

FEANTSA Proposal

A Retrospective module on homelessness for household surveys

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I. Background: EU debates on homelessness measurement

EU countries have been coordinating progress in the development of national anti-poverty policies since 2001 with the launch of an EU anti-poverty strategy.¹ The collection of EU data in the field of poverty is a very important element of this EU process. It contributes to a better understanding of phenomena of poverty, as well as the profiles of those people experiencing poverty; and it provides the right basis for implementing comprehensive social policy measures with the aim of combating poverty. The development of indicators is equally important in order to monitor the effect of policy measures against poverty and social exclusion.

The inclusion of **housing conditions** in any overall assessment of living standards or the extent of deprivation is crucial. This is all the more the case since those experiencing the most severe housing problems, people who are homeless, will not typically be included in the household surveys from which information on poverty and deprivation are derived for the simple reason that the people concerned do not live in households as such. Any indicators used to measure relative poverty across the EU, therefore, understate the proportion of people with income below the poverty line to the extent that people experiencing homelessness are excluded (Commission, 2006).

In their 2001 report, the representatives of the EU Social Protection Committee² recognised that they were unable to present a proposal for common housing and homelessness indicators, but agreed on the following common approach: “National Reports on social inclusion should contain quantitative information covering three issues: **(1) decent housing, (2) housing costs, (3) homelessness and other precarious housing conditions.**” (SPC, 2001)

There has consequently been ongoing work to improve homelessness measurement at EU level through various methods, namely the development of client record systems and survey methods (Commission, 2007). FEANTSA believes information is urgently needed on *current* homelessness trends through development of appropriate continuous homelessness client record systems (and is working with national administrations on improving this)³, but FEANTSA also acknowledges that *retrospective* measurements of homelessness can complement other measurement methods.

This short paper therefore takes a closer look at homelessness measurement through the integration of **retrospective modules on homelessness in national household surveys**, and formulates proposals for appropriate retrospective questions on homelessness.

¹ Currently referred to as the EU social protection and social inclusion strategy (after revision in 2006)

² The Social Protection Committee is the Intergovernmental advisory committee working coordination of social policy development in the framework of the EU strategy on social protection and social inclusion.

³ See FEANTSA position on measuring and monitoring homelessness, 2007

II. Retrospective modules on homelessness at national and European level

In 2004, the French office of national statistics (INSEE), published a feasibility study on measuring homelessness and housing deprivation in Europe (prepared for Eurostat).⁴ This report made a series of recommendations to the European Commission and the Social Protection Committee, which included a recommendation on drafting a module for EU-SILC (or other household surveys) covering retrospective episodes of homelessness. The INSEE report states that “retrospective modules on homelessness could be introduced cheaply and easily into general surveys that are already being harmonised, such as the workforce survey or the household budgets survey, and, if possible, into a section on housing conditions” (Brousse, 2004; p100).

The INSEE report examines retrospective modules which have been used at EU and national level.⁵ At EU level, a Eurobarometer survey included three retrospective questions on homelessness in 1993 for 13 European Union countries. At national level, the United Kingdom, Finland and France have already incorporated these types of questions in surveys.

Eurobarometer 1994

The INSEE report refers to the 1994 Eurobarometer on *Perceptions of poverty and social exclusion in Europe* (see Eurobarometer report [FR](#)). The following question was asked to survey respondents:

“Which of these situations have you experienced?”

- I was homeless and I stayed with people I knew (family, friends);
- I was homeless and I stayed in a shelter for the homeless;
- I was homeless and had to sleep outside on the streets or in places such as stations, derelict houses;
- I have slept rough (on the street, in shed, in public places) during at least 1 night ;
- I have never been homeless;
- Don't know/won't answer.”

These questions were a first in EU level household surveys, and no other household surveys have used this approach ever since. From the sample of 12 800 Europeans surveyed for the 1994 Eurobarometer exercise, it emerged that 5,5% of them considered themselves as experiencing poverty, and 5% of them had already been in one of the three situations of homelessness referred to in the question above.

