Toward a Harmonised Homelessness Data Collection and Monitoring Strategy at the EU-level[1]

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Abstract_ *Homelessness, an extreme manifestation of poverty and social exclusion, poses a complex challenge for both definition and measurement in Europe. At present, there is no consensus concerning the most valid and reliable methods to measure and monitor homelessness in Europe. Definitions and measurements vary significantly across Europe, making it difficult to assess the extent of the phenomenon in comparative terms. Monitoring refers to the systematic and continuous observation, measurement, or assessment of a particular phenomenon, process, system, or set of parameters over time. The primary objective of monitoring is to gather data and information to track changes, trends, or variations in the target subject. Monitoring homelessness is an ambitious goal that requires a well-developed toolkit, a clear, shared, and enforceable division of tasks between all actors involved, and sustainable funding.*

1 This article draws on work undertaken for a discussion paper prepared by the author for the European Commission. The views presented reflect the views of its author only. The European Commission is not liable for any consequences deriving from the reuse of material from the original discussion which can be found at https://event5.homeless-platform-events.eu/media/k54diddf/eujus20a_mlc5_23-24-oct_final-paper_-final_231116.pdf.

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Introduction

In June 2021 the EU Commission and the Portuguese Presidency of the EU launched the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness (EPOCH) at a Ministerial conference in Lisbon. Twenty-seven Member States, EU institutions, and a number of European stakeholders signed the Lisbon Declaration in which they committed to work together at the EU level on the issue of homelessness and to make substantial progress toward ending homelessness by 2030. The Lisbon Declaration underscores the importance of reliable data collection on homelessness, with the involvement of relevant stakeholders, allowing common understanding, systematic comparison, and monitoring at the EU level. In order to monitor homelessness and enable systematic comparison and monitoring at the EU level, we firstly have to define the phenomenon. Secondly, we have to choose the most valid, reliable method(s). Thirdly, we have to decide which profile characteristics need to be measured and monitored. Fourthly, we have to agree with all relevant stakeholders on the main guiding principles for data collection. In the final part of the paper, we formulate six recommendations to harmonise data collection on homelessness.

Definitions of Homelessness

Homelessness is perceived and tackled differently in the European Member States. The European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) was developed through a review of existing definitions of homelessness and the realities of homelessness which service providers are faced with on a daily basis. Homelessness and housing exclusion refer to a variety of living situations, such as sleeping on the street, to situations that are less visible, such as temporarily staying with friends. However, this consensus is not reflected in the national and legal definitions of homelessness.

This paper considers the ETHOS typology as a common framework to understand this complex and multi-layered phenomenon and ETHOS Light as a measurement tool as a starting point for measuring and monitoring homelessness in Europe. It also discusses the various types of measurement methods and explores the concept of 'hidden homelessness' and its consequences for measurement strategies.

ETHOS and ETHOS light

At the 2010 European Consensus Conference on homelessness, stakeholders and the European Commission agreed that ETHOS is the common framework to understand and define homelessness. Conceptually, ETHOS starts from the three 'domains' of a home, namely adequate accommodation over which someone can exercise exclusive possession (spatial domain), in which there is control over access, privacy, and space for social relationships (social domain) and which they have a legal right to occupy (legal domain) (Busch-Geertsema, 2010; Busch-Geertsema et al., 2014). Based on the score on these three domains of a home, ETHOS distinguishes between:

- Rooflessness: without a shelter of any kind (sleeping on the street)
- Houselessness (with a place to sleep but temporary in institutions or shelters)
- Living in insecure housing (threatened with severe exclusion due to insecure tenancies, eviction, domestic violence)
- Living in inadequate housing (in caravans on illegal campsites, in unfit housing, in extreme overcrowding)

These four categories are subdivided in 13 living situations. ETHOS has been important in advancing the debate about the nature and breadth of homelessness, shifting perceptions that it is just about street-based sleeping. Although ETHOS is seen as a consensus definition of homelessness, some of the categories remain contested. There might be different opinions as to whether people imminently threatened with homelessness should be classified as 'homeless'. Should people due to be released from institutions with no home to go to be defined as actually homeless or should they be classified as such only from the date of their release? The same question can be raised for people under threat of eviction or violence. While this might be controversial, there is a broad consensus that it is useful to have more information about these subgroups as the provision of support to them before they actually become homeless is essential for effective prevention. Another controversial category concerns people receiving longer term support (due to homelessness). In some countries whether they are 'counted in' as homeless might depend on the type of tenancy rights they have. Some see this type of provision as part of the solution rather than the problem and opt against including this group in a definition of homelessness. Immigrants in reception or short-term accommodation due to their status are also classified as homeless, which is not a definition any European government would accept.

Another challenge centres on ideas about minimum physical standards and what constitutes overcrowding reflects the different cultural and socioeconomic norms in different European countries. An example is intergenerational living in Europe. Several generations of the same family are, broadly speaking, more likely to live together under the same roof in some parts of Europe and less likely to do so in others. Can this be considered as 'overcrowding' or as a culturally acceptable form of living? In addition, different countries have different minimum standards in relation to space, overcrowding, number and use of rooms, utilities, or thermal efficiency. Thus, ideas about what constitutes 'unacceptable' housing are not consistent across Europe.

In conclusion, the ETHOS typology provides an extremely useful reference frame and underlines that rooflessness, the category that is least controversial and receiving the greatest attention from the media and the general public, is only the 'tip of the iceberg' making visible a much wider phenomenon of various living situations in which the three domains of a home are not realised. Although ETHOS is considered as the common European framework to understand homelessness and housing exclusion, the operationalisation of these 13 living situations still requires an in-depth debate that constantly touches on cultural assumptions about what is and is not an acceptable form of housing and what types of services for people experiencing homelessness are included (such as centres for refugees or centres for victims of domestic violence).

