

RESEARCH DIGEST NO.2 COUNTING EUROPEAN HOMELESSNESS

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The Research Digests are among the EPOCH Practice resources provided to representatives of EU Member States and all stakeholders working to combat homelessness in Europe.

The Digests aim to help policymakers and practitioners make use of academic research on homelessness
In 2025, six Digests will be published, covering various themes and disciplinary perspectives.

The Second Digest, dated April 2025, focuses on data collection related to homelessness in Europe.

This Digest was written by Professor Nicholas Pleace and designed the EPOCH Practice team.



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INTRODUCTION BY PR. KOEN HERMANS

Koen Hermans, is professor of social policy and social work at the KU Leuven and project leader at LUCAS KU Leuven. His expertise spans research in homelessness. He is a member of the European Observatory on Homelessness and the European Social Work Research Association. He is also a member of the board of the European Journal of Homelessness.

With the support of FEANTSA, the European Observatory on Homelessness has been working on dynamising research and dialogue between research and policy in order to fuel evidence based public policy making for preventing and reducing homelessness for 35 years.

This Digest brings together a selection of the crucial literature on defining and counting homelessness. In order to implement thoughtful and well-founded policies, a common understanding at the European level is needed, as well as statistical data that maps the issue. In the past 20 years, significant progress has been made in developing a shared understanding of homelessness. ETHOS and ETHOS Light have played a crucial role in conceptualising homelessness, although it remains a consensus definition and there are several limitations associated with it. Data collection remains challenging for various reasons.

As the Digest indicates, significant progress has been made in mapping the issue in a more uniform way, partly due to the fact that EPOCH has identified the importance of data as one of its key priorities.

The Point in Time count remains the most widely used method for this and sheds a light on the extent and profile of homelessness on a specific day at a specific location (city, member state). However, despite its added value of making this social issue visible, this method does not sufficiently capture the dynamic nature of homelessness. This Digest refers to those studies that make use of longitudinal data to understand the entries, the trajectories and exits out of homelessness.

1. DEFINING HOMELESSNESS

- **European Homelessness** is a wider social problem than people living rough (living on the street) and in homelessness shelters (emergency accommodation).
- People who are staying with family, friends or acquaintances because they cannot access a home of their own are experiencing '**hidden homelessness**'. They have no legal rights and can have little to no control over their own living space, privacy or physical security and lack access to their bedroom, kitchen and bathroom, because they are not in their own home.
- There are also people staying in **residential homelessness services** and people staying in **emergency and temporary accommodation**. They are homeless because they have no legal rights to stay in that accommodation, limited or no control over personal space or their privacy and may not be physically safe. People in this situation may also lack the basic facilities of a home, like their own bathroom, kitchen, living area and separate, private sleeping space.
- **The European typology of homelessness (ETHOS) Light** provides a standard definition of who is homeless in Europe. This definition includes hidden homelessness and is being used in the **EU Homeless Count research** which is creating a common way of defining homelessness across Europe to support the delivery of the **European Platform to Combat Homelessness (EPOCH)**.

2. COUNTING HOMELESSNESS

- It is difficult to count everyone living rough (sleeping on the street). People often spend time in homelessness services and live rough, so a count over one or two nights can miss them. As living rough is dangerous many people hide themselves and are also missed by counts. There has been a lot of **European research** and global research on finding better ways to count people living rough.
- There are also challenges in counting the number of **people experiencing hidden homelessness**. A key difficulty is that people who are by definition 'concealed' because they are sofa surfing, i.e. staying with acquaintances, friends or relatives, cannot be easily seen by attempts to count homelessness or by administrative systems, if they are not using services.
- Existing ways of counting homelessness can **over-represent the number of people with multiple and complex needs**. This happens when counts take place over a short amount of time, as people who are long-term (chronic) and repeatedly (episodically) homeless who have high levels of multiple and complex needs are more likely to be homeless when a count takes place.
- While international comparisons remain challenging due to differences in definitions, methods and contexts, recent progress has been made. ETHOS is now widely used by European and international organisations such as the **OECD** and **FEANTSA** to support cross-national analysis. The new Eurostat module on homelessness, **included in EU-SILC**, is also a key step towards harmonised data collection.

3. KEY LEARNING ON DEFINING HOMELESSNESS

A home is much more than having a roof over your head. Someone can be protected from the weather by a building, but not have a home, because they lack physical space and security, legal stability and tenancy rights, and social belonging and connection – the three core domains of home as defined by the ETHOS typology (physical, legal and social).

The European typology of homelessness (ETHOS) Light defines homelessness as:

- Living rough (living on the street)
- Living in emergency accommodation
- Living in accommodation for people experiencing homelessness
- Living in an institution
- Living in a non-conventional dwelling (encampments/unregulated settlements)
- Living temporarily in conventional housing with family/friends due to lack of housing (hidden homelessness)

Not all EU Member States define homelessness **in the same way**. A major project called the **EU Homeless Count research** is creating shared definitions of homelessness so that progress in **achieving the goals of EPOCH** can be monitored across all EU Member States.

