficult do you think buying a SIM card is in Germany?

n=130

How many times in the last year did you have to get a new phone due to loss, theft, phone breaking etc.

Which of these happened to you? (can check multiple)

n= 125

UK ONS: 0.7% of individuals in 2020 experienced phone theft.

Access Revisited

Instability of Access

(Rhoades et al. 2017, McInnes et al. 2013, Humphry 2019, Galperin et al. 2020, Marler 2018)

Quality of Access

(van Deursen, van Dijk 2018)

Phone Usage Beyond "Optimising Homelessness"

Entertainment, Media Consumption in particular

Choosing Disconnection

(Nguyen, Büchi, Geber 2021)

Practicing "Connectivity"

Resource-intensive practices

- SIM card registration
- Electricity
- Topping up
- WiFi
- Poor device quality = limited functionality
- Phone loss
- Expectation of availability

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PART 3
SMARTPHONE
DISTRIBUTIONS

Covid: New challenges, new agendas

- social services had to close doors, resume in limited ways

- services for the homeless were initially particularly impacted

- "Suddenly everything was closed - and of course the counselling as well. We all didn't know what was coming or how long it would take."

- soon: switching to hotlines, phone counselling, apps, …

- BUT: "A change of these services to telephone or digital contact options was hardly possible due to the special problem situations and the non-existing technical prerequisites on the part of the target group" (Klik e.V., 2020: 7)

- **24/7 facilities instituted**; however: "Often there is no access to WLAN [in the 24/7 facilities] and thus to information, education and interpersonal contacts outside the accommodation. [...] For homeless people, access to the internet or even charging their mobile phones is virtually impossible" (cf. AK Wohnungsnot et al., 2020: 1)
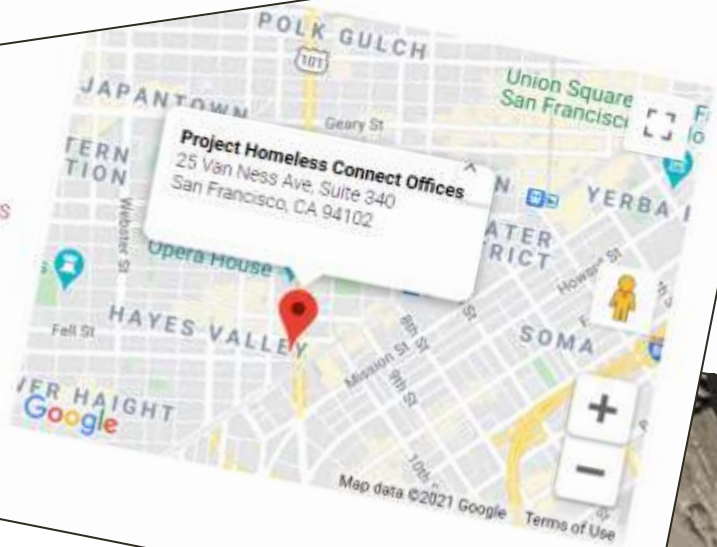
SmartPhone Distribution

- e... pe... ac...
- ...
- One-... egali...
- We ... manne... netwo...
- challenges arose from... monetary value of the phones

Smartphone distributions – a solution before working out a problem?

- Low-impact, difficult-to-target intervention
- Can be high-impact – but only if reaching out to those "hardest to reach" and/or offering additional, longer-term support
- Problem of digital inclusion is linked deeply with wider challenges – there is no "quick-fix" solution
- One possible intervention within a wider arsenal of supportive interventions

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Thanks for listening ☺

Next steps:

o Correlations from our data
o Finish evaluation of smartphone distributions