Data Collection Systems and Homelessness in the EU – An Overview [1]

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Introduction

The European Platform on Combating Homelessness (hereafter the Platform) wants to strengthen the monitoring and data collection on homelessness in the EU in order to promote evidence-based policies and initiatives addressing homelessness. It is looking for clarity, regularity, and comparability in the data available in the EU. ETHOS 'Light', is a widely used and pragmatic tool for homelessness data collection. It distinguishes six different operational categories: living in public spaces, emergency accommodation, shelter for the homeless, prolonged stay in institutions, non-conventional dwellings, with families or friends. Several efforts have been made to measure or estimate the number of people experiencing homelessness in Europe: the European Census of Eurostat as well as its EU-SILC module, the OECD, the European Social Policy Network, FEANTSA, the Fondation Abbé Pierre, and the Joint Research Center. It is estimated that at least 700 000 people experiencing homelessness are currently sleeping on the street or living in emergency or temporary accommodation across the European Union. There is evidence that this number – which does not include the more hidden forms of homelessness – is on the rise. However, at present it is not possible to provide the total number of people experiencing homelessness in Europe because data are lacking, or definitions and data are inconsistent.

Therefore, attempts have been made to make overviews of the different methodologies used and to make them more aligned. Some authorities or research institutes use administrative data, others rely on recurrent national surveys collecting individual or aggregate data. Some run one-off surveys at a national level. But there

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are also many regional and local one-off surveys undertaken. In recent years we see experiments with the mobilisation of volunteers to count street-based sleepers or the collaboration between local service providers and other actors to collect and monitor data on different forms of homelessness and housing exclusion in a particular location.

The recurrent methodological challenges encountered are varied. There are definitional differences, there is the phenomenon of hidden and invisible homelessness, the differences in duration of homelessness experiences, the over-reliance on services to estimate the homeless population, the urban bias in homeless counting efforts, the frequency and consistency of data collection, the impact of the policies, and homelessness in a broader context.

The European Platform therefore seeks to develop a monitoring framework using different sources of information on the number and the profiles of people experiencing homelessness as well as the different policies and their effectiveness. It can rely on various and complementary initiatives. Reference can be made to the Pilot Project on European Homeless Count, initiated by the European Parliament, that will promote local counts with the active involvement of local actors. But also, on the forthcoming EU-SILC module, the forthcoming Census, as well as national and local surveys. The objective is to generate more regular data collections and bring them together to identify profiles, trends, or problem areas and as such make them policy relevant. Therefore, more uniformity and consistency in definitions used and methodologies applied is needed. Key in this will be a multi-stakeholder approach involving national, regional, and local policy makers, service providers, researchers, and volunteers.

Homelessness is an extreme form of social exclusion that needs to be addressed through integrated approaches that successfully deliver on Principle 19 of the *European Pillar of Social Rights*. However, while progress in this regard is being achieved by a few European countries, available data shows that there has been an overall upward trend in homelessness across Europe over the last decade (Baptista et.al., 2011; Busch-Geertsema et.al., 2014; Fondation Abbé Pierre and FEANTSA, 2017). But who are we talking about? What is the *prevalence* of homelessness? In other words, how many people are homeless today? How does this evolve over time? What is the *incidence* of homelessness? In other words, how many people become homeless during a particular time period? How long are people homeless? What do we know about people *moving in* and *out* of homelessness? What is *the socio-economic profile* of persons who experience homelessness (gender, age, migration status, etc.)?

The members of the European Platform on Combating Homelessness (the Platform) have committed themselves to address these salient questions and to strengthen the monitoring on homelessness and the data collection in order to promote evidence-based policies and initiatives addressing homelessness and work toward ending it by 2030. They are looking for clarity, regularity, and comparability in the data available in the EU. Developing better data collection systems and monitoring mechanisms is one of the four main work strands of the Work Programme of the Platform. Amongst others, it is foreseen to promote a common monitoring framework on homelessness, to prepare a coordinated European-wide counting initiative, and to collect data on past experience of homelessness with a view to better understand the drivers of falling into and escaping from homelessness.

What is the Ambition?

In some countries or regions, the objective of ending homelessness has already been stated as an ambition. But what does it mean to 'end homelessness'? So far, there is no internationally recognised definition to 'ending homelessness'. The following options would apply:

1. An 'absolute end' to homelessness whereby nobody is homeless anymore as from a certain point-in-time, and the risk of becoming homeless, in any form it can take (sleeping on the street, relying on temporary shelter with a friend…), is completely excluded.

