Homelessness: Examining data and data collection methods*

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Introduction

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This policy brief aims to examine what data currently exist on the homeless population and homelessness policy outcomes, as well as discuss the most pressing issues regarding data collection. In particular, the policy brief presents data on the size and composition of the homeless population and the various methods used to collect these data in ten European countries, taking into consideration differences in the definition and operationalization of homelessness in data collection across countries. Furthermore, it discusses what data are collected at the European level and their usefulness to policymakers in providing insight on population groups at risk of homelessness and pathways into and out of homelessness. Lastly, drawing on other research carried out by the European Centre, this policy brief outlines the limited availability of data on homelessness policy outcomes and discusses gaps in this regard. The policy brief concludes with a list of recommendations at the national and EU-level for the improvement of data collection on homelessness and homelessness policy outcomes.

Background

Keywords:
Homelessness; data collection; access to homelessness services; policy outcomes

The topic of homelessness has attracted increasing attention in recent years. Both the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Union support research on the extent and nature of homelessness as well as on policies preventing and reducing homelessness (Baptista and Marlier, 2019; OECD, 2020; OECD, 2020a; see also the forthcoming results

of the Cost Action CA15218 – Measuring Homelessness in Europe). Similarly, this policy brief is part of a larger bilateral research project on homelessness conducted by the European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research.

This high level of interest is not surprising. Access to safe and adequate housing is one of the most basic human rights recognised by the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and, more recently, the European Pillar of Social Rights. At the same time, the number of people without a home has been increasing in many countries over the last decade. Furthermore, research on homelessness and homelessness policies continues to be marred by a lack of (comparable) data, varying definitions and data gathering methods (Baptista and Marlier, 2019; OECD, 2020; Pleace & Hermans, 2020). These problems make it difficult to understand the true extent of homelessness, the composition of the homeless population, the use of national and local policies to reduce and prevent homelessness and their effectiveness and, thereby, hinder the development and implementation of effective policies.

Against this background, the purpose of this policy brief is to outline what kind of data on the homeless population and homelessness policy outcomes exist and what the most pressing problems are regarding data collection with a focus on ten European countries: Austria (AT), Finland (FI), Germany (DE), Hungary (HU), Ireland (IE), the Netherlands (NE), Portugal (PT), Slovenia (SI), Spain (ES) and Sweden (SE). These ten countries were chosen for their geographical diversity and variety of welfare systems. To this end, we rely on several comparative reports (i.e. the ESPN national reports on national strategies to fight homelessness and housing exclusion), as well as consult more recent data where possible.

Existing estimates on the size of the homeless population

Differences in data collection methods and definitions of homeless hamper comparability across countries

Estimating the size of the homeless population is difficult and data collected by different countries are hardly comparable (Busch-Geertsema et al, 2014; OECD, 2020; Pleace & Hermans, 2020). There are two problems related to collecting (comparable) data on the number of homeless people (cf. Pleace & Hermans, 2020). The first is definitional: who counts as homeless? The second is practical: how can those who are homeless be counted? This section will focus on the first question while data collection methods will be discussed further below.

The term homelessness can cover a wide range of living situations from people sleeping rough to those in temporary accommodation for homeless people and individuals without a permanent home who are temporarily staying with friends

or family. The definition of who is counted as homeless, however, varies strongly between countries (see table 3 in the Annex). To improve this situation, to reflect the whole range of individuals affected by homelessness and housing exclusion and to increase the comparability of data across countries, the harmonised definitions ETHOS (European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion) and ETHOS Light have been introduced (see Box 1).

Box 1: ETHOS and ETHOS Light

ETHOS, was developed by the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANSTA). ETHOS provides a harmonised definition of different categories of homelessness covering a wide spectrum of living situations from people living rough to people living in inadequate housing such as individuals in extremely overcrowded accommodations (FEANTSA, 2017a).

ETHOS Light is a condensed version of the original ETHOS typology developed as a pragmatic tool to allow for the collection of comparable data on homelessness. It uses six operational categories corresponding to specific living situations:

- People living rough (Category 1)

- People in emergency accommodation (Category 2)

- People living in accommodation for the homeless (Category 3)

- People living in institutions (e.g. healthcare or penal) (Category 4)

- People living in non-conventional dwellings (e.g. mobile homes) due to lack of housing (Category 5)

- Homeless people living temporarily in conventional housing with family and friends (due to lack of housing) (Category 6) (FEANSTA, 2017b)

The ETHOS Light framework allows for a useful comparison of the types of living situations included in the definitions of homelessness used in national data collection efforts (see table 1 and annex).

Table 1: ETHOS Light categories included in national data collection efforts

		AT	FI	DE	HU	IE	NL	PT	SI	ES	SE
ETHOS Light category	1	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	X	✓	✓
	2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	X	✓	✓	✓	✓
	4	✓	✓	✓	X	X	X	X	X	X	✓
	5	X	X	✓	X	X	X	X	X	X	✓
	6	X	✓	✓	X	X	X	X	X	X	✓

Sources: OECD, 2020a (AT, FI, DE, IE, SI, ES, SE), Fruzsina et al, 2019 (HU), Oostveen, 2019 (NL), Perista, 2019 (PT). Note: Countries are listed alphabetically according to their long form.

