The different faces of homelessness: exploring specific data and policy needs

Introduction

The 8th overview of housing exclusion in Europe in 2023 (Fondation Abbé Pierre – FEANSTA) estimated that around 895,000 people sleep rough or stay in night shelters and temporary accommodation in Europe every night. This equals a population comparable to that of a city like Marseille or Turin. The escalating numbers of individuals experiencing homelessness across the continent signal an urgent need for action, as homelessness not only poses a severe risk to the well-being of those affected but also impinges on social cohesion.

Furthermore, homelessness is increasing in the majority of EU Member States, while current numbers are likely to underestimate populations such as migrants, women and youth, who often seek particular forms of shelter, and fly under the radar of common data collection forms, due to fragmented methodologies and the absence of a universally accepted definition of homelessness. This underestimation hinders the ability to respond effectively and necessitates an urgent review and enhancement of how this social issue is monitored.

The purpose of this brief is to delineate the complexities of monitoring and measuring homelessness, a critical step towards formulating evidence-based policies. It highlights the

→ Monitoring homelessness provides a basis for appropriate policy intervention. It is important to consider how different measurement techniques are likely to under- or over-represent various subgroups experiencing homelessness (e.g., women, youth or migrants).

→ Support to tackle youth homelessness should take into account their specific needs, offer education and training opportunities, and focus on emotional development.

→ Housing First works under a person-centred approach and gives individuals a high degree of choice and control. It provides tailored support that addresses not only housing stability, but also other areas of life that may need attention.

→ The smaller share of women in official homelessness statistics can be partly explained by differences in how homelessness is experienced by women, relative to men; how it is defined in official statistics; and how it is measured.

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urgency of developing a nuanced understanding of homelessness to inform policy responses that are as comprehensive and inclusive as possible. The brief also aims to underscore the importance of the European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) as a framework, which provides a comprehensive classification of the various living situations that amount to homelessness.

Reliable data collection and monitoring lies at the basis of evidence-based, effective and sustainable policies. Therefore potential biases and omissions should be as limited as possible. We need the full picture of the homeless population, taking into account the harder to reach subgroups, to adapt policies to the needs of all subgroups.

To this end, this brief zeroes in on the multifaceted nature of homelessness and the significance of employing a robust framework, such as ETHOS, which can standardize data collection and enhance the visibility of all forms of homelessness.

The brief outlines the existing challenges in capturing accurate data on homelessness, emphasizing not only the extent of the problem but also the critical gaps that need to be addressed. It examines how the adoption of the ETHOS framework can lead to improved monitoring, thereby enabling the design of more targeted and effective policies. It also explores a range of policy solutions, from preventive measures to intervention strategies such as Housing First, discussing their potential to create sustainable change as well as their limitations, and the necessity for a coordinated policy approach that is adaptable to diverse contexts. Building upon specific contributions from academia, Eurocities, the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and UN-Habitat, it highlights different ways to measure homelessness and related challenges; how to better capture the experience of homelessness among women; how policies can be tailored towards youth experiencing homelessness; the universal importance of housing-first polices; and finally, it discusses different pathways for improvement in Europe and beyond.

Better capturing the experiences of homelessness among women (Authors: Marissa Plouin & Alexandre Lloyd, OECD)

On average across the OECD, official statistics report that just over a quarter of all people experiencing homelessness are women. The share varies widely across countries: women make up roughly 5% of the overall population experiencing homelessness in Japan, over 40% in Australia, Iceland, and the United Kingdom, and about half of the people experiencing homelessness in New Zealand, according to the 2023 OECD ‘Questionnaire on Affordable and Social Housing’ (QuASH).

The smaller share of women in official homelessness statistics can be partly explained by differences in how homelessness is experienced by women, relative to men; how it is defined in official statistics; and how it is measured. Overall, women tend to experience homelessness differently than men and are generally less visible, and thus harder to capture in standard data collection approaches. Nevertheless, next to these measurement issues, additional factors – including different risk factors between women and men that may lead to homelessness – may also play a role.

Women are less likely than men to seek assistance from services designed for people experiencing homelessness, such as shelters. They also tend to rely more on informal supports to find accommodation (like staying temporarily with family and friends), which is notoriously hard to measure [2,3,4]. Women are thus more likely to experience “hidden homelessness” [5] – that is, people who may be considered experiencing homelessness according to national definitions, but are not always present in official statistics [3].

