



Measuring homelessness in Europe

Homelessness and housing deprivation exist in all European countries and yet there are few official statistics on homelessness, and those that do exist are rarely comparable between different countries. The lack of clear data on the extent of homelessness makes an understanding of its nature, causes and the effective action needed to tackle it all the more difficult.

Commissioned by DG Employment and Social Affairs of the European Commission in December 2005, this research builds upon the recommendations of the study carried out in 2003 by the French statistical institute (INSEE) on behalf of Eurostat. This report provides tools to improve the knowledge of homelessness and housing deprivation.

The report contributes to the debate on homelessness in relation to:

- definitions of homelessness and living situations
- the governance of data collection on homelessness
- strategies for data collection
- the search for indicators on homelessness and housing exclusion

This study adopts more of a technical approach to identify methods and practices to develop the information base required for measuring homelessness and housing deprivation. It aims, in particular, to identify how information collected by service providers on their clients can be captured and used for policy purposes. It particularly focuses on using information from providers of services to homeless people as a measurement technique. The main tasks to develop procedures and methodologies to do this are:

- Define living situations and homelessness
- Classify organisations providing services to the defined population of homeless people
- Develop a directory or database of such services
- Collect and aggregate data from service provider client record systems
- Undertake sample surveys amongst users of services to help understand homelessness

I Why measure homelessness?

Strategies to prevent and alleviate homelessness need to be evidence based. Homelessness strategies should aim to:

- prevent homelessness
- minimise the length of time people spend homeless
- ensure that re-housing outcomes are sustainable.

This means that policies to tackle homelessness require some combination of:

- affordable housing
- appropriate support.

Understanding the process of homelessness and integrating policies of prevention with policies of alleviation and re-integration requires different meas-

It is important to develop measures that provide:

- The count of the number and profile of homeless people at any one time (the point in time figure)
- The flow of people through services (the flow figure)
- The prevalence of homelessness over time for different geographies and communities



Measuring homelessness in Europe

ures of homelessness. This entails a need to capture and collate information from different sources and that produce different types of measure.

2 Boundary issues and data collection

The basis of reliable data collection lies in a robust conceptual definition of homelessness that does not stigmatise the homeless or relegate them to a statistical ghetto. The report approaches this task - what to measure - by tackling the underlying conceptual and measurement problems. This is approached by reference to three key questions:

- How do we define the different situations where people may live?
- How do we define homelessness in a consistent manner?
- How do we decide what data needs to be collected?

Places

In order to address the first of these questions the study identifies various typologies of living situations. The aim is to identify a broad generic typology of living situations that can be related to different sources of data collection and linked to a definition of homelessness and housing exclusion.

The report examines the legal basis for residential habitation of a structure or building which can be reduced to four main dimensions:

- physical (involving the physical space to be occupied and different housing types)
- occupancy (which concerns the household that has rights to occupy)
- time (the period of occupancy which may be temporary or permanent)
- legal (the legal conditions and rights to occupancy, ownership or tenure).

The report harmonises these aspects and various approaches into a summary definition of living situations adapted from the (2006) Recommendations of the Conference of European Statisticians for the 2010 Censuses of Population and Housing:

• HOUSING UNITS:	A. OCCUPIED CONVENTIONAL DWELLINGS B. NON-CONVENTIONAL HOUSING UNITS (e.g. MOBILE UNITS AND THOSE NOT DESIGNED FOR HABITATION)
• COLLECTIVE LIVING QUARTERS:	A. INSTITUTIONAL (e.g. PENAL, HEALTH AND RELIGIOUS) B. NON-INSTITUTIONAL (e.g. HOTELS AND HOSTELS)
• OTHER LIVING SITUATIONS:	IN PUBLIC/EXTERNAL SPACES

People

The lack of comparability of data on homelessness and housing exclusion lies, in part, in the different definitions that are employed both across Europe and, within countries, across different departments of government. The difficulty in developing a definition of homelessness derives partly from the fact that the underlying causes of homelessness can be linked to a range of structural, institutional, relationship and personal factors. This allows a multiplicity of perspectives on the nature of homelessness and who it affects. The difficulty of understanding homelessness lies in the fact that some of these components are more visible than others and that people move into and out of homelessness over time while measurement normally occurs at one point in time.