In their respective definitions used for data collection, all countries in our sample include people living in emergency accommodations like homeless shelters (cat. 2) and people living in accommodation of the homeless like temporary housing (cat. 3). Arguably, this is at least partially due to the fact that these individuals can be easily counted (see discussion of data collection methods below). People living rough (cat. 1), i.e. those experiencing the most extreme form of homelessness, are also included in the homelessness definitions of most countries. Notable exceptions are Ireland and Slovenia. Categories 4 (people living in institutions), 5 (people living in non-conventional dwellings due to a lack of housing) and 6 (people with a permanent home living temporarily with family or friends) are less commonly included in the homeless count.

Table 2 shows data on the number of homeless people in the two most precarious living situations (ETHOS Light cat. 1 & 2) as well as the most comprehensive estimates of the homeless population available based on data collected in accordance with the varying national definitions. Some countries like Austria and Finland report data for the ETHOS Light categories 1 and 2 together. The Netherlands only collects data on homeless people living rough and in emergency accommodation. Therefore, the total number of homeless people based on data collected according to the national definition is the same as the number of homeless people covered by the ETHOS Light categories 1 and 2 (30,500).

Table 2: The size of the homeless population

	DISAGGREGATED DATA (ETHOS LIGHT CAT. 1 & 2)				TOTAL NUMBER OF HOMELESS BASED ON NATIONAL DEFINITIONS		
	People living rough (Cat. 1)	People in emergency accommodation (Cat. 2)	Cat. 1 & 2 as % of total population	Year	Number of homeless persons	As % of total population	Year
AT	13,926		0.16%	2017	21,567	0.25%	2017
FI	238		0.00%	2018	5,482	0.10%	2018
DE	52,000	N.D.	N.D.	2016	337,000	0.41%	2018
HU	2,300	N.D.	N.D.	2019	7,199	0.07%	2019
IE	N.D.	N.D.	N.D.		8,200	0.17%	2020
NL	30,500		0.18%	2016	30,500	0.18%	2016

	DISAGGREGATED DATA (ETHOS LIGHT CAT. 1 & 2)				TOTAL NUMBER OF HOMELESS BASED ON NATIONAL DEFINITIONS		
	People living rough (Cat. 1)	People in emergency accommodation (Cat. 2)	Cat. 1 & 2 as % of total population	Year	Number of homeless persons	As % of total population	Year
PT	1,443	210	0.02%	2018	3,396	0.03%	2018
SI	N.D.	1,918	N.D.	2017	2,700	0.13%	2015
ES	3,149	N.D.	N.D.	2012	22,938	0.05%	2012
SE	647	1,229	0.02%	2017	33,250	0.33%	2017

Sources: Disaggregated data: Sweden (NBHW, 2017), all other countries (Baptista & Marlier, 2019)

Total number based on national definitions: OECD, 2020 (AT, FI, DE, NL, ES, SI, SE); Fruzsina et al, 2019 (HU); Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2020 (IE); Perista, 2019 (PT). Note: Countries are listed alphabetically according to their long form.

Given the definitional differences, comparing the total number of homeless people across countries has limited value. For example, looking at the total number of homeless people as a share of the total population, homelessness appears to be lower in Portugal (0.03%) than in Finland (0.1%). However, this is mostly because of Finland's more comprehensive definition of homelessness. If only categories 1 and 2 are considered, the picture is reversed: the number of homeless people relative to the overall population in Portugal is more than three times that of Finland.

Although it is difficult to compare homelessness populations across countries, the data collected by different governments, nevertheless, are useful to understand developments in the number of homeless people over time.

Homelessness has increased in some countries, while remained constant or decreased in others

In **the Netherlands**, the recorded number of homeless individuals rose strongly from 17,800 in 2009 to 30,500 in 2016 (Oostveen, 2019). Similarly, estimates show a 64.8% increase in the number of homeless people in **Germany** between 2006 and 2016 (Hanesch, 2019). In **Slovenia**, homelessness numbers fluctuated between 2013 and 2017, the most recent year for which data are available. After declining from 1,991 persons in 2013 to 1,241 in 2016, the number of individuals in shelters and accommodation programmes jumped to 2,211 in 2017 (Stropnik, 2019). In **Ireland**, the number of homeless people increased threefold from around 3,000 in 2014 to over 10,000 in 2019. Since then, the

numbers have been falling again to 8,200 in December 2020 (Focus Ireland, 2021).

In contrast, the homelessness rate declined by 39% in Finland between 2010 and 2018 (OECD, 2020a). In **Sweden**, the number of homeless individuals declined by 7% between 2013 and 2017 (OECD, 2020). In **Austria**, national data show an increase in the number of homeless people from 15,826 in 2009 to 23,756 in 2013. Since then, homelessness has decreased slightly to 21,567 in 2017. In **Hungary**, the number of homeless people decreased between 2014 and 2019 (from 10,459 to 7,199 persons) (Fruzsina et al., 2019).