The scope of the statistical definition of homelessness [6,7] helps to explain the large cross-country differences in homelessness rates among women and men. Official statistics based on a narrow definition of homelessness – for instance, limited to people living rough (European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion, ETHOS 1) – generally count fewer women. According to the OECD QuASH, on average in OECD countries, women account for just one in five people living rough. Street counts, typically conducted at night to estimate the number of people sleeping rough at a given time, tend to systematically undercount women, who, for safety reasons, are more likely to be out of sight or in public places that may not be covered by formal street counts (e.g., 24-hour services, hospital emergency rooms) [8,2]. The gap in homelessness rates between men and women is narrower when other types of homelessness are considered, such as people staying in emergency accommodation (ETHOS 2), accommodation for the people experiencing homelessness (ETHOS 3) or living temporarily with families and friends (ETHOS 6).

Other methodological challenges, such as the selection of accommodation and support services surveyed in service-based counts, can lead to undercounting. Namely, women staying in shelters for victims of domestic violence are not included in official homelessness statistics in more than half of OECD countries.

Avenues to improve data collection on women experiencing homelessness include:

- Assessing whether the existing homelessness definition and data collection approaches sufficiently capture the range of experiences of homelessness among women [also see 9].
- Canvassing a broad range of services that extends beyond shelters to include, inter alia, food banks, health centres, job centres, debt relief centres, counselling centres for refugees, and youth centres.
• Including women staying in shelters for victims of domestic violence in official homelessness statistics [see, for instance 2].

• Adapting the typical street count method, for instance by conducting the counting during the day, rather than at night, and expanding the geographic area to a broader range of services and commercial areas [see, for instance 10].

As a key contribution to the European Platform on Combating Homelessness (EPOCH), the OECD is supporting policy makers, statisticians and practitioners by developing guidance and good practice examples to improve data collection and public policies to tackle homelessness. The OECD will deliver a Monitoring Framework, a Policy Toolkit and a series of country notes to map the latest data and data collection approaches in OECD and EU countries.

Breaking the cycle: Success factors to combat youth homelessness in Europe (Solene Molard & Astrid Nordberg, Eurocities)

The Eurocities’ report, ‘Ending Youth Homelessness in Cities,’ shows that youth homelessness has been increasing rapidly across Europe in recent years.

It identifies crucial success factors for monitoring and tackling youth experiencing homelessness and demonstrates how important it is that cities are involved to reach the ambition of ending homelessness by 2030:

• **Recognising the specificities of youth homelessness:** Support to tackle youth homelessness should be mobile, offer education and training opportunities, and focus on emotional development. Including young people in policy co-creation can help ensure tailored solutions that address the unique causes, experiences, and needs of young people experiencing homelessness.

• **Preventing, not just responding:** Prevention is key, yet data shows a lack of focus on youth in cities’ prevention measures. Cities should identify risk factors early and intervene before the situation worsens (e.g. transitioning out from foster care). While more data is needed to better target those policies, evidence demonstrates that addressing conflicts at home, promoting well-being, and providing training opportunities can help avoid future situations of homelessness.

• **Reaching out or missing out:** Many young people experiencing homelessness do not identify as such and might hesitate to seek help due to negative experiences or fear of authorities. Given the prevalence of hidden homelessness among youth, cities must reach out to them where they gather, bridging the support gap and actively offering help.

• **Addressing the inter-connected nature of homelessness:** Youth homelessness results from multiple and interconnected factors. One of the most prominent is increasing mental health issues, sometimes caused by trauma. The situation can worsen when unhealthy coping mechanisms translate into substance misuse. Under challenging circumstances or by lack of role models, some young people are unable to acquire the skills required for independent living and drop out of school, leaving them ill-equipped for their future. All of these factors are exacerbated for young migrants, especially those in an irregular administrative situation, with limited access to public services. Integrated responses are essential to improve young people’s perspectives of definitely exiting homelessness. These include trauma-informed approaches, accessible mental health support, education and requalification.

• **Housing Access:** Ensuring the right to adequate housing is fundamental. Housing shortages and rising housing costs combined with young people’s relatively low incomes and precarious position in the labour market, exacerbate difficulties in addressing youth homelessness. Short-term high-quality unconventional housing should be considered to address immediate needs. While adequate, affordable and social housing expansion should remain a key long term goal.

While some of the competencies on homelessness lie in cities, multi-level and multi-stakeholder collaboration is crucial to end homelessness. Budgets for enabling support services to the people experiencing homelessness and other required forms of care are often lacking. Therefore, cities have to rely mostly on their own budget to address homelessness, but their strained local resources are insufficient. Sustainable funding solutions, and transfer of competence and resources, need to be put in place to allow municipalities to both prevent and alleviate homelessness.
This section discusses the main quantitative methods for studying homelessness and gives examples of their implementation in Europe. The aim is to provide a guide for policymakers interested in initiating or consolidating statistical assessments of homelessness, which represent an important information source for designing tailor-made policies.

