

HOMELESSNESS IN POLAND

KEY STATISTICS

There is no national data collection strategy for homelessness in Poland. Homelessness was addressed by the 2001 and 2011 Housing and Population Censuses, but there were considerable limitations to the methodologies and definitions used.

The Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy collects annual Social Welfare Statistics from all social welfare centres in Poland, including statistics on homeless assistance. The Ministry also holds a register of homeless service providers. Furthermore, since 2011, the Ministry has produced a biennial national study on homelessness. However, NGOs in the homelessness sector have many objections to the research methodology used and therefore consider the figures to be inaccurate.

NGO service providers collect homeless data in some regions. The Pomeranian Forum in aid of Exiting Homelessness (PFWB), for example, carries out very comprehensive biennial surveys of homelessness in the [Pomeranian](#) region. The “Shipyard” Foundation for Social Innovation and Research in [Warsaw](#) has developed a data-collection standard for homeless service users and a methodology for aggregating data on unique users of various services. Unfortunately, as for many other NGOs’ recommendations, it was never implemented in the nationwide study.

Census Data 2011:

- Number of people sleeping rough: approx. 9,600 on any given night (ETHOS 1.1, Census 2011 - 15/16.04.2011)
- Number of people living in group accommodation facilities for longer than 3 months: 14,500 on any given night (ETHOS 2 and 3, Census 2011 - 15/16.04.2011)

Total: 24,100

Key pull-out statistics

Ministry’s biennial national study on homelessness

2015: 5,740 people

2017: 2,753 people

Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy data on homelessness gathered in a point-in-time headcount of February 2017:

- Number of people rough sleeping: 6,508 (ETHOS 1)
- Number of people living in overnight shelters and homeless hostels: 26,900 (ETHOS 2.1 and 3.1)

Total: 33,408

Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy welfare services yearly statistics of 2016:

- Number of people who were provided with shelter: 18,654 (mostly ETHOS 2.1 and 3.1)
- Number of people who received financial support because of homelessness: 42,514

Other

According to quantitative analysis (performed within the “Housing First – Evidence Based Advocacy” project) of raw data collected by the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy during the 2013 National Homeless Count and Sociodemographic Survey, at least 5,338 of over 29,000 people surveyed were chronically homeless (over three years with the “disabling feature” of substance abuse declared as a cause of homelessness). Compared to the remaining population, they were more often found in non-shelter housing situations, used low-threshold short term support, generated income from informal jobs and welfare benefits and had disability status. Less often they declared having no income at all and having access to publicly-funded health services.

INCREASE/DECREASE IN NUMBER OF HOMELESS PEOPLE

After the sudden 17% increase (total: 5,740 people) in the Ministry's biennial national study on homelessness of 2015, the new study of 2017 shows a drop of nearly 8% (total: 2,753 people). Allegedly, the 2015 headcount suffered from a methodology flaw which caused a significant overestimation. However, the prevalence data (welfare services yearly statistics) indicate that after the 2013-2014 peak (exceeding 45,000 people) the number of homeless people has been slowly decreasing for two years in a row (ca. 42,500 in 2016). There is no new national policy to combat homelessness, therefore the decrease may be caused by a combination of positive macroeconomic measures, EU funds application and new tools in general social assistance, especially the 'Family 500 Plus' programme introduced in early 2016 thanks to which each Polish family, regardless of their financial status, receives a monthly amount of 500 PLN (ca. €115) per child, excluding the eldest. A significant drop in the number of homeless children according to the 2017 headcount (36,5% compared to 2015 and 21,9% compared to 2013) seems to support the hypothesis of major influence of the programme on the children homelessness in Poland (the programme's efficiency is already well proven in the area of general children poverty in Poland).

CHANGE IN PROFILE OF HOMELESS PEOPLE

The nationwide socio-demographic data on homelessness in Poland is very scarce. There is only the Ministry's biennial headcount, which is contested by the stakeholders for its methodological flaws. The last study of 2017 shows ageing of the homeless population (the percentage of homeless people in the 'above 60' group grew from 21.7% to 28.5% compared to 2013) and a continuing over-representation of adult men (79.8% in 2013, 80.0% in 2015, 81.8% in 2017). While the decrease in the number of homeless children is clearly visible, conclusions on the young adult group (18-25) which is under a serious homelessness threat in several other EU countries cannot be drawn from the Ministry's study. Anecdotal evidence from the service providers indicates that there is a very slight growth in this area.

Another extremely important factor is the growing length of homelessness episodes (details in table below), showing severe inefficiency of a shelter-based homelessness support system in the area of reintegration, with nearly a quarter of the homeless population remain homeless for longer than 10 years (2017).

Years in homelessness	2017	2013
0-2	26.5%	33.4%
3-5	24.6%	23.6%
6-10	25.1%	22.4%
11-15	10.8%	11.6%
16-20	7.2%	5.6%
above 20	5.9%	3.4%

POLICIES & STRATEGIES

- **National Strategy**

There is no national integrated homelessness strategy. Between 2008 and 2010, work on such a strategy was undertaken by the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, upon the request of the Parliamentary Commission for Social Policy and the Family.

In 2014, five out of six Polish FEANTSA members produced proposals for a homelessness strategy entitled "National Programme for Combating Homelessness and Housing Exclusion 2014-2020". The proposals were rejected by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, since in August 2014 a wider strategy called "National Programme for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion" was adopted by the Government. One of its priorities refers directly to housing insecurity and homelessness. It seems though, that the document is more of a set of guidelines for EU projects aimed at combating poverty than an actual national strategy.

- **Budget evolution**

According to the data published by the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, there was a remarkable and steady growth of funds for shelter services and social benefits for homeless people in the period 2010-2014. Unfortunately, there is no data for 2016 to compare.