The lack of regular collection of comparable data in **Portugal** and **Spain** (see section on data collection methods below) prevents a clear analysis of the development of homelessness. However, estimates based on local counts and other data sources suggest that homelessness has increased in Spain and remained more or less on the same level in Portugal.

There is an urgent need to further expand the definitions used in data collection and to improve the comparability of data across countries. Comprehensive measurement is necessary to also include those who are often not considered homeless, but who involuntarily live in temporary or non-standard forms of accommodation (categories 4-6). However, it must also be recognised that not all living situations covered by the ETHOS category pose the same challenges to individuals. Hence, disaggregated data on the number of individuals in different living situations are best suited to inform policies tailored to the specific needs of homeless people and of those threatened by housing exclusion. Reporting disaggregated data, not only by ETHOS categories, but also by gender and socioeconomic groups, is important, because women and men, and different societal groups tend to be affected by different forms of homelessness and housing exclusion. We further address these differences in composition of homeless in the following section.

The composition of the homeless population

Similarities in the composition of the homeless population can be seen across countries

Caution should be taken in making direct comparisons across countries on the composition of the homeless population, as comparability is hampered overall by differences in methodology and in definition, as discussed in the previous section. Vulnerable groups, such as women, young people, members of the LGBTI community, victims of domestic abuse and asylum seekers, often remain hidden by staying with relatives of friends or remaining in precarious housing conditions as a way to avoid homelessness (OECD, 2020; OECD 2020a).

When the definition of homelessness is restricted to either rough sleeping or emergency/temporary accommodation, the true proportion of these vulnerable groups experiencing homelessness is likely to be understated, therefore misrepresenting the actual composition of homelessness. The categories included in national data collection efforts by country outlined in Table 1 should therefore be kept in mind when comparing the distribution of the homeless population across countries. Despite these caveats, certain patterns can still be seen in the composition of homeless persons across countries. Unless otherwise stated, the term "homeless" refers to the country's definition of homelessness according to their data collection efforts as outlined in Table 1.

Men are consistently more likely to be homeless than **women**, with men comprising 62-84% of all homeless persons in our ten countries of interest. Ireland and Sweden have the highest proportion of homeless women of the examined countries: 35% of homeless persons in emergency and temporary accommodation in the Irish December 2020 count were women (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2020), and 38% of the homeless population in Sweden in 2017 were women (Knutagård et al., 2019). This percentage is reported with the caveat, however, that when the definition of homelessness is expanded to include "hidden" forms of homelessness (ETHOS Light categories 5 and 6) as is in Sweden, women tend to comprise a larger portion than if solely rough sleeping is included (Baptista & Marlier 2019). This is particularly emphasized in the case of Austria: 31% of homeless persons in registered institutions are women, while 23% of rough sleepers are women (Fink, 2019). Similarly, based on Ireland's 2016 census, 42.3% of homeless persons in emergency accommodation were women, but only 18.3% of rough sleepers were women (Central Statistics Office, 2016). These gendered differences suggest that women likely experience homelessness very differently than men.

There are many reasons for expecting gendered differences in experiences of homelessness. First and foremost, pathways into homelessness tend to differ for women, with domestic violence and relationship breakdown more commonly being linked to women than to men (Bretherton, 2017; Baptista, 2010). Closely related, women are also more likely to experience family homelessness, often the result of domestic violence and economic marginalisation (Pleace et al., 2008). At the same time, when dependent children are involved, women tend to be more protected by welfare systems prior to entry into homelessness (Bretherton, 2017).

Whether women are counted in homeless counts can depend on the definition of homelessness used, as women more frequently experience situations of hidden homelessness. Women tend to use and exhaust informal support, i.e. by

relying and staying with relatives, friends and acquaintances, before resorting to homelessness or welfare services (Bretherton, 2017; Pleace et al., 2008). Similarly, the use of domestic violence refuges or services—overwhelmingly used by women—tend to not be considered within homeless counts (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2014). This has been noted as the case in Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Netherlands, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden. Women who use domestic violence services tend to be viewed and categorized under national statistics as victims of domestic violence rather than as homeless (Baptista, 2010).

The characteristics of homeless women also tend to differ from that of men. In detailing the gendered differences of participants in a UK programme aimed to promote socioeconomic integration for homeless people or those at risk of homelessness, Bretherton (2017) noted that women participating in the programme were more likely to be at risk for homelessness (i.e. had housing but at risk of losing it), and more likely to experience domestic violence, but less likely to have contact with the criminal justice system and to have prior drug and/or alcohol abuse.

Women also tend to experience and react to homelessness differently than men, namely through the services they use (or rather lack of services) once homeless. As mentioned, women tend to resort to homelessness or welfare services only once all informal options are exhausted (Bretherton, 2017; Pleace et al., 2008).

