

HC3.1. HOMELESS POPULATION

Definitions and methodology

This indicator presents available data at national level on the number of people reported by public authorities as homeless. Data are drawn from the OECD Questionnaire on Affordable and Social Housing (QuASH 2021, QuASH 2019, QuASH 2016) and other available sources. Overall, homelessness data are available for 36 countries (Table HC 3.1.1 in Annex I). Further discussion of homelessness can be found in the 2020 OECD Policy Brief, “Better data and policies to fight homelessness in the OECD”, available [online](#) (and in [French](#)). Discussion of national strategies to combat homelessness can be found in indicator HC3.2 *National Strategies for combating homelessness*.

Comparing homeless estimates across countries is difficult, as countries do not define or count the homeless population in the same way. There is no internationally agreed definition of homelessness. Therefore, this indicator presents a collection of available statistics on homelessness in OECD, EU and key partner countries in line with definitions used in national surveys (comparability issues on the data are discussed below). Even within countries, different definitions of homelessness may co-exist. In this indicator, we refer only to the statistical definition used for data collection purposes.

Detail on who is included in the number of homeless in each country, i.e. the definition used for statistical purposes, is presented in Table HC 3.1.2 at the end of this indicator. To facilitate comparison of the content of homeless statistics across countries, it is also indicated whether the definition includes the categories outlined in Box HC3.1, based on “ETHOS Light” (FEANTSA, 2018).

Homelessness data from 2020, which are available for a handful of countries and cover at least part of the COVID-19 pandemic, add an additional layer of complexity to cross-country comparison. The homeless population estimate in this case depends heavily on the point in time at which the count took place in the year, the method to estimate the homeless (through a point-in-time count or administrative data, as discussed below), the existence, extent and duration of emergency supports introduced in different countries to provide shelter to the homeless and/or to prevent vulnerable households from becoming homeless (such as eviction bans). Where they are available, homeless data for 2020 are thus compared to data from the previous year in order to facilitate comparison with other countries.

Key findings

Definitions of homelessness vary widely across countries

Statistics from all countries include people living rough (rough sleepers), except for data on Austria, Canada, Estonia and Ireland, where rough sleepers are not separately identifiable and excluded from official counts. Data in 31 countries cover people living in accommodation for the homeless and people living in emergency accommodation. Sixteen countries include people living temporarily with family and friends due to lack of housing. Fifteen countries include people living in institutions, and fifteen countries also cover people living in non-conventional dwellings. Details are provided in Table HC 3.1.2, in Annex I.

This document, as well as any data and any map included herein, are without prejudice to the status of or sovereignty over any territory, to the delimitation of international frontiers and boundaries and to the name of any territory, city or area.

The statistical data for Israel are supplied by and under the responsibility of the relevant Israeli authorities. The use of such data by the OECD is without prejudice to the status of the Golan Heights, East Jerusalem and Israeli settlements in the West Bank under the terms of international law.

Box HC3.1. Towards a common definition of homelessness in Europe?

At European level, the European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) developed a typology to define data collection on homelessness called ETHOS: the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion, as well as a shorter version, “ETHOS Light”. These typologies illustrate the multiple dimensions of homelessness and are conceived to provide a common “language” for transnational exchanges on homelessness.

The typology allows authorities to indicate which categories are used in the statistical definition of homelessness in their country; not all countries will characterise individuals in each of the categories below as “homeless”.

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

1. *People living rough*: Living in 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 living in 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 in conventional housing with family and friends* due to lack of housing

Despite this attempt at a common standard, national data collection strategies and estimates still vary significantly within the European Union.

Source: FEANTSA, 2018, www.feantsa.org/download/fea-002-18-update-ethos-light-0032417441788687419154.pdf

In nearly all countries, less than 1% of the population is reported as homeless

As shown in Table HC 3.1.1a and HC 3.1.1b, the number of people reported as homeless accounts for less than 1% of the population in nearly all countries for which data are available. In the United Kingdom, where homelessness data are collected at the level of households, rather than individuals, homelessness rates were recorded at over 1% of all households, but these estimates include households that are threatened with homelessness as well as (except for England) those living in temporary accommodation (for more information, see Government Statistical Service, 2019). Moreover, homelessness data for the United Kingdom cover at least part of the COVID-19 period.