ETHOS Light includes hidden forms of homelessness

In 2007, ETHOS Light was introduced by the European Observatory on Homelessness as a statistical instrument to measure homelessness. This is a version of the ETHOS typology developed in the context of a 2007 European Commission study: Measurement of Homelessness at European Union Level (Edgar et al., 2007). ETHOS Light focuses on homelessness (and not housing exclusion) and distinguishes between six living situations.

The ETHOS Light typology proposes to categorise homeless populations as follows:

1. People living/sleeping on the street: living on the streets or public spaces without a shelter that can be defined as living quarters (e.g., public spaces/external spaces)

2. People in emergency accommodation: people with no place of usual residence who move frequently between various types of accommodation (e.g., overnight shelters)

3. People living in accommodation for the homeless: people living in accommodations for the homeless, where the period of stay is time-limited and no long-term housing is provided (e.g., homeless hostels, temporary accommodation, transitional supported accommodation, women's shelter, or refuge accommodation)

4. People leaving institutions: people who stay longer than needed in health institutions needed due to lack of housing and people in penal institutions with no housing available prior to release

5. People living in non-conventional dwellings due to lack of housing: where accommodation is used due to a lack of housing and is not the person's usual place of residence (e.g., mobile homes, non-conventional buildings, or temporary structures)
6. People living temporarily with family and friends due to lack of housing

Remarkably, staying temporarily with friends and family or living in non-conventional housing (such as garages, garden houses) are considered as a form of homelessness, but specific reception centres for immigrants (meant for refuges and asylum seekers) are not mentioned as part of category 3 ('people living in accommodation for the homeless'). On the one hand, ETHOS Light adds two specific forms of instable and inadequate housing situations to homelessness, while on the other hand remains rather vague about refugees and asylum seekers. In other words, ETHOS Light takes into account hidden forms of homelessness but not the situation of refugees and asylum seekers.

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

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

Based on their qualitative research with professionals and people experiencing homelessness, Demaerschalk et al. (2019, p.113) state that "even though a lot of informal solidarity can be found, staying temporarily with family/friends and living in non-conventional housing is not that rosy." The instability, lacking a home, the examples of abuse of trust, the negative effect on social relationships, and the general vulnerability and dependence often prove to be a serious burden. Peters (2012) concludes that sofa surfing is often stressful and demanding, since it may include having to vacate the accommodation during the day, providing services to the host, frequent moves, inadequate diets, and so on. Survival strategies to secure the sleeping place in the short term may hinder efforts to escape homelessness in the longer term (Deleu et al., 2023). Mayock and Parker (2019), who have conducted longitudinal research on homeless young people in Ireland, show that young adults move between housing and/or different types of homelessness and housing exclusion, and more specifically sofa surfing. Often this is an attempt to escape homeless services and a life in the margins. Including hidden forms of homelessness, it is also required to avoid 'gender blindness' in data collection (Mowstowska, 2021). Given the various survival strategies of men and women, additional attention has to be paid to persons staying temporarily with friends, since women more often make use of this strategy (Pleace, 2016; Hermans and Pleace, 2020; Bretherton and Mayock, 2021).

Legal and National Definitions of Homelessness

From a conceptual point of view, homelessness and housing exclusion refer to a variety of living situations, such as street-based sleeping to situations that are less visible (such as temporarily staying with friends), as can be derived from the typologies of ETHOS and ETHOS Light. However, this broad conceptualisation of homelessness is not always reflected in the national and legal definitions of homelessness of the European Member States. A report by ESPN (Baptista & Merlier, 2019) shows the diversity of legal definitions in the EU. This report also compares the national definitions of homelessness using the ETHOS-Light typology. The ETHOS Light typology has proved to be particularly useful for addressing comparability challenges. The ESPN-report shows that persons sleeping on the street, persons staying in emergency/temporary accommodation services, and those living in inadequate living spaces or in places which cannot be considered as 'regular housing units' are the most common references used in existing official definitions across Europe. The more hidden forms of homelessness are not always reflected explicitly in the national and legal definitions, such as staying temporarily with friends or family or staying longer than needed in an institution because of a lack of housing option. In other words, there is a potential conflict between how homelessness is conceptualised from a research point of view and how European Members States and policy makers define homelessness. When the aim is to harmonise data collection between Member States in order to produce comparable statistics, it also implies that Member States start from this encompassing conceptualisation of homelessness, including at least all six categories of ETHOS Light.

Measurement Methods

Progress has been made in measuring homelessness in Europe, although there is no golden standard yet. As a consequence, a broad array of methods has been developed, but in a rather uncoordinated way. Concerning the specific methods, we can distinguish broadly between the following approaches: (1) recurrent and one-off counts and surveys, (2) administrative databases, and (3) longitudinal studies. We describe these different methods and give a European example for each.

Recurrent and one-off counts and surveys

In a number of EU countries, recurrent national surveys on homelessness are conducted. Usually they are aiming at covering a complete picture of the homeless population at one point in time (or a specific week of the year), as a snapshot. Some of them are carried out every year, every second year, or at longer time spans. One of the positive effects of these surveys is that they allow us to monitor trends. One of the shortcomings is that they leave out those people experiencing homelessness who were not homeless on the day or during the week of the count, but at some other stage during the period in between. Short-term homelessness is therefore systematically underestimated and people experiencing homelessness long-term have a much higher probability of being captured. We can make a distinction between those recurrent national surveys, which are collecting individual data, and those which are collecting aggregate data. Moreover, it might sometimes be difficult to reach a national consensus on how to define and enumerate homelessness, especially in countries with a federal system.

Denmark has developed one of the most sophisticated monitoring strategies. In Denmark, a national biannual survey is organised. The first count was in February 2007 and was repeated in 2009, 2011, 2013 and 2015. The count is service-based including a wide range of local welfare services such as homeless shelters, street outreach teams, substance misuse treatment centres, psychiatric hospitals, municipal social centres, jobcentres, social drop-in cafés, etc. Each unit fills out a two-page questionnaire for every people experiencing homelessness they are in contact with or know about. This way a large group of people experiencing homelessness can be included: street-based sleepers, people in short-term transitional housing, and people staying with family or friends (who are of course in contact with social services). These can be filled out by staff only or through interviews with those experiencing homelessness. Double counts are controlled through individual information "personal numbers", birthdays, initials, or other information.