These gendered differences make the case for ensuring the composition of women experiencing homelessness are accurately captured. This, therefore, calls for the most comprehensive definition of homelessness being used, and data being sufficiently disaggregated across the ETHOS Light categories of homelessness according to gender.

The prime **working age** group tends to comprise the largest proportion of homeless persons in the countries of interest. In Austria, 43% and 37.4% of homeless men and women respectively were 25-44 years old (Statistik Austria, 2018). Similarly, 56.8% of homeless were aged 25-44 in Ireland (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2020), and around half were between 30-50 in the Netherlands (Statistics Netherlands, 2019). The average age of the homeless population was 43 in Spain (Cabrero et al., 2019), 42 in Slovenia (Stropnik, 2019) and 41 and 39 for men and women respectively in Sweden (Knutagård et al., 2019).

Older homeless persons generally tend to comprise a smaller proportion of the homeless population overall. However, in several countries, the data suggest

that there is a sizeable cohort of older homeless persons (Baptista & Marlier, 2019). Such is the case in Sweden and Slovenia (Knutagård et al., 2019; Stropnik, 2019). In Hungary older persons represent a sizable group: 6% of homeless persons were aged above 70, 29% between 60 and 69, and 32% between 50 and 59 in 2018 (Fruzsina et al., 2019).

Individuals with a **migrant background** are also disproportionately represented among homeless people, particularly considering they comprise a smaller portion of the general population. Available data suggest the share of persons with a migration background among the homeless population to be as high as 57% in the Netherlands (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2020) and as low as 18% in Portugal (Perista, 2019). Confounding to these figures are the differences in operationalizing the concept of "migrant background". Some countries disaggregate based on nationality, while others do so based on country of birth. The distinction between whether an individual is non-European or from a foreign European country also matters. In Spain, 45.8% of the homeless population were foreign nationals, with 35% of the total homeless population being non-European (Cabrero et al., 2019).

Composition based on **marital/family status** are recorded to a lesser degree. Based on available data, homeless persons are generally more likely to be single. In Finland, 88% of all homeless persons are single (Kangas & Kalliomaa-Puha, 2019), while this number is slightly lower at 80% in the Netherlands (Oostveen, 2019). Homelessness among families has generally risen, with this being seen in Ireland where the number of homeless families nearly quadrupled between 2014 to 2018 (OECD, 2020a). A large number of homeless families are comprised of single-parent households, as in Finland at 77.4% of homeless families (ARA, 2020) and 52.9% in Ireland (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2020).

Available data indicate that homelessness is concentrated in **capital/larger** cities. As much as 70.8% of homeless persons were found in Dublin in the weekly homeless count in December 2020 (Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2020). In Austria, 86% live in a city with a population over 100,000 (Statistik Austria, 2018). In the Netherlands, 37% of the homeless population in 2018 were found in the four most populated municipalities (Statistics Netherlands, 2019). In Hungary, on the contrary, the number of rough sleepers had increased outside of Budapest over the last decade (Fruzsina et al., 2019).

Existing data also suggest that **long-term homelessness** is alarmingly common. Nearly 27% of registered homeless persons in Austria in 2018 were homeless the year before (Statistik Austria, 2018). Over two-thirds of homeless people in

Sweden had been homeless for over a year, with 10% being homeless for more than ten years (Knutagård et al., 2019). Similarly, 43% in the Netherlands were registered as homeless for more than a year (Oostveen, 2019). At the lower end of these figures, 21% of the homeless population in Finland were homeless in the long-term (ARA, 2020).

Mental health issues and **addiction** problems are commonly seen among the homeless population in many of the ten countries. Mental health issues were found in 25-39% of the homeless population and addiction issues (either alcohol or drug related) were experienced by 20-28% of homeless persons (Fink, 2019; Fruzsina et al., 2019; Perista 2019). In 2016, 39% of homeless persons in the Netherlands were treated for mental health issues in the 3 years prior to homelessness (Oostveen, 2019). Alcoholism and drug-abuse are the primary drivers of long-term homelessness in Finland (Kangas & Kalliomaa-Puha, 2019).

Finally, evidence suggests that an intersectionality approach may be of use in understanding experiences of homelessness. For example, differences in experiences of homelessness may extend past that of gender alone, as the dimensions of migrant status and age may also result in differentiated experiences for women (Bretherton, 2017). This, therefore, makes the case for disaggregating data at an even finer level across an intersection of dimensions.

While the composition of homeless persons is disaggregated to some extent in most of the ten countries, further disaggregation by ETHOS Light categories according to the above-mentioned dimensions would allow for a better understanding of the distribution of homeless. As previously mentioned, women tend to experience different dimensions of homelessness (Baptista & Marlier, 2019), and so strengthening data collection so that ETHOS Light categories above category 3 are also properly captured would allow for a better representation of the gender composition of homelessness. Similarly, capturing the full spectrum of ETHOS Light categories could provide insights to other vulnerable groups not captured by categories 1 through 3. Furthermore, not all countries disaggregate their data according to all of the above-mentioned socio-demographic and health characteristics. This was particularly the case for types of homelessness (i.e. transitional vs. long-term homelessness) and mental health and addiction issues, where fewer countries reported these data. Ensuring that data collected are disaggregated according to all of the above characteristics would be beneficial in better targeting policies to prevent and reduce homelessness.