Due to these factors, distinct categories of living situations can be defined as homeless. The first identifies the visible or chronic homeless person (e.g. people living rough). The second includes other groups who are clearly homeless (e.g. people in emergency hostels, people living in temporary accommodation). The third category groups people which, in some countries, are defined as homeless and in other countries are defined as 'at risk of homelessness' (people about to leave an institution with no home to go to or are there because alternative accommodation or support is not available). The fourth category includes people who live in situations which are not intended for normal or permanent habitation. The final category includes people living in conventional dwellings on a temporary basis which is not their usual place of residence and who have no other home.

Operational Category	Living Situation	Definition
1 People Living Rough	1 Public space / external space	Living in the streets or public spaces without a shelter that can be defined as living quarters
2 People in emergency accommodation	2 Overnight Shelters	People with no place of usual residence who move frequently between various types of accommodation
3 People living in accommodation for the homeless	3 Homeless Hostels 4 Temporary Accommodation 5 Transitional Supported Accommodation 6 Women's shelter or refuge accommodation	Where the period of stay is less than one year ¹
4 People living in institutions	7 Health care institutions 8 Penal institutions	Stay longer than needed due to lack of housing No housing available prior to release
5 People living in non-conventional dwellings due to lack of housing	9 Mobile homes 10 Non-conventional building 11 Temporary structure	Where the accommodation is used due to a lack of housing and is not the person's usual place of residence
6 Homeless people living temporarily in conventional housing with family and friends (due to lack of housing)	12 Conventional housing, but not the person's usual place of residence	Where the accommodation is used due to a lack of housing and is not the person's usual place of residence

Services

The decision about what data needs to be collected on homelessness has to be considered in relation to this definition of homelessness. Although the report discusses the issues involved in the management of information in relation to all the categories, the focus of this report is to identify methodologies to collect and manage information on people in operational categories 2 and 3 in this typology.

For this purpose the report considers what services constitute homeless services and whether all people who receive services (accommodation and / or support) are homeless. The report explores different classifications of services that have been developed in some countries for a variety of purposes (e.g. collating directories and databases, carrying out surveys or for administrative, legal or regulatory purposes). A broad range of types of services emerges:

- **Accommodation for homeless people** (e.g. emergency shelters, temporary hostels, supported or transitional housing)
- **Non-residential services for homeless people** (e.g. outreach services, day centres, advice services, food providers etc.)
- **Accommodation for other client groups that may be used by homeless people** (e.g. hotels, bed and breakfast, specialist support and residential care services for people with alcohol, drug or mental health problems)
- **Mainstream services for the general population that may be used by homeless people** (e.g. advice services, municipal services, health and social care services)
- **Specialist support services for other client groups that may be used by homeless people** (e.g. psychiatric counselling services, drug detoxification facilities)

¹ The period of one year is chosen to allow consistency with Census recommendations of the Conference of European Statisticians in July 2006.

Measuring homelessness in Europe

The report maps accommodation services to the classification of living situations outlined earlier. It identifies three main relevant living situations for data collection using client registers:

- people in emergency accommodation
- people in hostels or other accommodation with intended length of stay of less than one year
- people in domestic violence crisis shelters.

There are inevitably boundary issues in some countries between emergency, temporary, transitional and permanent supported accommodation. Access and referral, support, length of stay and other criteria are identified as useful for classification and delimitation purposes.

This definition of services is important not only to guide the development of databases of services but also to determine which are included in the harmonised definition of homelessness. Finally, there will always be those homeless people who are not in contact with services at all and the only robust way of obtaining statistical information is via surveys and street counts.

3 How to measure

Having defined 'what' to measure, the third part of the report addresses the question 'how to measure' homelessness. Different sources of information are identified across Europe in relation to the collection of data on the categories in the definition of homelessness. Information on people living in emergency accommodation and in homeless accommodation is collected in client record systems - this is the subject of this study. Administrative data is utilised to collect information on people living in institutions. Survey sources are used for information on people living rough and people living temporarily with family and friends due to lack of housing. Finally, census data can provide information on people in non-conventional dwellings (if this is their usual residence) and, in some countries, also on people living temporarily with family and friends.

The report provides an overview of the use of the four main data sources on homelessness before considering in detail the methodologies needed to make more use of client registers held by service providers.

Four Main Data Sources on Homelessness

- *Client Registers*
- *Homeless Surveys*
- *Administrative Data*
- *Population Census and Household Surveys*

Methods to maintain a directory/database of services for homeless people

Since our review demonstrates that service providers provide data from client registers about homeless people, the first step to consider is how can such services be identified? Indeed can the number and type of services that exist, of itself, tell us something about the extent of homelessness?