The German Government has been obliged by a new act in 2020 to collect data on sheltered homelessness for the night of 31st January 2022, and then each year for the same date. The National office of statistics collects data from all municipalities on people experiencing homelessness accommodated by municipalities or NGOs in night shelters, hostels, hotels, and/or supported accommodation (without rental contract). The municipalities collect data from NGO services for people experiencing homelessness and add to their own data of people experiencing homelessness in temporary accommodation or oblige NGO services to report data directly to the national statistical agency. DESTATIS data includes refugees with international protection to a large extent (but not completely), but women in refuge centres for victims of domestic violence are (yet) excluded.

The Act also stipulates that the National Government takes measures to ensure the collection of data regarding the extent and structure of homelessness exceeding the coverage of national statistics about occupied temporary accommodation. The Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs publishes bi-annually a report about the (1) persons that live temporarily in conventional housing, without it being their usual residence, or who are roofless / sleeping on the street. The survey is conducted in the week following 31 January, using individual questionnaires to be completed by people experiencing homelessness from the two target groups (with help of service staff if needed). Used definitions are:

- People experiencing homelessness without any (institutional) accommodation: people who spent at least one of the last seven nights, at the time of the survey, on the street or in makeshift accommodation (e.g., under bridges, in house entrances, basements, demolished houses, wrecked cars, tents, or parks).
- Hidden homeless: people who were neither institutionally housed nor street homeless for at least one of the last seven nights, at the time of the survey, and who, due to an emergency, do not have a secure (rental or own) home, and who have temporarily sought refuge with friends or family members without having their permanent residence there.

There are also some interesting examples of recurrent surveys in certain regions or at the local level, which provide relevant information on the extent and profiles of homelessness in those specific areas. A specific method to count street-based sleepers is a city or street count, which mainly focuses on the extent of street-based sleepers during a specific night. Drilling et al. (2020) analyse the city counts of Basel (Switzerland), Bratislava (Slovakia), Brussels (Belgium), and Budapest

(Hungary). Each city developed a tailor-made method using instruments based on local context. They involve a broad range of actors (street outreach workers, services for people experiencing homelessness, but also for other sectors with contact with people experiencing homelessness, like physical and mental health, youth, migration, and addiction, etc; also, public transport and street cleaning agencies, etc.) and a large number of volunteers and help raise awareness among the general public.

Since 2018, the Nuit de la Solidarité (NDLS) is an annual night-time count of the number of people experiencing homelessness, led by the **City of Paris** and involving more than 2 000 volunteers and social work professionals every year. Its aim is to count the number of street-based sleepers at any given time, i.e., people who have nowhere to sleep for the night or who are sleeping in places unsuitable for sleeping (cars, tents, building lobbies, etc.), and to gain a better understanding of their profiles and needs, in order to help improve public policies on reception, accommodation, and integration. For each of its editions, the Nuit takes place between 10 at night and 1 in the morning. There are several reasons for the choice of this time slot. The aim is to limit double counting, as people are generally less mobile after their day-to-day activities (work, day centres, food distribution points, places to eat, etc.), but are not yet asleep. Next to the counting, a questionnaire is proposed to the street-based sleeper. During the Nuit de la Solidarité in March 2021, 2 829 street-based sleepers were counted. Of this, 973 agreed to answer, in full or partially, to the questionnaire.

In the last three years, local and regional point-in-time counts have occurred in **Belgium**. This method builds on the Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish count methodology. It is based on a close collaboration with all the services that directly or indirectly come into contact with people experiencing homelessness. Homelessness is defined on the basis of ETHOS Light. A count is organised within a geographically defined area at a specific moment (a specific day). On the count day, the services complete a brief questionnaire for all individuals who are in an insecure housing situation (based on the six living situations of ETHOS Light) and who have a link to the region. The advantages of this method are:

(1) the method encourages policy makers and non-profit organisations to develop more sophisticated policies

(2) special attention is devoted to ‘hidden homelessness ’ (people who are temporarily staying with friends or family, and people living in non-conventional housing)

(3) the count is based on close collaboration among all the services involved in a region, which improves the basis of support for a common approach to the problem (capacity-building)

(4) services specifically targeting people experiencing homelessness and also low-threshold services are involved, such as neighbourhood centres, voluntary organisations, social restaurants, social services, youth care centres, mental health services, and prisons

A questionnaire is also completed for every single young person experiencing homelessness aged between 16 and 18 years who has a link with the region, but only if they are single, i.e., unaccompanied by a relative. If there is more than one adult in a household, a questionnaire is completed for each adult member of the household (including specific information about the children). It takes 10 minutes on average to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire can be completed together with the person experiencing homelessness or by the person in contact with them.

A point-in-time count is an umbrella term since homelessness counts differ on several points. A first difference is the duration of the count. Some counts are done in one day, others on longer terms, such as a week (e.g., the count in Denmark). A second difference is the geographical coverage of the count. Some counts are realised at the national level (e.g., Denmark, Germany), whereas others are carried out at local authority level. A third difference is the frequency of the counts. Some European countries carried out one single survey, such as Italy and Portugal. Whereas other countries have been organising them on annual (e.g., Finland) or bi-annual (e.g., Denmark) basis. A fourth difference is the focus that can be merely on extent (e.g., Brussels) or also on profile and characteristics (e.g., Denmark). A fifth difference is to what extent attention is devoted to the inclusion of hard-to-reach groups (such as hidden homeless) in the count and the methods used to cover this.