New Zealand and Australia report a relatively large incidence of homelessness (0.86% and 0.48% of the total population, respectively), and this is partly explained by the fact that these countries have adopted a broad definition of homelessness:

- In **New Zealand** homelessness is defined as “living situations where people with no other options to acquire safe and secure housing: are without shelter, in temporary accommodation,

sharing accommodation with a household or living in uninhabitable housing” (Statistics New Zealand, 2009).

- In **Australia**, people are considered homeless if “they do not have suitable accommodation alternatives and their current living arrangement is i) in a dwelling that is inadequate, or ii) has no tenure, or if their initial tenure is short and not extendable, or iii) does not allow them to have control of, and access to space for social relations” (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

The country with the smallest share of homeless people is Japan (0.00% of the population in 2020; the homelessness rate has remained at similar levels in previous years), where figures only refer to “people who live their daily life in a park, a riverbed, at a road, a station or other institutions” (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2019). For further information on the national definitions used to collect data on homelessness, see Tables HC 3.1.1a and HC 3.1.1b.

Although the homeless are a small share of the population in most countries, these figures still represent more than 2.1 million people across the 36 countries for which data are available. Among the higher reported figures, the United States report 567 715 homeless people, and Germany, France, Canada, Australia and Brazil also report having over 100 000 homeless people in their most recent surveys.

The homeless rate has increased in several countries, while declining in others

Although comparability of data across countries is limited (see Data and comparability issues, below) and has been complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic, it is possible to identify trends in some countries, based on available information from national sources (Table HC 3.1.1a and HC 3.1.1b). Excluding countries that have reported homelessness data for 2020 (which cover at least some part of the period of COVID-19), Australia, Chile, France, Iceland, Latvia, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Portugal have recorded an increase in the homelessness rate in recent years, measured as a share of the total population.

- Iceland recorded the biggest increase in the homelessness rate, rising by 168% between 2009 and 2017, although the homelessness rate remained low, at 0.1% of the overall population.
- Moderate increases in homelessness rates were recorded in Latvia (a 60% increase between 2010 and 2017), the Netherlands (a 27% increase between 2016 and 2018) and Portugal (an 18% increase between 2018 and 2019).
- Small increases (less than 6%) in homelessness rates were recorded in Australia (a 5% increase between 2011 and 2016), Chile (a 4% increase between 2011 and 2019) and New Zealand (a 2% increase between 2013 and 2018).

Excluding countries that have provided data for 2020, the homelessness rate declined – or remained relatively stable – in several other countries: Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Poland, Slovenia and Sweden.

- Norway and Finland recorded the biggest drops in the homelessness rate: by 40% in Norway between 2012 and 2016 and by 39% in Finland between 2010 and 2018.
- More moderate decreases in Canada (a 14% decline between 2010 and 2016), Sweden (a 8% decline between 2011 and 2017), Slovenia (a 5% drop between 2018 and 2019).
- Denmark registered a 4% decline in the homeless rate between 2017 and 2019. Austria and Poland both recorded a 1% drop in the homelessness rate (in Austria between 2018 and 2019, and in Poland between 2013 and 2019).

Homelessness data from 2020, which in some countries cover part of the COVID-19 period, suggest mixed trends

In countries that have reported 2020 data, homelessness trends are mixed and, as discussed above, challenging to compare both across time and across countries. Considerable caution should be exercised when comparing homeless trends across countries:

- Israel's homeless population almost doubled between 2018 and 2020, from around 1 800 people to nearly 3 500 people. In the United Kingdom, the homeless rate as a percentage of the total population increased in Northern Ireland (by 9% between July-December 2019 and the same period in 2020); in England (by 8% between Q1 to Q4 2019 to Q1 and the same period in 2020); in Scotland (by 4% between April to September 2019 and the same period in 2020); and in Wales (by 1% between 2018-19 and 2019-20). In the United States, the total number of homeless people increased by 2% between 2019 and 2020, while the homeless rate (measured as the share of homeless people as a percent of the total population) increased by 4% over this period; the 2020 data result from point-in-time counts conducted in late January 2020, prior to the emergency measures introduced by the government, making the 2019 and 2020 estimates relatively comparable.
- Meanwhile, the homelessness rate declined by 7% in Ireland between 2018 and 2020, following significant gains in previous years. In Japan, the absolute number of the homeless declined by around 12% between 2018 and 2020.
- In Costa Rica, the homelessness rate remained stable between 2018 and 2020.

Table HC 3.1.1a: Estimated number of homeless people, 2020 or latest year available

	Year	Number of homeless	Homeless as % of total population ¹	Figures include <i>more than</i> persons 1) living rough, 2) living in emergency accommodation, and 3) living in accommodation for the homeless?
Australia	2016	116,427	0.48%	Yes
Austria	2019	22,580	0.25%	Yes
Brazil	2015	101,854	0.05%	<i>Not provided</i>
Canada (2)	2016	129,127	0.36%	No
Chile	2019	14,013	0.07%	No
Colombia	2019	13,252	0.03%	Yes
Costa Rica	2020	3,387	0.07%	<i>Not provided</i>
Croatia	2013	462	0.01%	No
Czech Republic (3)	2019	23,830	0.22%	Yes*
Denmark	2019	6,431	0.11%	Yes
Estonia	2011	864	0.06%	No
Finland	2018	5,482	0.10%	Yes
France	2012	141,500	0.22%	No
Germany (4)	2018	337,000	0.41%	Yes
Greece	2009	21,216	0.19%	Yes
Hungary	2014	10,068	0.10%	Yes
Iceland	2017	349	0.10%	Yes
Ireland	2020	5,873	0.12%	No
Israel	2020	3,471	0.04%	Yes
Italy (5)	2014	50,724	0.08%	No
Japan	2020	3,992	0.00%	No
Latvia	2017	6,877	0.35%	No
Lithuania	2011	857	0.03%	No
Luxembourg (6)	2014	2,059	0.37%	Yes
Mexico	2010	40,911	0.04%	<i>Not provided</i>
The Netherlands	2018	39,300	0.23%	Yes
New Zealand	2018	41,644	0.86%	Yes
Norway	2016	3,909	0.07%	Yes
Poland	2019	30,330	0.08%	Yes
Portugal	2019	7,107	0.07%	No
Slovak Republic	2011	23,483	0.44%	Yes
Slovenia	2019	3,799	0.18%	No
Spain	2013	22,938	0.05%	No
Sweden	2017	33,250	0.33%	Yes
United States (7)	2020	580,466	0.18%	No
United Kingdom: (8)				
England	2020 (Q1-Q4)	(289,800 households)	(1.25% households)	Yes, but limited to certain priority categories; includes households threatened with homelessness
Northern Ireland	2020 (July-Dec)	(7,989 households)	(1.10% households)	Yes, but limited to certain priority categories; includes households threatened with homelessness and people living in temporary accommodation
Scotland	2020 (April-Sept)	(27,796 households)	(1.14% households)	Yes; includes households threatened with homelessness and people living in temporary accommodation as of 30 Sept
Wales	2019-20	(22,392 households)	(1.66% households)	Yes, but limited to certain priority categories; includes households threatened with homelessness (Section 66) and people living in temporary accommodation (Section 73)

Notes:

1. Refers to population on first of January of the year of reference, see OECD Population database.
 2. Canada: data refer to the number of emergency shelter users.
 3. Czech Republic: This figure is the result of the first Census of homeless persons in the Czech Republic 2019, Roofless and selected houseless categories according to the ETHOS typology, undertaken by the Czech Research Institute for Labour and Social Affairs. This is an estimate of the number of roofless people in April 2019; note, however, that it does not include people living in commercial hostels (whose number has been growing during the last years), nor does it include people at the risk of losing housing or living in unacceptable housing.
 4. Germany: Includes three main groups: i) Homeless refugees with an international protection status of more than one year (and eligible for job seeking allowance and renting regular housing in Germany, but still in temporary accommodation because they could not find regular housing), ii) Homeless people without such a background who are provided with temporary accommodation by municipalities, and iii) Homeless people who are provided by NGOs with some type of temporary accommodation or are known as homeless users of their advice centres (without permanent housing and in contact with the advice centre at least once in the preceding months).
 5. Italy: Based on a survey carried out among homeless service users in 158 municipalities. The number of homeless people reported represents 0.24% of the population registered as resident in the surveyed municipalities.
 6. Luxembourg: 2014 data refer to a study carried out by LISER; see Baptista and Marlier (2019).
 7. United States: Data from 2020 result from point-in-time counts conducted in late January 2020.
 8. United Kingdom: Data refer to households, not individuals. Data refer to the number of households applying for housing assistance to local authorities who are accepted as statutory homeless during the year of reference, yet there are some differences across the UK in whether a household is characterised as "priority need" (and thus eligible for assistance from the local authority), as well as the conditions to be eligible as "priority need". Scotland, for instance, no longer categorises households into priority need. There are also differences in the number of days used to trigger the provision of assistance from the local authority. Data for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales include households threatened with homelessness and households living in temporary accommodation. For more information, see Government Statistical Service (2019).
- Source: OECD Questionnaire on Affordable Housing (QuASH), 2021 and 2019. For Croatia, Estonia, France, Greece, Hungary, Lithuania, Mexico and Spain: 2016 OECD Questionnaire on Social and Affordable Housing. For Germany: Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. For Luxembourg: Baptista, I. and E. Marlier (2019), Fighting homelessness and housing exclusion in Europe: A study of national policies, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2767/624509>. For Italy: ISTAT (2014), Le persone senza dimora. For Portugal: ENIPSA 2019 Report, <http://www.enipssa.pt/-/relatorio-enipssa-dados-2019> For the United Kingdom: household data from Office for National Statistics (2021), Households by type of household and family, regions of England and UK constituent countries, www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/datasets/householdsbytypeofhouseholdandfamilyregionsofenglandandukconstituentcountries; homelessness data for England were reported in the 2021 QuASH; homelessness data for Northern Ireland were retrieved from Department of Communities (2021), Northern Ireland Homelessness Bulletin July-December 2020, www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-homelessness-bulletin-july-december-2020; homelessness data for Scotland were retrieved from Scottish Government (2020), Homelessness in Scotland: Update to September 2020, www.gov.scot/publications/homelessness-scotland-update-30-september-2020/pages/3/; homelessness data from Wales were retrieved from StatsWales, Homelessness: Households eligible for homelessness assistance and in priority need by Area and Measure (Section 75), <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Housing/Homelessness/householdseligibleforhomelessnessassistanceandinpriorityneed-by-area-measure-section75>; see also Government Statistical Service (2019), Harmonisation of Definitions of Homelessness for UK Official Statistics: A Feasibility Report, <https://gss.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/GSS-homelessness-report-1.pdf>.

Table HC 3.1.1b: Comparing the estimated number of homeless people in selected countries, 2018/2019 and 2020

	2018/2019 data			2020 data		
	Year	Number of homeless	Homeless as % of total population ¹	Year	Number of homeless	Homeless as % of total population ¹
Costa Rica	2018	3,404	0.07%	2020	3,387	0.07%
Ireland	2018	6,194	0.13%	2020	5,873	0.12%
Israel	2018	1,825	0.02%	2020	3,471	0.04%
Japan	2019	4,555	0.00%	2020	3,992	0.00%
United States (2)	2019	567,715	0.17%	2020	580,466	0.18%
United Kingdom: (3)						
England (4)	2019 (Q1-Q4)	(269,510 households)	(1.16% households)	2020 (Q1-Q4)	(289,800 households)	(1.25% households)
Northern Ireland	2019 (July-Dec)	(7,959 households)	(1.01% households)	2020 (July-Dec)	(7,989 households)	(1.10% households)
Scotland	2019 (April-Sept)	(27,291 households)	(1.10% households)	2020 (April-Sept)	(27,796 households)	(1.14% households)
Wales	2018-19 (annual)	(22,452 households)	(1.64% households)	2019-20 (annual)	(22,392 households)	(1.66% households)

Note: 1. Refers to population on first of January of the year of reference, see OECD Population database.