2. 'Functional zero' homelessness, where it becomes a manageable problem and the policy measures, the available resources, and services are appropriate and sufficient to deal with homelessness associated problems. Reaching functional zero implies that we have and apply the tools necessary to make homelessness rare and exceptional. Also, that it is brief and permanently resolved when it occurs. This approach is more realistic and pragmatic than the first option, although it does not exclude to adhere to an absolute end option as an aspirational goal. A critical note is that reaching 'functional zero' does not imply that some people remain homeless because they are defined or considered 'voluntary homeless' or not accepting housing offers which are not adequate for them.

Both options require a policy kit that matches the needs and demands of the homeless population and the people at risk of homelessness.

Who are We Talking About?

Homelessness is defined, perceived, and tackled differently in the EU Member States. Within a given Member State different definitions may be used for different purposes or at different levels. In some countries, the definition is restricted to people living on the streets or in public spaces ('sleeping rough'), and/or living in shelters or other emergency accommodation. Other countries (or regions) apply a broader definition, which also includes people who are, for example, living in caravans and are doubled up with family and friends. Not all countries have an 'official' definition for statistical or policy-purposes. The ESPN study (Baptista and Marlier, 2019) revealed that this was the case in eight EU Member States.

In the framework of the work programme of the Platform, it is crucial to adhere to a common definition of homelessness and its different manifestations. It is a first and essential step in developing a common counting system and a joint approach to monitoring homelessness. Benefits from such an exercise will be drawn not only at the European level but equally at national and even local level, since experience suggests that countries that have counting systems on a nationally agreed-upon definition have more reliable data, better and more effective policies, and thus also better outcomes.

To develop a common language, in 2005 FEANTSA, the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless, developed the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) through a review of existing definitions of homelessness and the realities of homelessness which service providers are faced with on a daily basis. The European Consensus Conference on Homelessness, an initiative of the Belgian Presidency of the EU Council, co-organised with the European Commission in 2010, has recommended ETHOS as a common framework definition of homelessness. While remaining a voluntary approach, ETHOS is now commonly used by academia, policy makers, and service providers. ETHOS recognises that homelessness is not a fixed state but a dynamic process whereby people move in and out of different precarious living situations. ETHOS categories therefore attempt to cover all living situations which amount to forms of homelessness or housing exclusion: rooflessness, houselessness, and living in insecure or inadequate housing.

ETHOS Light is a definition of homelessness *for statistical purposes*. It harmonises a variety of existing definitions and has become a widely used pragmatic tool for homelessness data collection, rather than a conceptual definition. ETHOS Light distinguishes six different operational categories:

1. People *living rough* in public spaces.

2. People *in emergency accommodation* such as overnight shelters.

3. People living in *accommodation for the homeless* where the period of stay is time limited. Examples are homeless hostels, women's shelters, or refuge accommodation.

4. People *living in institutions* such as health care institutions or penal institutions for a longer period of time because there is no housing available prior to being discharged.

5. People living in *nonconventional dwellings* due to lack of housing. Examples are mobile homes or caravans on illegal campsites, non-conventional buildings, and temporary structures.

6. People living temporarily *with family or friends* due to lack of housing.

The main added value of ETHOS is two-fold: it provides a conceptual definition to underpin policymaking and it proposes a common language for understanding which living situations precisely are captured by data in different contexts. ETHOS is already widely used in these two senses. However, ETHOS is not a common European standard for national data collection strategies. National data collection strategies, including definitions used, still vary significantly within the European Union, which makes comparability of data limited.

What Do We Know? How Many People Experiencing Homelessness are there in the Member States and in the EU?

There have been different efforts at European level and beyond to get an idea of the number of people living in homeless conditions. Every 10 years, a European census counts the entire population and housing stock of the Member States and collects information on its main characteristics. For the census in 2011 (https://ec.europa.eu/CensusHub2), Eurostat asked Member States to count the people experiencing homelessness in their territory, but not necessarily as a separate group. However, only 16 countries did so. Together, these countries reported just under 120 000 people experiencing homelessness (118 946). These results could not help to compare homelessness across the European Member States. Nor could they reliably estimate the number of people experiencing homelessness at a European level. Extrapolation of the data available from the 16 countries was not possible because they were not a representative sample of all the Member States and the counting systems used in the countries covered were often of a very different nature (e.g., administrative data, point-in-time surveys,…). For the 2021 census round, European statistical legislation stipulates that Member States must do a separate counting of the homeless.

In 2018, a study was carried out by Eurostat (Eurostat, 2018), in the frame of EU-SILC, to give an overview of the magnitude of homelessness, through looking at how 'housing difficulties' are experienced by the entire European population. As this module was optional for Member States, only 12 countries participated: Belgium, Bulgaria, Germany, Denmark, Greece, Spain, Hungary, Ireland, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, as well as the United Kingdom, Albania, and Switzerland. According to this study, four out of every 100 people in Europe – in the sample of 12 countries – report that they have been homeless at least once in their lives (ranging from one in every 100 persons in Hungary to 10 in every 100 in Denmark). For every 100 people, three have had to live with relatives temporarily and one person in every 100 reports having slept on the street or lived in emergency or temporary accommodation or in a place not intended as a home. For the majority of people surveyed (76.2%), the duration of their most recent experience of home-lessness was less than 12 months. Almost a quarter of people surveyed reported that this period had lasted more than 12 months: for 11.5%, it lasted between 12 and 24 months, and for 12.2%, it lasted more than 24 months. The next time Eurostat will use the housing module of EU-SILC will be in 2023.