Data collection methods on homelessness

Administrative data, surveys and street counts are all used to count the number of homeless persons

As already mentioned above, collecting data on homeless individuals is challenging because homeless people can be 'more or less "invisible"' for public authorities (OECD, 2020). Those homeless people who use services for homeless people like shelters, daycentres, or medical services and those receiving benefits which require them to provide information about their living situation are the easiest to count. In contrast, individuals living rough who do not have contact with NGOs or public authorities, for example, because they do not meet eligibility criteria or fear the stigmatization, are more difficult to survey. 'Hidden homeless', people temporarily staying with friends, family, or acquaintances (ETHOS Light cat. 6), may also not use services or benefits intended for homeless people. In addition, people in this category are difficult to detect, because they have access to conventional housing and, unlike people living rough, are hence not easily identifiable.

There are different methods to collect data on the homeless population with different advantages and downsides. Like the definitions of homeless, the methods used and the frequency with which data are collected differ between countries (see also Busch-Geertsema et al., 2014; OECD, 2020; Pleace & Hermans, 2020).

Many countries use **administrative** data reflecting the number of people using services or receiving benefits. For example, Austria uses registry data to estimate the size of the homeless population. Included in this count are individuals living in accommodations for homeless people or who register as being homeless with the municipality (Fink, 2019). Similarly, the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Governments in Ireland publishes monthly data on the number of individuals in state-funded emergency accommodation arrangements overseen by housing authorities (Daly, 2019). In the Netherlands, the national statistical office collects data on the number of individuals in day and night shelters, individuals without a permanent address receiving social benefits and homeless individuals registered in a database on alcohol and drug users (LADIS). In Slovenia, annual data are collected on people receiving support from homelessness protection programmes, co-financed by the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, namely sheltered and support accommodation, daycentres, eviction prevention programmes (Stropnik, 2019). In Finland, data gathered by the municipalities are collected by the Housing Finance and Development Centre (ARA) and published annually (Kangas & Kalliomaa-Puha, 2019). The municipalities themselves can use different data sources but mostly rely on registry data (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2014).

The second commonly used data collection method is **surveys**. In Sweden, the National Board of Health and Welfare carries out a nationwide survey on homelessness every six years during one week in spring. There have been five rounds so far, but the homeless definition has changed between each round, rendering it difficult to observe trends over time (Knutagård et al., 2019). Hungary counts the number of homeless people each year on February 2nd. However, the survey is carried out by providers of services for homeless individuals on a voluntary basis and therefore only those using services are counted. Hence, the count is not a census covering the entire population and should be interpreted as lower boundary of the true number of homeless individuals (Fruzsina et al, 2019).

In Portugal, there is no official data collection strategy and national level data are collected irregularly. The last effort was made in 2018 when data collected by municipalities were aggregated at the national level. In Spain, data are collected only in irregular intervals as well. The last national survey was carried out in 2012.

In Germany, data on homelessness have so far been collected not by official actors, but by the Federal Association for the Support of the Homeless. In March 2020, however, Germany passed a new law[‡] mandating the regular collection of data on the number and characteristics of homeless people from 2022 onwards. Data will be collected using different methods. Each year on January 31st, the federal statistical office will count the number of homeless persons in shelters or temporary accommodations provided by or paid for by the municipalities. In addition, complementary efforts shall be made every two years to collect data on homeless individuals likely to not be counted in the annual survey, particularly people living in rough and hidden homeless situations such as people living in regular accommodations that do not have a permanent place of residency.

Different methods of collecting data on the homeless population have their benefits and downsides

Administrative data have the clear advantage of being easily collectible year-round and over longer periods of time. Such data can include additional information, for example, on the person's age, gender, duration of homelessness or specific needs. The level of detail and longitudinal nature of the data are valuable for researchers and can guide policy making. However, as mentioned above, not all homeless people register or use services. This is particularly the case for women who tend to resort to homelessness services as a last resort (Bretherton, 2017; Pleace et al., 2008). Hence, administrative or registry data can only be used to establish the lower boundary of the true number of homeless people (Busch-Geertsema et al, 2014).

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‡   Wohnungslosenberichterstattungsgesetz (WoBerichtsG) of March 4, 2020 (BGBl. I S.437)

Surveys conducted by outreach teams can be used to elicit detailed information also from people living rough who do not have contact with public authorities or NGOs. Furthermore, surveys may be used to ask homeless persons about their needs for support and experiences with existing benefits and services. The downside, however, is that not all homeless are willing to participate in surveys or are reached by them. Furthermore, when surveys are carried out by service providers, like for example in Hungary, the results can be biased towards groups more likely to use services like the long-term homeless (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2014).