Researchers have tried to establish what ‘home’ means in order to build a better idea of **what ‘homelessness’ means**. One of the challenges here is that home is not always safe because of **domestic abuse** which disproportionately affects women and because of issues like severe **overcrowding** and some housing **not being fit** for human habitation.

Some EU Member States define homelessness as only including people sleeping rough and people in emergency shelters. As has been argued by Eoin O’Sullivan and others in **Distorting Tendencies in Understanding Homelessness in Europe** using these definitions means that much of the experience of European homelessness is not accurately recorded. There are also distortions because counts of people living rough and in emergency shelters tend to show high numbers of lone men with addiction and mental illness who are experiencing sustained and repeated homelessness, which also gives a false impression of who is actually homeless in Europe.

In reality, the populations experiencing homelessness in Europe are not all lone men. Women and families, particularly **families with lone women parents** looking after dependent children, experience homelessness in Europe. European research that explores hidden homelessness and looks at homelessness outside emergency shelters and people living rough reports **much wider populations** than lone men. Recent research suggests that, when broader definitions of homelessness are used, including hidden homelessness, women are just as likely as men to experience homelessness. As data collection becomes more inclusive and refined, the perceived gender gap in homelessness is narrowing.

Outside the EU, in **Homelessness in the UK: who is most at risk?** Glen Bramley and Suzanne Fitzpatrick show that homelessness is clearly associated with inequality and poverty, with certain groups being at heightened risk but as a much wider social problem than lone men with addiction and mental illness.

The major Australian study, **Journeys Home**, tracked people experiencing homelessness over time and also reported a much wider population than lone men were experiencing homelessness.

Some key resources that are freely accessible online include:

- **Defining and Measuring Homelessness in Europe** (2010) by Volker Busch Geertsema, traces the history of developing shared definitions of homelessness across EU Member States.
- Koen Hermans (2024) **Toward a Harmonised Homelessness Data Collection and Monitoring Strategy at the EU-level** discusses the different ways in which homelessness is defined in different EU Member states and how a new shared definition can be created for the **EU Homeless Count research**.
- An EPOCH practice webinar (2025) **Are we seeing everyone? Inclusive Data Collection in Homelessness Research** explores the different ways in which definitions of homelessness vary between EU Member States and also features discussion of the **EU Homeless Count research**.
- Joanne Bretherton's and Paula Mayock's (2021) **Women's Homelessness Evidence Review** for FEANTSA argues that women's homelessness has been underrepresented because it has been too narrowly defined. Women are more likely to experience hidden homelessness which is not included in some EU Member state definitions of homelessness. Women living rough often hide and are missed by counts. Women made homeless by domestic abuse who are in domestic abuse services are often not recorded as experiencing homelessness.
- Someone can be effectively 'homeless' because they are not physically safe in their existing home. A TED Talk by Dr Craig Gurney, **The Meaning of Home: More Than Bricks & Mortar?** discusses the differences between 'housing' and 'home' and the ways in which our ideas of 'home' as a safe place are flawed. This is because of social problems, including domestic abuse and social isolation, which can occur at home. In the UK, people at risk of violence and abuse at home have been **legally defined as 'homeless' since 1977**.
- Nicholas Pleace and Koen Hermans (2020) in **Counting All Homelessness in Europe: The Case for Ending Separate Enumeration of 'Hidden Homelessness'** argue that any representative definition of European homelessness should include hidden homelessness. **The OECD Monitoring Framework to Measure Homelessness** (2025) argues that women, young people, minority ethnic groups and people in rural areas will be undercounted if hidden homelessness is not included in attempts to accurately define homelessness. In the UK, evidence reviews for the **Scottish Government** and **Office for National Statistics** have concluded that women experiencing homelessness and other populations are undercounted if definitions used for homeless counts exclude hidden homelessness.

- The **US government annual homelessness count**, last conducted in 2024, notes that it does not include a key element of the population experiencing homelessness, people who are staying with family and friends, also known as people who are ‘doubled up’ or ‘couch surfing’, i.e. hidden homelessness. The Crisis **Homeless Monitor** in the UK reported that around half of all homelessness in **England**, estimated at 242,000 people, were those experiencing ‘sofa surfing’ (hidden homelessness).

4. KEY LEARNING ON COUNTING HOMELESSNESS

There are a number of challenges around accurately counting people who are living rough.

These are technical challenges that can be summarised as follows:

- ‘Rough sleeper’ counts can only usually cover limited areas. This is because deploying people to count people living rough is expensive.
- People who are living rough are at heightened risk of being **victims of crime**, including physical and sexual violence, which means that many people living rough, including **women**, will try to conceal themselves when living rough and therefore be missed by rough sleeper counts.
- There is considerable evidence that many people alternate between emergency shelters, homelessness services, hidden homelessness and living rough. This means **more people are likely to be living rough over the course of a year** than will be counted using a point-in-time (PIT) survey approach.