In addition, EU-SILC survey allows monitoring housing deprivation and housing conditions. These data are also used for the Social Scoreboard, which tracks the implementation of the Pillar of Social Rights. The Scoreboard has among its headline indicators the housing cost overburden rate, which monitors housing conditions and affordability, in line with principle 19 of the European Pillar of Social Rights. It also has a secondary indicator on the severe housing deprivation rate.

In 2020 the OECD estimated a total of just over 900 000 people experiencing home-lessness in 21 EU Member States (2020 data or latest year available data; 911 177). These data were drawn from the OECD Questionnaire on Affordable and Social Housing and other available sources (https://www.oecd.org/els/family/HC3-1-Homeless-population.pdf). Although there is a lot of variation in the percentage of people experiencing homelessness in the Member States, in all of them less than 1% is reported homeless. Definitional differences and differences in methodologies used drive some of the variation in the reported prevalence of homelessness across countries. These differences, of course, hamper international comparison and an understanding of the differences in homelessness rates and risks across countries. The OECD could not collect data for the same years for all countries as the timing of homelessness counts is not harmonised across countries. In a number of countries, there have not been any data collection efforts at a national level and led by their national statistical institutions in the last five years.

At the request of the European Commission, in 2019, the European Social Policy Network (ESPN) published a report on national strategies to tackle homelessness and housing exclusion (HHE). The synthesis report of this mapping exercise outlines several key findings (Baptista and Marlier, 2019). First of all, the available data, although inconsistent, point to an increase of HHE over the last decade in the majority of the 35 countries covered by the ESPN. Finland is the only EU country where homelessness has decreased significantly over the last two decades. There are similarities in the profiles of people experiencing homelessness across Europe (mostly men within working age), as well as emerging profiles within specific national contexts (e.g., young people and an older cohort of people experiencing homelessness). Women and children remain a more invisible category (often resorting to more informal 'hidden' accommodation solutions). In most EU countries, long-standing or more recent negative housing market developments (e.g., steep increases in rental prices, insecurity of tenure, rising evictions) are the main determinants behind HHE increases.

Until 2010, FEANTSA's European Observatory on Homelessness published estimates on homelessness on a yearly basis. Since 2016, FEANTSA and the Abbé Pierre Foundation publish their annual Overview of Housing Exclusion. In its 2017 edition, the Overview provided a 'map of alarming trends' bringing to light facts and figures from most European Union Member States. This information shows how shocking the situation is in most countries. The map offers a closer look at certain cities or categories of people particularly affected by homelessness. Every year, the report publishes an updated table of national figures and summarises the most telling trends. Insofar as possible, the data comprise the most recent official figures from the country concerned and, if these figures were not available, other sources, such as those collected by services for the homeless or research, are provided.

In the 2020 edition, FEANTSA and the Foundation Abbé Pierre estimate that at least 700 000 people experiencing homelessness are currently sleeping on the street or living in emergency or temporary accommodation across the European Union. This is a 70% increase in the space of 10 years. This is based on an earlier estimate from 2009. The methodology consisted of combining point-in-time survey data from the countries where it was available and extrapolating for the EU as a whole. Looking at it from different angles, this is considered to be a conservative and not particularly robust estimate.

As background material for its reports, FEANTSA also produces country profiles that can be retrieved from its website and that are regularly updated.

In 2021, the Joint Research Center (JRC) of the European Commission carried out a survey on homelessness among cities and smaller towns. The main aim of this study is to get a better understanding of the phenomenon of homelessness

(trends and numbers), policies (prevention and rehousing), the developments during the pandemic, and the potential implications for future policies. The study includes a wide range of urban classifications, from smaller towns and villages to large metropolitan areas.

The survey was completed in Spring 2021. In total, 131 responses were collected from 16 Member States, the majority of which came from two countries, Italy and Portugal. The survey included 29 questions, divided into five main sections:

1. General information about the respondents and the municipality that he/she represented;

2. Data to quantify and qualify homelessness;

3. Existing strategies and policies for homelessness;

4. Specific trends or initiatives related to homelessness that have been observed or put in place during the COVID crisis; and

5. The availability of public/social housing in the municipality and the criteria for inclusion/exclusions from it (van Heerden et al., 2022).