Simple **street counts** can be useful in counting those living rough who are unwilling to actively participate in a survey. Street counts are a blunt instrument, because they do not provide additional information on those being counted (e.g. biographical information). Furthermore, women, who tend to experience hidden forms of homelessness such as by staying with relatives and friends, are less likely to be captured by this method. Nevertheless, street counts can be used to complete other data collection methods to prevent an underestimation of the number of rough sleepers.

Finally, one approach for detecting hidden forms of homelessness may focus on private **individuals providing shelter** instead of homeless individuals themselves. For example, household surveys may be used to ask individuals whether they are providing room for people who have no other place to stay (Lohmann, 2021).

Regarding the **frequency** of data collection, frequent and regular data collection is essential to track trends and provide policy makers with recent and detailed data to react to ongoing developments.

In sum, a strong argument can be made for the coordinated use of different methods to combine the strengths of each. Furthermore, data collection methods should ensure that hidden forms of homelessness which disproportionately affect women and other vulnerable groups are covered as well. In this respect, the new law passed in Germany mandating the use of administrative data and complementary data collection methods to develop the most comprehensive picture of the homeless population as possible. While it would be useful to harmonize data collection strategies across countries, there are limits to which one can harmonise the collection of administrative data, and data collection strategies may need to be adapted according to local and national contexts.

Data collected at the European level

European level data may still be useful to policymakers on populations most at risk of homelessness and pathways into/out of homelessness

While EU-level surveys may not be appropriate for collecting representative data on homeless persons themselves, they can still prove useful to policymakers by providing information on the population groups most at risk of becoming homeless and for understanding pathways leading into and out of homelessness.

For example, the **EU-SILC's** (Survey on Income and Living Conditions) main module captures housing conditions (i.e. overcrowding rate and housing cost burden), housing deprivation (i.e. no indoor flushing, no bath/shower, etc.), and individuals at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Eurostat also captures the **housing cost overburden rate**, which identifies the proportion of individuals paying more than 40% of their disposable household income (net of housing allowances) on housing costs. Taken together, these data can all inform on those most at risk of homelessness.

The **2018 EU-SILC Ad hoc Module** on **material deprivation, well-being** and **housing difficulties** includes questions on where an individual stayed during past experiences of housing difficulties (PHD01T) (if applicable) and the duration of most recent housing difficulty (PHD02T). This module further reports on the main and additional reasons for housing difficulty (PHD03T/4T) and contributing reasons for exiting housing difficulties (PHD05T). Responses suggest that in the 5 countries of interest that participated in this ad hoc module (DE, ES, HU, IE, PT), relationship or family problems were the leading cause into homelessness, followed by financial problems/insufficient income. Among reasons for recovering from housing difficulties, existing/new relationship with family or partner was the highest. To some degree, this ad hoc module can provide insights on areas of policies needed to better assist individuals out of homelessness, as well as hint to the feasibility of certain policies for homeless persons. Furthermore, as women tend to experience different trajectories of homelessness than men, using this data differentiated by gender can better address the issues that tend to lead to homelessness for women. This data could be used to better inform and target policies aimed to prevent and lift women out of homelessness. However, this is accompanied by the caveat that the EU-SILC ad hoc modules are not representative of the homeless population.

Similarly, the **2015 EU-SILC Ad Hoc Module** on **Housing Conditions** contains information on the quality of housing (HC010-HC070), as well as changes in accommodation/eviction experiences (HC150) and reasons for changes (HC160), although again, are not representative of the homeless population. While not focused on the EU specifically, the **OECD Affordable Housing Database** includes information on housing affordability, share of households receiving housing

allowances by quintile, housing quality and evictions across many EU countries, which can inform states on population groups at risk of becoming homeless. This is with the caveat, however, that data are not consistently available for all European countries. Finally, the **Eurostat Urban Audit** may inform on the number of individuals living in accommodation for the homeless (SA1029V) to get a better estimate of this hidden population.

Given the substantial technical and logistical challenges of data collection on the national level, it would be difficult to try to organise standardised data collection efforts on homelessness across the entire EU or OECD. Nevertheless, EU-level data can be useful as complementary to national data by identifying population groups at risk of becoming homeless, as well as pathways into and out of homelessness. Future EU-SILC ad hoc modules on housing difficulties should, however, be expanded to include a larger range of countries to ensure countries can benefit from data on pathways into and out of homelessness.

Data on policy outcomes

Data on policy outcomes relating to homelessness are extremely limited

In this section, we discuss the availability of data on homelessness policies according to some of the outcome measures identified in the European Centre's project "Mapping trends and policies to tackle homelessness in Europe". These outcome measures capture the impact of homeless policies and relate to accessing adequate housing, homelessness services, social assistance, and healthcare services.

Access to adequate housing

Limited data are collected by individual European countries on the extent of **access to adequate housing** both for homeless persons and vulnerable persons at risk of homelessness. Existing data on the extent to which vulnerable individuals have **access to social/public housing** tend to be at the national level on a case-by-case basis, based on independent studies (Cirman, 2017; Barnett et al., 2020; Kofner, 2017; Irish Housing Agency, 2019). Data on access to **secure tenure** with legally enforceable, contractual, statutory or other protection is also non-existent.