European researchers have been working to improve the coverage and quality of rough sleeper counts which includes efforts to **extend the scope and range of data collected**. The World’s largest systematic PIT count the **American Annual Homelessness Assessment Report (AHAR)** records unsheltered and sheltered populations to try to cover the whole population at risk of living rough.

Counting hidden homelessness can also be difficult. This is because people experiencing homelessness are concealed in other households, which makes counting them inherently harder than if they are in places in which people experiencing homelessness are known to be, i.e. in homelessness services or living rough. Hidden homelessness is also inherently precarious, i.e. the instability of living in this way can mean people move around a lot, which also makes finding and counting people who are hidden homeless harder. However, it is realistic to at least estimate numbers, which is a technique employed in several **Nordic countries** in Europe and the **UK**.

There is considerable evidence, dating back to **work in 1990s in the USA** by Dennis Culhane and others and to more **recent work in Europe**, that only a minority of people experience homelessness for sustained periods (chronic homelessness) or on a repeated basis (episodic homelessness). People experiencing sustained and repeated homelessness are highly likely to have high treatment and support needs. Point-In-Time (PIT) counts which use short periods of time, tend to find the people most likely to be homeless on any given day or night, i.e. those experiencing sustained or repeated homelessness.

This means PIT counts can seriously overestimate the proportions of people with needs like addiction and mental illness who are experiencing homelessness in Europe and undercount everyone else. As Dennis Culhane and others **have argued**, collecting and using administrative and longitudinal data (tracking people experiencing homelessness over time) can give us a better picture of homelessness. However, these approaches are not perfect as administrative data only records people experiencing homelessness who make use of services and longitudinal data collection can be difficult and expensive. This has led to the idea that multiple sources of data should be used to understand homelessness.

Some key resources that are freely accessible online include:

- The **EU Homeless Count research** is a major research project at European level that will begin reporting through 2025-2026. In the Autumn of 2024, 15 cities across 10 EU countries conducted a comprehensive homelessness count using a shared methodology. Further city counts to test and develop this methodology will take place in 2025.
- The **London CHAIN database** is a system that uses a common continuous data collection protocol across almost all the services that people sleeping rough use in the city. This enables London to track people moving in and out of rough sleeping, track the rate at which new rough sleepers are appearing and the levels of repeated and sustained rough sleeping. The **methods used for the annual government rough sleeper count in England** are also available online.
- The **2023 Women's Rough Sleeping-Census Report** by Sam Wright and others explores the development of methods to better represent the number of women living rough in the UK.
- A number of discussions of methodology and approaches to counting homelessness can be found in the **European Journal of Homelessness**, these include:
 - Philipp Schnell and Robert Musil (2024) **Strategies for Measuring Homelessness in a Federally Organised State – The Case of Austria**
 - Nadia Rondino and Juan Manuel Rodilla (2022) **Longitudinal Study of the Homeless Population in Valencia**
 - Lars Benjaminsen and others (2020) **Measurement of Homelessness in the Nordic Countries** This paper contains descriptions of the highly comprehensive approaches to homelessness data collection in Denmark and Norway, which include hidden homelessness.
 - Matthias Drilling and others (2020) **Measuring Homelessness by City Counts – Experiences from European Cities**
 - Evelien Demaerschalk and others (2019) **Homelessness Merely an Urban Phenomenon? Exploring Hidden Homelessness in Rural Belgium**
- The Irish **Pathway Accommodation and Support System (PASS)** is one of the most comprehensive shared information systems in Europe covering the bulk of homelessness services in the country. An **extensive range of reports** are available.

- **The OECD Monitoring Framework to Measure Homelessness** (2025) contains recommendations for measuring homelessness on a cross national basis an using multiple points of data to capture as much information on homelessness as possible.
- The **Crisis Homeless Monitor** led by Heriot Watt University and Crisis, is a sustained attempt to enhance statistics on all dimensions of homelessness, including hidden homelessness, using multiple data points, including the homelessness administrative data collected by governments in **England, Scotland, Wales** and **Northern Ireland**.

5. BEYOND ACADEMIA

Behind the numbers, the voice of homeless citizens.

The Vocea cetățenilor fără adăpost (The Voice of Homeless Citizens) project, led by CeRe in partnership with Carusel, aims to make homeless people in Romania visible. Rather than simply quantitatively counting them, this initiative seeks to shed light on their stories and needs, offering a qualitative perspective on their situation and emphasising the importance of going beyond the numbers.

For example, one homeless woman shared: "I wash myself with cold water. As a woman, I like to be clean. Even if I wash with cold water and catch a cold, at least I know I am clean." These testimonies illustrate the daily struggles faced by homeless people and highlight the importance of listening to them in order to better understand their realities.

By directly involving around 40 homeless individuals in a community organising process, the project aims to strengthen their self-esteem and advocate for concrete measures addressing their needs. Vocea cetățenilor fără adăpost seeks to bring the invisibilised into the light, ensuring they are seen and heard by both the public and institutions.

For more details, visit:

[!\[\]\(17acf1afa8cdf0b67c53d4865a5ed469_img.jpg\) Project page on Carusel](#)

The website is in Romanian, but can be translated using your internet browser.