EU Methodological Initiatives on Better Measuring Homelessness

The European Social Policy Network study of 2019 we referred to in the previous section puts the finger on the soft spot of most research on homelessness in the EU: at present it is not possible to provide the total number of people experiencing homelessness in Europe because data are lacking, or definitions and data are inconsistent.

Still, there have been several attempts to harmonise the measuring of homelessness in Europe, especially over the last 15 years. These methodological exercises have led to important insights in how best to measure – or estimate – homelessness.

A first initiative worth mentioning is the MPHASIS (Measuring Progress on Homelessness through Advancing and Strengthening Information Systems) Project which ran from December 2007 to December 2009. MPHASIS (https://www.dundee.ac.uk/geddesinstitute/projects/mphasis/) made a significant contribution to building capacity in measuring homelessness. Networks of key stakeholders were created, involving not only people with a responsibility for data collection but also policy makers and service providers. At a national level, MPHASIS provided a mechanism for bringing national and local government departments and agencies together with NGOs. In some cases, this was done for the very first time. The inclusion of stakeholders from national statistical agencies was particularly significant.

Then, in 2009, the Social Protection Committee (SPC) organised a peer review on data collection and homelessness. During the peer review meeting, organised in Vienna, improved and comparable counting was considered the basis for the planning of assistance.

FEANTSA and its European Observatory on Homelessness (EOH) have undertaken a lot of work on data collection on homelessness in the EU. In 2014, the EOH published a comparative study on the 'Extent and Profile of Homelessness in European Member States'. It asked experts in 15 EU Member States to complete a questionnaire exploring the extent of statistical data on homelessness in their countries. The experts were also asked to summarise any relevant statistical research on homelessness published in their countries since 2009. In addition, the national experts were asked to describe the methods used to count and survey people experiencing homelessness in their country and to provide an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of these methods.

In a way the recent COST Action (2016 – 2021), in which 20 EU Member States participated along with some neighbouring countries, was a follow-up to the previously mentioned EOH exercise. The results were published in a special issue of the European Journal of Homelessness (Volume 14, Issue 3, 2020). In a coordinated European approach, researchers tried to make progress on the development of a European wide scientifically based methodology to measure it. More specifically, the purpose of this network was (1) to bring together the expertise with regard to measuring homelessness, (2) to tackle specific measurement challenges (such as measuring hidden homelessness or homelessness careers), and (3) to create a common European framework on measuring homelessness.

To that effect, in 2017 a questionnaire survey was conducted among the COST action members. The results of this work were published in 2020 in a special issue of the European Journal of Homelessness.

The researchers first focused on the legal definitions and observed 5 substantive elements in the legal acts.

1. Lack of tenancy rights/status.

2. Income situation is insufficient to sustain housing (affordability).

3. Actual living situation: topological (street); institutional (within service provision); in physically inadequate structures or unsafe; involuntarily living with family or friends.

4. There is a threat of becoming a person without housing or no home to return to (e.g., after release from prison).

5. Administratively defined (lack of registered address).

In some countries there is no legal definition and thus only a research-driven defini-
tion. In some countries the above elements are combined in one, single legal defini-
tion. Sometimes in the same country definitions change over time or different
definitions are used simultaneously by authorities, regions, or researchers. Except
for street-based sleeping and the presence in emergency accommodation, many
legal definitions do not cover the ETHOS Light categories mentioned before. Few
refer to people who must extend their stay in health care or penal institutions
because they have no housing available. Only a few take into account people living
with family or friends by lack of housing. Practices in different countries also differ
because they include specific groups (e.g., young people, migrants) or exclude
groups because of lack of enumeration techniques (e.g., women, migrants).

The researchers also identified six methodological clusters and gave an overview
of the use of these methods by the European countries.

A first method consists of the use of administrative data. These data mostly refer
to numbers or profile of service users. Administrative data can be an effective
means to assess the number of individuals using homeless services and may better
capture the flows of people who transition in and out of homelessness over a given
period. These estimates tend to be much larger than point-in-time estimates.

This method is used in many Member States. More systematic, coordinated, and
sophisticated methods using a combination of registers and involving different
stakeholders can be found in Denmark, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Germany. [2]

A second method that is used in several Member States consists of recurrent
national surveys. In most cases a point-in-time or week method (PIT) is used.

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[2]   The 2019 ESPN study revealed that eight Member States do not have an official definition at all.
The study, that covers 35 European countries, concluded that a comparison between the
presence or absence of the various living situations encompassed by the six ETHOS-Light
operational categories among the 35 countries reveals a clear trend: the more visible the HHE
situation (e.g., rough sleeping, living in emergency shelters), the higher the probability of that
condition being defined as homelessness. In fact, people living on the street are almost every-
where defined as being homeless. On the other hand, only 14 countries include "people living
temporarily with family and friends, due to lack of housing" in their homelessness definition and,
out of these, only four are actually able to provide data on the extent of this phenomenon. For
an overview of all the definitions used in the EU Member States, see Baptista and Marlier, 2019.