Access to and quality of homelessness services

Data on the number of people using emergency housing and shelters is among the most widely collected. However, as stated above, these data are not always reported separately. For example, Austria reports data on the number

of individuals using homelessness services together with the number of the registered homeless.

Similarly, some data on the use of other **homeless-related accommodation services** (i.e. homeless hostels, temporary accommodation, women's shelters, refuge accommodation, etc.) are available for most countries. All countries report figures through their national statistical bodies for at least one category under ETHOS Light category 3, with the exception of **Germany**. Again, in some cases, countries combine figures across categories, rendering comparisons difficult.

Data on the number of places in **Housing First services**, in contrast, is very limited. While evaluations have shown the effectiveness of these services across many countries, only Sweden reports actual data on the number of places they offer in such programmes (Pleace, Batista and Knutagård, 2019).

Data on the **quality** of homeless-related accommodation services (i.e. overcrowding in shelters, lack of private space in shelters, safety) are not regularly and systematically collected, and especially not for users of emergency accommodations. The most recent data on quality were collected through questionnaires sent to Member States as part of Pleace et al. (2018) and serve to highlight particular issues in individual countries. For example, temporary shelters in Ireland have been described as being of low quality, unsafe and exposed to drug use (Pleace et. al., 2019). Furthermore, low quality (mattresses on the floor) is common for winter shelters in large German cities.

Similarly, **user satisfaction** or **perception/awareness** of homelessness services is rarely captured. As a result, little can be said about the adequacy of these services and whether homeless person's needs and preferences are respected.

Social security and access to income and social assistance

There are currently no data collected specifically on homeless persons' access to income and social assistance. The limited data that exist are not comparable, as they are carried out by non-representative surveys or rely on data collected by individual NGOs. These limited studies suggest that non-take-up of social benefits is higher among rough sleepers than among those in homeless accommodations, indicating that homeless services can be crucial in reducing non-take-up rates (Boccadoro, 2014). A clear example of this was in France, where the non-take-up rate of the homeless population was 17% compared to that of the general population at 35% (Chareyron, 2015). The Netherlands is a seeming front-runner in this regard, where there is no non-take-up by homeless

people due to a large network of institutions that assist homeless persons in accessing benefits (Ibid). Further research is needed in this area to discern what policies work best, and so data on non-take-up of benefits by the homeless population should be systematically and regularly collected across countries.

Access to healthcare services

The elevated prevalence of infectious diseases, health conditions, mental health issues and risk of substance abuse experienced by homeless persons has been documented across a number of countries. Despite the heightened risk of poor health, health outcomes of homeless persons are difficult to track. While **healthcare**, **mental health**, and **addiction** services for homeless persons exist across nearly all ten countries, cross-country comparative data, and even comprehensive data within countries, on the extent of access to these services and their outcomes are extremely limited. Existing data are fragmented in that they are often collected by the homeless service providers or organisations themselves and, therefore, are not representative of overall access and utilisation of these services. Data collected by these organisations tend to include the number of individuals attending the services or appointments provided in a given year.

Data on **continuity in care** (i.e. the proportion of homeless persons supported in transitions out of a medical environment or scheduled for follow-up care) are practically non-existent, as what exists are anecdotal evidence of gaps in this area.

What further data on policy outcomes are needed?

In light of the limited data on access to adequate housing, homelessness services, income and social assistance and healthcare services and the quality of services from the perspective of users, further data collection efforts can be classified under two streams: 1) macro-level data on the number of homeless people able to access services and benefits, and 2) micro-level data on homeless persons' perceptions, expectations, experiences and awareness of the services and benefits available to them. Macro-level data includes general access to social/public housing, access to homelessness services relating to accommodation (distinguished by ETHOS Light categories), take-up of income and social assistance, and access to healthcare-related services. Micro-level data includes the former-mentioned aspects, but from the perspective of the homeless population. Data collection on these 2 streams is essential in providing policymakers with sufficient evidence for future policy planning.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

Many challenges/gaps remain in data collection on homelessness and policy outcomes

Data collection on the number and composition of homeless people is crucial for understanding the extent of homelessness, the gender dimension of homelessness and for tracking changes in trends. However, the data on the homeless population and on the outcomes of policies for homeless individuals remain limited. Furthermore, where data do exist, cross-country comparisons are marred by the use of different definitions. This lack of (comparable) data makes it more difficult to develop evidence-based policies and undermines research to gain a better and more nuanced understanding of homelessness and how it affects different societal groups.

Overall, improved data collection efforts would provide the opportunity to elicit information on the needs of homeless people, their knowledge of and access to benefits and services as well as their satisfaction with the latter. Such an approach would see homelessness not merely as a societal problem but, in line with international and European law, regard the homeless as people with clear and individual rights, worthy of support in line with their own specific needs.

