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Journal Philosophy

The European Journal of Homelessness provides a critical analysis of policy and practice on homelessness in Europe for policy makers, practitioners, researchers and academics. The aim is to stimulate debate on homelessness and housing exclusion at the European level and to facilitate the development of a stronger evidential base for policy development and innovation. The journal seeks to give international exposure to significant national, regional and local developments and to provide a forum for comparative analysis of policy and practice in preventing and tackling homelessness in Europe. The journal also assess the lessons for Europe, which can be derived from policy, practice and research from elsewhere.

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Part A

Regional Characteristics of Housing Loss Risk during COVID-19

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Abstract_ *In Japan, the decrease in homelessness is attributed to the adoption of a narrow definition focusing solely on rough sleepers. However, by adopting a broader conceptualization similar to ETHOS, it is plausible that Japan harbors a significant homeless population comparable to that of other countries. Analyzing the factors contributing to the risk of housing loss is imperative for preventing rough sleeping. The Housing Security Benefit (HSB), a form of rent subsidy system for the unemployed, played a substantial role in mitigating the risk of housing loss during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study analyzes factors associated with HSB recipient rates at the city level across four dimensions: the housing market conditions, condition of the labor economy, safety nets, and demographic dynamics. Findings reveal a correlation between the prevalence of HSB recipients and the vulnerability of housing affordability, higher unemployment rates, and lower public assistance recipient rates. To reduce the risk of housing loss and prevent homelessness, the development of housing policies to increase affordability is necessary. HSB prevented housing loss due to unemployment resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Even after COVID-19 subsides, however, housing loss risk may persist. Effective housing policies are necessary even after the COVID-19 pandemic subsides.*

Keywords_ *Housing loss risk, Regional characteristics, COVID-19, Housing Security Benefit, Housing affordability*

Introduction

Enhancing the welfare system is key to reducing the number of people experiencing homelessness. Stephens and Fitzpatrick have pointed out that countries with welfare regimes characterized by high levels of poverty and inequality tend to exhibit higher levels of homelessness (Stephens & Fitzpatrick, 2007). This claim is supported by the comparative study conducted by Benjaminsen and Andrade (2015), which used the annual prevalence of shelter use as an indicator to compare levels of homelessness in the United States—a prototypical liberal welfare state—and Denmark—a prototypical social democratic welfare state—revealing that the annual prevalence in Denmark was only one-third of that in the United States.

When focusing on welfare systems, as Benjaminsen points out, it is necessary not only to consider overall tendency such as the extent of welfare provision but also to take into account many different subsystems that constitute the welfare system, such as housing policy and income security, and to examine country-specific policy developments and their impact on homelessness (Benjaminsen, 2024). Japan is one of the few countries that has successfully reduced homelessness. According to OECD estimates, homelessness increased in many developed countries from 2010 to 2020[1], with a few exceptions such as Finland and Norway. By contrast, homelessness in Japan has decreased by over 90% in the past 20 years, from 25 296 people in 2003 to 2 591 in 2025 (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2025). One of the factors contributing to the decrease in homelessness in Japan is the introduction of various employment support policies, such as the establishment of facilities called "Self-Reliance Support Centers," which aim to assist homeless individuals in finding employment. Further, the general public assistance program called *seikatsu hogo*, a form of general public assistance for the poor that facilitates transition to stable residences, has had a large impact (Kiener and Mizuuchi, 2018). In a comparison with Supplemental Security Income (SSI) in the United States, Goto claims that the generality, comprehensiveness, and expeditiousness that characterize Japan's *seikatsu hogo* contributed to reducing homelessness (Goto et al., 2022).

Until the 1990s, however, *seikatsu hogo* was not actively applied to people experiencing homelessness. This was due in part to the perception that those deemed capable of working were not making sufficient efforts to do so, as well as the reluctance of local governments to provide support to those without resident registration. In response to the sharp increase in street homelessness in the 2000s, the administration of *seikatsu hogo* became more flexible. In particular, during the global financial crisis of 2008, when an increasing number of people lost their

1 OECD Affordable Housing Database, HC3.1 Homeless population estimates. Available at: (https://www.oecd.org/els/family/HC3-1-Homeless-population.pdf)

housing, eligibility criteria for *seikatsu hogo* were relaxed, helping to prevent a further rise in the number of rough sleepers (Yamada et al., 2024). In this way, it can be argued that the strengthening of the welfare system has played a significant role in reducing people experiencing homelessness in Japan.

False Dawn?

However, Japan's homelessness numbers cannot be directly compared with those of other countries. Japan officially defines homelessness as sleeping on the street or in a park[2], often labeled as "sleeping rough" in European countries. The European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) proposed by the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) considers people in shelters or emergency accommodation as potentially "homeless," as well as people living in insecure accommodation and those living under threat of eviction. The ETHOS typology offers countries and researchers options for which categories to include and which to exclude as "homeless," and enables comparability by definitional category. Furthermore, a revised version of ETHOS has been proposed, which explicitly rejects the conflation of homelessness with rough sleeping and incorporates situations such as unwillingly staying with family or friends, as well as living in conditions that are detrimental to health and well-being (Pleace & Hermans, 2020). In light of such international discussions, Japan's definition would be considered quite narrow, as it focuses only on people with the most extreme lack of shelter, "rough sleepers." (Okamoto and Bretherton, 2023). Alternatively, in a recent internet survey of 140 000 Japanese people, Kakita found that with a broader definition inclusive of emergency accommodation and insecure housing that the rate of "homelessness" in Japan was 5.2% (Kakita et al., 2022). This figure is much more comparable to rates of homelessness in the US and in European countries.

Homelessness, understood in this broader sense, functions as a "reserve army" for homelessness in the narrow sense, understood here as rough sleepers. In Japan, rough sleepers are often people who used to live in housing directly linked to their employment, such as company dormitories (Iwata, 2003). When the people living in such housing become unemployed, they are put at high risk of losing their place to live and becoming rough sleepers. In addition, among low-wage workers who have lost their housing, many sleep in internet cafes (Obinger, 2009). Yet even they may become rough sleepers if their income dries up and they cannot even afford to stay in internet cafes anymore. It follows that if one focuses exclusively on the

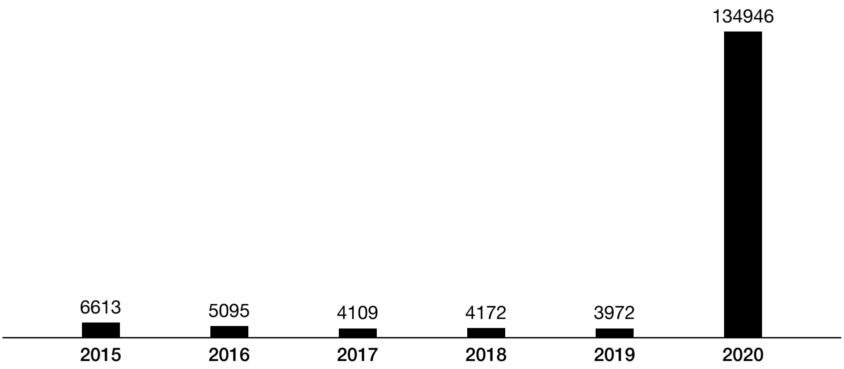
2 Law on Special Measures for Self-Sufficiency Support for Homeless People (*hōmuresu no jiritsu no shien tou ni kansuru tokubetsu sochi ho*)

low numbers of rough sleepers, the risk of losing housing will go unaddressed, and opportunities for taking preventive measures will be missed. Thus, in examining the policy challenges to address the phenomenon of rough sleepers, the factors that contribute to the broader risk of housing loss should also be considered.

In Japan, the unfavorable economic situation resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic has further increased the risk of housing loss. This is evidenced by the dramatic increase in the number of Housing Security Benefit (HSB) recipients. Implemented in 2015 to promote employment and improvement of livelihoods of people in need, HSB is a rent subsidy system based on the *Act on Support for Self-Reliance of Needy Persons* (*seikatsu konkyusya jiritsu shien ho*). It pays a rental equivalent amount, capped at the total housing subsidy provided by *seikatsu hogo* for a period of three to nine months to low-income unemployed individuals. In other words, people receiving HSB would not be able to pay their rent without the benefit and would therefore be at risk of losing their homes. The recipients of HSB are limited to unemployed adults, yet given the absence of a universal rental subsidy system in Japan, this scheme plays a crucial role in mitigating the risk of housing loss.

However, because HSB had strict conditions for use, it did not reach enough people who were at risk of losing their housing. That said, in July 2020, the Japanese government, concerned about increased numbers of people losing their homes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, significantly relaxed the conditions for HSB eligibility, including expanding coverage to individuals on temporary leave and extending the duration of benefits. Due to this special measure to address the COVID-19 pandemic, HSB has been extended to cover a broader range of people facing the risk of losing their housing. As shown in Fig. 1, the number of HSB recipients grew from 3972 in 2019 to 134946 in 2020, a more than 30-fold increase. This study analyzes the factors involved in housing loss risk, as indicated by the number of HSB recipients.

Fig. 1 Number of HSB recipients



Source: Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare

As discussed above, Japan's official definition of homelessness is limited to rough sleepers. However, several studies suggest the existence of a broader population experiencing housing loss that is not confined to this narrow category. The increase in recipients of HSB during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the magnitude of housing loss risk. In light of these considerations, the decline in people experiencing homelessness described in the previous section may represent a false dawn. This study, therefore, analyzes the factors contributing to housing loss risk in Japan, using the number of HSB recipients as an indicator.

Regional Characteristics of Housing Loss Risk

There are a variety of approaches to elucidating factors associated with the risk of housing loss. One common approach is to examine individuals' factors for housing loss risk, such as health status, work history, and the socioeconomic status of the family of origin. However, ascertaining such individual factors is difficult, given the absence of administrative data on the personal attributes of HSB recipients. Therefore, to overcome this difficulty, this study focuses on regional-level structural factors related to HSB recipient rates in each city. In their analysis of the regional characteristics of homelessness rates, Elliott and Krivo argue that unfavorable structural conditions are necessary precursors to widespread homelessness, regardless of the extent of personal problems among those negatively affected by them (Elliott and Krivo, 1991: 114). As to why the scale of the problem differs so much across urban contexts, Lee argues that it is necessary to adopt a structural perspective that treats the homelessness rate as a function of other attributes of communities (Lee et al., 2003: 336). Recently, Colburn and Aldern published an important study that explains the variation in homelessness rates across cities using various indicators that reflect urban characteristics, based on a strategy that emphasizes focusing on differences between cities rather than between individuals (Colburn and Aldern, 2022).

As described below, numerous studies analyzing factors related to homelessness rates at the regional level have been conducted in Europe and the United States. In Japan, too, some studies have examined the relationship between various regional-level characteristics and homelessness (Furugori, 2014), but they take a relatively large region called a "prefecture" as their unit of analysis, and the homelessness numbers at the street level as dependent variables. As mentioned, the number of homeless people on the streets in Japan is extremely small and is not an adequate proxy for the risk of housing loss. In addition, while poverty is deeply related to homelessness and housing loss risk, poverty is not the same as homelessness, although some studies use regional-level poverty rates as dependent variables (Tanabe and Suzuki, 2018). This study aims to identify regional-level factors associated with the increased risk of housing loss in Japan during the COVID-19 pandemic, drawing on previous research from Europe and the United States that has suggested associations between homelessness rates and the following factors.

Housing markets

Transformations in the housing market have particularly undermined housing affordability for low-income households, raising concerns about increasing rates of homelessness. Lima et al. (2023), in their analysis of the financialization of the Private Rental Sector in Ireland, argue that neoliberal marketization has driven up private rental prices, while austerity in social housing policy has contributed to the rise in homelessness. Similarly, interviews with professionals from the municipal social service authorities in Malmö, Sweden, reveal that the marketization of housing policy has reduced housing affordability for the poor, resulting in a contradiction wherein the welfare system is compelled to address housing problems (Sandberg & Listerborn, 2023). In Germany as well, high rents and low vacancy rates among small flats have been reported as contributing factors to the increase in homelessness (Kröll & Farhauer, 2012).

In the United States as well, a longstanding body of research has established a link between high rents and elevated rates of homelessness. Using homelessness numbers compiled by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in 1984, Bohanon found that the median rent in each city analyzed was correlated with the rate of homelessness among those in poverty (Bohanon, 1991). Additionally, in their analysis of the determinants of homelessness rates in metropolitan areas based on S Night Data from the 1990 census, Lee also reports that rent levels strongly contributed to the homelessness rate (Lee et al., 2003). Indeed, numerous other studies have identified the relationship between rent levels and homelessness rates (Honig and Filer, 1993; Early and Olsen, 2001; Quigley and Raphael, 2001; Raphael, 2010; Byrne et al., 2013). Through estimates of the relationship between rent and homelessness rates by metropolitan area, recent studies have found that large increases in rent are associated with increases in homelessness in New York, Los Angeles, Washington DC, and Seattle (Glynn and Fox, 2019), and that, when the median rent exceeds 32% of median income, the expected homelessness rate in the region increases sharply (Glynn et al., 2021). The argument of Colburn and Aldern (2022), which is considered one of the most important studies in recent homelessness research, is that the variation in homelessness rates between cities can be explained not by individual and cultural factors, but by rent levels and vacancy rates.

The fact that high rent levels are contributing to an increase in homelessness highlights the importance of assessing government rent control policies. According to Kholodilin (2022), who reviewed 60 studies across 18 countries on the effects of rent regulation, such policies are effective in reducing or slowing the growth of rents. However, they may also have negative consequences for housing mobility and quality. It has long been argued that rent control can lead to local housing shortages and, consequently, an increase in homelessness (Troutman et al., 1999). However, if, as Troutman argues, "the problem with homelessness is not the existence of housing, but the allocation of housing," then rather than viewing rent regulations alone as the problem, emphasis should be placed on increasing the affordability of housing for low-income people. Research examining the impact of cuts to rent subsidies for low-income beneficiaries in the United Kingdom has found that such reductions led to greater housing instability. These effects include increases in evictions, higher proportions of people living in temporary housing arrangements, and rises in both statutory homelessness and actual rough sleeping (Fetzer et al., 2019). Another study found that the transition from Housing Benefit to Universal Credit in the UK has heightened the risk of rent arrears—particularly for people with disabilities and claimants moving from Housing Benefit to Universal Credit—due to factors such as longer waiting periods and the shift to direct payment systems (Williams et al., 2022). These findings resonate with earlier studies that found a lack of low-rent housing (Elliot and Krivo, 1991), low vacancy rates (Quigley and Raphael, 2001), and low availability of subsidized housing for low-income people (Early and Olsen, 2002) are associated with high rates of homelessness in a region. Research demonstrating the correlation between investments in permanent supportive housing (PSH) and reduced regional rates of homelessness also underscores the importance of housing policy (Byrne et al., 2014; Corinth, 2017).

Labor economy, safety nets, and demographic dynamics

O'Sullivan et al. (2020) criticize medical research for framing homelessness primarily as a consequence of mental ill-health and substance misuse, arguing that such an approach distorts our understanding of the root causes of homelessness. They contend that homelessness should instead be understood as a structural issue. In addition to housing market conditions, one of the key factors expected to be associated with homelessness rates is the state of the labor economy, particularly as it relates to poverty. An analysis of three large-scale datasets from the United Kingdom found a strong association between poverty—especially poverty experienced during childhood—and the risk of homelessness (Bramley & Fitzpatrick, 2017). Similarly, a qualitative study based on interviews with individuals using three homelessness services in England identified socially and economically disadvantaged childhood conditions, such as poverty, as major contributing factors to homelessness (Mabhala et al., 2017).

When examining the relationship between poverty and homelessness within the context of regional characteristics, dynamics of the labor economy—such as unemployment rates—are particularly relevant. Gould and Williams (2010), in their analysis of county-level factors associated with shelter admissions in the state of Missouri, United States, found that regions with higher unemployment rates had higher homelessness rates among families admitted to shelters. Many other studies have reported that unemployment rates are related to homelessness rates (Bohanon, 1991; Burt, 1992; Fargo et al., 2013). In addition to unemployment rates, a county's taxable sales (Gould and Williams, 2010) and regional employment structures, such as its number of manufacturing workers (Burt, 1992), have also been found to be related to homelessness rates.

The state of local safety nets is also expected to be associated with homelessness rates. For example, a study analyzing data from 323 local authorities in England found that declining economic activity, along with reductions in welfare spending—particularly on social care and housing services—was strongly associated with increases in homelessness applications (Loopstra et al., 2016). Similarly, in the United States, Elliott and Krivo (1991) report that higher budgets for psychiatric care are strongly linked to low regional homelessness rates (Elliott and Krivo, 1991). Similarly, many studies report that financial investment in mental health care is inversely associated with homelessness rates (Bohanon, 1991; Honing and Filer, 1993). Increasing spending on a wide range of mental health care measures, including inpatient care, may prevent homelessness among people with mental illnesses. Some studies note that, in addition to spending on mental health care, access to General Assistance (public assistance for unemployed single adults) is also related to homelessness rates (Burt, 1992; Richard and Rule, 2024), while others argue that, compared to economic and housing conditions, safety net indicators cannot explain the determinants of homelessness rates (Fargo et al., 2013).

Moreover, numerous studies have shown that demographic factors—particularly the high proportion of single-person households—are key determinants of urban homelessness rates (Lee et al., 2003; Burt, 1992; Byrne et al., 2013). Single-person households are likely to be at risk of homelessness due to the difficulty they face in securing housing. Additionally, Byrne found that the ratio of the population belonging to the baby boomer generation (born between 1946 and 1964) was also associated with homelessness rates (Byrne et al., 2013).