Administrative data

Administrative data can be a potentially interesting source in order to collect information on homelessness. An advantage of administrative data is that these data are readily available in organisations and can be transferred to a centralised database, on the condition that the systems of different organisations are similar. However, using register data also has some disadvantages. A first one is the so called ‘service paradox’: providing services for people experiencing homelessness will lead to the use of these services, which in turn makes people experiencing homelessness more visible. Whereas providing no care or accommodation will give the idea that there are less people experiencing homelessness. This can make it difficult to compare European countries on this matter as it can reflect the level of social protection provided for poor and vulnerable people. A second disadvantage is that register data are confined to those in contact with services. This makes certain groups invisible, for example those people staying with family or friends and not using any services. A third disadvantage is that various systems exist, in various countries, but also in different parts of one country. In all these systems, concepts are measured differently, with different variables and different response options. As a result, the collected data are not comparable. Although existing administrative data seem to be an efficient and easy to collect type of data, these data led often to comparability and interpretation issues.

Thomas and Mackie (2020) analyse 50 different administrative data collection systems. Most often, these systems have other purposes than measurement and are mainly used for operational purposes (such as accountability). They distinguish between six design characteristics that have to be taken into account when developing such systems, including function, data architecture, data quality, ethic-legal considerations, privacy preservation, and data access and accessibility. However, very few systems combine all elements because of the tension between operational and research goals. In addition, the current GDPR laws complicate the collection and re-use of this kind of data. Nevertheless, administrative data represent significant resources for research on homelessness and have the potential to be used for longitudinal analysis and to shed a light on the duration of homelessness for those groups that make use of services.

In **Denmark,** annual shelter statistics are collected and processed by The Social Appeals Board, through a client registration system on all homeless shelters (shelters operated under section 110 in the Social Assistance Act.) This data collection system operates continuously throughout every year (since 1999). Shelters collect the data locally (they use different IT-solutions locally), but send data to the responsible data collection authority – which from 2016 has been Statistics Denmark. Data are collected on an individual level with unique identifiers – (CPR-numbers – central personal register). Only quite limited information on users is gathered, such as length of the shelter stay and some information on the situation upon entry and discharge. However, the CPR-numbers enable linking of data to other databases from other parts of the welfare and health systems for statistical purposes.

In I**reland,** an administrative bed and case management system, called PASS, records service user data from statutory and NGO services for people experiencing homelessness, funded by local authorities. Since April 2014, PASS provides national weekly point-in-time data each month on the use of emergency and other homeless services – it thus excludes those staying with families and friends. Data on the profile of households experiencing homelessness is provided by region, age, gender, and nature of accommodation provided, i.e., supported temporary accommodation, private emergency accommodation, and temporary emergency accommodation. In addition to the monthly/weekly point-in-time data. Local Authorities are required under their funding protocol with the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government to produce *Quarterly Performance Reports*. Commencing in the first quarter of 2014, these reports provide data on:

- The number of people experiencing homelessness who exited to secure tenancies each quarter
- The number of new presentations to homeless services each quarter
- The number of people experiencing homelessness in consecutively or continuously and non- consecutively or cumulatively in emergency accommodation for more than six months
- The number of people experiencing homelessness with a support plan
- The numbers leaving emergency accommodation per quarter
- The occupancy rate in emergency accommodation
- The numbers exiting to independent living with and without support
- The numbers sleeping on the street voluntarily and involuntarily

As above, the PASS system is utilised to provide this information and thus shares both the strengths and limitations of this administrative data.

Homelessness Trajectories: Longitudinal Studies

Most of the described methods result in a snapshot of homelessness. Over the past 20 years however, homelessness is more and more considered as a moving target (Lee et al., 2021), as a dynamic process instead of a stable state. Current measurement methodologies are often point-in-time, which leads to an overestimation of people experiencing homelessness repeatedly. However, homelessness manifests itself on a temporal continuum as situational, episodic, or chronic, as was shown by the ground-breaking study of Kuhn and Culhane (1998). Over time, individuals experiencing homelessness may experience changes in housing status that include being on the street, shared dwelling, emergency shelter, transitional housing, permanent housing, hospitalisation, and incarceration in correctional facilities. Episodes of homelessness result in individual and social consequences, which are commonly detrimental to individual wellbeing and negatively affect social interactions within the community (Nooe and Patterson, 2010). Different homeless pathways need different kinds of policy measures (Culhane and Metraux, 2008).

As shown by O'Sullivan et al. (2020), within the broad family of research into homeless trajectories, a number of distinctive traditions can be distinguished, such as an interactionist strand with an emphasis on qualitative and mostly ethnographic methods of research; a strand that starts with the concept of housing/homeless careers and reconstructs housing trajectories of people experiencing homelessness; and strands which utilise Randomised Control Trials to evaluate the efficacy of Housing First approaches (Goering et al., 2011), interventions to end family homelessness (Gubits et al., 2017), and quantitative longitudinal studies to grasp the dynamic nature of homelessness. These longitudinal studies are based on the collection of survey data (for instance, the G4 CODA study in the Netherlands, Journeys Home in Australia), on the linkage of large-scale administrative databases consisting of information from social, health, and criminal justice services (Culhane, 2016; Benjaminsen and Andrade, 2015), or combining data sets from various household surveys (Bramley and Fitzpatrick, 2018). Based on an analysis of the evidence generated by these studies, O'Sullivan et al. (2020) conclude that the majority of those experiencing homelessness experience short term episodes, and that only a minority experience entrenched or long-term homelessness. In addition, these studies also show that persons with complex needs are not the majority of the total homeless population and that these persons can be successfully housed.