UK - England

The 1994/1995 edition of the Survey of English Housing (two survey quarters) shed new light on homelessness. Three additional questions were used to find out the extent to which heads of households had experienced homelessness during the previous 10 years and how the situation was distributed socially:

“There is a lot of discussion at the moment about the issue of homelessness. Can I ask you:

- During the last ten years, would you say that you have ever been homeless?
- During the last ten years, have you contacted the local authority housing department yourself?
- Have you ever been registered as homeless by the local council?”

UK - Scotland

Since 2001, the Scottish Household Survey 2001 (SHS) has included a module of questions for those who have been homeless in the past. By size of sample (15 000 respondents), this survey is one of the largest in Scotland. The SHS tackles subjects of a more general nature (current and past practices), and it was chosen to include these questions in the general household survey in preference to more specialised surveys such as those on housing (the Scottish House Condition Survey), health (the Scottish Health Survey) and social attitudes (the Scottish Social Attitude Survey).

⁴ See full INSEE report on Eurostat [website](#)

⁵ See chapter 3.3 of the INSEE report on « Household surveys that include retrospective questions on homelessness »

It includes a detailed module on episodes of homelessness consisting of a series of five questions, four of which are put to all respondents:

- (1) Have you ever been homeless? That is, lost your home with no alternative accommodation to go to? (if the answer to question (1) is 'yes', go to question (2); if the answer is 'no' go to question (3))
- (2) How many times has this happened to you in the last five years?
- (3) Have you ever applied to the local council because you were homeless?
- (4) Have you ever had to sleep rough because you were homeless?
- (5) Have you got your name on either a council or housing association waiting list?

Moreover, a [feasibility study](#) carried out by Pickering *et al* in 2003 put forward potential questions to integrate in the Scottish Household Survey to gain more information on [hidden](#) forms of homelessness experienced by people in the following situations:

- Persons whose accommodation is 'unreasonable' or is overcrowded and a danger to health;
- Persons with only a short-term permission to stay, such as those moving around friends' and relatives' houses with no stable base;
- Persons with no legal rights or permission to remain in accommodation, such as squatters or young people asked to leave the family home;
- Tenants or owner-occupiers likely to be evicted (whether lawfully or unlawfully).

Finland

In 2001, the municipality of Helsinki conducted a survey amongst 20000 persons aged 18-70 where the questionnaire included the following question concerning accommodation circumstances (Korhonen, 2002) : "Have you stayed with friends or relatives because of lack of dwelling/housing during past 12 months ?" Around 5% of the persons interviewed stated that during the past 12 months they had been accommodated with family or friends due to the lack of a home of their own. However, this result is thought likely to be an underestimate given the level of non-response (50% of targeted respondents) amongst low income households.

France

The first French large sample survey where questions on previous episodes of homelessness were asked was the French National Health Survey conducted in 2002-2003 on a sample of 16,000 households and where all people in the household aged over 18 were interviewed, which resulted in 24,000 people answering those questions. The series of questions on episodes of homelessness was used to estimate the adult population living in independent accommodation that had experienced at least one episode of homelessness between 1993 and 2003. Rather than covering the circumstances surrounding the loss of one's home (which were comprehensively described by the 2001 INSEE survey on homelessness in France), the questions proposed for this survey aimed especially at measuring the total duration of episodes of homelessness since the age of 18, and the start and end dates of the last episode. It is interesting to note that unlike all the modules of retrospective questions described here, this survey never refers to the concept of homelessness ('sdf' or 'sansabri').

The questions integrated in the survey are the following:

- (1) Since the age of 18, have you ever been provided with temporary accommodation by a charity or a hostel because you had no home of your own? (If the person being interviewed is a woman: including a mother and child centre)?
- (2) How long for in total?
- (3) In which year was the last time this happened?
- (4) In which month of the year?
- (5) Since the age of 18, have you ever had to sleep on the street, in a vehicle, in the hallway of a block of flats or in a makeshift shelter, because you had no home of your own?
- (6) How long for in total?
- (7) In which year was the last time this happened?
- (8) In which month of the year?

A housing survey carried out by INSEE in 2006 also included retrospective questions (see questions in Annex), which are similar to the questions asked in the 1994 Eurobarometer survey (see above), although include additional categories such as related to "never having left the family home" or to living in institutions (prison, medical, etc).