- 2010: 138,420,514 PLN (ca. €34,954,675; €1 was 3,96 PLN on 31 December 2010)
- 2012: 166,781,665 PLN (ca. €40,777,913; €1 was 4,09 PLN on 31 December 2012)
- 2014: 222,445,368 PLN (ca. €52,217,222; €1 was 4,26 PLN on 31 December 2014)

On the other hand, it must be pointed out that there is a significant lack of funds for investments (new shelters, meeting quality standards) and housing services.

REMARKS ON KEY POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

Positive

Work on strategic documents concerning homelessness and poverty has been taken up again after a standstill of several years. The Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy has presented the National Programme for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion 2014-2020, while the partnership of NGOs working on the ESF-funded quality framework project prepared the National Programme for Combating Homelessness and Housing Exclusion 2014-2020.

The quality standards framework prepared by five out of six Polish FEANTSA Members called “Municipal Standard of Leaving Homelessness” was accepted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. With the amendment of the Act on Social Assistance in July 2015, the framework was also partly amended – mostly by authorising the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs to issue a Regulation on the standards of homeless services, standards of buildings in which the services are provided and standards of personnel providing the services.

The new Government that came to power in autumn 2015 has launched some new social policies, including the Family 500 Plus child benefit (described above) and the National Housing Programme that aims at providing affordable tenancy housing, which is hoped to have a major impact on preventing homelessness in the future. The programme was adopted in November 2016, and the legislative preparations on housing acts are now being conducted.

In December 2017 the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy proposed an amendment to the Social Assistance Act which imposes a tighter control on municipalities’ fulfilment of their obligations towards homeless people. It is forecasted that it will come into power mid-2018 and will give the service providing NGOs a better position in negotiating their contracts with municipalities.

In the last few years a growing prominence of homelessness advocacy has been observed, mostly from the new Citizens’ Rights Ombudsman appointed in the summer of 2015 (who established an expert group on combating homelessness and evictions) and the National Federation for Solving the Problem of Homelessness (a national NGO Umbrella). Recently, the advocacy reached the mainstream nationwide media (TV, radio and newspapers).

An important awareness and research project was realised in 2015-16 by FEANTSA member Camillian Mission of Social Assistance. The survey conducted in the project titled “Housing First – Evidence Based Advocacy” found that the majority of stakeholders who took part in the project were convinced that Housing First needs to be implemented in Poland. 98% were convinced that Housing First may contribute to reducing chronic homelessness and that financial resources should be allocated to its implementation in Poland.

Negative

While temporary health insurance coverage exists, some homeless people still encounter difficulties in accessing health services due to bureaucratic requirements and due to the reluctance of healthcare institutions to apply the relevant legislation. However, the government announced that by 2018 the requirement for health insurance will be cancelled and everyone with Polish citizenship will be covered by free health services financed directly from the state budget. Details are still unknown, but it is feared that homeless people may become excluded due to bureaucracy requiring them to prove that they are eligible to receive the services.

The legislation issued in 2015 on the “Municipal Standard of Exiting Homelessness” framework (amendment to the Act on Social Assistance), which came to effect in September 2016, has been largely criticised for creating dangerous loopholes. It already caused difficulties regarding shelter access for those who are not self-reliant (i.e. the sick, disabled and elderly who need permanent assistance) and in financing the NGO shelter services by the municipalities.

These difficulties remain unsolved (a respective amendment to the Social Assistance Act awaits parliamentary works at the moment).

The Regulation describing the quality standards that are to be applied in all shelters until September 2018 has been issued in May 2017 and there are many contentious issues with it – mostly in the area of financing adaptation to the new standards, lack of ways to finance the services and high personnel requirements (some service providers claim that the standards prepared by the Ministry will cause the closure of their shelters). These legislative problems are subject of fierce discussion between the NGOs and the Government at present. Another amendment to the Social Assistance Act prolonging the deadline for the application of these standards until December 2020 is being prepared by the Ministry at the moment. A positive aspect is that the NGOs are supported by some municipalities in this discussion, creating opportunities for new alliances. In addition, mainstream media show a growing interest in the problem of homelessness.

The National Housing Programme became a subject of criticism. Despite its general aim that is hoped to largely support combating homelessness, there are many details that may become counterproductive – such as a persisting focus on the development of the system of shelters instead of a gradual shift to housing-led services and a lack of reliable financing tools for investment in the infrastructure of homeless services. Furthermore, the legislation based on the programme became subject of a wide criticism due to lack of tenants' rights protection easing the eviction procedures.

The major issue behind the problems with the National Housing Programme seems to be the inability of cooperation between the Ministry of Infrastructure and Construction (responsible for the Programme and housing issues in general) and the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy (responsible for combating homelessness). In December 2015 the Citizens' Rights Ombudsman asked the Prime Minister to appoint a Government Plenipotentiary (interdepartmental coordinator) for Combating Homelessness. The answer was negative, for the responsibilities of the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy fulfil the needs in this area.

Due to allegations of non-compliance to democratic standards by the ruling "Law and Justice" party, there is a constant tension between the Government and the Citizens' Rights Ombudsman. Even though the conflict itself does not concern combating homelessness, it is feared that it may end with a dismissal of the Ombudsman, which would be a shameful loss for homelessness advocacy.

Furthermore, it makes NGOs cooperating with the Ombudsman seem politically involved, which is already creating difficulties for cooperation with the Government.

Finally, there is a persisting lack of initiatives to improve the knowledge of the real costs of public homelessness policy (e.g. costs of employment-led policy, costs of dwelling in public space) and a lack of efficiency requirements for existing mainstream services i.e. shelters and programmes for exiting homelessness (also those provided by NGO service providers).