Denmark, for example, has annual shelter statistics based on a client registration system. Ireland
records service user data from statutory and NGO services for people experiencing homeless-
ness. The Dutch National Statistical Office uses a combination of data from the national popula-
tion register (covering data on people with a postal address at a day or night shelter), a data base
on homeless benefit claimants, and data from the national alcohol and drug information services
for national estimates on street-based sleepers. A core set of data on NGO providers of services
for people experiencing homelessness is analysed each year by the national umbrella organisa-
tion in Germany to produce statistics on the profile of service users.

In some cases, *individual data* are collected. This is done on a yearly basis in Hungary, bi-annually in Denmark, and every six years in Sweden. [3] Germany also plans to do it yearly for 'sheltered homeless', and bi-annually for street homelessness and people experiencing homelessness sharing with friends and relatives. In other countries, such as Finland and Portugal, *aggregate data* are collected. [4]

In France, certain cities have recently introduced a method to count people experiencing homelessness in the streets and in public spaces: '*les Nuits de la Solidarité'* or '*Solidarity Nights*'. Using the slogan 'Une nuit qui compte' ('A night that counts'), they take place mostly on one, single night. The method has been inspired by similar experiences in the USA and was tried out in Paris in 2018. Since then, this method has been used in several big cities such as Rennes, Metz, Grenoble, Toulouse, and Montpellier, each having its specificities. In 2020, Berlin (Germany) used a similar methodology. Les Nuits de la Solidarité are multi-actor operations mobilising hundreds of volunteers and grass-roots organisations that walk through the streets and squares of the cities during a specific night. Using a questionnaire, the volunteers also have a chat with the street-based sleepers they encounter. To address the many conceptual, organisational, budgetary, methodological, and communication challenges these operations face, the French national statistical office produced a methodological guide in May 2021.

This kind of point-in-time estimates may be more effective in reaching homeless people who do not seek out formal support and provide an estimate of the stock of the ('visible') homeless population on a given night. They focus on the first three categories of the ETHOS Light typology. They represent an underestimate of all the people who have experienced homelessness over a given period. In addition, such estimates fail to capture those who may be transitionally or temporarily homeless in a given jurisdiction.

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[3]   In Hungary, since 1999, a homelessness survey has been conducted every February 3rd. It is carried out by services for people experiencing homelessness and also covers street-based sleepers. Participation is voluntary for services and clients and a self-completion questionnaire is used. It is not a count but provides profile data. In Denmark and Sweden all potential contact services (such as shelters, addiction treatment centers, psychiatric facilities, municipal social centers, or social drop-in cafés) are asked to document information on homeless clients in individualised questionnaires within a certain week. Double counting is excluded by unique identifiers. Surveys are repeated bi-annually in Denmark and every six years in Sweden.

[4]   In Finland, for example, all municipalities have been asked to provide data or an elaborated estimate of the number of people experiencing homelessness every year (since 1987) as part of a general Housing Market Survey. For a number of years, in Portugal, online surveys were done. The questionnaires were filled out by social departments and services of municipalities. They provided data about people who are roofless and live in a public space, in an insecure form of shelter, in emergency shelter, or in temporary accommodation.

The great strength of this methodology is the mobilisation of citizens and local organisations as well as the sensitisation of public opinion and policy makers through local media.

Another experiment has been tested out in a number of Member States, notably the Nordic countries and Belgium: *multi-method measurement and monitoring systems*. In this case an inventory is made of the available data. These are then combined with a local multi-stakeholder approach to trace as many people experiencing homelessness as possible, including the 'invisible homeless'. This methodology thus tries to capture all categories of the ETHOS Light typology.

In Belgium, since 2020, this methodology has been rolled-out in different cities. Academics give back-up to these exercises. To get more information on the extent of homelessness in a certain area and at a certain point-in-time, as well as the profile of the people concerned, short questionnaires are used by social workers together with the homeless client. As such they gather information on gender, age, children, nationality, permit of stay, income, accommodation, reason of homelessness, duration, stay in institution, health, and service use. In this way the profile of the homeless also comes into the picture.[5]

The counting is done in a coordinated way by as many local institutions as possible: specialised services for the homeless (night shelters, residential centres, day-care centres…); regular social services (public and non-profit); low-threshold services (social restaurants, neighbourhood centres…); health care services; penal and psychiatric institutions; social housing companies; etc. For example, in the city of Gent, a city of 260 000 inhabitants, 37 different counting organisations were involved.[6]

Together the different local actors determine the point-in-time for the counting and work together for a full year to prepare the exercise, to inform the stakeholders, to fill in the questionnaires, to do the counting, and to make the analysis and draw the conclusions. The strength of this mixed-methods approach lies in the mobilisation of actors and the local coalition building around the topic. Like for other methods, the major challenge is to get a view on the dynamism of homelessness.