The proposed classification of organisations that provide services to homeless people provides the basis for building a database of services. This is vital to identify which services can provide client register information and provide a sampling frame for surveys.

Comprehensive, up to date information about services also provides base line capacity data about numbers of bed-spaces for people in emergency and other accommodation. However, the danger of the "service provider paradox" should be noted, whereby those countries that have a lot of service provision for homeless people may appear to have higher numbers of homeless people due to the fact that services exist and homeless clients can be more readily counted.

Research for this report found a variety of databases/directories of homelessness services across the EU; most were referral directories, some were developed for carrying out surveys and some were registers of state funded services. These have been published by national or regional government, municipalities or NGOs. Whilst some databases had national coverage, most covered major cities and smaller geographical areas.

Overall, the availability of such resources demonstrates the feasibility of establishing further directories and databases in the future, and there is already substantial expertise in this area. The report outlined a procedure for developing directories/databases of services which covers management, IT, costs and implementation issues.

Central to this procedure is a minimum recommended set of “level 1” or core data to ensure standard, good quality data which covers organisation details, clients served and services provided.

It is possible to maintain a database with relatively low costs, given the benefits of being able to measure homelessness and to provide invaluable information to help homeless people get the services they need. Taking a staged approach (i.e. prioritising developing databases for capital and other major cities and conurbations) can help towards developing national datasets which require more significant resources.

Client registers and recording systems

A range of different client register systems were examined across nine different countries in order to identify the structure and content of existing client register systems. The report examined how these systems have been developed, managed and maintained and found that they can already provide a wealth of data about the numbers and characteristics of homeless people.

Implementation of client record systems is also examined, including costs, and the necessary stages of planning in consultation with service providers, system development, and then ongoing management of the system, monitoring of usage, data cleansing and providing reports on data.

Methodologies are proposed for national authorities to aggregate or collate data from the registers held by such organisations, including an examination of the development, management, IT and resource issues. Such issues include:

- *Responsibility for developing the systems*
- *Services covered by the systems.*
- *Software system development options*
- *Functionality of systems*
- *Data Protection*
- *Data Quality Assurance*
- *Data Analysis and Reporting*
- *Implementation*
- *Finances, resources and budgeting*

All systems identified conformed to national data protection requirements which are vitally important for the protection of sensitive data about clients. Maintaining the quality of the data about clients is also essential.

Developing further client register systems across services and geographical areas has the capacity to make a dramatic step change towards improving the amount and quality of data about homelessness.

Standard register variables

As a basis to understand what data on homelessness is needed the report examines what data is collected already in client registers and whether core data be collected using standard definitions.

The report proposes a set of variables that can be extracted from client record systems to describe, in a standard way, the scale and profile of the homeless people using those services. Harmonising definitions of key variables is necessary if they are to be used for comparative purposes at national and EU-level. These standard variables can also be used, where appropriate, for gathering comparable information from surveys and other methodologies.

The recommended minimum core data set is drawn from the review of data collected in existing systems. These core variables were selected because of their importance and usefulness in data terms, relative ease of definition, extent to which they are already in use, and ease of implementation and collection.

- *Demographic characteristics (age and gender)*
- *Nationality and migration background (country of birth)*
- *Composition of homeless households*
- *Accommodation situation (immediately before service period and at time of data collection)*
- *Duration of (current) homelessness*
- *The reasons for (last) homelessness*

The report then goes on to propose a number of non-core variables where consensus in terms of definition is more difficult and where they are not always perceived to be essential for measuring the scale of homelessness. These variables can therefore be considered optional for measurement purposes. They cover economic characteristics (e.g. activity

status and main source of income), educational characteristics and support needs/problems (e.g. physical and/or mental health problems, addiction, financial distress). Where possible, these non-core variables followed recommendations for the census 2010 for their definition of data items.

Finally, data collected on provision of services and outcomes was examined but not included as minimum standard recommended variables at this stage as they are the most difficult to harmonise, despite the importance for both service providers, funding bodies and policy makers.

Surveys

The main focus of this study is the effectiveness of client register systems as a method of ongoing data collection from homelessness services. However, there is no doubt that surveys also play a useful role in measurement. Indeed they are an essential part of strategy, especially in the short to medium term, and can be used in combination with other administration and registration data, and general population and census data. Surveys are a necessary method of data collection in a number of situations:

- People who do not use homeless services (e.g. people sleeping rough, people living with family and friends);
- Getting more detailed information from service users.

The report examines both surveys directly carried out of homeless people (including street counts of people sleeping rough) and surveys collecting data from organisations providing services to homeless people.