2. United States: Data from 2020 result from point-in-time counts conducted in late January 2020.

3. United Kingdom: Data refer to households, not individuals. Data refer to the number of households applying for housing assistance to local authorities who are accepted as statutory homeless during the year of reference, yet there are some differences across the UK in whether a household is characterised as “priority need” (and thus eligible for assistance from the local authority), as well as the conditions to be eligible as “priority need”. Scotland, for instance, no longer categorizes households into priority need. There are also differences in the number of days used to trigger the provision of assistance from the local authority. Data for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales include households threatened with homelessness. For more information, see Government Statistical Service (2019).

4. Data for England (United Kingdom) include information on new prevention and relief duties owed, which include any activities aimed at preventing a household threatened with homelessness within 56 days from becoming homeless. Relief duties are owed to households that are already homeless and require help to secure settled accommodation. Data are not comparable with the homelessness decisions or prevention/relief activity reported prior to April 2018. This is because amendments to legislation, as introduced by the 2017 HRA, have introduced new duties that mean more people will be eligible for assistance out of homelessness from local authorities.

Source: OECD Questionnaire on Affordable Housing (QuASH), 2021. For the United Kingdom: household data from Office for National Statistics (2021), Households by type of household and family, regions of England and UK constituent countries, www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/datasets/householdsbytypeofhouseholdandfamilyregionsofenglandandukconstituentcountries; data for England were reported in the 2021 QuASH; data for Northern Ireland were retrieved from Department of Communities (2021), Northern Ireland Homelessness Bulletin July-December 2020, www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/northern-ireland-homelessness-bulletin-july-december-2020; data for Scotland were retrieved from Scottish Government (2020), Homelessness in Scotland: Update to September 2020, www.gov.scot/publications/homelessness-scotland-update-30-september-2020/pages/3/; data from Wales were retrieved from StatsWales, Homelessness: Households eligible for homelessness assistance and in priority need by Area and Measure (Section 75) – data include both households threatened with homelessness within 56 days (Section 66) and households assessed as homeless and owed duty to secure (section 73), <https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Housing/Homelessness/householdseligibleforhomelessnessassistanceandpriorityneed-by-area-measure-section77>; see also Government Statistical Service (2019), Harmonisation of Definitions of Homelessness for UK Official Statistics: A Feasibility Report, <https://gss.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/GSS-homelessness-report-1.pdf>.

It is important to note that annual homelessness estimates do not capture the total number of people who may have experienced homelessness or extreme housing insecurity over the course of their lifetime. For instance, results from the 2018 EUROSTAT *ad hoc* module on Material deprivation, well-being and housing difficulties found that around 4% of people reported that they had, over the course of their lifetime, stayed with friends and relatives temporarily; stayed in emergency or other temporary accommodation; stayed in a place not intended as a permanent home; or “slept rough” or slept in a public space (Eurostat, 2020). Similarly, a study from Scotland found that in mid-2015 at least 8% of the Scottish population had experienced homelessness at some point in their lives (Vaughn et al., 2018).

The homeless population is heterogeneous

People experience homelessness in different ways, and the homeless population is increasingly diverse. A smaller, but more visible, share of the homeless population experiences prolonged periods of homelessness, or transitions in and out of homelessness over the course of several weeks, months or years (i.e. “chronically homeless”). A larger share of the homeless population in most countries is homeless for only a short period before finding a more stable housing solution (i.e. “transitionally” or “temporarily” homeless).

Further, while single men have traditionally been more likely to be homeless, homelessness among several groups – including youth, women, and seniors – has increased. Nevertheless, homelessness among these groups still represents a small share of the overall population.