Different Methods Measure Different Aspects of Homelessness

Different methods bring into light various aspects of homelessness. Therefore, it is essential to specify whether what is being measured is the stock, the flow, the prevalence, or the incidence of homelessness (Benjaminsen et al., 2010):

- The stock of homelessness refers to the number of people or households who are homeless at any point in time. Survey data (e.g., counts of street-based sleepers) is point-in-time or stock data; equally, the specification of the supply capacity in terms of the number of bed spaces available is a stock figure.
- The flow of homelessness refers to the people who have become homeless, or ceased to be homeless, during any time period. The number of people entering and leaving a homeless accommodation service over time is an example of flow information.
- The prevalence of homelessness refers to the number of people who have experienced homelessness during a particular period of time (period prevalence or lifetime prevalence). The relevant time period will reflect both the data instrument and the policy purpose for which the data is collected. Thus, for example, a homeless module in EU-SILC (EU Survey on Income and Living Conditions) may ask if people have experienced an episode of homelessness in the previous 10 years.
- The incidence of homelessness refers to the number of people who became homeless during a particular time period.

Most data collection on homelessness is still focusing on stock data or point-in-time data. However, if point-in-time data collection is repeated at different times (yearly, bi-yearly,…), trends in the extent or the stock of homelessness can be discerned. However, point-in-time data collection methods are less designated to give information about the flow of homelessness, the prevalence of homelessness and the incidence of homelessness are not covered by this type of data collection.

Profile Characteristics of the Homeless Population

Methods can focus on the stock or extent of homelessness, the total amount of persons that experience homelessness on a specific moment or during a specific period. A monitoring strategy not only aims to monitor the number of people experiencing homelessness but will also aim at collecting and providing further information on their profile characteristics. In order to make meaningful comparisons between different methods and data on the local, regional, national and European level, it is feasible to agree on a certain minimum of variables which are collected in the same way. Even without full coverage of the homeless population, a set of harmonised core variables would enhance the understanding of homelessness and of the changing profile of the homeless population. The Mphasis Study (Edgar et al., 2009) developed a core data set with a restricted number of variables which should be collected all over Europe using the same definitions and which should provide the basis for information about the profile of people experiencing homelessness in Europe.

This core data set should inform about:

- Basic demographic characteristic (age and gender),
- Nationality and migration background (country of birth),
- Composition of homeless households,
- Their prior accommodation situation,
- The duration of (current) homelessness, and
- The reasons for (last) homelessness.

Of course, not only a consensus is needed about the variables, but also about the answer categories of these variables. As Edgar et al. (2009) stated, such a restricted list of core variables increases the feasibility of data harmonisation. These variables can be used in client registration systems or in surveys and counts. However, such a list needs to be reviewed regularly, since homelessness is a social phenomenon that can be linked to societal changes, such as changes in the housing markets or social protection systems. Moreover, during the last 20 years, it became clear that migration is a new driver of homelessness (Hermans et al., 2020). This together with climate change and, as a consequence, natural disasters are probably the newest drivers of homelessness. Such changes need to be included in the core set of variables. For instance, the Mphasis named two specific variables that can be linked to migration: nationality (country of birth) and the reason of homelessness. However, it is rather peculiar that the core set does not mention legal permit to stay nor specific services for migrants as a specific type of previous accommodation as possible variables or answer categories. Information about the permit to stay is needed to track down which policy departments are responsible to find a solution for the specific situation and to explore social rights the person experiencing homelessness is assigned.

Principles for Data Collection on Homelessness

In addition to defining homelessness and determining the specific research method and the profile characteristics (variables), a monitoring strategy should include a set of principles for data collection. In a study by Demaerschalk et al. (2018), whose goal was to develop a Belgian homelessness monitoring strategy, those principles were established and validated together with representatives of the Government, of services working with people experiencing homelessness, and with representatives of the homeless population (see annex 1). In this paragraph, we summarise the main principles that need to be fulfilled.

First, the monitoring strategy should define clearly at which level the data are collected and that national data are needed. Second, policy makers need to clarify the goals of data collection. Homelessness data can be misused by policy makers in order to criminalise people experiencing homelessness. Third, data collection is not an end in itself. Since the data collection requires many efforts for all stakeholders, policy makers show a clear engagement. Ideally, the data collection is part of the national and regional action plans to combat homelessness. Fourth, the monitoring strategy is based on a co-creative process in which stakeholders such as field workers and poverty organisations are to be involved in every step of the monitoring strategy, namely from the design of the used methods to the discussion of first results, so that they share ownership and responsibility of the collected data. Fifth, and possibly the most important principle, is that the monitoring strategy avoids negative impact on people experiencing homelessness at any cost. A negative impact of data collection on the lives of people experiencing homelessness has to be avoided at all costs. Data collection should not (negatively) impact on contact with services nor the income situation of people experiencing homelessness and those close to them (for example a host for someone is temporarily staying with family/friends). Strict procedures need to be developed to prevent unnecessary intrusiveness into the personal sphere. Sixth, the strategy recognises that a variety of methods is needed to measure and monitor the various types of living situations. For instance, measuring overcrowding requires another method than monitoring ETHOS Light. Seventh, a qualitative component is a crucial part of a monitoring strategy to give field workers, as well as people experiencing homelessness, the possibility to interpret and document the data collected. Eighth, data collection should be the responsibility of a non-governmental research institute in order to minimise political or policy intervention. This research institute needs strong links with services and practitioners and building trust relations with them is a necessary task. The interpretation of the numbers has to be an interactive process in which all relevant stakeholders have a voice.

Toward a Common Monitoring Strategy at the EU Level

Although homelessness is a complex and dynamic phenomenon that refers to very different living situations, comprehensive and recurrent national homelessness surveys are feasible, if the political will exist and the necessary resources are provided. In several countries and regions (e.g., in Ireland, Denmark, Germany, Belgium), promising examples of recurrent data collections can be found. In other countries, important steps toward progress have been made. In the next section we formulate six recommendations in order to harmonise data collection on homelessness in Europe.