Advantages and disadvantages of surveys are identified. Some methodological issues involved around measuring homelessness from surveys are also explored. These include the need for a comprehensive directory of services and representative sample, choosing between a cheaper option of a survey of service providers or a more expensive direct survey of homeless people, and a time frame and use of unique identifiers to help minimise double counting. The use of standard core variables is also vital for comparability over time with repeat surveys and between different surveys.

4 Statistics and indicators

Three distinct measures of homelessness can be described: Point in time, Flow and Prevalence. The three types of measure are useful for different policy purposes: for example, the point in time figure is useful for emergency hostel provision, prevalence data is useful for estimating the need for support services, and flow information can help evaluate preventative strategies.

Other issues identified concern whether the “unit of measurement” relates to homeless individuals or households of individuals, couples and families, and at what point measurement takes place (i.e. point of entry to service, and preferably the time and nature of exit from the service).

Issues relating to supply and user statistics are considered. Data on the accommodation included in a directory of services can give two measures of supply:

- Total number of bed-spaces and
- Average prevalence occupancy rate.

Client registers that use unique identifiers for clients can also identify the number of repeat episodes of service use in any given time period. If data on both date of entry and exit from services is recorded, it may be possible to calculate the number of people using the services or occupancy level at a given date as well as the flow or turnover of people through the service. It is also then possible to calculate the average duration of time spent in the accommodation.

The report presents a simplified model of the homelessness system in order to identify the ways in which the flows of people in the system can be measured. This is described in terms of the pathways of people into homelessness, the nature of the homeless system (i.e. people using homeless services and those who do not) and outputs from the homeless sector (e.g. into permanent housing or supported housing or back to institutional living). With regard to the homeless accommodation service sector, three main system indicators can be identified: number of people in the system, flow of people through the system and the duration of their stay in the system. The report presents some scenarios of the state of these indicators in situations where homelessness is increasing or remaining static compared to the ability of the sector to re-house people.

ENTRY
HOMELESSNESS

INCREASING

STATIC
DECREASING

HOMELESS SYSTEM
ACCOMMODATION SERVICES

OCCUPANCY
TURNOVER
DURATION

OUTPUT
ACCOMMODATION SUPPLY

SHORT RUN STATIC SUPPLY

Finally, the report notes that using client register systems to continually record core variables about homeless people can provide profile and trend data on their characteristics over time (e.g. in terms of age, gender, nationality, household type, previous accommodation and reasons for homelessness). This data can then be used for detailed tabulation to produce statistics for various purposes.

5 Strategy and responsibility for national authorities to collect data

Each chapter of this report focuses on a particular aspect of measurement and includes a range of specific proposals. However, in summarising the methodology by which information collected by service providers on their homeless clients can be captured for analysis, the report makes a number of overall recommendations for national authorities to improve their capacity for data collection and for the European Commission for action at EU level.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NATIONAL AUTHORITIES

1. Prepare a national Homelessness Monitoring Information Strategy developed in consultation with all relevant Ministries and stakeholders.
2. Identify (or establish) a co-ordinating mechanism or agency for homelessness data collection.
3. Adopt the harmonised definition of living situations and homelessness from this report as a basic framework for data collection.
4. Adopt the set of standard core variables from this report and their definition as a basic set of variables to be employed in data collection.
5. Adopt a national definition of services for homelessness.
6. Establish and maintain a directory/database of services for homeless people.
7. Ensure that funding for homeless service providers requires the provision of basic anonymised data on clients and provide funding to facilitate this as necessary.
8. Establish a strategy for collection of data from service provider client registration systems.
9. Ensure added value of data collection for the services and homeless people.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION

1. Encourage Member States to develop in the framework of the streamlined EU open method of coordination for social protection and social inclusion national strategies to combat homelessness.
2. Encourage Member States to identify progress reached with the development of national strategies and whether this incorporates a homelessness monitoring information strategy.
3. Monitor progress of Member States towards continuous client recording systems.
4. Encourage national statistics offices to adopt the harmonised definition of homelessness for data collection while recognising that alternative definitions may be used for policy purposes.
5. Encourage national statistics offices to play a coordination role in the collection of data on homelessness for use in EU level initiative.
6. Reduce the obstacles to achieving homeless information monitoring (e.g. through the use of funding under FP7, structural funds and European research programme).

Further information

A copy of the full report can be found on the EU's social inclusion website:

http://ec.europa.eu/comm/employment_social/social_inclusion/studies_en.htm

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