Based on previous studies that have analyzed factors associated with homelessness rates, it is essential to consider not only the housing market conditions but also regional factors such as the labor economy, safety nets, and demographic dynamics when analyzing the regional characteristics of housing loss risk.

Characteristics of homelessness in Japan

Meanwhile, Japanese research has determined unemployment to be the main cause of homelessness. In particular, during the 1990s, it was noted that day laborers working in *yoseba*[3] were forced into rough sleeping when they lost their jobs (Fowler, 1996; Aoki, 2006). Day laborers working in *yoseba* are mostly employed by the construction industry, so regions with a large number of workers in the construction industry should be expected to have high rates of homelessness. However, since 2000, the study of homelessness in Japan has changed in recognition that rough sleeping is not unique to day laborers working in the construction industry; it is also experienced by people engaged in part-time and non-regular employment, for example, through staffing agencies (Ezawa, 2002; Aoki, 2003). Because these people are often engaged in the manufacturing industry, homelessness rates can be expected to be high in regions with high levels of employment in the manufacturing industry, even today. Based on prior research on homelessness in Europe, the United States, and Japan, this study treats housing market conditions, safety nets, labor economy conditions, including industry composition, and demographic dynamics as regional-level factors associated with the risk of housing loss.

Methods

To identify regional-level factors associated with the number of HSB recipients in each city, we conducted multiple regression analysis using independent variables reflecting four characteristics: housing market, labor economy, safety net, and demographics. In prior research, some analyses of the regional characteristics of the homelessness rate were conducted using two categories: metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas (Fargo et al., 2013; Byrne et al., 2013). Cities in Japan are divided into ordinance-designated cities: large cities that meet criteria such as a population of 500 000 or more (20 cities nationwide as of 2020); core cities, of a similar size (60 cities nationwide); and general cities (712 cities nationwide). In addition, there are 23 special wards in central Tokyo. In this analysis, these 815 municipal districts were divided into metropolitan areas (Tokyo special wards, ordinance-designated cities, and core cities, for a total of 103 cities) and non-metropolitan areas (712 cities).

Dependent variables

This study uses data on the number of HSB recipients by city. Although it was introduced in 2015, HSB was only utilized by about 4 000 to 7 000 people nationwide annually for the five years up to 2019. However, because of concerns about increases in the number of those in poverty losing their homes due to the impact

3 *Yoseba* is a term used to describe a space where many day laborers reside and look for work.

of COVID-19, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare relaxed the conditions for use, resulting in a sharp increase in the number of users, to 134 946 in 2020. In other words, even though pre-2019 HSB and 2020 HSB are the same system, the quality of the system can be said to have changed dramatically as a result of COVID-19. In this study, we analyze city-specific data on the number of HSB users in 2020 provided by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare.

HSB is implemented by prefectures, cities, and Tokyo special wards across the country. Because prefectures have jurisdiction over rural regions, including towns and villages, this study uses only the number of HSB recipients provided by cities and special wards. In 2020, the average number of HSB recipients in the 815 cities implementing the system was 162 people, but the standard deviation was 523.8 people, a large variance. To ensure data stability, this study limits the analysis to the 331 cities where the system was used by 50 or more people. Using population numbers reported in the 2020 census, we calculated the number of HSB recipients per 10 000 people in these 331 cities and set it as the dependent variable. Table 1 shows descriptive statistics for the number of HSB recipients per 10 000 people in the 331 cities included in the analysis.

Table 1. The number of HSB recipients rate per 10 000 people

	Total (n=331)		Metropolitan areas (n=100)		Non-metropolitan areas (n=231)	
	Number of cities	%	Number of cities	%	Number of cities	%
Under 5 people	41	12.4	18	18.0	23	10.0
5-10 people	134	40.5	32	32.0	102	44.2
10-15 people	84	25.4	15	15.0	69	29.9
15-20 people	31	9.4	14	14.0	17	7.4
Over 20 people	41	12.4	21	21.0	20	8.7
Mean	12.3		15.2		11.0	
Standard Deviation	10.1		14.5		7.1	
Minimum	2.0		2.0		2.7	
Maximum	79.9		79.9		65.3	

Independent variables (Table 2)

Housing market conditions

Rent levels, low-rent housing ratios, public housing ratios, and vacancy rates were used as independent variables to indicate housing market conditions. Given that single-person households constitute most of the HSB recipients and homeless in

Japan, the average rent[4] for tenants of rentals with an area of 29 square meters or less was aggregated from the results of a 2018 survey by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications[5]. Additionally, low-rent housing was defined as rental housing with rents below the average rent in each city, and the ratio of low-rent housing to the total number of housing units was calculated. Vacancy rates and public housing rates were also calculated from the ratios of the number of vacant houses and public housing units to the total number of housing units.

Condition of the labor economy

Unemployment rate, average income, irregular employment rate, ratio of construction workers, and ratio of manufacturing workers were used as independent variables indicating the condition of the regional labor economy. The unemployment rate was calculated as the percentage of completely unemployed people in the labor force, as reported in the 2020 census. Using tax data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications[6], we calculated average income as total income per taxpayer in each city. The irregular employment rate was calculated as the ratio of temporary and part-time workers to the number of employees, as reported in the 2020 census. The ratio of workers in the construction and manufacturing industries was calculated as the percentage of construction and manufacturing workers out of the total number of employees, as reported in the 2020 census.

Safety nets

Public welfare expenditures, public health expenditures, and public assistance recipient rates were used as independent variables related to safety nets. Using each city's 2020 financial statements as reported by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications[7], we calculated the amount of public welfare expenditures and public health expenditures[8] as a percentage of total municipal expenditures. Using the results of a survey by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare[9], and data obtained directly.

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4 In previous studies conducted in the United States, the median rent is commonly utilized as an independent variable. However, in Japan's official statistics, the median is not disclosed. Therefore, in this analysis, the mean value was employed instead.

5 Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (2018) *Housing and Land Survey.*

6 Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (2020) *Survey on Taxation Status of Municipalities (shichousonzei kazei joukyou tou no shirabe 2020)*.

7 Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (2020) *Survey of Financial Statements by Municipalities (shichousonbetsu kessann joukyou shirabe 2020)*.

8 In previous studies conducted in the United States, the expenditure on mental health care is commonly utilized as an independent variable. However, in Japan's official statistics, the mental health care expenditure is not disclosed. Therefore, in this analysis, the overall public health expenditure was employed instead.

9 Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2020) *National Survey on Public Assistance Recipients.*

Table. 2 Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

	Total (n=331)		Metropolitan areas (n=100)		Non-metropolitan areas (n=231)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Housing Market Conditions						
Average Rent (yen)	45,777	10,243	50,292	14,558	43,822	6,827
Low-rent Housing Ratios (%)	61.09	10.45	59.37	9.71	61.84	10.68
Vacancy Rates (%)	13.02	4.15	12.86	2.86	13.09	4.60
Public Housing Ratios (%)	3.09	2.24	3.53	1.79	2.91	2.39
Condition of the Labour Economy						
Unemployment Rate (%)	3.90	0.66	3.82	0.62	3.94	0.68
Annual Average Income (1,000 yen)	3,325	706	3,625	1,053	3,195	426
Irregular Employment Rate (%)	34.92	3.53	32.90	4.18	35.80	2.78
Ratio of Construction Workers (%)	6.99	1.73	6.66	1.81	7.14	1.68
Ratio of Manufacturing Workers (%)	16.05	7.76	12.72	5.81	17.49	8.06
Safety Nets						
Proportion of Public Welfare Expenditure to Total Expenditure (%)	32.67	5.30	34.34	5.90	31.95	4.85
Proportion of Public Health Expenditure to Total Expenditure (%)	3.25	1.22	3.22	1.10	3.26	1.26
Public Assistance Recipient Rates (%)	1.53	0.90	1.95	0.94	1.34	0.81
Demographic Dynamics						
Ratio of Single-person Households (%)	36.71	7.49	41.76	8.64	34.52	5.70
Ratio of First Baby Boomers: 71-73 years old (%)	4.62	0.77	4.38	0.71	4.72	0.78
Ratio of Second Baby Boomers: 46-49 years old (%)	6.36	0.54	6.35	0.50	6.37	0.55

From each city, we calculated public assistance recipient rates as the ratio of recipients to the total population.

Demographic dynamics

The ratio of single-person households and the ratio of baby boomers were used as independent variables related to demographic dynamics. The ratio of single-person households was calculated as a percentage of the total number of households as reported in the 2020 census. As for baby boomers, the term is used to describe people born from 1946 to 1964 in the US, but in Japan, people born between 1947 and 1949 are called "first baby boomers," while those born between 1971 and 1974 are called "second baby boomers." For this study, we defined those aged 71 to 73 years old in 2020 as "first baby boomers," while we defined 46-to-49-year-olds as "second baby boomers," and their ratios were calculated as a percentage of the population, as reported in the census.

Results (Table 3)

Housing markets

Of the variables related to the housing market (rent level, low-rent housing, vacant housing, public housing), rent level was found to be significantly associated with the HSB recipient rate. Regions with higher average rents tended to have higher HSB recipient rates (b=0.359, $p<0.001$). This was evident in non-metropolitan areas, but no significant association was observed in metropolitan areas. Furthermore, in metropolitan areas, lower HSB recipient rates tended to be associated with higher ratios of low-rent housing to the total number of housing units (b=-0.119, $p<0.1$). Neither the vacancy rate nor the proportion of public housing was observed to be related to HSB recipient rates.

Labor economy

Among variables related to the labor economy (unemployment, income, irregular employment, construction workers, and manufacturing workers), unemployment was found to be significantly associated with HSB recipient rates. Regions with higher unemployment rates tended to have higher HSB recipient rates (b=0.255, $p<0.001$). This trend was observed in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. Average income, the proportion of irregular employees, and the ratio of construction and manufacturing workers were not significantly associated with HSB recipient rates.

Safety nets

Of the variables related to safety nets (public welfare expenditures, public health expenditures, and public assistance recipient rates), public assistance recipient rates were found to be significantly related to HSB recipient rates. Regions with higher public assistance recipient rates tended to have lower HSB recipient rates (b=-0.186, $p<0.05$). This trend was significant in metropolitan areas, but no significant association was observed in non-metropolitan areas. There were no significant relationships between HSB recipient rates and public welfare expenditures or public health expenditures.

Demographic dynamics

All variables related to demographic dynamics were significantly associated with HSB recipient rates. Regions with higher ratios of single-person households tended to have higher HSB recipient rates (b=0.457, $p<0.001$). This trend was observed in both metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas. As for baby boomers, a negative relationship was observed for both first and second baby boomers, as regions with a higher proportion of baby boomers had lower HSB recipient rates. This trend was significant in non-metropolitan areas, but no significant relationship was observed in metropolitan areas.

Table. 3 Factors Associated with HSB Recipient Rate

	Total			Metropolitan Areas			Non-metropolitan Areas		
	β	B	(95% CI)	β	B	(95% CI)	β	B	(95% CI)
Housing Market Conditions									
Average Rent	0,359 ***	0,000	(0,000 - 0,001)	-0,091	0,000	(-0,001 - 0,000)	0,312 **	0,000	(0,000 - 0,001)
Low-rent Housing	0,016	0,015	(-0,063 - 0,094)	-0,119 †	-0,180	(-0,389 - 0,029)	0,066	0,045	(-0,031 - 0,120)
Vacancy Rates	-0,006	-0,020	(-0,364 - 0,324)	0,016	0,081	(-0,786 - 0,949)	-0,034	-0,072	(-0,411 - 0,268)
Public Housing	-0,040	-0,183	(-0,595 - 0,229)	-0,012	-0,095	(-1,280 - 1,090)	-0,007	-0,020	(-0,411 - 0,371)
Condition of the Labour Economy									
Unemployment Rate	0,255 ***	4,000	(2,279 - 5,720)	0,333 **	7,783	(2,201 - 13,365)	0,229 **	2,492	(0,839 - 4,145)
Average Income	0,004	0,000	(-0,002 - 0,002)	0,055	0,001	(-0,003 - 0,005)	-0,165	-0,003	(-0,006 - 0,001)
Irregular Employment	0,066	0,191	(-0,162 - 0,543)	0,016	0,054	(-0,788 - 0,896)	0,078	0,203	(-0,170 - 0,576)
Construction Workers	-0,012	-0,069	(-0,724 - 0,586)	-0,158	-1,262	(-3,155 - 0,631)	-0,040	-0,169	(-0,821 - 0,484)
Manufacturing Workers	0,008	0,011	(-0,133 - 0,155)	-0,020	-0,050	(-0,434 - 0,335)	-0,074	-0,069	(-0,212 - 0,073)
Safety Nets									
Public Welfare Expenditure	0,085	0,168	(-0,066 - 0,402)	0,096	0,235	(-0,216 - 0,686)	0,070	0,107	(-0,162 - 0,376)
Public Health Expenditure	-0,003	-0,022	(-0,698 - 0,654)	0,039	0,514	(-1,227 - 2,255)	-0,001	-0,006	(-0,660 - 0,648)
Public Assistance Recipient	-0,186 *	-2,133	(-3,791 - -0,475)	-0,274 *	-4,270	(-8,079 - -0,462)	-0,169	-1,512	(-3,361 - 0,337)
Demographic Dynamics									
Single-person Households	0,457 ***	0,625	(0,411 - 0,840)	0,655 ***	1,100	(0,541 - 1,659)	0,361 ***	0,465	(0,248 - 0,682)
First Baby Boomers	-0,156 *	-2,132	(-3,769 - -0,495)	-0,154	-3,121	(-8,618 - 2,377)	-0,213 **	-2,077	(-3,587 - -0,567)
Second Baby Boomers	-0,162 **	-3,076	(-5,095 - -1,057)	0,061	1,779	(-3,889 - 7,447)	-0,203 **	-2,652	(-4,641 - -0,664)
Intercept		-21,9	(-46,8 - 3,0)		-40,6	(-113,5 - 32,4)		-1,7	(-26,3 - 22,9)
Adjusted R-squared Value	0,543			0,665			0,379		

****p<0.001 **p<0.01 *p<0.05 †p<0.1*

Discussion

This study analyzed regional-level factors related to the HSB recipient rate. HSB recipients are people who, without the subsidy, would be unable to pay rent, consequently facing the risk of losing their housing and, in some cases, becoming rough sleepers. Furthermore, in contrast to research in Europe and the United States, Japanese research on homelessness has rarely analyzed the regional characteristics of homelessness rates. The identification of regional-level structural factors associated with HSB recipient rates can aid in the formulation of policy strategies to prevent homelessness. This study examined the relationship between HSB recipient rates and four regional-level characteristics: housing market, labor economy, safety nets, and demographic dynamics. Among these factors, the housing market, labor economy, and safety net can be utilized for policy interventions.

First, regarding the housing market, high regional rent levels were correlated with HSB recipient rates. However, while this correlation was significant in non-metropolitan areas, it was not observed in metropolitan areas. That said, in metropolitan areas, low proportions of low-rent housing correlated with higher HSB recipient rates. Both high rent levels and scarce low-rent housing are housing affordability issues. The finding that low housing affordability increases housing loss risk at the regional level accords with prior studies of the regional characteristics of homelessness rates in Europe and the United States (Lima et al., 2023; Sandberg & Listerborn, 2023; Glynn and Fox, 2019). Therefore, reducing housing loss risk and preventing homelessness may require establishing regulations on rent increases or other means for expanding the supply of low-rent housing. In 2017, Japan's housing safety net system was revised to implement rent subsidies and the registration of housing for people who require special consideration in obtaining housing. However, the housing registration initiative has not progressed adequately, making housing policy necessary to prevent the risk of housing loss from becoming a reality.

As for labor economy conditions, high unemployment rates were strongly associated with HSB recipient rates. However, no relationship was observed with regional average income or the ratio of irregular employees. HSB eligibility conditions have been relaxed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. In other words, HSB became more of a livelihood support system for people who lost their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than a pure rent subsidy for the general population. This is likely to have strengthened the relationship between the HSB recipient rate and the unemployment rate, indicating that HSB was effective for those facing housing loss risk due to unemployment during COVID-19. However, in April 2023, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare began a review of the special measures implemented in response to COVID-19, to consider whether to abolish some of the measures enacted to ease HSB eligibility requirements and partially shorten the benefit period. There are concerns that as this review progresses, the capacity for HSB to address the risk of housing loss due to unemployment will be weakened. Moreover, housing loss risk is not a phenomenon limited to COVID-19. In Japan, where a universal rental subsidy system is not in place, the role played by HSB in mitigating housing loss risk during COVID-19 conditions suggests the necessity of establishing a universal rent subsidy system.

Regarding regional labor economy conditions, no correlation was found between the ratio of construction workers or manufacturing workers and HSB recipient rates. In Japan, homelessness was traditionally thought to largely involve people working in the construction and manufacturing industries, but in recent years, homelessness has no longer been limited to occupations in construction and manufacturing. To be sure, industries such as the restaurant industry and the tourism industry were hit hard during COVID-19, thus, broadening the spectrum of industries vulnerable to the risk of housing loss beyond the construction and manufacturing sectors. In other words, the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have accelerated the diversification of pathways to homelessness in Japan.