**Point-in-time counts** consist in counting and surveying people sleeping rough and/or in shelters in one single night. This method minimizes double counting and it was used in major cities such as Paris [11], Rome [12], Milan [13] and Madrid [14]. The main drawback is that it underestimates the size of the homeless population, as some might be hiding in inaccessible places. Moreover, it tends to underestimate women, youth, and those experiencing short homelessness spells. From an operational perspective, covering an entire city in one night requires recruiting and training a large number of interviewers, resulting in high costs.

**Time-location sampling** is a method that involves first a census of the facilities used by the people experiencing homelessness (usually canteens and shelters), and then a survey of a random sample of users, typically carried out over one month. Double counts are accounted for by assigning a lower weight to respondents that use facilities more frequently. Time-location sampling requires fewer interviewers per area covered [17], thus being more cost-effective and easier to scale-up. The statistics institutes of France [15], Spain [16] and Italy [17] used it for studying homelessness at the national level. However, this method is unable to account for people experiencing homelessness that do not use facilities. Relatedly, when there are only few facilities – especially if already used at capacity – more people might be underserviced and remain undetected. For example, if the size of facilities in a city (e.g., number of beds or meals provided) decreases, this can lead to a decrease in the estimated population experiencing homelessness even though there was no actual change. Thus, the estimates can be difficult to compare over time, as they depend also on the number and size of facilities on the territory [18].

Time-location sampling and point-in-time methods have been combined in Germany in 2022 [19]. The people experiencing homelessness sleeping in shelters were counted through a point-in-time approach, while rough sleepers and ‘hidden’ homeless (i.e., people temporarily hosted by acquaintances and family) were estimated through time-location sampling conducted in a wide range of facilities (e.g., counselling services, employment centres, migration services). This combination allowed to better uncover homelessness among women that tend to be overrepresented among the people experiencing ‘hidden’ homelessness.

**Capture-recapture** is based on the identification of people experiencing homelessness ‘captured’ in different data sources. Studies on the people experiencing homelessness using capture-recapture are typically based on administrative data. Recently this method was applied in the Netherlands [20] to quantify and study the people experiencing homelessness in years 2009-2013. It is relatively cost-effective, as no additional data collection is required, and results are comparable over time. However, its feasibility depends on the availability of high-quality administrative data, where it is possible to uniquely identify individuals. Moreover, this method might be of limited use in detecting undocumented migrants experiencing homelessness that might not appear in administrative data. Point-in-time sampling and time-location sampling might be better alternatives for detecting this subpopulation.

Some studies use **nationally representative surveys** that include questions on whether respondents have ever experienced homelessness. This method generates cross-country data on the life-time prevalence of homelessness [21, 22]. However, it underrepresents those experiencing chronic homelessness who might never be reached by a standard national survey. Moreover, these surveys usually detect only a small sample of respondents that ever experienced homelessness, which limits further analyses unpacking gender, age, or migration status.

Recent developments suggest a shift from pure point-in-time counts towards more cost-effective approaches. These include time-location sampling, or capture-recapture where the administrative data is of sufficient quality. Alongside these methods, including questions about homelessness in existing surveys.

Finally, it is important to consider how different approaches are likely to under- or over-represent various subgroups. The definition of homelessness is also crucial in determining the result of the estimates. The ETHOS (European Typology of Homelessness and housing exclusion) classification [23] provides a useful framework at the European level to generate comparable homelessness statistics.
In the realm of addressing homelessness, Housing-Led policies—such as Housing First—have emerged as a transformative approach that challenges traditional methods and offers a promising solution.

Housing First is a model that prioritises providing stable, permanent housing for individuals with complex needs experiencing homelessness, regardless of their history of substance abuse, mental health issues, or criminal records. This paradigm shift stems from the recognition that a secure home is not just a basic human need, but also a fundamental platform upon which individuals can rebuild their lives.

Unlike traditional approaches that oblige individuals experiencing homelessness to meet certain criteria, such as being sober or undergoing treatment, before receiving housing assistance, Housing First centres on the belief that providing a stable home is the first and most crucial step towards addressing other challenges that individuals experiencing homelessness might face. Under this approach, individuals are provided with immediate access to housing and are offered ongoing support services to address their specific needs.

Developed by Dr. Sam Tsemberis and Pathways to Housing back in the 1990s in New York, this ground-breaking model has gained momentum during the last years in Europe due to its proven effectiveness in improving outcomes for individuals experiencing homelessness and communities. Research consistently shows that when people have a stable place to live, their overall well-being improves, emergency hospital visits decrease, and interactions with the criminal justice system decrease. This not only leads to improved lives but also results in cost savings for local governments that would otherwise spend on emergency services.