III. FEANTSA proposal

Modules on retrospective episodes of homelessness in household surveys have been used in different ways (in general household surveys or in specialised thematic surveys) and for different purposes at national or local level (for finding out about past episodes of homelessness, about reasons for homelessness or about duration of homelessness). Some of the examples in the above section cover questions related to past episodes of rough sleeping, while other examples cover rough sleeping as well as other more hidden forms of homelessness and housing exclusion such as living temporarily with friends or family, threat of eviction, and living in dwellings unfit for habitation.

For the purpose of integrating retrospective questions on homelessness in national household surveys or more specialised surveys on housing conditions, we propose to adapt the living situations question used in the 1994 Eurobarometer by extending this question to cover other living situations as represented in the ETHOS 2007 typology:

	Operational Category	Living Situation	Generic Definition	
Conceptual Category v	POORLESS	1 People Living Rough	1.1 Public space or external space 1.2 Night shelter	Living in the streets or public spaces, without a shelter that can be defined as living quarters
		2 People in emergency accommodation	2.1 Night shelter	People with no usual place of residence who make use of overnight shelter, low threshold shelter
	HOUSELESS	3 People in accommodation for the homeless	3.1 Homeless hostel	Where the period of stay is intended to be short term
			3.2 Temporary Accommodation	
			3.3 Transitional supported accommodation	
	4 People in Women's Shelter	4.1 Women's shelter accommodation	Women accommodated due to experience of domestic violence and where the period of stay is intended to be short term	
	5 People in accommodation for immigrants	5.1 Temporary accommodation / reception centres	Immigrants in reception or short term accommodation due to their immigrant status	
		5.2 Migrant workers accommodation		
	6 People due to be released from institutions	6.1 Penal institutions	No housing available prior to release Stay longer than needed due to lack of housing No housing identified (e.g by 16th birthday)	
		6.2 Medical institutions ⁶		
		6.3 Children's institutions / homes		
	7 People receiving longer-term support (due to homelessness)	7.1 Residential care for older homeless people	Long stay accommodation with care for formerly homeless people (normally more than one year)	
		7.2 Supported accommodation for formerly homeless people		
8 People living in insecure accommodation	8.1 Temporarily with family/friends	Living in conventional housing but not the usual or place of residence due to lack of housing Occupation of dwelling with no legal tenancy Illegal occupation of a dwelling Occupation of land with no legal rights		
	8.2 No legal (sub)tenancy			
	8.3 Illegal occupation of land			
9 People living under threat of eviction	9.1 Legal orders enforced (rented)	Where orders for eviction are operative		
	9.2 Re-possession orders (owned)	Where mortgagor has legal order to re-possess		
10 People living under threat of violence	10.1 Police recorded incidents	Where police action is taken to ensure place of safety for victims of domestic violence		
INADEQUATE	11 People living in temporary / non-conventional structures	11.1 Mobile homes	Not intended as place of usual residence	
		11.2 Non-conventional building	Makeshift shelter, shack or shanty	
		11.3 Temporary structure	Semi-permanent structure hut or cabin	
12 People living in unfit housing	12.1 Occupied dwellings unfit for habitation	Defined as unfit for habitation by national legislation or building regulations		
13 People living in extreme overcrowding	13.1 Highest national norm of overcrowding	Defined as exceeding national density standard for floor-space or useable rooms		

ETHOS 2007 : European Typology on Homelessness and housing exclusion⁶

⁶ See more about the [ETHOS definition](#) on the FEANTSA website and in the [2006 FEANTSA Review of Homelessness Statistics](#)

FEANTSA would suggest the following retrospective question on homelessness to use in household surveys:

-Have you experienced any of the following living situations during the last 10 years? If so, for how long were you in this situation?

- I have been obliged to stay with family or friends because of lack of resources to afford my own accommodation;
- I have stayed in an shelter or hostel for homeless people;
- I have slept rough (on the street, in shed, in public places) during at least 1 night because I had no other home to go to;
- I have lived in an institution (due to lack of any other housing option);
- I have stayed in a dwelling with no legal tenancy;
- I was asked to leave my parental home when under 18 years of age;
- I have had to leave my family home due to threat of violence;
- I have been threatened with eviction;
- I have lived in overcrowded conditions (involuntarily);
- I have lived in non-conventional forms of housing which were not fit for habitation;
- I have never been in any of these situations.