Regarding safety nets, a negative relationship was found between the public assistance recipient rate and the HSB recipient rate. Previous US studies have reported similar findings (Burt, 1992; Richard and Rule, 2024). The fact that regions with higher public assistance recipient rates have lower HSB recipient rates suggests that the receipt of public assistance prevented the risk of housing loss from becoming a reality. Goto has argued that public assistance contributes to reducing homelessness and fulfills a significant role from the perspective of preventing homelessness (Goto et al., 2022). However, while the negative association between the public assistance recipient rate and HSB recipient rate was significant in metropolitan areas, it was not observed in non-metropolitan areas. While public assistance strongly contributes to reducing homelessness and alleviating poverty, there remains a strong stigma attached to receiving benefits. This stigma is more pronounced in non-metropolitan areas, and as a result, it likely weakened the correlation between public assistance recipient rates and HSB recipient rates in those regions. In order for public assistance to make an effective contribution to the prevention of homelessness, the elimination of this stigma is a major challenge.

Based on the findings of this study, three key measures are suggested to reduce the risk of housing loss: improving housing affordability, advancing general unemployment countermeasures, and expanding public assistance as a safety net against poverty. Fitzpatrick et al. (2021) proposed a five-stage typology of homelessness prevention: Universal, Upstream, Crisis, Emergency, and Repeat. The three implications identified in this study correspond to the Universal stage of prevention, underscoring the importance of preventing or minimizing the risk of homelessness across the general population.

However, it must be noted that this study merely used the number of Housing Security Benefit (HSB) recipients as a proxy indicator for the risk of housing loss. Since the HSB provides rent subsidies to unemployed individuals, it can be more appropriately classified as a Crisis-stage preventive measure. Therefore, it is also essential to examine which groups of people utilized the HSB and whether it enabled them to avoid housing loss. Due to limitations in the available data, this study was unable to investigate this aspect. Nonetheless, assessing the preventive effectiveness of the HSB itself remains an important topic for future research.

Conclusion

In Japan, the number of rough sleepers has declined since 2000, largely due to the more flexible application of public assistance to people experiencing homelessness. However, because the official definition of homelessness in Japan remains narrow, it is likely that a significant number of individuals in housing-insecure situations are not recognized by the government. Therefore, it is essential to implement preventative measures that address a broader spectrum of housing loss risks beyond just rough sleeping. This study utilized findings from previous research on the regional characteristics of homelessness rates to identify structural factors at the regional level associated with the risk of housing loss. The recipient rate of the HSB system, expanded through special measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, served as a proxy indicator for the risk of housing loss. The analysis showed that lower housing affordability, higher unemployment rates, and lower public assistance recipient rates were associated with higher HSB recipient rates. Reducing the risk of housing loss and preventing homelessness will require the development of housing policies to increase housing affordability. HSB recipients are individuals who, despite being at risk of losing their housing, have managed to avoid homelessness by receiving HSB assistance. From this perspective, the results of this study suggest that the expansion of HSBs helped prevent housing loss resulting from unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, even after the COVID-19 pandemic subsides, the risk of housing loss may persist. Considering the role played by HSBs in mitigating the risk of housing loss during the pandemic, it is imperative to develop effective housing policies for non-pandemic times as well.

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From Fidelity to Adaptations: A Qualitative Analysis of Contextual Factors Shaping Housing First

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Abstract_ *This article examines the relationship between the Housing First model and contextual factors influencing its implementation. Fidelity research in this field has aimed at minimizing differences in how Housing First is applied. Numerous studies have confirmed that high-fidelity implementations yield positive client outcomes, whereas variation might dilute the model. However, an alternative perspective has emerged, emphasizing context as an inherent aspect of Housing First implementation. This paper explores the question at the everyday level of Housing First practice and asks: (1) what contextual factors emerge during practical implementation in different countries and cities; (2) how they challenge or support implementation of Housing First; and (3) how the approach is adapted to meet contextual challenges. The study draws on qualitative focus group interviews (N=8) with frontline workers and clients across four European countries. Theoretically, the analysis builds on Lancione et al. (2017), who conceptualize context as a dynamic element to which the Housing First model must be actively adapted while maintaining fidelity to its core principles. The article identifies five key contextual factors shaping implementation and explores strategies developed to adapt the model in response.*

Keywords_ *Housing First, fidelity, adaptations, qualitative research, front-line work, Europe*

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Introduction

Housing First has gained prominence as a key strategy in efforts to combat homelessness. The policy outlined by community psychologist Sam Tsemberis and colleagues in New York in the 1990s highlights permanent, rent-based housing and related individually tailored support as central means of homelessness work and has been implemented in different contexts since its inception (Tsemberis et al. 2004; Padgett et al. 2012; Aubry et al. 2016). There is a wide evidence-based understanding that Housing First works. Several studies have shown positive results of the policy in terms of housing stability and resident well-being compared to traditional homelessness work, which relies on temporary shelters and conditional housing arrangements (see e.g. Roggenbruck 2017; Baxter et al. 2019; Aubry et al. 2020).

Where the research still lacks understanding is how Housing First is implemented in different contexts and how the principle could be adapted to achieve the best possible results in different institutional and cultural settings and with different client groups. Pleace and Bretherton (2013) highlighted the need to better understand the variability of Housing First interventions, as the model had drifted from the original approach in many instances. This need has been addressed afresh in recent discussions with a particular reference to the proliferation of Housing First policies in Europe (Lancione et al. 2017; Pleace 2019; Wygnańska 2020; Boesweldt et al 2024). Some limitations in the application of the original Housing First model have been identified as well. Woodhall-Melnik and Dunn (2015) highlighted that there is still insufficient evidence on how well the model serves different resident groups and responds to local needs. In a similar vein, Parsell et al. (2015) suggest that approaches beyond the original model, such as single-site Housing First, may be particularly beneficial for people with the most complex and severe support needs. Another set of criticisms has concerned the possibilities of Housing First being scaled up as a homelessness intervention, if certain problems, such as lack of suitable housing, are not addressed (Katz et al. 2017; Oudshoorn 2022).

This article approaches Housing First as practical work, which is surrounded by other practices and societal structures that create both possibilities and barriers for policy implementation. The article pays attention to the context surrounding the implementation of Housing First and asks 1) what contextual factors emerge during the practical implementation of the model, 2) how they challenge or support the implementation of Housing First, and 3) how the approach is adapted to address the challenges posed by the context. Empirically, the article draws on eight qualitative focus group interviews with a total of 72 participants, which describe the perceptions and activities of frontline workers and residents of Housing First gathered from four European countries, Finland, Germany, Ireland, and Spain. The countries represent different Housing First models and welfare systems and are also geographically situated in different parts of Europe and were chosen for the project to represent both the examination of diverse applications of the Housing First model and the contextual factors shaping them.

We start by briefly reviewing the current research on Housing First and positioning our own research in relation to it. Following this, we present the context, the data, the central concepts, and the analysis of the study, after which we present our main findings. In conclusion, we discuss the relevance of our results in light of previous literature.

Why Study Adaptations

Housing First research can be separated into different traits. First, there is the body of research, looking at the impact of Housing First as a homelessness intervention. These investigations employ both qualitative and quantitative methods and are based on extensive empirical evidence. In the light of this research, Housing First has been able to achieve better results than traditional homelessness approaches in terms of cost offsets, housing stability, and residents' wellbeing (Culhane et al., 2002; Padgett et al., 2015; Woodhall-Melnik and Dunn 2015; Aubry 2016; 2020; Roggenbruck 2017).

The second body of research links impact research to the fidelity of Housing First projects to the original model. Fidelity refers to certain 'critical ingredients' (Proctor et al., 2009), which distinguish the Housing First model from other interventions in the same field, such as staircase approaches (see e.g. Tainio and Fredriksson, 2009). These include housing as a human right, choice and control for service users, separation of housing and treatment, person-centered planning, and flexible support as long as needed. Also, principles of harm reduction and recovery orientation are highlighted (Pleace 2016, p. 13). The principles should be maintained to achieve the desired impact. To date, several Housing First-specific methodologies have been published to measure fidelity (Gilmer et al., 2013; Stefancic et al., 2013; Goering et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2017). One of the most widely used fidelity surveys (Gilmer et al., 2013) assesses adherence to the Housing First model in terms of housing choice and structure, the separation of housing and services, service philosophy, as well as the range of services provided and the structure of service teams. High fidelity to these principles has been seen as the aspiring goal of an organization implementing Housing First (Aubry et al., 2015).

However, systemic, organizational, and individual barriers can hinder the achievement of fidelity, making particularly high-fidelity models seem idealistic or unattainable in many settings (Samosh et al., 2018; Wygnańska, 2020). In this case, adaptations of the model might be necessary. Pleace and Bretherton (2013) suggest a typology in which the term Housing First could refer to a specific type of service or intervention, such as the original model, as well as a broader concept. According to Chen (2019), the rapid proliferation of the Housing First model has led to models that may be very far from the original one and even opposite to it, which is why the requirement of fidelity is not completely without merit. However, at the same time, there is evidence that programs using, for instance, different types of housing can still adhere to the Housing First approach and achieve good impact, without being completely faithful to the original model.

Lancione et al. (2017) highlight the importance of context, which must be considered if Housing First is to be applied successfully. According to them, a desired outcome of policy drift from one context to another would be active adaptation, which in the case of Housing First would mean preserving the core ethos of the model but adapting the practical work to fit the context (see also Aubry et al., 2015; Greenwood et al., 2018). A similar view has been presented in the report of Demos Helsinki (2022) in the form of a compass metaphor. A compass, unlike a map, which easily provides too rigid solutions, would provide decision makers and practitioners with a goal and a set of principles to aim for, but also a possibility to find their own way of achieving them. At worst, too strict adherence to predefined principles can lead to inappropriate policy transfers and neglect of differences between contexts (Parsell et al., 2025).

Finally, a third, a more critical research tradition, has argued that some Housing First research and implementation debates may focus primarily on individual housing and support, thereby paying insufficient attention to structural drivers of homelessness such as poverty and limited affordable housing (Katz et al., 2017; Grainger, 2021). Concentrating on services may also hide disinvestment in housing and other structural measures, such as prevention (Oudshoorn 2022). Another structural-level challenge that has been identified is the cooperation between Housing First models and other sectors of society. The delivery of Housing First can be hampered, for instance, by cuts in health care costs (Boesweldt et al., 2024). Pleace (2024) has argued for an integrated strategy in which Housing First would be integrated into existing social and health services. However, there may be financial, administrative, and value-related barriers to this.

Research Setting: Adapting Housing First in Different Contexts

The context of this article is the development and research project "Adapting Housing First – Innovating Staff" funded by the European Union's Erasmus+ program (see for example, Perälä 2025). The project involved four partner organisations from four countries, Finland, Germany, Ireland, and Spain, and aimed to develop a deeper understanding of how Housing First has been implemented across Europe in diverse service and policy contexts. The participating countries and organisations reflected variation in Housing First implementation types, welfare systems, and geographical settings, and were therefore considered to provide a useful lens for examining contextual differences in implementation.

Previous research by Pleace (2019) and Greenwood et al. (2018) has analysed the state of Housing First in Europe. Pleace (2019) notes that many programs widely adhere to the core principles outlined in the Housing First Europe guide, and some operate with a high level of fidelity. Greenwood et al. (2018) identify factors that either support or hinder program fidelity in European Housing First organizations. In this study, we focused more closely on the types of implementations and adaptations that exist, and how these are developed in relation to their specific contexts.

Empirically, the article draws from eight (8) audio-recorded focus group interviews gathered in the project, which involved front-line workers, peers, and residents of Housing First projects in partner countries and were conducted during the autumn of 2023 and the spring of 2024. Two interviews were conducted in each country, one for the workers and one for the residents. In one of the countries, the groups were mixed. Altogether, 73 people from 8 different Housing First organizations participated in these focus-group interviews. They received information about the research in written form, and the purpose of the interview was also explained to them in the situation orally. All gave their written consent to the interviews and their recording.

Interviewed staff were front-line practitioners working with Housing First residents in day-to-day practice (n=46). Some of them also did management work. This group was intentionally recruited for the focus groups to examine Housing First implementation as it unfolds in everyday practice and to capture the practical realities of delivering Housing First support. In the project's other datasets, we also interviewed other key stakeholders, ranging from policymakers and public authorities to leaders of Housing First organisations (Perälä, 2025). Twenty-seven residents with a background of long-term homelessness, ranging from a couple of years to more than ten years were also interviewed in the focus groups. All participants had been living rough and thus fell within category 1 of the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS). For some, street homelessness had lasted for several years, whereas for others it was more episodic, with most of the time spent on temporary accommodation and emergency shelters (ETHOS categories 2 and 3). Participants were approximately 30–70 years old. At the time of the interviews, they had been living in their homes on their own tenancy agreements, either in scattered-site housing or in a single site housing unit, for between two and nearly ten years. The interviewees included both men and women. In Germany and Finland, all resident interviewees were men, whereas in Ireland and Spain the groups comprised both men and women.

The interviews were semi-structured thematic interviews. The questions focused on Housing First and its adaptation and were structured around three central themes: housing, support, and training. Researchers guided participants in discussing these themes. The interviews were conducted in English, except in Finland, where they were carried out in the native language of the researchers. In two countries, Germany and Spain, the interviews were accompanied by an interpreter who translated the questions and answers into the interviewees' own language. The discussion on the interview themes was free-flowing. However, it stayed largely within the interview themes in all the groups. The resident interviews were characterized by the discussion of themes through personal experience. However, they also addressed the themes at a more general level, for example by expressing hopes for improved practice, suggesting training themes, or commenting on the situations of the people experiencing homelessness in general. Gender differences did not emerge prominently in the interviews. This may be due to the fact that the interviews remained at a relatively general level, with the primary focus being on residents' experiences of Housing First support. All interviewees reported experiences of violence on the streets, as well as feelings of loneliness and isolation, and experiences of discrimination related to homelessness.

After the interviews, the recordings were transcribed by a professional transcriber. The transcription was done in English, except for the interviews conducted in the researchers' native language. For those interviews where an interpreter was used, the English parts translated by the interpreter were transcribed.

Reflexive Thematic Analysis

The analysis followed the process of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun and Clarke, 2019; 2022). This approach to data is qualitative and seeks to identify recurring themes and patterns in the data as well as to give an interpretation to these themes and patterns (see also Byrne, 2021). The process relies on coding, which is the process of exploring the data and identifying key themes pertaining to the research questions. The output of coding is codes, which capture or highlight these themes (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p. 52-53).

RTA acknowledges the central role of the researcher in the research process, from the decisions made in data gathering to the interpretations made of the data. The result of the analysis is an interpretation of reality, not an objective description. However, the interpretation is based on an open and systematic analysis of the data, which is further enhanced by the theoretical framework used by the researcher. In this analysis, interpretation was made by combining empirical data and literature on the Housing First principle, which jointly provided a particular perspective on the debate surrounding the principle.

The actual coding process was conducted with the Atlas Ti software. The process combined deductive and inductive coding (Braun and Clarke, 2022, 55). First, the data were coded using keywords related to the project: Housing First, adaptation, housing, support, and training. The interviews were searched for passages where these issues were discussed, and the passages were labelled with the above codes. After the initial coding, the codes were further explored. This raised interesting new themes, such as the contextual factors, which, in the light of the interviews, affected the implementation of Housing First on the everyday level of work. This led to a search for further literature on the topic to support the analysis. A key source at this stage became the article by Boesveldt and colleagues (2024), which looks at the relationship between the implementation of housing strategies and the local context in the Netherlands. Context is also a central concept in the article by Clarke at al. (2020), who argue that rather than a paradigm shift, the implementation of Housing First should be understood as a process of policy translation, where complex contextual factors play a crucial role and create different approaches to the policy.

In the second stage, the interviews were coded with these ideas of context. Our understanding of the context was wide, entailing a range of factors that affected the implementation of Housing First, according to the interviewees' accounts. They included both concrete actors (clients, other organizations, politicians, neighbours, etc.) and more abstract things (funding, housing, legislation, culture, and values). The first code list contained a lot of overlaps, and some of the codes entailed only a couple of interview quotations. In the third and last phase, the codes were summarized for analysis and named as follows: client's needs, material resources, community, policy and politics, and service system and culture.

As for adaptations, we read through the interviews and marked with a code "adaptation" all the segments where the interviewees, according to our interpretation, talked about adaptations of Housing First. The notion, adaptation, was taken from Lancione et al. (2017), who look at the application of Housing First policies in different contexts. Here, adaptation refers to the link between a locally applied policy and the underlying initial policy model. After the first round, we divided the adaptation code into subcodes. First, we had two subcodes: adaptation related to housing (adaptation housing) and adaptation related to support (adaptation support). These were the most often mentioned adaptations in the data. This could be expected as the interviews guided the interviewees to discuss these themes. After this, we separated in more detail what kind of adaptations these two subcodes entailed. We got a list of adaptations related to housing and support, which we then analysed for similarities and differences.

We now turn to a more detailed presentation of our results. We start by looking at the contextual factors and describing what the codes related to the context include. In the second section, we look at the adaptations of Housing First, which could be found in the interviews.

Results

Contextual Factors Affecting Housing First

We identified five contextual factors that affected Housing First work on the everyday level of work, based on interview data. We labelled them client's needs, material resources, politics and policies, community and service system, and culture. The contexts and what they entail are explained in Table 1.