Furthermore, Housing First works under a person-centred approach and gives individuals a high degree of choice and control. In this way, Housing First provides tailored support that addresses not only housing stability but also other areas of their life that may need attention. In other words, part of the success of Housing First relies on its ability to be shaped to service users’ preferences, rather than making users adapt to the model.

Due to the above, a positive development on EU level towards tackling homelessness through Housing First took place within the recent years. Evidence of this can be found in the European Parliament resolution of 24 November 2020 on tackling homelessness rates in the EU as well as the European Parliament resolution of 21 January 2021 on access to decent and affordable housing for all. Currently the European Commission in the European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan encourages stakeholders to implement Housing First as seen in the EPOCH work programme.

Although Housing First is already spread across Europe, one of the best examples on the implementation of Housing First is found in Finland, a country that has been able to decrease homelessness, year by year, by creating affordable social housing and providing support through Housing First programmes.

Currently there are also adaptations of the original Housing First model, designed to address the unique needs and challenges faced by young people or women. These additional considerations are layered over the eight core principles to better adapt to the needs of these service users. Housing First for young people (HF4Y) is designed to address the needs of developing adolescents and young adults by providing them with immediate access to housing that is safe, affordable and appropriate, and the necessary and age-appropriate supports that focus on health, wellbeing, life skills, engagement in education and employment, and social inclusion. Women who experience homelessness also encounter a number of specific challenges. They have different paths into and out of homelessness and a significant number have histories of violence, trauma, and abuse. Moreover, women are more likely to be part of the ‘hidden’ people experiencing homelessness, since they tend to conceal their gender and rely on informal arrangements, such as staying with friends, relatives, and/or acquaintances.

Find out more on the website of the Housing First Europe Hub: https://housingfirsteurope.eu/

Pathways for continued improvement, in Europe and beyond (Francesca Lionetti, UN-Habitat)

On several accounts progress has been made in Europe to address homelessness in a more inclusive and effective way. This can also inspire non-EU countries, starting with the strong commitment made in the Lisbon Declaration to end homelessness by 2030. Advancements have also been made in expanding data and knowledge, as well as in the implementation of innovative housing strategies such as Housing First. Some countries and cities have also shown by example that reducing homelessness is possible. It requires the expansion of social housing and a proactive government strategy bringing together different public services and levels, as well as civil society organisations.

Investments in tools and surveys contribute to a better understanding of the diverse circumstances of homelessness. The development of typologies like ETHOS and statistical data collection methods in partnership with academia and civil society organisation can promote a better understanding of the root causes of homelessness. This in turn can inform interventions and support the evaluation of policy effectiveness.

Despite these advancements, challenges persist. However, challenges also present potential pathways for continued improvement, in Europe and beyond:
• A human rights-based approach to homelessness sees persons experiencing homelessness not primarily as persons in need of charity or social welfare, but as rights-holders entitled to the same protection of their rights as any other person. As duty-bearers, governments are obliged to ensure that persons experiencing homelessness can enjoy their rights on a non-discriminatory basis. This entails a review of legislation, regulations, and policies that may result in the exclusion of persons experiencing homelessness from social benefits or the right to vote.

• Meaningful participation of people with lived experiences. A rights-based approach underlines that persons with lived experience should also be able to participate in the design, implementation, and evaluation of policies aimed at preventing or addressing homelessness.

• It is important to ensure policies and interventions are not solely based on the profile of persons experiencing homelessness at a point in time, as such information provides a biased understanding of the experience of homelessness. Understanding the dynamics of homelessness is crucial to designing policies that can end homelessness.

• Integrated and personalised services and collaboration between multiple stakeholders. It is crucial to invest in comprehensive services beyond housing, such as healthcare, education, and mental health care, in coordination with sectors like employment support.

• Capacity-building among public personnel is also essential for sustaining policy changes. Experiences like the Australian integrated service delivery models can provide good examples and lessons learnt.

• Universal, upstream prevention which seeks to minimize the risk of homelessness through the implementation of economic and social policies that promote societal inclusion, particularly with a pro-poor orientation is still not yet adequately mainstreamed in public policy. Examples of homelessness strategies embedded within broader housing and poverty reduction initiatives are still few (e.g., Canada’s National Housing Strategy).

• Addressing the unique needs of specific at-risk groups, such as children transitioning from foster care, persons exiting correctional facilities, those requiring mental health support, and those living in institutions is critical to ensure inclusive policies and programmes to end homelessness.

• Inclusive community contexts and community engagement. It is fundamental to engage local communities to address stigma and discrimination against people experiencing homelessness.

• Support policy measures with adequate funding, ensuring that funding opportunities are available for local actors working to address homelessness.

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