The conceptual categories of the ETHOS typology provide a good framework for better understanding how these different living situations relate to homelessness. The intention of this proposal is to offer **general guidelines** on the type of living situations to integrate in questions on retrospective episodes of homelessness. Individual countries are then encouraged to add subsets of questions adapted to their national context and use national definitions in relation to each situation.

In addition, we would like to highlight some important issues to take into consideration in the preparation and use of retrospective questions:

- The *definitions* of living situations in retrospective survey questions have to be clarified, including the definition of different types of collective dwellings (shelters, temporary accommodation, hostels, institutions), the definition of non-conventional dwellings, the definition of notions such as “eviction” and “overcrowded conditions”;
- Given the different perceptions and interpretations of “homelessness” (wider or narrower) across Europe and even within a single country, it is best for comparability purposes not to mention the words “homeless” or “homelessness” in the questions, but rather to describe living situations which amount to forms of homelessness or housing exclusion;
- In order to allow for comparisons between countries, more information on the lengths of homelessness episodes would be required;
- All relevant agencies should be consulted for any preparation of retrospective modules on homelessness, including homeless service providers;
- In order to have relevant samples, retrospective measurement of homelessness should extend back over a significant period of time (at least 10 years);
- It is likely that any sample of formerly homeless people obtained from the use of a retrospective homelessness module is likely to under-represent people experiencing long-term homelessness;
- Such retrospective questions can in fact provide revealing data about people who consider themselves to be experiencing forms of homelessness and housing exclusion at the time of the survey;
- Information collected about past experiences of homelessness can also be useful for investigating characteristics of people with experience of homelessness and understanding homelessness pathways, and links between different forms of homelessness such as rooflessness, houselessness, insecure housing and inadequate housing;



- The information gathered from such methods could also be useful in generating a sample of people with experience of homelessness which could then be studied further using either a one-off retrospective quantitative or qualitative survey. This is an ideal opportunity to study a group of people who have broken the cycle of homelessness, and would therefore be able to provide crucial information on 'routes out' of homelessness.

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References

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SPC (2001), *Social Protection Committee : Report on Indicators in the field of poverty and social exclusion*, Brussels

Annex: Extract from questionnaire for the 2006 Housing survey (INSEE)

A - EPISODES SANS LOGEMENT PERSONNEL

INTRO

Dans cette partie, nous nous intéressons aux problèmes de logement dans des périodes particulièrement difficiles de l'existence : difficultés financières, professionnelles, personnelles...

⇒ Pour le groupe de référence et les individus de 15 ans ou plus en dehors des enfants et des petits-enfants du groupe de référence

SDP

Est-il arrivé à PRENOM de ne pas avoir de domicile personnel ?

On s'intéresse ici à l'absence durable et non choisie de lieu de vie. Les situations d'hébergement momentané par des amis en attendant la disponibilité d'un logement loué ou acheté ne doivent par exemple pas être prises en compte.

1. Oui
2. Non
3. Ne sait pas

⇒ Si Oui

SDA

Qu'a fait PRENOM ? (plusieurs réponses possibles)

1. Il a été hébergé par des amis ou de la famille
2. Il a séjourné dans des logements d'urgence ou temporaire (ex : foyer, asile de nuit, centre maternel, hôtel payé par une association)
3. Il a séjourné dans un logement sans autorisation du propriétaire ou sans autorisation légale
4. Il a séjourné dans un lieu non prévu pour l'habitation (rue, véhicule, hall d'immeuble, abri de fortune...)
5. Il n'a jamais quitté le domicile de ses parents
6. Autres : hôpital, maison de convalescence, établissement de cure, prison...
7. Ne sait pas

SDA	SDT Combien de temps au total ? [1 à 100, "NSP"] SDTU En année, ou mois ou jours	SDTA En quelle année était-ce la dernière fois ? (Année de la fin de la période)	SDTM En quel mois de l'année ? (Mois de la fin de la période) [1 à 12, NSP]
SDA = 1 à 4 J (jours), M (mois), A (années)		

⇒ Si SDA=6

SDACLAIR

Qu'a fait PRENOM exactement ?

(en clair)