Table 1. Contextual Factors Affecting Housing First

Contextual Factors				
Client's Needs	Material Resources	Community	Service System & Culture	Policy & Legislation
Client's needs for housing and support Professional views of clients' support needs	Available housing Different forms of housing Resources for support and for Housing First projects	NGOs, other organizations, volunteers, and neighbours affecting Housing First	The way of doing things in the homelessness field and in official organizations Prevailing thoughts and values related to homelessness	Prevailing homeless strategies and policies at country and local level Legislation affecting support work and housing

The most often mentioned contextual factor that affected Housing First work was clients' needs. On the one hand, this reflected the key principles of Housing First, flexibility, and person-centered planning (see e.g. Pleace, 2016), which were often referred to in the interviews and used as a central justification for the Housing First work and how it was carried out. On the other hand, the needs of the clients were described as a challenge to Housing First work, hence the need for adaptations. Extracts 1-4 from focus group interviews in Table 2 illustrate the typical client needs in need of Housing First adaptations mentioned in the interviews. They were drug addiction and related life management issues of the residents, youth homelessness, loneliness and isolation, immigration (undocumented status in particular), and problems of families and couples who are experiencing homelessness.

Table 2. Client's Needs as a Contextual Factor of Housing First

Extract 1: Addiction and Mental Health
Some people that are not successful in the Housing First program. Maybe because they have behavioural problems, maybe because they have mental issues, or maybe because they have addictions, or even everything at the same time. So, this gives us a very complex profile, and people that cannot live in the housing options that we offer them. (Spain)
Extract 2: Young People
Engaging and motivating them (young people) is something that I find challenging nowadays, because then it's just substance abuse. Their everyday life is built around that use. If there is nothing sensible for a resident to do, then no one controls it. That's the challenge (Finland)
Extract 3: Isolation and Loneliness
R2: We also talk a lot about this isolation issue (…) I think there's a camaraderie in the likes of this unit (single site housing). You're in the same corridor and you can just knock in to say hello. They won't knock around for a cup of tea or drop a milk or whatever it is (in scattered housing) (Ireland)
Extract 4: Undocumented Status
I had trouble with finding a place. They say, oh, you're from different country, you cannot have nothing, go away, like something like this. There was also this paper, and you need to also this here, this paper. I didn't know it, what all I needed to have a flat. (Germany)

Client's needs often appeared in interviews in relation to another central contextual element affecting Housing First work, namely, material resources, which included the available housing and resources for support. The impact of resources is described in extracts 5-9 in Table 3. Ideally, Housing First organizations had housing that met the needs of the residents and resources for sufficient support (Extract 5). Very common, however, were situations where either suitable housing was not available or the support was perceived to be too scarce. In the worst case, Housing First organizations lacked both suitable housing and resources for support (Extracts 6-9).

Table 3. Housing and Support as Material Contexts of Housing First

Extract 5. Enough Housing and Support
They get to know you, they find a place where you fit, and now I live in a flat with two other people. Everyone lives their own life. And I have been like this for two years. X (HOUSING FIRST organization) gives me all the support I need, therapy, help. And I'm really happy. They have changed my life. I'm more relaxed now and I'm thankful. (Spain)
Extract 6. Not Enough Permanent Housing
Ten years ago, you paid 400 euros a month for a bedsit. It has shifted a lot. Accommodation has gotten very expensive, housing crisis, I think (…) There's too many STAs (short term accommodation) and not enough LTAs (long term accommodation) and I would love to see that change. (Ireland)
Extract 7. Not Enough Suitable Housing
Sometimes, we find this snap moment where it's the right time to give a housing to this person, however, maybe the apartment that we have available doesn't have an elevator and they have to wait longer, and it's very frustrating to see all the work that we have been doing, and when this exact moment comes, we can't offer them a good solution. (Spain)
Extract 8. Temporary Funding of Housing First Projects
We have funding for two years, and we would like to be part of the regular service system, and it is hard for the administration of the regular system to imagine how this (Housing First) works here. (Germany)
Extract 9. Poorly Resourced Service System
Then, there's the rest of the service system. There is a decline in services. Substance abuse services have deteriorated, and mental health services have also deteriorated, but perhaps substance abuse services have deteriorated the most. (Finland)

Extract 6 is, for instance, an example of a typical situation that particularly the big cities involved in the project faced with their growing number of homeless people, who were impossible to address through Housing First without new housing or with rents being too high. Extract 7 shows another typical problem with housing, which is the availability of suitable housing, i.e., housing that would meet the support needs of the residents, in this case, accessibility.

The lack of adequate support resources was pointed out as a very common challenge of Housing First projects: Firstly, there was project-based and temporary funding, based on, for instance, tendering or other kinds of arrangements with the public stakeholders, which brought uncertainty about the continuation of the work (Extract 8). The situation was considered paradoxical in the interviews. For instance, sometimes there would have been available housing, but the Housing First project did not have sufficient resources to support their homeless clients moving into it. It was also hard to expand the project, as the future of the project was considered unclear. Another set of problems with the resources for support arose from the surrounding social and health care sector. For example, if the operation of these sectors suffered due to, for example, cuts in the budgets, the operation of Housing First was also compromised as housing itself wasn't considered enough support (Extract 9).

As for the rest of the contextual factors, politics and policies played a role in legislating, funding, and promoting attitudes towards homelessness and Housing First work. The local authorities had, for instance, different rules regarding the client's choice of apartments, which then created boundaries for the implementation of Housing First, where choice is one of the core principles. The Housing First approach was also challenged by different forms of bureaucracy related to, for instance, renting, which could make the housing process sometimes very slow or even impossible. As one staff member in Germany summarized in the interview: "*Sometimes, you could really move in already, but you are missing that one piece of paper*". Other kinds of problems with bureaucracy emerged in cooperation with the social and health care system and public stakeholders. For instance, support for the client was sometimes very hard to get, even with the assistance of Housing First professionals.

Community appeared as a very important context for the work, including various NGOs and other organizations, volunteers, and people in neighbourhoods where the residents lived. The first three were described as facilitating partners, offering, for instance, job opportunities or assistance for the residents, while the neighbours often complicated the work in the form of complaints and negative attitudes towards tenants of Housing First. Interviewed residents often stressed the importance of community in their talk. For example, visits by volunteers or activities organized by NGOs brought meaning and content to life. On the other hand, negative attitudes in the neighbourhood contributed to feelings of exclusion and loneliness. Extract 10 illustrates the importance of community to the residents, alongside housing.

> Extract 10
>
> In my case I have a flat thanks to X (organization). They took me off the streets. I was lost in alcohol too. And now I work in the clothing department, washing the clothes from people who are showering. And I'm very happy here. I know everyone, we are all fond of each other. We play domino and board games and we're like a family and that boosts your self-esteem.

Finally, with respect to the service system, there were ways of working that made Housing First work challenging in all the cities. A very typical situation was that the working culture in the surrounding service system did not recognize the Housing First principle, which made it difficult to carry out the work. In one of the interviews, a mindset of distrust present in the service system was discussed, which was also reflected in the behaviour of the clients. They had been forced to hide things, such as their drug use, and did not easily trust the staff working in Housing First either. This, then, complicated the support work.

Interestingly, also, the Housing First principle itself was seen to have created practices that were not necessarily always very responsive to the context, especially to the needs of clients. Extract 11 illustrates this kind of situation. The identified issue by Housing First worker is that national Housing First programs tend to focus exclusively on individuals experiencing the most severe forms of long-term homelessness, thereby excluding groups such as young people and families from access to Housing First projects.

Extract 11

> They're trying to get people that are literally in and out of services for 10, 15, 20 years. They're at that stage, I think. They're not getting to the other stage, like the person that's 18-year-old or whatever that's coming out of care. They're not even focused on (foster care) leavers or young adults or families either. It's not on the plan.

Adaptations

The interviewees also described successful practices and cooperation taking place. In these kinds of situations, the Housing First work was able to respond, manage, or "actively adapt" (Lancione et al., 2017) to the challenges posed by the context. What made these practices adaptations, according to our interpretation, was that they involved some modification of the original Housing First model to meet the challenges of the local situation.

In extract 13, a Housing First staff member describes the various housing options their organization has for its clients. The depiction is a response to the question of what kind of adaptations can be found in their organization.

Extract 13

> We have different apartments around the city. First, we have single apartments where there is just one person. Then we have housing for people that are not that autonomous, so they need more support. We also have some other apartments that are lower threshold solutions, and it's for homeless people that need somewhere to rest, maybe they also need to have dinner there, they have some space to wash up, et cetera. And then we also have a single building with apartments where they only share the kitchens, so each apartment is shared between two users and they only share the kitchen, but they have, for example, the room for themselves (…) It's a model that I like a lot, and that it works very well, because it gives them some autonomy, they are sort of free, but at the same time, they have support, so they have these two options. So, I think having more of this could work, it's working very well.

Typically, the adaptations were described as rising from the needs of the client. The extract 13 highlights, for instance, “single building” housing, which is depicted to offer some residents access to more intensive support than scattered housing. In the Housing First literature, this form of housing is referred to as communal Housing First (Pleace 2012), single-site housing (Kaakinen & Turunen 2021), or congregate housing (Somers 2017; see also Harris et al, 2019), where support for residents is available on site, but they nevertheless live independently in their own apartments with their own rental contracts. In the interviews, this form of housing was seen as the only functioning housing option for some of the residents, who were unable to live by themselves. As an interviewee summarized the key problem present in the scattered housing: “*The neighbour may tolerate very little of any disturbance. A lot of things can happen in a fast cycle. And then it will result in the termination of the lease. Then you’re in debt, and then it’s all over again*”.

Other housing solutions that were either considered to be working or welcomed as part of the Housing First model were those that would take better account of different homeless groups. The poor situation of young people was highlighted in all the interviews. Either they were not acknowledged in Housing First policies at all, or the support given was thought to be too scarce, or the housing arrangements were not suitable for them. Alongside youth, families and couples were raised to the fore as groups needing more attention in Housing First policies, particularly in the Dublin interviews.

Also, housing solutions that could change according to the life situation of the residents were sought. It was, for example, discussed that someone might need the intensive support and community provided by single-site housing at first, but later be able to cope with less. Temporary solutions were considered for those situations where the resident’s life situation was not clear, and they did not necessarily know what kind of housing they wanted. However, the temporary solution should include a promise of ongoing support and permanent housing.

Table 4 shows residents’ housing paths (Extracts 14-17). Also, they reflect the importance of housing options. Some like to live in a community, others prefer to live alone. Also, for clients, it was most important that housing was stable and provided intimacy and security, and that it could change according to their needs.

Table 4. Resident's Housing Paths

Extract 14: From Shelter to Shared Flat
Organization X (name of the organization) came and talked to me. They took me to apartment X (temporary shelter) and then someone told me, hey, this is your key, this is your place. And now I live with two other people. We're very happy. (Spain)
Extract 15: From Single Site Housing to Supported Scattered Housing to Independent Housing
I've been completely homeless for a couple of years, and then I got to live in the main unit of X (single site housing). Then I got a job and lived in X (scattered support apartment) for a while. And then nowadays I'm completely on my own and I've got contracts and training and I'm going to school. In a way, through the Housing First principle, I've managed to reintegrate back into society, or become part of it, as I've never really belonged in it in the first place. (Finland)
Extract 16: From Friend's Houses, Pensions and Hostels to Own Housing
I've been three years on the street, and I have lived also five, six years around friends' houses or pensions- hostels where I would pay and stay. The money was little, and the money was given to me by my friends. Somebody put me on a waiting list at Housing First, and since April, I've had on own place. (Germany)

As for support, the interviewees highlighted very similar activities and principles in all countries. The client's support needs were individual, and support should be tailored according to client's needs and wishes. Here, the strengths of the original Housing First model as a specifically client-centered approach were often highlighted. However, what the original model missed, according to many interviewees, was a more caring and community-based approach to support. In fact, most of the support adaptations mentioned in the interviews seek to introduce these kinds of approaches to the Housing First model, where the residents would receive more than "only" housing.

These included activities in the single-site units to involve the residents in the community and thus increase their participation and quality of life. In the interviews, this meant shared spaces, activities, and encounters, community meetings, access to work activities for a small fee, shared parties, outings, and other activities. The residents were also encouraged to seek activities outside their apartments and were often also escorted to them. However, as stressed by the interviewees, the activities were voluntary and not linked to housing.

Support and a sense of community were also promoted in scattered housing. One discussed and highlighted feature was the visits to residents' homes, which were seen as an important sign of 'normal living'. In some organizations, these are also involved in the use of volunteers. The importance of the visits also showed in the interviews with the residents. As one resident described: "*Now I have someone coming to my place, and I must prepare coffee for them, just like in the old times. I feel like a person*." There were also aims to create a sense of community for the people living in scattered housing through activities at the Housing First projects. Some projects had also developed cooperation with the landlords in situations where the tenant was at risk of losing their accommodation, for example, due to unpaid rent or other reasons. In the interviews, this was seen as a needed adaptation of the original principle where support and housing are separated.

The rest of the adaptations mentioned in the interviews were designed to meet the challenges of other contextual factors. Neighbourhood work was mentioned to deal with the problems stemming from the community, such as neighbours and their complaints. This entailed interacting with neighbours or arranging activities in the neighbourhoods. The adverse housing situation as a crucial material context affecting Housing First and its implementation was discussed particularly in the interviews conducted in the cities suffering housing shortage. However, the interviewees didn't present any suggestions or adaptations to tackle this issue.

In extract 13, the housing situation is discussed in a very similar manner to the research literature on Housing and homelessness, stating that Housing First cannot be scaled up without housing (see e.g., Parsell et al., 2025). However, in light of the quote, the central stakeholders seem to lack initiative with respect to this issue.

> Extract 18
>
> There is a lack of housing in general in Berlin. We went to a political meeting, and we had the chance to address a few of these politicians, and we noticed that they're like going in circles and there are no real solutions being found for this housing problem that is in Berlin. (BER)

To conclude the results section, some interviewees also made critical remarks about the housing solutions and support. Some respondents considered single-site housing as a solution that did not contribute to the well-being of the residents and, at worst, even undermined it. On the other hand, this also raised debate and was seen as a matter of poor resources of the some of the single-site units rather than the single-site housing itself. Moreover, a part of the criticism was not only directed at single-site housing, but at the Housing First approach in general, which, according to the interviewees, failed to take sufficient account of the support needs of residents both in scattered and single-site housing.

The interviews also identified a tense relationship between adaptations and the original Housing First model, making successful balancing between these two a key criterion for successful Housing First work and expertise. Extract 19 highlights this kind of expertise in the context of single-site housing, which recognizes both the residents' right to privacy and choice and seeks to actively care for and maintain contact with them.

Extract 19

> Then obviously there are a lot of people… they don't want to see you because they're on a bender or whatever it is. You must respect it. They don't want to see you. They don't want to answer the door. You still potentially try. And we have a kind of clear policy on what to do when that happens. Don't just say, yeah, that's fine, I'll see you next month. So, you're keeping an eye maybe on cameras, or you're noticing them around. Okay, they were seen. They were seen yesterday or whatever, even though they might never have talked to you. It really kind of becomes around, are they still alive, are they still okay. It's kind of skill that keeps contact even though they don't want to.

Conclusions

The article explored the relationship between the Housing First model and its surrounding context, the latter of which emerged as an essential factor influencing Housing First work in the analysis of the focus group interviews. The contribution of the article to research on Housing First is twofold. First, the data from different countries shows how context shapes the implementation of Housing First, regardless of what the model itself is aiming for or hopes to achieve. Secondly, the article brings to the fore the different adaptations of Housing First, which have been designed to meet different needs and challenges posed by the context. This way, the results add to the discussion on the future development of the Housing First principle and the societal factors surrounding this development.

The article was built on Lancione and colleagues' (2017) understanding of the context in which the Housing First model is actively adapted to fit the challenges posed by the local context, but at the same time adheres to the key principles of the model. Moreover, context was seen as a factor that cannot, and should not, be fully minimized in policy implementation, as this may exclude important factors that need to be considered (Clarke and Parsell, 2020; Boesweldt et al., 2024). On this basis, five contextual factors, clients' needs, material resources, policy and politics, community and service system, and culture, were identified that influenced the work of Housing First and, secondly, the different adaptations that were made to meet the challenges posed by the context.

The results underline firstly the importance of developing Housing First policies that consider the needs of clients, and particularly the needs of different client groups. These needs may vary in different contexts, in which case we need to talk about a plural application of the Housing First model, rather than a single model. In the interviews, in practice, this meant, first, different forms of housing that would consider the needs of the clients, with the flexibility to change according to their changing needs, as well as considering the needs of different groups of residents, in particular, young people and families experiencing homelessness. Similar conclusions have been reached in previous studies. Chen (2019) discusses the programmatic differences of Housing First, which can benefit the development of the model and the residents. For instance, housing type doesn't compromise the strengths of the model if different housing types and programs adhere to the central principles of Housing First (see also Brown et al., 2015; Clifasefi et al., 2016; Harris et al., 2018; Montgomery et al., 2019). Also, the Housing First studies on young people have stressed that the measures aimed at them must differ from those aimed at adults and take as their starting point the demands associated with adolescence and identity development (Slesnick et al., 2023). The findings on homeless families in the interviews were interesting. As they often have a roof over their heads, they are not counted as a target group for the Housing First model. In practice, however, families may live in temporary and poor-quality housing for years. The interviews, therefore, identified a need to develop and extend the Housing First model for families

Another important emerging context is that of material resources (available housing and support), which inevitably affect the implementation of Housing First work, regardless of the principles of the model. It was also clear from the interviews that the key question for the future of the Housing First principle is how to respond and find solutions to the constraints set by material resources. Regarding housing, what is alarming is that the interviewees did not have any solutions or adaptations to the housing crisis existing in their cities, nor, according to them, did other actors. Indeed, this issue has less to do with the homelessness field, represented by the interviewees, than it does with construction and urban development, as pointed out by, for instance, Meda (2009) and Parsell and colleagues (2025). As for resources for support, funding for Housing First projects should be secured so that they can be developed in the longer term. Cooperation with other sectors, such as the service system and civil society, must also be strengthened, as they provide both material and non-material support for the Housing First principle.