Develop a common understanding of all ETHOS light categories

There are significant differences in the ways legislators define homelessness. This also means that any cooperation at the European level must be fully aware of this. Thus, despite the agreement reached at the European Consensus Conference on the use of the typology of ETHOS as a common framework to define homelessness, the harmonisation process of data collection on homelessness will have to pay attention to these differences on the one hand, but on the other hand also transcend these differences. We are convinced that ETHOS Light as a common measurement tool will provide a strong connection between Member States, regional and local authorities, and NGOs, since it also includes hidden forms of homelessness, which includes people who may not be officially counted in statistics but still lack secure and adequate housing because they stay temporarily with relatives or live in a specific dwelling not fit for housing. Data collection efforts should consider these hidden forms of homelessness. Although ETHOS Light is a hands-on tool, during the harmonisation process sufficient time should be foreseen in developing a common understanding of the different operational categories of homelessness before setting up strategies to measure and monitor homelessness because of different interpretations between countries. The ETHOS Light framework allows us to transcend local and national legal differences and enables a common approach to monitor homelessness. ETHOS Light has proven to be the most effective measurement tool in European research on homelessness.

A point-in-time count is a valid, reliable, and pragmatic tool to measure and monitor homelessness

As shown by this short overview, there are a wide variety of methods available to measure homelessness. All methods capture different aspects of this social phenomenon. The choice of method is thus determined by the research questions and knowledge needs. Administrative data coming from specific services for the homeless are relatively easy to collect, but only capture those individuals who are in contact with such services. Counts allow counting the number of outdoor sleepers at a specific time, but the choice of day and period of the year strongly determines the results. Moreover, counts often focus on the number of people counted and it is much more difficult in the evening and at night to collect profile data as well. Surveys, in turn, require elaborate sampling to assess representativeness.

However, there seems to be a tension between measuring the extent and the profile of homelessness, especially in counts. To collect more in-depth information about people experiencing homelessness, such as their age, former housing situation, health issues, and cause of homelessness, the cooperation of the person experiencing homelessness is needed. If this person does not consent, the enumeration of the extent of people experiencing homelessness is threatened. However, when focusing on the extent of homelessness, street counts, which aim to cover the whole geographical area and are applied in cities such as Brussels or Paris, give a strong view on the number of people experiencing homelessness, but lack information on their characteristics. Especially when the results of the counts are used in policy debates, more detailed information on their profile characteristics could make a more sophisticated policy approach possible. Thus, since the term ‘count’ is currently subject to multiple interpretations, there is a need to build a uniform method that reflects upon, but also standardises, the different systems of European homelessness data collection.

To address these limitations of censuses and surveys and to overcome the tension between the extent and the profile of people experiencing homelessness, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark have developed an ‘extended service-based count’ at the national level, involving services for people experiencing homelessness, low threshold services, neighbourhood centres, regular social services, social housing providers, hospitals, and mental health services. This method has since also been successfully applied in local and regional counts in Belgium and in the Netherlands.

The method includes ETHOS Light 1-6, and people still housed but at the immediate risk of eviction, and collects the information about the profile characteristics in the same way, i.e., the same questionnaire, the same questions, and the same response options, building on the recommendations from the Mphasis study. The Danish, Belgian, Norwegian, and Dutch point-in-time count methodology is very promising, since it covers all categories of ETHOS Light, is based on a cooperation between a very broad network of services, and makes use of a questionnaire to collect profile data in a uniform way.

Capacity building and awareness raising as a fundamental part of the count

In addition, a broad network of all very different types of services that are in contact with people experiencing homelessness are engaged to take part in the data collection. All these services fill in a specific questionnaire on a specific day for all the people experiencing homelessness they are in contact with. Specific strategies are used to reach out to street-based sleepers. By means of collaborating in data collection, the links between these services become stronger and, consequently, awareness on the different forms of homelessness increases.

Data collection is not an end in itself, but contributes to a more integrated approach to combat homelessness. However, homelessness figures are a necessary but not sufficient condition to achieve such an integrated approach. Counts can contribute to this integrated approach if they are organised in a specific way, together with all actors and policymakers involved. It is therefore essential to involve all relevant stakeholders in the collection and the analysis of the data. By involving them in the whole process of the count from the beginning, the support for the results is a considerably larger. Involvement of a broad array of services is an important driver for a successful count. More specifically, a strong cooperation between national authorities, the local public services, and the NGOs leads to a more valid data collection and contributes to a stronger network of services that is needed to combat homelessness.

Collect data about adults AND children

Most data collection strategies are not fully considering the situation of children experiencing homelessness. Therefore, we propose not only to collect data on adults, but also on children, in line with the European Child Guarantee. A recent literature review revealed several severe negative impacts of homelessness for children, such as developmental and learning delays, behavioural difficulties, increased levels of anxiety and depression, poorer performance in school testing, and increased levels of aggression (D'Sa et al., 2021). A recent study on homelessness among families with dependent children in Europe (Baptista et al., 2017) shows that the existing data on family homelessness (and consequently on children) is often incomplete and unreliable, namely because families may experience high rates of hidden homelessness. The peer review on homelessness from a child's perspective argues to disentangle the invisibility of children experiencing homelessness and to consider them as 'subjects' in data collection. Due to GDPR and sensitivity issues, at least for counting children, we must develop an ethical and politically supported solution so that data collection will not harm children's interests.

Define ethical and privacy-related guidelines for data collection

Data collection, and especially homelessness counts, are vulnerable to personal and political interests, claims, and demands. Because figures on homelessness legitimise or question social policy decisions, they are susceptible to criticism and misinterpretation (Drilling et al., 2020). Moreover, data collection can harm individuals experiencing homelessness. For example, a count may reveal sleeping places, which could be a reason for cities to act against them. Data collection should preferably be done by an independent agency. This is always the case in countries with a more developed data collection infrastructure. Collaborating with researchers is a great asset, as researchers must not only respect GDPR in any form of data collection, but also submit and justify their methods to their ethics committee.