- As reported in the 2021 OECD Questionnaire on Affordable and Social Housing (QuASH), some OECD countries report a significant, and in some cases growing, share of **youth** homelessness (among youth aged 15-29, unless otherwise indicated). In Australia, youth represented 33% of all homeless people youth in 2016 (38 277 homeless youth); 32% of the total homeless population in Costa Rica in 2020 (1 099 homeless youth) and the Netherlands in 2018 (12 600 homeless youth); and 30% of the homeless population in Denmark in 2019 (1 928 homeless youth aged 18-29). Among countries for which data are available over time, youth homelessness increased in the Netherlands, New Zealand and Australia. Youth homelessness more than doubled in the Netherlands between 2010 and 2018. It also increased by 30% in New Zealand between 2006 and 2018 and by 20% in Australia between 2011 and 2016. Meanwhile, homelessness dropped among youth in Canada (by 17% between 2011 and 2016) and Finland (by 25% between 2010 and 2018).
- Homelessness among **families with children** has risen – in some cases, significantly – in several OECD countries for which data are available. Homelessness among families with children almost quadrupled in Ireland between 2014 and 2018, from 407 to over 1,600 households, before declining to 970 households in 2020. Family homelessness in New Zealand increased by 44% between 2006 and 2013, representing nearly 21 800 individuals in 2013. The rate of family homelessness in England (United Kingdom) remained roughly stable between 2018-19 and 2019-20, with homeless families with children representing around 43% (over 63,000 households) of all households assessed as homeless. In the United States, while the overall number of people in families with children who were homeless in 2020 remained relatively stable relative to 2019 (over 171,500 people in total), the number of unsheltered families with children increased by 13% between 2019 and 2020, as the number of sheltered families with children declined (US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), 2021). By contrast, family homelessness declined in Denmark and Finland in recent years. Homelessness among **women** is also increasingly important. Women made up around half of the homeless population in New Zealand in 2018, 44% of the homeless population in England (United Kingdom) in 2019, and 39% of the homeless population in the United States in 2020. The homeless rate among women has increased most significantly in Japan (by 44% between 2010 and 2020) and Israel (by 43% between 2018 and 2020).
- While cross-national data are scarce, homelessness among **seniors** has risen in several OECD countries. Where data are available, seniors make up less than 10% of the homeless population (with the exception of Costa Rica, where they account for around 11%). In Canada, while seniors (aged 65 and over) make up only a small share of users of homeless shelters, the number of seniors using emergency shelters increased by about 50% from 2005 to 2016 (Government of Canada, 2019). England (UK) recorded more than 10 000 homeless seniors in 2019-20.

Data and comparability issues

Definitional differences drive some of the variation in the reported incidence of homelessness across countries; these differences hamper international comparison and an understanding of the differences in homelessness rates and risks across countries. For instance, several countries that adopt a broader definition of homelessness report a higher incidence of homelessness, like Australia and New Zealand, relative to countries with a narrower definition, such as Chile, Portugal or Japan. However, definitional differences do not fully explain the variation in homelessness rates across countries: several countries with a broad definition of homelessness report among the lowest incidences of homelessness, such as Norway, Poland, Finland and Denmark.

Different definitions of homelessness can exist within the same country, depending on the purpose and the collecting authority, producing vastly different homelessness estimates over the same territory. In the United States, for instance, the definition of homelessness used by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) – which is used to allocate federal funds to local authorities to address homelessness – is narrower than that used by the Department of Education (Evans, Phillips and Ruffini, 2019), which forms the basis of funding allocation to school districts to support homeless children and youth. The result is two drastically different estimates of homelessness in the United States: while HUD estimated that nearly 500,000 people were homeless on any given night in 2016 (Henry et al., 2016), the Department of Education reported roughly 1.36 million children and youth nationally experienced homelessness at some point over the same year (National Center for Homeless Education, 2019).

Beyond definitional differences, there are a number of challenges in the scope and methods of data collection that might affect measuring the full extent of homelessness.