The third key finding of the article relates to the more communal, caring, and supportive Housing First approach that emerged from the interviews. According to the interviewees, these elements should and could easily be incorporated into the model without the original model suffering as a result. A similar question of social integration and support within the Housing First approach has also been raised in earlier research (Quilgars and Pleace, 2016; Marshall, 2024). Marshall and colleagues (ibid.) have considered its relationship particularly to the principle of choice, arguing that alongside formal rights and choice, it is also necessary to ensure that people have actual capabilities to pursue their rights and choices.

As for the limitations of the study, this was a qualitative study that provided descriptive information on the status of Housing First policies in four European countries. The interviewees were residents and front-line workers, which is reflected in the responses, emphasizing the daily and practical problems of Housing First. As such, the data is not comprehensive in terms of the state of the Housing First policy in different countries, nor in Europe. However, it brings to the fore critical insights into the everyday implementation of Housing First, shedding light on factors that might be overlooked by policymakers and authorities.

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"You Live the Same Day 24/7, Day In and Day Out": Managing Everyday Life in Homelessness in Sweden

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Abstract_ *This article, part of a participatory longitudinal study, explores how roofless individuals manage everyday life in a major Swedish city. Based on qualitative interviews with nine participants who have extensive experience of homelessness, the study examines daily routines, safety strategies, and ways of navigating life without stable housing through the lens of everyday life theory. The findings show that participants' everyday practices are structured around continuous movement through the city—between semi-public spaces, day centres, and public transport—where managing time and space becomes essential to access shelter and meet basic needs. This movement is shaped by factors such as opening hours and border control, including patrolling security guards and social pressures to conform to societal norms. Access to housing or temporary shelter is often contingent upon complying with social service regulations, and available options are sometimes described as unsafe. For some, staying outdoors is perceived as a safer or more autonomous choice than accepting formal support. These findings align with previous research about life on the streets and highlight the need for changes in both policy and practice to better address the needs of people living roofless.*

Keywords_ *Homeless, everyday life, roofless, social service, street, place*

Introduction

Homelessness and housing exclusion continue to be a significant societal problem and a growing area of concern in Europe and beyond. Even in the Nordic region, often cast as comprising countries with the most far-reaching welfare systems in the world, homelessness remains a persistent problem. Among the Nordic countries, Sweden stands out with the highest rate of homelessness relative to its population (Benjaminsen et al., 2020). According to the most recent Swedish homelessness count in 2023, over 27 000 people were experiencing homelessness, and of these individuals, 4 400 lived in "acute homelessness" (NBHW 2024).[1] The term "Acute homelessness" corresponds to ETHOS[2] term "Roofless", which indicates people sleeping rough or subsiding in emergency accommodation. This development has been traced back to the early 1990s and a "neoliberal turn" that meant increased market orientation of Swedish housing policy (Sahlin 2020, p. 178). As a result, homelessness has become the responsibility of local social services rather than a national housing problem. Homeless and housing scholars have highlighted the need to focus on the right to housing, rather than on presumed individual deficiencies among homeless individuals (Anderberg & Dahlberg 2019), and to address structural dimensions contributing to homelessness, such as lack of affordable housing, (Grander, 2018; Wirehag 2022), unregulated allocation of rental housing (Sahlin 2020) and precarious housing situations (Listerborn 2021).[3] There is a related qualitative research strand that addresses how structural aspects of the homeless problem are experienced and managed by people experiencing homelessness (e.g. Hansen Löfstrand, 2005; Samzelius, 2020). Much of the existing research highlights situations where the individuals in question are temporarily housed—representing the largest group of people experiencing homelessness in Sweden. As a result, there is still limited knowledge about the everyday lives and struggles of people living roofless (but see Levy, 2022). In Sweden, social services hold the ultimate responsibility for individuals experiencing homelessness (NBHW, 2024), yet existing research indicate that they often fail to meet the needs of many of those living on the street or in temporary accommodation (Wirehag et al., 2021). In this article, ETHOS term *roofless* will be used, referring to individuals living on

1 The Swedish definition of homelessness is divided into four situations: 1. Acute homelessness (staying in night-shelters or in places not intended to live in), 2. Living in an institution soon to be released, 3. Long-term housing under certain rules and conditions, 4. Self-arranged short-term accommodation (NBHW 2024).

2 The term"Roofless" in ETHOS (the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion) corresponds to people sleeping rough or subsiding in emergency accommodation). https://www.feantsa.org/download/ethos2484215748748239888.pdf

3 After lacking a national action plan on homelessness for more than a decade, in 2022 the Swedish Government launched a Housing first oriented homeless strategy for 2022-2026 (S2022/03255) and budgeted four million each year for its local level implementation.

the streets, in emergency accommodation, or in similar conditions. Exploring their daily routines, their experiences with social services, and the reasons they give for living on the streets is crucial—both for designing appropriate support measures and for informing policy decisions.

This article offers an in-depth exploration of the everyday lives of nine homeless individuals with experience of rooflessness in a major Swedish city. Focus is aimed at the ordinary activities, interactions, routines and strategies which "texture the everyday life" (Kalekin-Fishman 2013, p.722). Particular attention is given to how these individuals perceive support and encounter potential barriers within the social services system. The article begins by reviewing previous research and theoretical perspectives on everyday life in the context of homelessness. It then outlines the study's methodology, including the setting and data collection process. This is followed by an analysis and presentation of the findings, focusing on the structure of everyday life for roofless individuals and the potential barriers they face in accessing support. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings' relevance and their implications for practice and policy.

Everyday life in homelessness

In their classic study, Snow and Anderson (1993) make an in-depth exploration of "life on the streets as experienced by the homeless, their strategies and struggles to subsist from one moment to the next, materially, socially, and psychologically" (p.IX-X). Their results conflicted with the prevailing, "big data"-based knowledge on homeless people, casting them as pathological deviants in need of control. Instead, Snow and Anderson highlighted the normalcy of the homeless individuals they encountered and the disabling character of the society surrounding them. Two Swedish studies that follow this tradition but focus exclusively on homeless women are those by Rosengren (2003) and Thörn (2004). Both studies provide examples of how the women navigate the stigmatizing position of homelessness in their interactions with social services and the general public. They also highlight how the women are often forced to either adapt to the housing options offered or choose to sleep in public spaces (Rosengren, 2003; Thörn, 2004).

Several studies highlight the mobility that characterizes everyday life when living roofless. Time is often spent moving between certain places in a regular pattern governed by both locations of homeless services, but also by regulations of space in the city (Wardhaugh, 1996; Caswell & Schultz, 2006; Jackson, 2012; Temesvary, 2019; Gouseti, 2025). Homeless people respond and react to these constraints and challenges through developing strategies to meet basic needs (such as food, sleep, and personal security), and to "pass" as domiciled (Snow & Mulcahy 2001, Casey et al., 2008; Hodgetts et al., 2010; Menih, 2020; Wardhaugh, 1996; Wardhaugh, 2000).

Hsieh (2017) argues in her narrative review that spending most of your time in the street increases exposure to various forms of violence, particularly at night and especially for women. Besides physical or sexual violence, individuals may also experience symbolic violence and social stigma facing sanctions for deviating from societal norms, through as example being associated with dirt or mental illness. Furthermore, structural violence manifests through measures such as the criminalization of begging or sleeping in the street (Hsieh, 2017). In other studies from the US, UK, and Australia examining homeless women's exposure to violence, similar patterns are described in how women manage risky situations. Among these strategies are choosing carefully where to stay at night, for example, squatting in a "hidden" public place, carrying a weapon, being careful with what drug you take, sleeping close to surveillance cameras etc. (Casey et al., 2008; MacDonald, 2014; Menih, 2020). Another recent study from Gothenburg, Sweden, where this research also takes place, highlights the precarious situation of homeless women, who may feel safe within women-only shelters, but face imminent risk of violence outside or in mixed shelters (Grange, 2025).

Several scholars have argued that the political climate in both Europe and the US has taken a more restrictive turn towards visibly homeless populations over the last two decades, focusing safety and order in public places through anti-homeless laws, news articles, excluding design and border control[4] (Doherty et al., 2008; Gerrard and Farrugia, 2015; Hsieh, 2017; Goldfischer, 2018; Pospech, 2020). For example, while semi-public places (such as shopping malls, terminals, and train stations, frequently used by homeless people) are seemingly open for all members of society, they are regulated by opening hours, controlled by security guards, and often designed for commercial use or just passing by (Doherty et al., 2008). A unique semi-public space is the library, which studies show fills an important role for people living roofless by providing shelter, seats for resting, toilets, books, and computers for leisure (Hodgetts et.al, 2008; Marler, 2023).

Potential barriers to social service engagement among roofless individuals are another area of interest for this study. Previous research points to various reasons for avoiding shelters, including concerns about safety and sanitary conditions, distrust of services providers, a desire to avoid pity or past experiences of inadequate care, triggers for substance use, strict shelter regulations, lack of accessi-

4 Border control refers to different ways of keeping unwanted people away from public or semi-public spaces through, for example, guards and surveillance (Sahlin, 1996; Doherty et al., 2008).

bility or restrictions on bringing pets or family members to the shelter (Caswell & Schultz, 2006; Donley & Wright, 2012; Bender et al., 2018; Fahnøe, 2018; Bowpitt, 2020; Tsai et al., 2024).

Theories of Everyday Life

We live our everyday life in different cultural and societal contexts. Being born into a specific context means getting access to previous interpretations or experiences of the world, a kind of 'everyday heritage' which we comprehend and imbibe through our sociability (Mead, 1934/1995). In addition, the understanding of and involvement in everyday life is shared with others through experiences and through actions (Schutz, 1962/2002). And yet, for each one, the world is comprehended as a kind of totality. This is what is sometimes referred to as our *life world* (Ahrne, 1981). A characteristic of our everyday life is that it is experienced as well as known to us, as most of the activities we perform are done so through routines. There is a set of informal but almost ritualised rules of how to do these routines, therefore also a "wrong way" to do it (Garfinkel, 1967). Living outside the taken-for-granted, like during homelessness, creates a rupture of expectation that needs to be adjusted to or reflected on.

And yet, after a certain time living roofless, even this situation becomes mundane and filled with routines. Everyday life is lived through places and through time, since everything that takes place during a day does so by occurring in a particular place, and at a particular time. When analyzing the participants' interviews, specific attention has been given to accounts relating to time, places, and boundaries, as well as the skills described as necessary to survive when living roofless.

Research design

Methodology

This article is part of an ongoing PhD project – a qualitative, longitudinal study exploring everyday life in homelessness and transitions through homelessness over time. It draws on the first set of interviews conducted with nine individuals with experience of living roofless. The broader PhD study has been co-constructed with a reference group comprising three individuals with extensive previous personal experiences of homelessness. The reference group did not take part in the data collection nor as interviewees in the study, but actively contributed through regular workshops discussing the study's scope and informing the direction of this article by helping to select key analytical themes[5]. Involving the reference group from an early stage allowed them to offer valuable insights from a lived-experience perspective. The original aim of the broader study was to explore pathways through homelessness. A key contribution from the reference group was to deepen the focus on everyday-life activities by, for example, adding a question to the interview guide about describing an ordinary day as roofless. This co-productive approach aims to collaboratively generate knowledge that resonates with—and is relevant to—individuals experiencing homelessness (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2021), as well as to policymakers and the scientific community. The project has been ethically approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (2023-03342-01).

Setting

In Sweden, homelessness services are organized at a municipal level, leading to significant variation between urban areas. This means that where you live in the country affects what kinds of support you are entitled to (Wirehag, 2022). To access housing support, individuals must first be assessed as eligible for assistance by the local social services by demonstrating that they experience specific challenges in securing housing on their own, given that the social services only provide housing assistance as a last resort. Housing services can, after this, be provided by either the municipality or by external organizations such as NGOs and private stakeholders.

This study has been conducted in Gothenburg, the second largest city in Sweden, inhabited by 600 000 people. The city is facing increasing segregation and unequal living conditions, and the housing market is strained (City of Gothenburg, 2023). In 2023, 2 581 adults were reported homeless in Gothenburg, and of these, 475 persons experienced sleeping rough or staying in emergency accommodation (NBHW, 2024). Over 1 000 individuals are residing in a secondary housing market[6] through social services, including both apartments and shared accommodations. Few options exist for temporary housing support without getting through the process of being eligible for support from the social services, and there is only one emergency shelter in the city where you can get a bed while staying anonymous. This shelter requires applying for a bed every night, in competition with other roofless individuals.

5 This process is described under the headline”Analysis”.

6 The secondary housing market involves Social Services subletting second- or third-hand rental units to homeless clients through special contracts that waive security of tenure. This practice has reinforced exclusion from the regular housing market and contributed to the growth of alternative housing forms (Sahlin, 1996)

In contrast to the national level, the city has made considerable efforts to combat homelessness for many years, through, for example, introducing Housing First[7], and is now struggling to meet the political goals of ending homelessness in the city by 2028.

Recruitment and data collection

This article is based on nine qualitative interviews conducted in the autumn of 2023 with individuals who have extensive experience of living roofless (four women and five men). Participants ranged in age from 40 to 75 years, and most had many years of experience living roofless and moving between various housing situations. The interview guide was designed with open-ended questions, following the narrative approach outlined by Riessman (2008) and Creswell and Poth (2017). Questions focused on experiences of homelessness over time and interactions with the social service system, allowing space for participants' personal narratives and subjective experiences. All participants were personally recruited by the first author from various day centres, cafés, and shelters—operated by both municipal and non-governmental organizations—that serve the city's homeless population. The recruitment process involved the first author spending several days at each location, engaging with visitors and providing information about the study. Individuals who expressed interest were given a more detailed explanation of the project and what participation would entail. Interviews were then scheduled based on each participant's preferences and practical considerations, and they were given time to reflect on their decision to participate.

The selection criteria for participation included adults (over 18 years) with current or recent experiences of living roofless. All interviews were conducted by the first author in a private room, either within or near the homeless facility or at the university, to ensure confidentiality. The interviews were audio recorded, and informed consent was obtained orally. Each interview lasted between approximately 45 minutes and two hours and was transcribed verbatim by the first author. Participants were offered a supermarket gift card as compensation for their time; some accepted it, while others declined. To protect anonymity, all identifying information related to individuals and locations has been altered, and participants have been assigned pseudonyms. Participant characteristics are summarized in Table 1. Given the relatively small homeless community in Gothenburg, no specific details regarding participants' age, ethnicity, or other identifying traits are disclosed.

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[7] The Housing First model, developed by Pathways to Housing, provides immediate housing to chronically homeless individuals without requiring sobriety or treatment. Support is offered through a 24/7 interdisciplinary ACT team, emphasizing consumer choice and individual needs (Tsemberis et al., 2004)

Table 1: Participant characteristics

Code name	Gender	Current housing situation
Alexander	Male	Living roofless for several years.
Arthur	Male	Living roofless for a couple of years.
Ellen	Female	Just moved to the secondary housing market after living roofless for a year.
Charlie	Male	Living in the secondary housing market for about a year, with many years' experiences of living roofless and in temporary housing.
Caroline	Female	Living in the secondary housing market for a couple of years after many years living roofless.
Emma	Female	Living in the secondary housing market for about a year.
Gabriel	Male	Living in permanent housing since a couple of years, with earlier experience of living roofless.
Oscar	Male	Living roofless for several years.
Sofia	Female	Not disclosed.

Analysis

The analysis of the material was an ongoing process, conducted both during and after data collection, using an abductive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially, the first author read through the material multiple times to identify recurrent themes, supported by the use of NVivo. This process resulted in the identification of seven themes: Time and movement in the city; Managing practical matters such as money and belongings while living roofless; The significance of social relationships; Experiences with the social services system; Women's vulnerability in homelessness; Becoming a "client"; and finally, The significance of individuals who went the extra mile to help. Subsequently, a workshop was held with the reference group, during which these themes were discussed and reflected upon. Based on this discussion, three broader themes were identified as most central to the article and were selected for their relevance to both social work practice and academic research: The practical management of everyday life while living roofless, Survival strategies on the street, and Participants' experiences with social services. Furthermore, to enhance academic quality, the results were discussed with the co-authors and analysed in relation to theories of everyday life and previous research.

Findings

The findings focus on various aspects of managing everyday life on the streets while living roofless. The chapter begins by describing an ordinary day, structured by time, movement between places, and the handling of practical matters such as belongings and money. This is followed by a section on surviving on the street and managing fear, which highlights that danger cannot be avoided but must be navigated through learned strategies. The chapter concludes with the theme of navigating the social services system, including participants' reasons for declining available support.

An ordinary day on the streets

When asked about their daily life, participants described it as structured by passing the time, getting basic needs met, and attending to the opening and closing hours of semi-public places. A common initial reaction when asked to describe an ordinary day was that “there is not much to tell”. As Alexander puts it: “You live the same day 24/7, day in and day out”. This reality, although characterized by uncertainty and insecurity, includes an everyday rhythm where movements between specific places in the city in accordance with specific points of time related to the opening hours of emergency shelters and homeless services, as well as closing and opening hours of public places and public transport, which Jackson (2012) has described as “fixed mobility”.