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[5] This method reveals that the proportion of people with 'complex needs', such as addiction or psychiatric problems, is much smaller than usually assumed (Pleace and Hermans, 2020).

[6] In 2020, they counted 1 472 people experiencing homelessness, of which 401 were children. Of those, 124 lived in public spaces, 113 in night shelters for the homeless, and 169 in temporary accommodation. Further, 136 were institution leavers, 246 lived in non-conventional dwellings, and 585 lived temporarily with family or friends. In addition, 76 persons were identified who had the risk of being evicted.

The major disadvantage of both these measurement systems is that it remains unclear how to reach national numbers from these local counts. One-off surveys at national level are another way of gauging the extent of the homelessness problem in a country. We find examples of these in Italy and Germany. [7] Regional and local recurrent surveys are also executed in a number of countries, such as Spain. [8] Regional and local one-off surveys are a final way of base-line counts. These were already implemented in a number of Member States. [9]

Critical Methodological Challenges

There are significant methodological challenges that make it difficult to assess the full extent of homelessness. Homelessness is, by its very nature, a problematic circumstance to assess, as people experiencing homelessness may be more or less 'invisible' to the 'outside' world and as they live a very mobile life.

So far, efforts to count the number of people experiencing homelessness at one point in time or during a certain period often, at best, produce very good and methodologically reliable estimates that when done on a regular basis can give important information on profiles and trends. In this way, these estimates can contain crucial information and lay the basis for insights that are useful for evidence-based policymaking.

Definitional differences drive some of the variation in the reported incidence of homelessness across countries. These differences hamper international comparison and an understanding of the differences in homelessness rates and risks across countries. Different definitions of homelessness can exist within the same

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[7]   In Italy, a national survey was conducted between 21 November and 20 December 2011 and again in 2014. A sample of users of accommodation and meal services for people experiencing home-lessness were interviewed. National numbers were estimated on the basis of service use and beds and meals provided in cities. Recently in Germany, data on people sleeping on the street or with relatives and friends were collected via low-threshold services, food banks, advice centers, places for fictive postal addresses, street outreach services, etc. People in shelters and other types of temporary accommodation provided by municipalities and NGOs are included in a recurrent point-in-time count of the National Office of Statistics every 30 January from 2022 onward.

[8]   In Spain, recurrent local surveys have been conducted in Madrid where they do street counts every second year since 2006. In other big Spanish cities, like Barcelona and Sevilla, as well as in the Basque region, similar exercises are done.

[9]   There are many examples of these not (yet) repeated methods to gather data. Mention can be made of Bavaria and Badem-Wuerttemberg (Germany), Athens (Greece), Bologna (Italy), Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht (the Netherlands), Bratislava (Slovakia), Lisbon (Portugal), Flanders and Wallonia (Belgium), and Bucharest (Romania).

country, depending on the purpose and the collecting authority, producing vastly different homelessness estimates over the same territory. In some cases, changes to the definition does not allow for reliable comparison over time.

But there are more than definitional problems that hinder the collection of valid and reliable data on homelessness. Chief among these is the increasing incidence of 'hidden homelessness,' which refers to people who do not appear in official statistics on homelessness because they are not sleeping on the street nor using homeless services. Hidden homelessness tends to be more prevalent among women, youth, LGTBI, victims of domestic abuse, and people living in rural and smaller communities. As a consequence, people experiencing long-term homelessness are over-represented in many measuring exercises and especially in point-in-time counts. In addition, it is difficult to count specific groups such as undocumented migrants, EU migrants with no claim to social benefits, people with prolonged stay in institutions, or people sleeping with friends or families, also known as 'sofa surfers'.

People experiencing homelessness are literally a mobile population. It is therefore necessary, but methodologically complicated, to take into account the relevance of time and the duration of experiencing homelessness. Biographical studies on 'homeless careers' or 'paths through homelessness' therefore distinguish between those leading to only a relatively short single episode of homelessness (transitional or short-term homelessness), those involving successive, mostly relatively short periods of homelessness (episodic homelessness), and those where homelessness has been experienced without interruption for a longer period of time and usually one year or more (chronic homelessness).

As most research on homelessness departs from the services for homeless people or the 'supply side', many counting exercises suffer from a 'service paradox': the more services are available, the more people experiencing homelessness are registered and counted. As women and young people disproportionally rely on alternative solutions, such as living with friends or family, and use services less than older men, they are underrepresented in many surveys. This means that research on homelessness should also sufficiently take into account the 'demand side' or the dynamics of homelessness as seen and lived by the homeless themselves. [10]

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[10] To some extent this has been done by some European Commission funded projects such as studies that aim to identify strengths and weaknesses of service providers from the perspective of the 'clients' (Goboardi et al., 2020).