Data ownership and access is also a particularly important topic. It is often assumed that homelessness services themselves can set up and coordinate data collection. The experience with counts shows that there can be a great reluctance of volunteers and NGOs to participate in this if the data gets into the hands of the cities. For instance, services tend to not to want to share data that criminal justice agencies would want to know because as soon as they are seen as collaborating with the police (or immigration service), that can mean at least some people experiencing homelessness will not go there. By engaging an independent (research) institution to collect and analyse the data, volunteers and services will be more willing to cooperate. This also means that this project should consider these issues. But it also shows that developing a methodology, the goal of this project, must also clarify how ownership of the data is collected so as not harm people experiencing homelessness, and that access to the data is clearly legally regulated. Data collection requires thorough ethical reflection on a few guiding principles. First, it must always be avoided that data collection affects individuals experiencing homelessness adversely. Second, it is recommended that an independent research-oriented institution is responsible for data collection.

Align with existing national data collection strategies

In some Member States, there are already extensive counts of homelessness taking place. In particular in the Nordic countries, national homelessness counts have been conducted for several years. In Denmark and Sweden, national counts are conducted every second and fifth year, respectively, based on a similar counting methodology and with a timeframe of one week. In Finland, a one-day enumeration takes place every year, following a different methodology as in Denmark and Sweden. As shown earlier, Germany has also developed its own monitoring strategy. The recent homelessness counts in Belgian cities and regions were widely inspired by the methodology applied in the Nordic counts. When conducting homelessness counts, it is therefore an important element that the methodology applied will be widely compatible with the existing data collection in the relatively few Member States that already have extensive data collection strategies and that an alignment process is set up with these Member States in order to harmonise data collection. An alignment process is needed with these Member States that already have extensive data collection strategies.

Data Collection in Member States and Ethos Light: points for discussion

ETHOS Light

During the EPOCH meeting in Brussels in October 2024, the participating members raised three issues: the use of ETHOS Light, strengths and weaknesses of different methods and goals of data collection.

ETHOS is considered as the guiding framework to understand and conceptualise homelessness. Participants stress the importance of ETHOS light as a common measurement tool. It is based on a broad conceptualisation of homelessness that also takes into account the more hidden forms of homelessness. At the same time, participants point out that data collection in their Member States mainly focuses on ETHOS 1-3. ETHOS 4-6 requires different data collection strategies and the involvement of other organisations and services that do not focus specifically on people experiencing homelessness, such as youth clubs or general social services. In those areas with less services, alternatives need to be identified, such as general practitioners or post officers. In addition, although a common understanding of the various ETHOS light categories is available, the operationalisation of these categories at the level of the Member States remains a challenge since the supply of services is widely divergent in the EU. For instance, are youth hostels or hotels considered as ETHOS 3 living situations, do we take specific shelters for refugees into account, are women's refuges included?

Strengths and weaknesses of different methods

The OECD is currently conducting a study that maps the current measurement strategies in OECD-countries that develops a monitoring framework and a policy toolkit. The mapping of different measurement methods shows that service-based counts and street counts are the most applied methods. However, as already mentioned in the position paper, behind these terms there are very different interpretations. During the discussion, several advantages and challenges of service-based counts and street counts were discussed.

	Advantages	Challenges
Service-based count	• Capacity building and networking among organisations • Building on existing data of services • Profile information leads to better solutions	• How to count hard to reach groups such as young people and invisible women who are couch surfing • Operationalisation of the categories (for instance, temporarily living with friends) • Impact of homelessness Service Paradox • ETHOS 2 and 3: how to expand the amount of participating services (e.g., hospitals, day centres) • Staff shortages leads to less data collection
Street count	• Awareness raising as a consequence of involving volunteers and the broader public • Data is collected about the most urgent categories, namely, those sleeping on the street • Street count helps to identify people experiencing homelessness which are not in contact with services	• The quality of the data strongly depends on the training of the volunteers • Very sensitive information on sleeping locations is collected and needs to be treated in an ethical way

Thus, each method has strengths and weaknesses and measures other aspects of homelessness. A national homelessness monitoring strategy is preferable based on various methods that deliver additional information. Specific attention needs to be paid to the coverage of more rural areas since homelessness is also a reality in those areas, although other ETHOS categories dominate, such as staying temporarily with friends.

A strong focus on the extent of homelessness (which refers to the identification of the exact number of people experiencing homelessness) can also distract attention from the specific profile characteristics of people experiencing homelessness. If less information about profile characteristics is collected, then stereotypical ideas about the composition of the homeless populations are likely to be reproduced.

When measuring and studying homelessness, it is crucial to consider not only the technical aspects of the chosen method but also reflect upon the individuals who may be implicitly or explicitly excluded in the process. Homelessness is a complex and multifaceted issue that affects a diverse range of groups and persons in various ways. Specific groups that are not always taken into account in data collection are children, women, young people, victims of domestic violence, and migrants. Therefore, researchers, policymakers, and service providers must reflect upon the inclusion of all people experiencing homelessness in data collection and consider how measurement choices influence our ideas about homelessness, and in the end, also policy decisions.

The timing of data collection in the context of homelessness measurement is also a critical point to take into consideration. While annual figures may seem necessary for keeping attention on the issue, there are important trade-offs to be considered. It is essential to strike a balance between collecting data and taking action. A high frequency of data collection, such as annual counts, can be valuable for tracking trends. However, it may also divert resources and attention away from the actual implementation of policies and interventions to address homelessness. Frequent data collection can even lead to data fatigue, where policymakers and the public become desensitised to the issue due to the constant reporting of statistics. This can hinder the urgency and impact of policy initiatives. That is, policy makers need sufficient time to work with the data, analyse it, and translate the numbers into effective policy objectives. In some cases, more extended intervals between counts (e.g., biennial or triennial) may allow for a more in-depth analysis of the data's implications. In addition, regular data collection requires resources, including manpower and funding. It is crucial to evaluate whether the resources allocated to frequent counts are available. In summary, while frequent data collection is essential for tracking and addressing homelessness, it is equally important to consider the potential drawbacks of too-frequent counts. Striking the right balance between data collection and policy implementation is crucial to ensure that resources are effectively utilised and homelessness solutions are developed and implemented based on a deep understanding of the issue.