The participants’ days usually start early, whether in an emergency shelter or in a public or semi-public place (streets, vehicle parks). Emergency shelter rules usually allow you to stay no longer than 10 am, after which the residents and all their belongings must be gone. If spending the night in a public or semi-public place, you need to wake up and gather your belongings before the public arrives, like Emma describes after spending the night in a playhouse in someone’s backyard: “I put a clean sheet on a bed in there, put in earplugs, and slept until six in the morning. Then I slipped away – there was no sign that I had been there.” Arthur describes an ordinary day in the following way:

> Sitting on the bus to pass the time. Well, now you’re in the shopping mall, the security guards pass you once, twice, ten times: “Why are you sitting here during the day?” So, then you go down to the city. I go to the library. You can’t use the computer for more than an hour, so I usually sit around 40 minutes looking for a job. Then, what else? Two hours pass, two and a half hours. If it rains, I sit and read. If it’s not raining, what can I do? I’m a smoker, I [take] a cigarette. I walk around, maybe some church somewhere is handing out food, coffee and cake or something. Then it’s just a matter of walking up and down. Until you need to make the call [to get a bed at the local shelter], at 5 pm. Maybe you get a bed, maybe you don’t. If you don’t; okay, then you stay in McDonalds until 2 am. Since buses and carriages stop between 2 am to 4.30 am you are out in the cold, and now it is winter. From 4.30 am you go to the Central station and sit there. Because then it opens. Then it gets light again.

This quote illustrates that *keeping time* and *spending time* when living roofless is crucial for keeping warm, getting food and money, and accessing shelter for the night. Arthur’s days and nights, like the other participants, are structured around movement in the city. When staying what is perceived to be too long in a semi-public place, like sitting at a bench in an indoor shopping mall, Arthur knows that security guards are going to approach him and that it is time to move on (see

Doherty et al., 2008). The knowledge about where to go for food, warmth, or shelter, about opening hours, and or the accepted length of staying in places, is gained through long experience of homelessness. This knowledge is shared among those in similar situations, becoming part of their everyday life (Schutz, 1962/2002). This finding is a recurrent feature in other studies (Snow and Anderson, 1993; Wardhaug, 1996; Jackson, 2012). Even the uncertain elements of the everyday routines: The fact that you never know if you are going to get a bed to sleep in for the night, or if you are going to survive, is incorporated in the everyday routines, with a constant plan B.

Getting to this point of daily routines is a process, whereas you, when new on the street, experience fear and uncertainty about where to go and what to do (see also Snow and Anderson, 1993). Although these elements remain when you have more experience of living roofless, it seems like making the uncertainty part of a daily routine could be a coping strategy; feelings of fear are described as something you put aside and learn to live with. Another important point in Arthur's excerpt, shared with several of the participants, is the importance of keeping a check on time to get access to the emergency shelter. At the allocated time, there are usually many people calling the unit responsible for allocating the limited number of beds in the shelter. This appointment, created by the social support system to control access to the available beds, signifies that Arthur ends up in a competitive situation with other homeless people. These uncertainties characterizing time and space are controlled by security guards, closing and opening hours, which means you never know if you will get shelter for the night. While everyday life is typically described as predictable, for the people in rooflessness, it is lived in a precarious terrain of institutional arrangements and societal expectations that don't align with the material conditions they must navigate; the extreme becomes everyday routines.

Between various appointments during the day, you need to find ways to spend the time. Oscar describes that due to an aching body, he cannot spend his days walking. Instead, he uses public transportation during the daytime, which allows him to sit a bit more comfortably without security guards telling him to leave: "So, I'm just sitting on the boat. Maybe I can get hold of a newspaper, so I can read the newspaper. And they have proper armchairs." This statement illustrates how the participants' use of public transportation deviates from societal norms of using public transportation. Rather than a means of getting from point A to point B, public transport becomes a place to meet basic needs of rest and to spend the many hours during the daytime waiting for the emergency homeless services to open. Later in the interview, Oscar underlined that he has the right to use public transport. At the same time, he points out that the drivers clearly do not appreciate him sitting in their coaches for several hours. Although he is not directly asked to leave the vehicle, he says that he feels their disapproval, judging from certain looks or questions asked to him, which can be seen as an example of the symbolic violence directed towards people living roofless (Hsieh, 2017).

According to the participants, performing basic needs and tasks (such as sleeping, washing up, and going to the bathroom) is a daily challenge when living roofless; sitting at a bench in the public space is accepted, but the minute you lie down, security guards come and move you along. Oscar describes a situation when "[t]his person fell asleep in a bus stop, and three guards showed up out of nowhere. It was raining and stormy, and they just pushed him out from the bus stop". While sleeping in public spaces is not prohibited by law or local regulations, public transportation is operated by a regionally owned company, which has its own rules governing acceptable behavior on its vehicles. Sleeping in your seat is accepted when using public transport, provided you have a valid ticket; sleeping at a bench in a bus stop is not. When meeting basic needs becomes prohibited in public space, homeless people are left without a place to do these actions (Caswell & Schultz, 2006; Doherty et al., 2008).

Navigating semi-public and designated places

Libraries are mentioned as important for seeking shelter, attaining leisure time, and as a space for passing the hours. But even at libraries, the waiting can be hard, as Oscar puts it: "Even if you are a bookworm. Ten hours at the library… How many academics, how many people can… Ten hours!". Even though libraries differ from other semi-public places in the way that they are not built for consumption only, they are also characterised by border control and regulations of space (Doherty et al., 2008), which for homeless people becomes present through subtle allusions. If spending too many hours, the participants describe certain looks from the staff that tell you it's about time to leave, you only have the computers for a certain time, and the bathrooms are usually locked. This corresponds to other studies about the library being both including and excluding homeless people (Hodgetts et.al, 2008; Marler, 2023).

Places like day centers, etc., usually have a more inclusive ambition: you can be anonymous, and the activities are free of charge. Some places serve food, hand out clothes, and sometimes you have the possibility to sleep for a few hours, take a shower, do laundry, etc. Several of these places are open to all in need[8], while

[8] All in need in these cases have the significance that you don't have to prove that you are in a specific need, rather that, just by showing up at these places it means that you have the need to be there, for financial or social support etc.

others are aimed at homeless people. Ellen, who by the time of the interview had been living roofless for around a year, describes one of these day centers, aimed to support homeless women:

> In here I met a lot of people. And to see the staff help so many people, it was incredible, it's absolutely incredible every day. That they stand there and cook for you… And every day they bake, and fixes everything! Washing your dishes. They change the baskets that you throw your garbage in- Who would have done that? And like, I get clean clothes, hygiene items, I can shower. And never are you told: NO! They always say yes.

Ellen's description of how the staff actively helps and supports her contrasts with the way she is generally treated by society. As a woman living roofless, she is exposed to different kinds of violence and social stigma (Hsieh, 2017), so being treated with respect becomes a remarkable difference for her. However, although open centers represent themselves as welcoming for all in need, there is still a possibility of being banned if your behavior is perceived as unacceptable. Because of this, these places evoke a range of emotions. For example, Alexander described a church-based day center—which other participants characterized as welcoming—as follows: "It says in the law that a church can never ban a homeless person who has nowhere to go or eat… A church must not, absolutely never, ban anyone. But this place has done that; they deport many people. I'm banned there for life, apparently." In addition to the psychological impact of being excluded from both broader society and spaces allegedly open to all, there are also physical consequences of having no place to meet your basic physical needs. As a result, individuals are compelled to carry out daily routines in ways that deviate from societal norms, aligning with Garfinkel's (1967) assertion that, through social learning, there are 'correct' and 'incorrect' ways of performing everyday activities. Living roofless thus creates a life world shaped by exclusionary mechanisms, where the performance of ordinary routines becomes stigmatized due to their divergence from normative expectations.

Managing practical things

A big challenge living in rooflessness is how and where to keep your belongings. Important items are kept close to the body, but clothes and other things are washed when possible or collected from aid organisations. Belongings become representatives of your daily routines, since you are dependent on them for your everyday activities to function. Without a home to store your belongings, you must decide which belongings you can manage without. This creates uncertainty and a rupture in the ability to manage your everyday life. Since the city has no economic interest in providing storage for people living roofless, options like cheap lockers at the central station are now gone. Caroline, with a long experience of living roofless, describes this situation:

> I've slept a lot outside, in the middle of winter, freezing cold. I have dragged around sleeping bags, hidden them somewhere, then they're gone later. They lock the Central Station; they lock the shopping mall. So, there's nowhere. Had you been able to lock it up during daytime in a cupboard, then it would have stayed there.

During the interviews, participants showed me belongings they valued, which, unlike Caswell & Schultz's (2006) study, were not survival items, but contents in cellphones like photos of loved ones, places they had lived, diaries, and songs that reflected their lives. I was also shown saved cut-out articles that represented important aspects of their life. These artifacts were small and easy to carry around; still, they represented something important and seemed to function as a sort of life preserver, a way for the participants to keep memories and a self-presentation (see also Hodgetts et al., 2010). Gabriel described how he tried to handle his belongings and maintain an occupation while living roofless:

> Out of the shelter at 8 o'clock in the morning. I had to bring all my things: shampoo, brush, T-shirt, jacket, schoolbooks, I went to school! Took a shower at the school and locked my bag there. When the classes ended; to the library, until they closed and then to the shelter the next night again. And so, it went on.

Gabriel's example shows the complexities of keeping up with a normative lifestyle while homeless. Even though your belongings are representatives of your everyday life, they cannot be taken for granted and become a part of a sort of fixed movement (Jackson, 2012) in space and time; belongings travel around in the city together with their owners, who must be prepared to lose them at any time.

Practicing your basic needs outdoors, like going to the bathroom, eating, drinking, and keeping your belongings safe, is expensive. If you also need drugs or alcohol to function, the expenses are even higher, as Alexander puts it: "A Day for me? [laughs], I walk around… And make money. Maybe not in a legal way, so to speak, but you must survive. The main thing is that you have food on the table". Ellen takes another standpoint when describing her way of financing the street-life: "I've picked cans, and deposited cans, a lot, to get by on the weekends. I have not been ashamed for a single second to rummage through the trash cans. I thought: As long as I don't steal anything, I'll do this". The participants present different stances when talking about making money or engaging in *shadow work* (Wardhaug, 1996), but several of the participants manage their financial situation without getting support from the social services. In this way, they stress that they can handle their situation, not being a burden to anyone. Money is a source of both security and danger: To have money means getting by during the day, being able to invite other people to a cigarette, etc., which gets you allies. But having money also means exposing yourself to the risk of getting robbed, and without an address, it is hard to get a credit card, so you often must carry cash. Strategies for managing belongings and money are key parts of the daily routines and uncertainties when living roofless. Managing practicalities like belongings and money is, in this way, characterized by volatility, constant movement, and uncertainty, being simultaneously a source of security and danger.

Surviving on the street

Surviving on the street is described as difficult and dangerous, but also as a learning process, where people in the same situation help each other out. Several of the participants say (with pride) that politicians would not make it through a week out on the street, as Alexander puts it: "It's not just Vietnam warriors who see too much. So do we homeless people. The worst is at night then, with everything. Crime, drugs, drug trafficking, stabbings, gunshots". Spending years on the street, witnessing and experiencing violence, carries expectations about again be subjected to violence and you must always be prepared for this. Determining which places and people to trust and which to avoid constitutes a constant ambivalence. Strategies consist of both being with other people and staying away from people, since people represent both danger and security (see also Fahnøe, 2018). As other study's point out (Casey et al., 2008; MacDonald, 2014; Hsieh, 2017; Menih, 2020; Grange, 2025) being out on the street, especially in the nighttime, is described as dangerous, especially for women, but being offered a bed in someone's apartment is often equal with accepting to make a sexual payment for the stay or risk getting abused. Emma describes how she has tried to stay in the homes of others:

> These years I've tried being a lodger and sharing an apartment. With different people. And it has not gone well. Four men or more have expected sex. There was a man who tried to throw himself into bed and thought we should cuddle. I was completely shocked and kind of bounced into the wall. So, I had to go out in the middle of the night sometimes. I was so terrified so I couldn't stay.

As a homeless woman, the potential danger of accepting a bed in someone's house must be weighed against the risk of sleeping outside. Some of the participants describe keeping awake by walking during the night as a way both to stay safe and to remain invisible. Caroline describes trying to stay safe at nighttime:

> Something I've thought about very often is that "where do all the homeless people go at night?" For everyone, just pouf, they're gone! I've managed all by myself. I was sick once, so I went into a public toilet, and I vomited everywhere, I cleaned up in there and then I made my bed. I had a high fever. Then a security guard comes and just "Take your shit and get out of here" and it was freezing outside… The only thing I thought was: I had heard that the women sleep outside

> the City Library. Because we women must sleep where we are seen, among other people. And preferably in a group. Because there are so many sex offenders out there.

When Caroline was evicted from the space she had tried to make comfortable, her only option was to seek out other women for protection. This aligns with Menih (2020), who describes how women sleeping rough develop night-time strategies to stay safe, such as squatting in hidden places or staying close to others. While participants emphasized the particular dangers faced by women, men also described similar strategies—avoiding certain areas due to who might be there or asserting themselves through acts like participating in fights to gain respect. Stories of violence and danger tied to specific places in the city are shared among people living roofless, yet due to limited route options, these places are often impossible to avoid.

Navigating the social services system

Despite the hardship described when living roofless, some of the participants rarely mention getting support from the Municipality's social services. Although stories are shared about meeting helpful professionals, seeking support for more stable housing don't seem like an option for some, corresponding with other studies showing that reasons like security, distrust or not seeing the point make some homeless people choose to fend for themselves instead of seeking help (Donley & Wright, 2012; Bender's et al., 2018; Fahnøe, 2018; Bowpitt, 2020; Tsai et al., 2024). The participants describe how, at times, managing on their own feels safer than sleeping in a shelter. They also express a reluctance to adapt to certain rules and regulations of specific places, or that they are not allowed to sleep with a partner or bring their pet to the shelter. When asked about how he feels about seeking support, Oscar states that "Unfortunately, I judge people by their occupation, and social workers are the worst". Several of the participants have tried to stay in the secondary housing market, but for some, this has not worked out, or they have opted themselves out. To get access to housing support, you go through a process of categorization to fit into a specific housing option (Löfstrand, 2005), but when the participants don't adapt to these categories, the alternative seems to be to stay out of the social services system. One of the participants, Sofia, describes how she feels when living for a long time in the secondary housing market:

> It can damage you. Living there gives you complications in the brain; in a year I am changed as a human being. When you are homeless, you are left out throughout society, because it's shaped after a certain category of people. That's so excluding. And how are they going to take care of you in the housing? It takes time to get healed when you are completely homeless. Many people would rather choose to be outside, there is more freedom there. But the outside is not so suitable either.

Besides the long-term excluding mechanisms described when living in the secondary housing market, physical danger also seems to be present. Caroline describes living in one particular housing as kind of a false security, there is staff nearby and you have your room, but at the same time you can't protect yourself from the other tenants: Men living in the same facility. She describes how she, after many years of living roofless, decided to accept staying in a housing unit, even though she felt unsafe, because this was the only way of gaining access to a long-term apartment:

> I stayed at this worthless accommodation. I was supposed to get help with addiction and sort things out and everything, but nothing happened. The men went in and out of our rooms, the women were exposed. The staff just locked themselves in the office. It was not possible to be drug-free there. But as soon as I got the apartment now, I've stopped. It's my dream now to be with my child and grandchild as much as possible.

In other cases, seeking help from the social services is simply not included as an option, or shaped by mistrust. Opting out of support is described as already knowing that you don't have a chance, as Alexander describes: "If you have been homeless all your life and you suddenly get an apartment, there's always some way to ruin it and to end up on the street again". Unsanitary conditions or the hardship of keeping sober or getting evicted for taking a relapse are other difficulties mentioned. Charlie describes staying at a low threshold accommodation which led him back to drinking: "I shared a toilet with others, and I didn't know if it was water or piss on the floor, it was completely wet. I went to NA [narcotics anonymous], aiming to recover, but every day it was "Do you want a beer" and finally I cracked, so I said "Yes, why not". The choice of not accepting support can also be explained by the social services' requirements for adaptation to the support alternatives that are proposed (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer, 2003; Löfstrand, 2005), as in Sofia's case earlier. Resisting support from the social services can therefore become a necessary strategy for maintaining agency in a context when one's situation is governed by social policy (Bowpitt, 2020). The rules in the secondary housing market can also be perceived as impossible demands, as Ellen describes when trying to get shelter in the middle of the winter:

> The coldest, it was minus 9 degrees Celsius, which we managed outside! [Laughs] I had the dog with me, and to keep him warm I had a sweater, which I put over him. He had to stay warm. We didn't get in anywhere. Tried to get a place for the night, I was completely desperate because it was so cold. But I was denied because I had the dog with me.

These examples of trying to navigate through the social services system and different housing options present participants with nearly impossible choices. To qualify for support, individuals must conform to and accept the options provided by social services, even if they feel unsafe or believe they can't recover in that environment. However, not accepting the support, to maintain their agency, they must also face a potentially dangerous situation. Managing the micro decisions of everyday life therefore, often comes down to deciphering a variety of institutionally formulated demands, and/or requirements, making the social and material aspects of homelessness stand out as a balancing act between different kinds of safety, where no option is optimal.