Geographic coverage of data collection represents additional methodological chal-
lenges. Many counting exercises focus on urban centres and have no data for rural
areas. As realities of homelessness in urban and rural areas differ fundamentally in
terms of numbers, dynamics, and living experiences, it is not possible to simply
make extrapolations from urban data to get a view on nation-wide realities.

Frequency and consistency of data collection is also often problematic. Data are
often only collected once or irregularly. They are often partial, not comprehensive.
They come from some service providers only, at best specific types of service
users, in particular cities or regions, and, in voluntary counts, there are always
services and people experiencing homelessness missing because they do not
(want to) participate. It has to be noted, as we have done in the table in Appendix
1, that only a few European-wide data collection efforts rely on the original data
they generate themselves. Most studies reproduce data or estimates that are
collected by third parties.

Double counting is often a problem, and unique identifiers are sometimes rejected to
protect the anonymity of the service users, though anonymised identifiers may be used.

A major challenge for the measurement of homelessness in quantitative terms is its
correlation with existing policies. Very few studies have ventured into this which
leaves an immense gap in our understanding of the effectiveness of strategies and
policies. This was also one of the conclusions of the European Social Policy
Network study of 2019 already referred to above. [11]

Finally, it has to be noted that most research and data available tell us something
about the homelessness problem *an sich*, as an isolated phenomenon, and less in
its relation and interaction with the wider community or society. In other words, we
most of the time zoom-in on homelessness itself but could also zoom-out and shed
light on important questions such as the attitude of the population in general toward
people experiencing homelessness, the perceived reasons for homelessness, the

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[11] The researchers found that integrated strategic responses to HHE are on the increase across
the EU, although evidence of their effectiveness remains scarce. Very few countries have strong
evidence-based mechanisms enabling the assessment of their strategies' implementation.
There is evidence of a growing presence of housing-led services (e.g., Housing First) across
Europe within an overall prevailing 'staircase model' of homelessness service provision, i.e.,
mostly aimed at making someone 'housing ready' by providing support and treatment. There is
insufficient evidence to assess adequately the effectiveness of existing homelessness services
in most of the 35 countries covered by the study. This is particularly striking for services repre-
senting the bulk of homelessness service provision across Europe such as emergency and
temporary accommodation as well as day centers.

perceived risk of becoming homeless as a citizen, the willingness to support people experiencing homelessness, or the approval or disapproval of policy measures in the field of homelessness. [12]

What Can Be Achieved Before 2024?

Over the last decade, the EU has supported a number of projects aiming at better defining, measuring, and understanding homelessness at a European level, but there is a need to build a consensus on *what* should be measured, on *how* to measure it, and to *start actually measuring it*.

Monitoring framework

Progress should be made in developing a common monitoring framework on home-lessness to enable common understanding, better comparison, and assessment of the extent of homelessness as well as policy responses and their impact across EU countries. The framework should be based on existing typologies, such as ETHOS Light, and take into account actual national and regional monitoring systems. The objective should be to agree on common definitions, but also on the best way to measure the different categories of homelessness. The framework should cover different collection methods such as point-in-time counts, surveys on past experience, and other sources (for instance, administrative data). The moni-toring framework could include indicators on number and prevalence of homeless, incidence and flows as well as on policy levers. The monitoring framework could compile data from different sources (PP, EU-SILC, census, national sources, etc.) at a macro level.

The monitoring framework could be discussed within and agreed upon by the Indicator Sub-Group of the Social Protection Committee and by the Platform. It is important to base the framework on state-of-the-art research, as well as on a thorough mapping of the situation in Member States. Building upon existing initia-tives at national, regional, or local level, the EU level framework could put forward a common approach, which could in return inspire national or local initiatives.

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[12] Of the few attempts to look at these issues, we could mention the special Eurobarometer on Poverty and Exclusion that was published in 2007 (Edgar et.al., 2007) as well as a study that tries to understand how much inequality EU citizens accept regarding homelessness and how people with a lived experience of homelessness perceive opportunities, choices, and capability gains with the services and the existing social policies (https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/726997).

In parallel, efforts can be undertaken to add sources to the framework and to provide data on the different forms of homelessness and on policies combatting homelessness. The following projects have the potential to fill in some of the gaps in the data collection. They are complementary, covering both past experiences of homelessness, as well as point-in-time counting.

Pilot Project on a European Homelessness Count

The European Parliament adopted a proposal for a Pilot Project on a European Homelessness Count in the 2022 Budget. This project will be one of the first concrete initiatives of the Platform.