At the national level, countries should attempt to collect disaggregated data according to the widest possible definition of homelessness (ETHOS Light, categories 1 through 6) and, where possible, data should be reported for each category individually. Disaggregated data are particularly important, because different forms of homelessness and housing exclusion require different policies, and, because not all societal groups are equally affected by all forms of homelessness.

Data collection on the number and composition of the homeless population should be regular and consistent, particularly for the countries in absence of a data collection strategy. Furthermore, data on policy outcomes should also be collected in order to monitor, evaluate and develop future policies.

To this end, a combination of complementary data collection methods should be used. The combination of the regular collection of administrative data and with complementary methods to also cover individuals sleeping rough and hidden forms of homelessness to be implemented in Germany are a promising example for such an approach. Furthermore, incorporating the collection of survey data on homeless persons' experiences, expectations and preferences could better inform policies and be a measure of policy outcomes in and of itself.

EU-level efforts should focus on improving the harmonisation of definitions and the comparability of data to enable comparative analyses and policy learning

across countries.

In light of the many data-related challenges in measuring homelessness across EU countries, there is much to be done to improve the data situation. Improving and harmonising data collection efforts will be crucial in understanding the extent of homelessness, tracking changes in trends as well as measuring and evaluating policy impact. Prioritising such efforts will be a key step in tackling homelessness across Europe.

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Annex

Table 3: Homelessness definitions used in national data gathering efforts

	Definition of homeless in data collection (OECD, 2020)
AT	"Registered homelessness": number of people who have a note of their status of homelessness (*Vermerk des Obdachlosenstatus*) or are registered in accommodations for the homeless (OECD, 2020a).
FI	Homeless people include those living out of doors, in various temporary shelters and night shelters and institutions due to lack of a dwelling (e.g. shelters, nursing homes, psychiatric hospitals, institutions for mentally handicapped). Also released prisoners with no known dwelling are included in homeless people. In addition, the homeless comprise those living temporarily with friends and relatives and itinerants (OECD, 2020a).
DE	Definition used for the latest round of data collection: Persons who are not currently living in an accommodation which they have a legal right to occupy as tenant or owner-occupier (or have permission to occupy from the householder) (OECD, 2020a). From 2022 onwards: Annually: people who are homeless and who are provided with shelter or accommodation either by municipalities or by NGOs financed by municipalities for this purpose. In addition, every second year additional data shall be collected in particular on people living rough and people who temporarily live in regular accommodation but do not have a stable residency (Wohnungslosenberichterstattungsgesetz (WoBerivhtsG)).
HU	Reported data are from the annual February 3rd survey. The survey covers rough sleeper and individuals using for the homeless including shelters and temporary accommodation (Fruzsina et al., 2019)
IE	Reported figures refer to persons in state funded emergency accommodation, overseen by local authorities. A person shall be regarded by a housing authority as being homeless if — (a) there is no accommodation available which, in the opinion of the authority, he, together with any other person who normally resides with him or who might reasonably be expected to reside with him, can reasonably occupy or remain in occupation of, or (b) he is living in a hospital, county home, night shelter or other such institution, and is so living because he has no accommodation of the kind referred to in paragraph (a), and he is, in the opinion of the authority, unable to provide accommodation from his own resources (OECD, 2020a).

	Definition of homeless in data collection (OECD, 2020)
NL	Data are collected based on three sources: (1) people who reside in day and night shelters, (2) people who receive social assistance benefits but have no permanent residence and (3) homeless people in the national Alcohol and Drugs Information System (LADIS). These sources partly overlap. The National Statistics Office (CBS) uses this data to estimate the national number of homeless people (Oostveen, 2019).
PT	Homeless people are persons who, regardless of their nationality, racial or ethnic origin, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, socio-economic status and mental and physical health, are: i) roofless and living in a public space or insecure form of shelter or accommodated in an emergency shelter, or ii) without a house and living in temporary accommodation for the homeless (OECD, 2020a).
SI	Those who use night shelters (emergency accommodation), accommodation for homeless and those who use different day programmes for the homeless financed by the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities (MLFSAEO) (OECD, 2020a).
ES	People sleeping rough, people living in emergency accommodation provided by the local authority or an NGO, people staying in long-stay group accommodation provided by the local authority or an NGO (non-emergency centres, shelters for victims of domestic violence, centres for asylum seekers or irregular migrants), people living in buildings that would commonly be considered unsuitable for human habitation, people living in temporary accommodation such as pensions or guest houses, people living in squats(OECD, 2020a).
SE	Including 1) Acute homelessness (Emergency accommodation, overnight shelters, women's shelters, rough sleeping. Hotels, campsites, hostels, caravans, mobile homes, etc.). 2) Institutional care, category housing, penal institutions (Penal or correctional institutions, healthcare institutions, treatment centres). 3) Long-term housing solutions (Housing solutions provided by the municipal social services, temporary accommodation, transitional supported accommodated housing). 4) Short-term housing solutions (Temporary living in conventional housing with friends, acquaintances, family or relatives. Temporary (less than three months) sublet contracts in conventional housing. The person must have been in contact with social services or other care providers to be included in the statistics (OECD, 2020a).

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