Discussion

This study explores the narratives of nine individuals experiencing homelessness and managing everyday life while living roofless. Although the number of participants is relatively small—and should not be viewed as representative of a broader, heterogeneous homeless population—they describe lives lived outside the support systems typically offered by social services to people experiencing homelessness in Sweden. Nevertheless, their experiences align with findings from other research, both European and non-European, that describe the struggles of living roofless. The analysis shows that strategies for navigating daily routines and mitigating risks on the street are closely tied to the structure and functioning of the local social services system. The participants' presence in the city is governed by regulations of space and border control (Doherty et al., 2008), such as security guards patrolling semi-public spaces and normative expectations about the appropriate use of urban areas, which hinder them from attending to basic needs. These mechanisms often restrict their presence in the city and contribute to a state of constant movement along specific routes. At the same time, participants attempt to pass the time while waiting for shelter access and manage time by adhering to strict schedules, such as opening hours and designated times for making phone calls to secure a place for the night. This enforced mobility, combined with the need to carry personal belongings at all times, shapes a form of daily existence that is both structured and precarious. It reflects a condition in which extreme uncertainty and survival are incorporated into the rhythms of everyday life. Since this study is built on interviews, combining it with ethnographic methods–such as following individuals living roofless in their daily lives and mapping their time-geography within the city–could add depth to the understanding of everyday life on the streets. An expanded study with a larger number of participants would also allow for comparative analysis of how rooflessness is experienced across demographic groups such as age, ethnicity, citizenship status, and gender. This could deepen the understanding of homelessness and inform more effective policy interventions.

When both time and space are regulated by external control mechanisms, such as those described above, one way to maintain a sense of agency is to decline support from social services. By opting out of available support—or being denied access to it—participants become more vulnerable to violence and insecurity. As a result, they rely on strategies learned from peers to try to stay safe. These strategies include finding ways to obtain money, knowing which places to visit or avoid, staying awake during the night, or sleeping near others or hiding to avoid detection (see Wardhaugh, 1996; Menih, 2020). The participants cited several reasons for declining support from social services, including safety concerns—describing housing units as offering a false sense of security—as well as issues related to sanitation, restrictions on bringing pets to shelters, and a general sense of hopelessness or the belief that accepting support no longer serves a purpose. The empirical data show no major differences in how women and men articulate their reasons for avoiding social services. However, female participants frequently highlight the pervasive risk of sexualized violence in public spaces, when staying with acquaintances, and even in shelters, as also shown in Grange (2025). This is not mentioned by male participants, who instead emphasize general violence and insecurity. These findings suggest that safety for homeless women warrants closer attention. The presence of individuals left without support, as shown in this and other international studies, suggests that social services fail to meet the needs of certain groups. This underscores the need to review policies on support and housing options, and how these can be designed to ensure equitable access to the right to housing. It also reflects broader structural issues – such as housing market exclusion and systemic inequalities – that shape both the risk of becoming roofless and the prospects of exiting homelessness. Furthermore, a discursive gap emerges between how social services define support and how it is perceived by some recipients. This discrepancy warrants further examination—for instance, by comparing official policies with both the support actually provided and the lived experience of recipients. Such inquiry can shed light on how these dynamics shape the discretionary power of case workers who mediate access to services. These findings indicate a need for further research on the interactions between roofless individuals and case workers during support-seeking encounters, to better understand how access to assistance is negotiated in practice. Given that a significant portion of the homeless population in Sweden resides in the secondary housing market, it would also be valuable to explore their experiences and perceptions of the support they receive.

Public attitudes toward people experiencing homelessness, along with policies and resource allocation, shape the spatial and temporal constraints that roofless individuals encounter. It is therefore essential to make these social structures visible and subject to critical examination. Such understanding is vital for addressing—and ultimately counteracting—the structural marginalization that shapes the everyday lives of people living roofless, not only in Sweden but across other Western countries.

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Implementing a Social Investment Pilot for Homelessness in England

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Abstract_ *Homelessness has increased across the United Kingdom in recent years, but resources to address this issue are limited. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a partnership between the UK government, social investors, and not-for-profit service providers developed a pilot which uses a "social investing" model to acquire properties and rehouse people at-risk of or experiencing homelessness. One goal of the social investment model is to address a social problem whilst generating a modest financial return for investors. The pilot tested different economic models for purchasing properties and making them available to service providers. Because scant research has analysed the use of social investments to obtain affordable housing for homeless households, housing scholars lack knowledge about the use of this asset class for addressing homelessness. This paper presents findings from an implementation evaluation of the aforementioned pilot. The authors use interview and archival data to identify three implementation barriers—market constraints, tenant characteristics, and organisational constraints—and suggest policies to inform similar social investments in the future.*

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Introduction

Homelessness has become more common in the United Kingdom (UK) since 2010. Since then, core homelessness, the number of people sleeping rough, living in unconventional accommodation, hostel residents, individuals staying in unsuitable temporary accommodation, or sofa surfing, increased from about 210 000 in 2012 to roughly 225 000 in 2020, and that figure is expected to approach 350 000 by 2041 (Watts et al., 2022a). When this figure is broken down by country, we see the spike in core homelessness has disproportionately occurred in England, where the projected rate of core homelessness is expected to reach 1.2 percent in 2041, compared to.6% in Wales and.5% in Scotland (ibid, 2022a). National disparities in core homelessness partly reflect the devolution of housing policy to each UK country. Whereas the Scottish government has adopted new housing protections (Watts-Cobbe et al., 2024), the UK Government implemented social security, welfare service, and housing investment cuts that made low-income households more vulnerable to homelessness (Watts et al., 2022b).

Regardless of the cause, the growth in core homelessness in the UK is happening as national governments have less capacity to finance public services. When the COVID-19 pandemic reached the UK, the government borrowed heavily. The Office for Budget Responsibility estimated the UK Government borrowed £311 billion to finance pandemic-related support measures (Brien and Keep, 2023). This caused the public sector debt to GDP ratio to jump from 80.3% in 2019 to 96.9% in 2025 (Clark, 2024). During the COVID-19 pandemic, inflation rose from 0.9% in 2019 to 9.6% in 2022, before falling to 3.5% at the end of 2024 (ONS, 2024a). Furthermore, economic productivity in the UK remains low after pandemic restrictions were lifted (ONS 2024b), relatively reducing the UK tax base. Public debt has therefore increased at the same time government revenue declined.

The UK Government is experimenting with "social investing" to address homelessness within these constraints. A social investment is "made with the intention to generate positive, measurable social and/or environmental impact alongside a financial return" (GIIN, 2025). Lending organisations that make social investments accept lower financial returns to facilitate positive social change. At the beginning of the pandemic, the UK Government allocated £161 million for housing assistance to prevent the spread and impact of COVID-19. Of that total, £15 million was set aside for a social investment pilot (SIP). Government officials were keen to finance the SIP because it tested a long-term solution to homelessness that relied on private sector financing. Better Society Capital (BSC) matched the UK Government's £15 million to purchase 273 affordable housing properties for homeless households. Both investors then financed a three-year evaluation study to produce an evidence-base that institutional investors need to support similar investments in the future.

This paper reports on the implementation evaluation of the SIP. It uses interview and archival data to analyse the implementation of the SIP by key stakeholders: investors, fund managers, and investees (i.e., service providers). Although each of the funds had been successfully implemented when this paper was written, the authors chose to analyse the barriers that key stakeholders faced to identify problems policymakers should anticipate whilst planning similar investments in the future. This paper evaluates a novel finance solution to homelessness and expands the nascent literature on social investments and homeless governance. While some studies have analysed the use of social investments to finance homeless service delivery, only a couple have examined their use to expand the affordable housing stock for homeless households (Jarvis, 2020; Wang and Xu, 2022). This paper contributes to the policy debate on how to address affordable housing shortages. It is widely acknowledged that affordable housing shortages have contributed to the recent spike in homelessness (O'Sullivan, 2022; Tudor, 2024), but housing scholars have provided little advice to help national governments address that shortfall within their budgetary constraints. The paper concludes with policy recommendations to guide similar social investments in the future.

The paper starts with a review of the literature on homeless strategies and social investment to delineate the contribution of this study. It then describes the SIP in more detail to give the reader context for the case studies that are analysed. The data and methods that were used in this study are then discussed before the key findings are presented. After the data analysis, the authors discuss the implications of their findings for policy and make evidence-based policy recommendations.

Homeless Strategies

A consensus has emerged among European housing scholars, advocates, and policymakers about the best strategies to address homelessness. Baptista and Marlier (2019) listed several policy recommendations that Member States of the European Union should adopt. They argued, "The provision of affordable and accessible housing should be at the forefront of housing policies" (ibid, 2019: 19), before recommending several ways Member States can do that. At the top of the list, Baptista and Marlier (2019) encouraged Member States to expand social housing stocks. That recommendation stems from a conclusion reached by most housing scholars: "The single most important public policy response is the provision of an adequate supply of affordable and secure housing, either provided directly by municipalities and/or not-for-profit organisations or with rental subsidies" (O'Sullivan, 2022: 150). A recent review of homeless strategies showed Member States have adopted policies that steer service users to permanent housing rather than emergency shelter or temporary accommodation (Szeintuch, 2024). Doing so requires Member States to finance affordable housing and politically commit to their homeless strategy (Baptista and Marlier, 2019). But whether each country can or will do this is an unanswered question, as multiple systemic crises have recently constrained government spending in Europe.

The UK Government has incorporated similar policies into its homeless strategy. The rapid rehousing initiative eases dependency on temporary accommodation by immediately putting homeless households in permanent housing (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2018). To advance this housing-led approach, the current Labour Government announced £1 billion in funding to reduce and prevent homelessness (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2024a). Of that figure, £633 million is dedicated to prevention services and £281.3 million is reserved for people who are sleeping rough. Policy commentators have long called for public reinvestment in social housing and cited the decline of council housing stocks as a key driver of homelessness (Fitzpatrick et al., 2019; Fitzpatrick et al., 2021b). The Homelessness Monitor, which is published by Crisis UK, was established in 2010, when the Coalition Government took power, and has been tracking the ebb and flow of homelessness in Britain until 2030. The authors of that report have repeatedly stressed the need for new social housing to curb the growth of homelessness in England. To help expand the housing stock, the Labour Government has called on local governments to submit plans to build 1.5 million new homes over the next five years, and councils are required to "give greater consideration to social rent"whilst developing those properties (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2024b). The aforementioned budgetary constraints mean local governments need more than traditional grants to finance those properties.

Social Investment

Social investment is one way local governments can expand their affordable housing stock. A social investment solves a social problem while returning at least the principal to the investor (Höchstädter and Scheck, 2015). The non-financial effects created by a social investment are both intentional and measured, while the rate of financial return can vary across projects (Dexter, Noble, and Bryce, 2013). Investors do not have to weigh (non-)financial impacts the same or accept below-market returns on their principal. Table 1 places social investment on a “spectrum of capital” to differentiate it from other investment types (Trelstad, 2016). A range of actors have financed social investments in the public and private sectors: national governments, philanthropic groups, commercial and investment banks, private equity funds, insurance companies, and pension funds (OECD, 2019). Social investors have financed debt, equity, and/or real assets (Mudaliar, Bass, and Dithrich, 2018), but the social investment market is small due to confusion and risk-aversion amongst investors (Maduro, Pasi, and Misuraca, 2018; Muir et al., 2018; Phillips and Johnson, 2021). Proponents consequently seek ways to ease concerns and grow the market (Hand et al., 2024).

Table 1. Social Investment Sits Between Traditional Philanthropy and Commercial Investment.

Investment model	Traditional philanthropy	Venture philanthropy	Social investing	Impact investment	Socially responsible investment	Commercial Investment
Primary goal	Impact only with grants	Impact focussed with venture capital	Impact with below-market financial return	Impact with financial market return	Financial market return while reducing negative impacts	Financial market return

Some social investments have addressed housing insecurity. They can be divided into two broad categories: social investment to build or acquire properties and social investments to provide services. A number of initiatives in the UK have used social investment to build or acquire properties to alleviate homelessness directly or to provide affordable housing. For example, in the UK, the Resonance Homelessness Property Funds are described by Resonance (2024) as impact investment funds that aim to provide stable and affordable homes for people facing a housing crisis. Socially motivated investors provide finance and the various funds that have been established by properties that Resonance refurbishes prior to leasing the properties to expert and experienced housing partners across the UK, to manage the tenancies and support tenants.

Cheyne Social Property Impact Fund, launched in 2014 by Cheyne Capital, bought and developed affordable and supported housing and leases them to housing associations, charities, and local authorities that deliver affordable housing for people on low incomes, supported housing for people with disabilities, and accommodation for people experiencing homelessness. A second fund was launched in 2020 (Big Society Capital 2021). The Ethical Housing Company was established by Bridges Evergreen Holdings to increase the affordable housing stock for low-income households in Teesside (Bridges Fund Management, 2018). Doing so was meant to improve housing quality for those renters and prevent homelessness by securing suitable accommodation for tenants.

Similar social investments have been made in Australia. Australian Ethical is a fund manager that has partnered with private developers to build 475 built-to-rent units in Brisbane (Wilmot, 2025). Fifty percent of those units will be let to low-income tenants at below market rent.

An important context to this evaluation is the changes in how social housing investment is funded in England, of which this programme is arguably part. Several academics argue that institutional and for-profit investors have increased their involvement in social rented and affordable housing sectors (Aalbers et al, 2017; Nethercoter, 2020), that this is part of a wider process of financialisation, and that this pattern can be seen in a number of high-income countries around the world. Others have provided a more nuanced view of these changes, evidencing a considerable level of differentiation between investors in these markets and criticising the assumptions of a homogeneous investor market in much of the extant literature (Ozogul and Tasan-Kok, 2020). The purpose of this article is not to contribute to this wider, critical literature on financialisation in social housing, but rather to provide insights from an evaluation of a specific housing social investment project.

In addition to affordable housing development, social investments have been used to finance homeless service delivery. In the UK, over the last ten years, a number of Social Impact Bonds (SIBs) or social outcome partnerships have targeted homelessness, including in London and Greater Manchester. In London, two consortia (St Mungo's and Thames Reach) used intensive 'navigator' support to help 830 entrenched rough sleepers. The London Homelessness SIB significantly reduced rough sleeping over two years, while the GM Homes Partnership housed almost twice as many people as originally targeted at half the cost of similar interventions funded in other ways (Big Society Capital 2021). In the US, "Project Welcome Home" is a permanent supportive housing (PSH) programme for 150–200 people experiencing chronic homelessness (Third Sector Capital Partners, 2024). Also in the US, eight organisations jointly raised $6.9 million for a service provider in Santa Clara County to deliver wraparound support to PSH tenants. All these examples demonstrate how social investments are being used to stop entries to and facilitate exits from homelessness.

However, little research has analysed the use of social investments to address homelessness (Wang and Xu, 2022). Most of the studies published on this topic have focused on SIBs (for example, Sebag and Pellizzari, 2020). A SIB is a species of social investment that uses a "pay-for-success" model to reimburse investors when they achieve expected results (Carrillo, 2017). But SIBs usually focus on funding services rather than property procurement. A small body of research has analysed planning and implementation issues. Past research has shown that information asymmetry and measurement problems discourage institutional investors from financing social investments (Phillips and Johnson, 2019). When fund managers have purchased affordable housing with social investments, they have confronted problems with building procurement, risks associated with potential changes to rental assistance, and struggles to ensure property values grow over time (Jarvis, 2020). Previous studies have also demonstrated that frontline workers face social investment implementation problems. Caseworkers at a British agency criticised SIBs for creating a conflict of interest between investors and homeless service users, but nonetheless praised it for allowing them to help clients with complex needs (George, Rogers, and Roberts, 2020). The social investment literature is thus limited to a small number of case studies, most focusing on services, not properties, and there is very limited evidence on implementation issues that stakeholders confront in different contexts.

Policymakers consequently lack an evidence base to rehouse homeless households with this asset class (Painter and Culhane, 2021). Without robust evidence to demonstrate the efficacy of social investment, proponents struggle to ease risk for investors and access trillions of pounds for affordable housing development (Better Society Capital, 2024). If proponents convince investors to finance a social investment, the dearth of implementation research means they lack the knowledge to plan and deliver the social and economic returns of the project. This paper helps fill that knowledge gap by analysing the use of social investment to rehouse homeless households during the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper presents five case studies from the Social Investment Pilot.

Getting "Everyone In" to Fight COVID-19

When COVID-19 reached the UK, the Conservative Government launched "Everyone In" a programme for local authorities to ensure homeless households could isolate in accommodation (Cromarty, 2021). Government officials announced a £161 million package in March 2020 for pandemic-related housing assistance to prevent vulnerable people from becoming homeless and ensure homeless households could self-isolate in private accommodation. While most of that funding was dedicated to emergency housing assistance, £15 million was ringfenced for a SIP and was matched by Better Society Capital (a social investor) to finance a pilot that tested a long-term solution to homelessness. The pilot pooled public and private resources for nonprofit organisations, including charities and Housing Associations, to purchase units and rehouse people who were sleeping rough. It was implemented by three fund managers—"F1", "F2", and "F3"—who partnered with local housing providers, including charities and Housing Associations.

Social investors used the £30 million fund to acquire residential properties for people experiencing homelessness. With that asset class, investors sought a modest financial return, new housing opportunities for homeless households, and a sustainable source of funding for affordable housing. The three fund managers operated five funds using different housing purchase models, and four distinct theories of change are discernible (see Table 2).

Table 2. Four Models and Theories of Change Used in the Social Investment Pilot.