There are different methods to collect data on homelessness. The type of housing solution of someone experiencing homelessness – whether it is a shelter or emergency accommodation service, temporary lodging with family or friends, or living out of a car or on the street – will be better reflected in some data collection methods than others:

- *Administrative data* (such as registries from shelters and local authorities) can be an effective means to assess the number of individuals using homeless services, and may better capture the flows of people who transition in and out of homelessness over a given period; these estimates tend to be much larger than point-in-time estimates. However, these data only paint a partial picture of homelessness, as they leave out people who are not in contact with such services (such as unsheltered homeless individuals or those who otherwise do not seek out support). Research has shown, for instance, that women are less likely to turn to shelters, preferring first to seek out housing solutions with friends and families (Baptista and Marlier, 2019). Austria, Canada, Chile, Denmark, Estonia, United Kingdom (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales), Greece, Israel, Luxembourg, Latvia, the Netherlands and the United States collect homelessness data based on administrative data.
- *Point-in-time estimates* (such as the street counts), depending on how such estimates are conducted, may be more effective in reaching homeless people who do not seek out formal support, and provide an estimate of the stock of the homeless population on a given night. However, such estimates fail to capture those who may be transitionally or temporarily homeless in a given jurisdiction; they thus represent an underestimate of the full extent of people who have experienced homelessness over a given period. Australia, Belgium (Brussels Capital Region), Colombia, Costa Rica, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic and the United States collect homelessness data based on point-in-time estimates.
- *General population and census data* provide additional information about some segments of the homeless population, but such data are not collected on an annual basis. Australia and New Zealand collect homelessness data drawing on the census.

In addition, some OECD countries report an increasing incidence of “hidden homelessness,” which refers to people who do not appear in official statistics on homeless. Hidden homelessness tends to be more prevalent among women, youth, LGTBI, victims of domestic abuse, asylum seekers, and people living in rural areas and smaller communities (where shelters and social support services are less prevalent and where homeless surveys may not be required) (National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services, 2014). For instance, The London Assembly (2017) estimated that around one in ten people in London experienced “hidden homelessness” in a given year, and that one in five 16 to 25 year olds “couch surfed” in 2014 – roughly half of them for over a month. While there is no formal definition, the hidden homeless may include:

- people who are not in contact with any administrative support services, and are thus not registered in any service database;
- people who may not be eligible for support services, or may not be considered a priority case to access limited public support services;
- people living in unsustainable or inadequate shelter (e.g. in their car, with friends or family).

Incomplete geographic coverage and limited frequency and consistency of data collection represent additional methodological challenges. For instance, some national data only cover the largest municipalities (France, Italy, the United States), or the biggest region or city (Belgium, Iceland). Even in the presence of national guidelines for homelessness counts to be conducted at subnational level, jurisdictions may interpret and apply the guidelines differently, leading to local homelessness estimates that are difficult to compare within a country.

Frequency and consistency of data collection also pose challenges. Efforts have been made through the OECD Questionnaire on Social and Affordable Housing to collect information on the number of homeless persons over several years. Nevertheless, it was not possible to collect data for the same years for all countries as the timing of homelessness counts is not harmonised across countries. For instance, two OECD countries collect data on a monthly (Ireland) or quarterly (United Kingdom) basis. More commonly, countries collect homelessness data on annually (Austria, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Israel, Japan, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Norway, the United States) or bi-annually (Canada, Denmark, Poland). Some countries conduct regular homeless counts at longer intervals: every four years (Norway), every five years (Australia and New Zealand), six years (Sweden) or ten years (the Slovak Republic). There have been no data collection efforts at national level in at least five years in Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Mexico, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Spain, Switzerland or Turkey.

In some cases, changes to the definition and/or methodology underlying data collection does not allow for reliable comparison over time. Some countries do not have a regular system of data collection on homelessness in place, and rely on information from one-off surveys without reference to one another.

As a result, official statistics – regardless of the methodology or the definition – likely underestimate the extent of homelessness.

A full description of methodological issues in homelessness data collection is beyond the scope of this indicator but more in-depth information can be found in Busch-Geertsema et al. (2014) and OECD (2015).

Sources and further reading

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