Goals of data collection

The goals of data collection in monitoring homelessness are indeed crucial and should be well-defined to ensure that data collection serves a meaningful purpose and contributes to more sophisticated policies. Data collection should not be an end in itself but a means to inform and to guide policy development. The primary goal is to generate insights that can lead to more effective strategies for preventing and addressing homelessness. Ideally, data collection is an integral part of a comprehensive national action plan to combat homelessness. This ensures that the data collection process aligns with broader policy objectives.

At the same time, we have to be aware of the fact that data collection can serve two distinct purposes: (1) giving insight into the scope and nature of the homelessness as a social problem, and (2) monitoring the effectiveness of policies aimed at reducing homelessness. As for the latter, specific data collection is needed that shed light on specific outcome measures, such as stable housing, improved access to support services, and reductions in recidivism into homelessness. Next to outcomes measures, monitoring policy goals should offer insights into the underlying causes and drivers of homelessness. This information is essential for developing policies that address root issues. For instance, at the EU level, specific housing indicators are available, such as:

- Housing Cost Overburden Rate: most Member States report housing cost overburden rates between 2-10% of total income, although Greece stands out with a higher rate of 30-45%. Some Member States have seen an increase in this rate.
- Housing Deprivation: various Member States have reported an increase in housing deprivation, with different deprivation items such as leaking roofs and inadequate facilities.
- Overcrowding Rate: the overcrowding rate remains relatively stable across Member States.
- Severe Housing Deprivation: data on severe housing deprivation is available up to 2020 and varies between 3-12%, with stability in most countries.

The Annual Report of the Social Protection Committee (SPC) monitors the main trends, identifies key issues, and uses the housing cost overburden rate as a central housing indicator. The Joint Employment Report (JER) classifies countries into performance categories and assesses the changes in the most recent years. In addition, the SPC organised additional data collection focused on energy poverty, including measures to combat energy poverty, to ensure access to energy, and to cushion the impact of energy costs. All this information is available on the EU level and gives insight into some of the drivers of homelessness.

Effective data collection and analysis require collaboration between different government agencies, non-profit organisations, and researchers. In other words, cross-sector partnerships can facilitate a more comprehensive and holistic approach to addressing homelessness and data collection. In order to achieve the necessary trust to build such partnerships, the goals of data collection need to be made explicit. In other words, building trust between government agencies, non-profit organisations, and user organisations is an essential precondition for data collection.

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Annex 1. Principles for a Belgian monitoring strategy

The monitoring strategy is a national strategy

The aim of the monitoring strategy is to provide data on homelessness on a national level.

The monitoring strategy has clear goals

The (political) goals of collecting data have to be made explicit and communicated to all relevant stakeholders.

The monitoring strategy is part of the national and regional action plans to combat homelessness

Ideally, the monitoring strategy has to be linked to national and regional action plans to combat poverty and homelessness, and to be explicit on which government is responsible for what kind of data collection. In other words, the data collection needs to be part of national and regional action plan to reduce poverty and to fight homelessness. Since data collection requires additional efforts by practitioners, services and other actors, clear policy goals concerning homelessness will motivate them to do the extra work.

The monitoring strategy shows clear engagement from policy makers

Different government levels are responsible for different building blocks. Some building blocks are the responsibility of the federal government, for others the different local governments should be addressed. Linked to the Cooperation agreement of 2014, it should be clear who has to take the lead in developing next steps.

The monitoring strategy uses ETHOS as a common definition of homelessness

As the European typology shows, a broad conceptualisation of homelessness is needed to grasp all those living situations which are characterised as housing instability. This implies a comprehensive strategy consisting of different methods to cover all living situations. Data collection requires collaboration with different types of services. In order to include vulnerable groups in the count, a cooperation is needed with all organisations working with these persons. ETHOS light requires specific attention needs for hidden homelessness: (1) staying temporarily with friend or family (because of no other housing solution) or (2) staying in inadequate housing (car, garage, squat).

The monitoring strategy is based on shared ownership and shared responsibility

Different stakeholders such as field workers and poverty organisations are to be involved in every step of the monitoring strategy from the design of the used methods to the discussion of first results so that they share ownership and responsibility of the collected data.

The monitoring strategy aims to create a win-win situation

The data collected in a monitoring strategy has to be useful for field workers so that it can help them in their work.

The monitoring strategy avoids negative impact on homeless persons at any cost

A negative impact of data collection on the lives of homeless persons has to be avoided at all costs. Data collection should not (negatively) impact on contact with services nor the income situation of homeless persons and those close to them (for example a host whenever someone is temporarily staying with family/friends). Strict procedures need to be developed to prevent unnecessary intrusiveness into the personal sphere.

The monitoring strategy is based on a mixed method approach

There is a broad consensus to gather information concerning the numbers, the profiles and the trajectories of homeless persons. However, different strategies are needed to implement these three types of data collection. Concerning an additional (point-in-time) count, the stronger the focus on profile, the higher the risk that homeless persons and services will want to avoid the additional data collection. More sophisticated data collection is necessary to grasp the dynamics of homelessness.

The monitoring strategy… has a focus on prevention

Setting up strategies aimed at preventing homelessness should always be taking into consideration in a monitoring strategy. This means that also persons at risk for homelessness need to be measured and monitored.

The monitoring strategy… includes narratives

A qualitative component is a crucial part of a monitoring strategy to give field workers as well as homeless persons the possibility to interpret and document the data collected. For this purpose, innovative as well as visual methods should be used.

The monitoring strategy gives feedback

Feedback on the collected data should be provided to all participants involved in the collection. Not only on federal and regional level but also feedback on local level in a way that the data can be used by local services and policy makers.

The monitoring strategy… is coordinated

Data collection should be the responsibility of a non-governmental research institute in order to minimise political or policy intervention. This research-oriented institute needs strong links with services and practitioners and building trust relations with them is a necessary task. The interpretation of the numbers has to be an interactive process in which all relevant stakeholders have a voice.