The project has a budget of almost EUR 1 million. It aims at "stimulating regular collection of data on homelessness at local level" and "building on existing robust and effective methodologies, such as point-in-time counts, point of prevalence, and surveys". "The pilot project would promote a common methodology among interested local authorities and coordinate a common European homelessness count at the same moment/in the same period. The aim would be to repeat such count on a regular basis and expanding the number of cities participating over time. The results would inform local, national, and European authorities and policymakers about the evolution of the nature and scope of homelessness, and the different dimensions and profiles of homelessness." Complementary with Eurostat efforts will be ensured.

Forthcoming EU-SILC Module
on Housing Difficulties and Homelessness

The available homelessness estimates do not capture the total number of people who may have experienced homelessness or extreme housing insecurity over the course of their lifetime.

The 2023 EU-SILC module on housing difficulties will collect data on past experience on homelessness and therefore on the incidence and prevalence of homelessness and housing difficulties over the life cycle. It will repeat questions that were tested in the 2018 Eurostat ad hoc module on "material deprivation, wellbeing and housing difficulties". Then, Eurostat found that around 4% of people had, over the course of their lifetime, temporarily stayed with friends or relatives; stayed in emergency or other temporary accommodation; stayed in a place not intended as a permanent home; or slept in a public space (Eurostat, 2020). The next EU-SILC module on housing difficulties will also collect data on the reasons why people entered into and left homelessness. The survey could allow to better understand

the drivers of falling into and escaping from homelessness. The module is carried out every six years. The next survey will take place in 2023, allowing a publication of results in Spring 2024.

Agencies such as Eurofound or the Fundamental Rights Agency can also play a role. Their surveys can provide valuable information on dimensions of homelessness. This is the case for Eurofound's quality of life survey) and FRA's surveys on women's experiencing violence, on LGBT, on Roma, or data on asylum seekers and migration.

Conclusion

Better homelessness data should be a priority for Member States to assess and monitor homelessness trends. From the overview we can draw a number of lessons and conclusions. There have been numerous efforts in Europe and Member States to count or estimate the number of people experiencing homelessness. The COST Action has mapped the different methodologies and the methodological challenges. We can build upon the COST Action and many of the previous research and counting exercises mentioned before.

There is certainly a pressing need for more regular data collection. As the table in Appendix 1 shows, many studies bring together existing data and estimates (e.g., from FEANTSA or from national and local authorities) and do not generate own new data. The issues of uniformity in methodology or method-mix and consistency have also to be addressed. In particular, a common understanding of the phenomenon would need to be based on a common definition. ETHOS Light can be a guiding definition and measurement tool in this respect. The different forms of homelessness can be measured using different methodologies. Apart from counting, looking at the profiles of the people experiencing homelessness is also important. It helps to develop more sophisticated and varied policies to tackle the multiple problems the homeless are facing.

The forthcoming EU initiatives mentioned in this research note should provide more clarity, regularity, and comparability in the monitoring of homelessness at an EU level, allowing a common understanding of the issue at stake. They should also stimulate data collection on homelessness at the national level, but also at regional and local levels. City counting is important to mobilise local actors, local public opinion, and to develop focused local policies. When bringing together results and insights from local counting, it is possible to identify trends and recurrent problems and issues. To get a clear view on the national or European landscape of homelessness, it is important to combine different levels and methodologies of data collection, involving different sources and different stakeholders (data from local and/or national public services, data from NGOs, advanced research, etc.).

In addition, efforts to expand the methodological toolbox to collect data and investments in the integration of different data sources are needed. There are already interesting experiments and innovative approaches to link administrative and survey data. These should be pursued and promoted.

Appendix 1: Summary of the initiatives on the table:

Institution	Year	Expected results	Remarks
Census	2021	First time data on current homelessness	***Sources****: MS Administrative and/or existing survey data* Once every 10 years Different methodologies/comparability
JRC	2021	Amongst others: data on cities and smaller towns	***Sources****: existing data at city or town level*
Eurostat (EU-SILC)	2023	Life-time homeless experience Instrument to compare scope and nature of homelessness	***Sources****: Own survey* Once every 6 years Methodological sound/comparability Is not a proxy of current homelessness Useful for awareness raising
ISG	Yearly	Collecting and updating national data	***Sources****: No own data* Different methodologies In framework of semester
OECD		Housing database Comparison with non-EU countries	***Sources****: Data from own questionnaire collecting existing MS data plus FEANTSA-data* Different national methodologies
FEANTSA	Yearly	Profile data	***Sources****: Own research and members data* Thematic Network of national researchers Longitudinal data from service sector Comparability?
Pilot Project	2022-23	New data collection initiative	***Sources****: local data to be generated* Geographical coverage Micro => macro Feasibility
Other		Eurobarometer, Eurofound, F.R.Agency	

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