	Model Type	*Theory of Change*	*Fund manager*	*Investee*
1.	A leasing model for charities based on leasing from a social investor.	The fund manager acts as a social landlord for the period of the lease-term (7-10 years).	F1 F2	O1 O3
2.	A leasing model for small, specialist Housing Associations based on leasing from a social investor.	The fund manager acts as a social landlord for the period of the lease- term (7-10 years). The structure and terms of the lease relationship are more friendly towards housing associations than commercial lease arrangements.	F1	O4
3.	A property ownership model based on debt finance from a social investor for charities who wish to grow their property ownership portfolio.	The fund manager provides a loan facility for a 10-year period for the charity to source and purchase properties and, at the end of the period the charity can return the property to the fund manager or buy on preferential terms.	F2	O2 (complex needs) (Ex-offender)
4.	An equity investment model that involves investors owning a stake in an ethical lettings company and sharing in the risk of failure and proceeds of company profits.	In this model, properties are owned by the company.	F3	Ethical Housing

This paper looks at the first three models and only two fund managers: F2 and F1. Table 2 shows how investors divided the £30 million across the three fund managers. F2 received £15 million, which was divided across two funds, while F1 was given £12.5 million, which was split between two funds. Each fund targeted a different subpopulation, varied in the number of units that were procured, and offered the fund manager different options at programme termination. For example, F2 gave investees a 10-year loan to purchase a total of 120 units for "disadvantaged people," while F1 provided investees a 10-year lease on 126 units to rehouse people sleeping rough. Whereas F2 gave investees a chance to buy SIP properties at a discounted rate when their 10-year loan ended, F1 will arrange for its properties to continue being let to the target population. Table 3 illustrates the flow of information between stakeholders. Investees collected Key Performance Indicator data about service delivery that was shared with fund managers. Fund managers used Key Performance Indicator data to write quarterly reports for BSC. BSC shared those reports with the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). During these meetings, investors discussed progress, implementation problems, and policy changes that needed to be made.

DLUHC and BSC staff designed the SIP to create a new vehicle for affordable housing finance. From their perspective, private capital is an untapped resource that can help the government address homelessness when budgetary constraints limit public sector involvement. Because this is a novel policy experiment, investors had limited evidence to guide SIP implementation. The investors thus commissioned an evaluation study to understand what role social investment has in addressing homelessness, collate evidence on the delivery of accommodation through social investment, and analyse the impact of that accommodation on service users (Better Society Capital, 2021). From those aims, the authors developed three evaluation objectives: determine if social investments can channel private capital to increase the supply of social housing for people experiencing homelessness; identify outcomes that accommodation and support financed with social investment can provide homeless households; and measure the comparative value for money of social investments in bringing forward new units of accommodation for people who have experienced homelessness. The current paper uses data from that evaluation to answer two general questions: What barriers complicated SIP implementation? How did key stakeholders deal with those problems? Following Durlak and DuPre (2008), we broke the concept of implementation down into more specific implementation questions:

- Has the programme been implemented as intended? (Fidelity)
- Did the programme reach its intended recipients? (Reach)
- What accommodation and support were received by programme recipients? (Dosage)
- How does the process of delivering social investment schemes compare with traditional government grant funding streams? (Differentiation)

In this paper, we concentrate on three broad implementation challenges that emerged from this analysis.

Data & Methods

The authors use data from five case studies to answer the primary and supplementary implementation questions. Each case study was located in one of four English councils: "L1", "L2", "L3", and "L4". Table 3 describes some key characteristics of each case study. The case studies were selected with maximum variation sampling. On the one hand, the authors wanted to include case studies with different model types and theories of change. This lets them delineate implementation issues that might be unique to each approach. On the other hand, the authors sought contextual variation in the sample. This lets them identify political, economic, and social forces that affected SIP implementation and must be considered by anyone planning a similar investment.

Table 3. Key Characteristics of Selected Case Studies

Fund manager	*Investee*	*Location*	*Number of SIP Properties*	*Average Rent 1-Bedroom*[1]
F1	O1	L1	56	£1 374
	O4	L2	18	£738
F2	O2	L3	18	£449
	O3	L4	36	£585

The primary source of data for this paper is a semi-structured interview. The evaluation team created interview protocols that were tailored to each stakeholder. Each protocol had questions about the SIP planning process, the relationship between key stakeholders, various issues participants faced during implementation, and strategies that were used to solve those problems.[2] Interviews were conducted on Teams in 2023 and 2024. The authors conducted three interviews with investors, one interview with each fund manager, seven interviews with O1 staff, seven interviews with O3 staff, three interviews with O4 staff, and 13 interviews with O2 staff (n=30). Interviews ranged from 60–120 minutes. An interview transcript was produced on Teams and then cleaned by a team member.

The secondary source of data was case files for SIP tenants. After setting up data sharing protocols, the authors accessed case files for all of the clients (n=47) in three programmes: O1, O2 complex need, and O2 ex-offender programmes. Anonymised data was extracted from each case file about the clients' demographic characteristics, risk assessment, support plan, and/or case log. After the case file

1 Office for National Statistics. 2024. *Housing prices in your area*. Available at https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/articles/housingpricesinyourarea/2024-03-20

2 Interview protocols are available to readers upon request.

data was reproduced on a spreadsheet, the team then drafted narratives about the clients' transition from homelessness into a SIP property and the implementation problems that emerged throughout that process.

The authors coded the cleaned transcripts and case file narratives in NVivo using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The data were inductively analysed first with open codes to identify emergent themes. The team grouped open codes into superordinate ones based on commonalities. Variations within each superordinate code were identified with subthemes to identify latent themes between semantically unrelated data. The team defined each theme, selected exemplary quotes from each code, and used that data to write this paper. Once a final draft of the paper was completed, the team conducted member checks with participants and circulated copies to research colleagues for their feedback.

Findings

The data analysis is divided into three subsections. The first subsection analyses the way property markets affected procurement and how key stakeholders navigated those constraints. The second subsection identifies tenant characteristics and their interaction with the goals of the programme. The third subsection discusses organisational (in)capacities that affected implementation. Table 4 presents the key findings of this study.

Table 4. Implementation Problems Confronted by Each SIP Model

Model Type	*Market Constraints*	*Tenant Characteristics*	*Organisational Incapacities*
A leasing model for charities based on leasing from a social investor.	Slowed procurement Reduced selection High rents Move-on barriers	Complex needs Anti-social behaviour Demotivation for change Move-on barriers	Local bureaucracy Knowledge gaps Data lags
A leasing model for small, specialist Housing Associations based on leasing from a social investor.	Slowed procurement Reduced selection High rents	Complex needs Anti-social behaviour Demotivation for change	Local bureaucracy Knowledge gaps
A property ownership model based on debt finance from a social investor for charities who wish to grow their property ownership portfolio.	Slowed procurement Reduced selection High rents	Complex needs Anti-social behaviour Demotivation for change Property relocations	

Market Constraints

The first set of barriers was related to the housing markets where fund managers bought properties. The inflation crisis that stemmed from COVID-19 caused housing prices to increase significantly in the UK (ONS, 2023). Fund managers set a price cap to meet procurement targets. A BSC representative described how soaring costs made it hard for fund managers to buy quality units within their initial price range:

> "Funds that launched in 2020 and 21 have, in parts of the country, struggled with the fact that there was this COVID house price spike, which made it hard to find properties at the right prices. These funds are trying to find houses in exactly the right geography that works for the needs of people who are more vulnerable within a certain band of financial return parameters… Being able to find those is key to the impact thesis. But if the market makes it harder to achieve that, then that slows it."

This quote shows procurement was complicated by inflation related to COVID-19. But the impact of inflation on housing prices varied across local authorities. An administrator from F1 said this expedited procurement in some councils but slowed it down in others, resulting in repurposing the funding towards families moving out of temporary accommodation in one area where one-bedroom flats were in short supply. SASC reported similar constraints in a housing market outside of our sampling frame, but was able to buy desired properties in the case studies that we analysed. Fund managers responded to inflation by raising price caps and/or expanding procurement timelines. But even with these adjustments, some investees said inflation still made it hard for them to buy the kind of properties that their clients needed. For example, an administrator from O2 lamented the dearth of ground-floor units that were available for people with disabilities:

> "The sort of lower ground floor, specifically what we're looking for, like our clients that have different physical disabilities or ailing health, they are like gold dust."

This either limited the number of people with severe physical disabilities that O2 rehoused in SIP properties or forced people with those conditions to live in suboptimal accommodation. Other investees said they were unable to purchase one-bedroom units. Key stakeholders addressed this by changing the eligibility criteria for SIP tenants, modifying quality thresholds, and/or offering house shares to some clients. The latter caused problems when the tenants did not get along with each other and occasionally led to tenant relocations. In other cases, fund managers could not buy properties in desired neighbourhoods. Although the price of housing in 'good' neighbourhoods was a factor, staffing constraints also limited the geographic spread of SIP properties in some case studies because investees lacked enough caseworkers to assist clients who were dispersed geographically. Some clients were consequently housed in "poor" neighbourhoods and/or ones geographically isolated from their support network. This could undermine the investee's goal to make SIP tenants more self-reliant and socially integrated. Regardless of the cause, unexpected constraints in the property market slowed procurement. Fund managers were unprepared for this and had to quickly adjust their procurement policies to accommodate market conditions. Doing so sometimes meant that investees had to modify the housing offers that were made to clients. On occasion, this compromised the social impact of those programmes by placing clients in suboptimal properties.

Local property markets also made it harder to move-on clients with a one- or two-year lease. In some cities, where private lets are expensive and social housing stocks cannot meet demand, clients have limited options to move-on when their SIP lease ends. The pool of potential move-on accommodation was truncated by high rents that investees charged clients to cover the cost of services and accommodation. One administrator from O1 said the rents they charged were much higher than social lets:

> "[F1] needs to make a return on their investment. And that means the rents that we have to charge are high because we need to cover our costs as well as [F1's] costs… Private rented sector rent inflation in [L1] and the southeast has been such that our rents don't look that bad now for private renters; they're very high compared to social housing."

This concerned some O1 staff that a portion of SIP tenants would refuse or would be unable to pay those rents. Because O1 was obligated to repay F1, unpaid rent could saddle O1 with debt, unless staff could recoup those funds from tenents with outstanding arrears. Aside from that, an obvious implication of high rents is that SIP tenants would be unable to save money to move-on when their lease ended. The dearth of social housing in one area left an O3 staff member to ask:

> "Where do we move them to? You've got a lack of social housing… Private rents… they've gone sky high. So, there goes our private network of properties that we used to have, which were more affordable. The prices have increased on a monthly basis for rent, but the housing allowance is still the same."

With inadequate savings, those clients would be forced to let units that were lower quality than their SIP property:

> "A lot of move-on for homeless people in [L1] is to private rentals. It's not a good accommodation. You find there are pockets of [L1] where you have lots of people who have been housed from probation and from local authorities and from rough sleeping services… And if that's the option for people coming out of our service, it seems very likely that people will struggle once they're in that situation." [O1]

Some investees worried that clients would balk at moving onto independent accommodation when their SIP lease ended. Some investees planned for that situation by setting aside resources to extend the lease of clients who struggled to move-on for six to 12 months. At the time of this study, few clients had involuntarily needed to move-on. So, the authors cannot comment on the efficacy of that approach. But the key point is that rents in the standard rental market interact with those of SIP properties to complicate programme goal achievement by agencies that provide temporary accommodation.

Tenant Characteristics

The second set of barriers pertains to the characteristics of tenants. Some SIP programmes used a 'treatment first' model to deliver services. That model assumes clients had become "housing ready" after receiving rehabilitative services in the hostel system (Padgett, Henwood, and Tsemberis, 2016). SIP tenants who were in a treatment first programme were assessed for housing readiness before occupying a property. Assessment processes sometimes failed to select housing-ready tenants who could manage their tenancy. An administrator from O4 described how the tenancy of one SIP tenant with severe substance misuse problems ended:

> "The one [client] that failed shouldn't have been placed there. And should have been placed into a rehab scheme, instead… She called [us] to say, 'I feel suicidal.' We thought she'd actually killed herself. So, that's what prompted the support providers to find a detox place for her. And that was the end of the tenancy."

This example demonstrates a bigger issue that caseworkers face with clients who were unready or unable to make personal changes when they became SIP tenants. Three SIP programmes provided fixed leases that ended after one or two years. Tenants in those programmes were expected to participate in supportive services that prepared them to move-on when their lease ended. But even with the looming threat of displacement or homelessness, an O1 caseworker said they struggled to get their clients engaged with services:

> "The big issue is non-engagement… Sometimes you think, is it deliberate?…It's like a game of chess. You got to be very shrewd… It's full-on.…. Some of them drop out. And then you have to drop them in again… But it's tiring…"

The need for caseworkers to motivate service engagement sometimes conflicted with their property management role. In addition to helping clients become self-reliant, caseworkers had to collect rent, coordinate maintenance repairs, address neighbour complaints, and/or facilitate property relocations. When clients struggled to fulfil their lease obligations, caseworkers had to confront their actions and consequently jeopardise rapport. For example, "Gidi" was a young adult Black man who had migrated to the UK. Although Gidi initially engaged with his caseworker on a regular basis, his cooperation waned as his rent arrears increased and interactions became more confrontational:

> From the beginning of their tenancy, Gidi struggled to set up their Housing Benefit to pay rent. The Local Authority (LA) initially agreed to only pay a proportion of Gidi's weekly rent, resulting in over three-quarters of Gidi's monthly £1 050 income needing to go to rent. After his caseworker helped Gidi contest his Housing Benefit decision, the LA increased the award, and a £30 / month repayment plan was arranged. O1 agreed to pause the repayment of those arrears so Gidi could visit family abroad. Upon his return, the caseworker tried to schedule a meeting to discuss arrears, which had jumped to almost £2 000. But Gidi ignored those phone calls before contesting the arrears. Efforts by the caseworker to get arrears repaid undermined their rapport with Gidi, "It was difficult to talk with [Gidi because he was saying we only care about money…" The caseworker then asked her manager to submit a court report for arrears, but Gidi remained disengaged from services and by this point owed over £5 000 in arrears.

Repeated efforts to obtain unpaid rent led Gidi to question the motives of his caseworker. This demotivated service engagement and preparation to move-on to independent accommodation. The onus on caseworkers to maintain properties sometimes undermines rapport with clients if a problem cannot be immediately solved. A caseworker who was asked whether their inability to immediately address a maintenance issue put a strain on their relationship with their client replied, "Yes, because I was the point of call.… So, it would fall upon you [and] unfortunately you would bear the brunt of it…" Weakened rapport made it tough for caseworkers to encourage clients to use supportive services. On the one hand, that could limit the SIP's social impact by destabilising tenancies and putting clients at risk of homelessness. On the other hand, it could undermine economic return for investors or hamper service providers with debt if clients stopped paying rent or caseworkers were prohibited from letting units in a building.

That said, implementation problems were also confronted by staff who managed 'Housing First' programmes. Housing First is a service model that defines permanent accommodation as a prerequisite for rehabilitation because the basic needs of service users must be met before personal changes can happen (Tsemberis, 2010). Unlike treatment first programmes, which screen applicants for housing readiness, Housing First providers assume everyone is ready for housing, regardless of their desire to change. O2's complex needs programme operated a model similar to Housing First. SIP tenants who participated in that programme often had a severe mental illness and/or substance misuse problem that complicated their tenancy. For example, "Sarah" was a dual heritage woman whose apartment was "cuckooed"—taken over without the tenant's permission—by drug dealers that created problems for her neighbours:

> When she became an O2 client, Sarah had been diagnosed with schizophrenia and struggled with addiction. Within the first month of her F2 tenancy, local drug dealers had taken over Sarah's flat. This made Sarah fear for her safety and generated ASB complaints from neighbours. Sarah's caseworkers suggested she move to a different unit, but she refused available properties because they were in neighbourhoods where she felt threatened. Her caseworkers then installed CCTV around her flat and additional window locks. But she was eventually forced to move to a different F2 property.

Sarah's ASB helped drug dealers cuckoo her apartment. This generated complaints from neighbours and eventually resulted in two property relocations. Luckily, Sarah was eventually able to settle in another SIP property and manage her opioid addiction with methadone. But the process of getting her to that point required financial outlays by O2 and tensions with neighbours at different properties that could prevent other clients from living in those units. At other times, the behaviour of clients required O2 to finance unit adaptations. For example, "Stan" was a chronic alcoholic who suffered a stroke after he became a SIP tenant:

> O2 caseworkers initially helped Stan manage his alcohol consumption. Stan refused their offer to access alcohol treatment. One day, Stan's caseworkers noticed him slurring his speech and unable to use the right side of his body. Stan was rushed to the hospital. Hospital staff confirmed Stan had suffered a stroke and required treatment. Stan was hospitalised for three-and-a-half months, diagnosed with aphasia, and had limited mobility. After his release, care providers found Stan was incontinent. Neighbours complained about the smell of urine. O2 caseworkers tried to address the problem and arranged for the carpets to be replaced with vinyl flooring and the toilet raised to help Stan urinate. But Stan's caseworkers eventually decided he needed a care home with 24-hour assistance.

Both examples demonstrate that tenant characteristics were sometimes a barrier to SIP implementation by Housing First programmes. The key difference between Housing First and treatment first programmes was that the former worked with clients indefinitely. This was essential for clients with complex needs who could not sustain a tenancy in independent accommodation after one or two years. Treatment first programmes were designed for clients who needed limited support, but participants said most of those clients required long-term support and were unprepared to-move on when their lease ended. Although the agencies delivering treatment first programmes were on track to meet their economic targets, the social impact of those interventions could be undermined by the mismatch between client needs and the lease model.

Organisational (in)capacity

The last set of barriers concerns the incapacities of organisations that directly implemented the SIP. The authors focused their attention on local government, investors, and investees. Participants faced barriers that differed across local governments. Some fund managers negotiated lease contracts with a combined authority that included multiple councils. This created problems when F1 was developing a lease for SIP tenants with a local authority. An administrator from O4 said this was a long, arduous process:

> "It's been hard to get to where we are now… Coming up with a lease that the partners and F1 all agreed with… Lease agreements for us go through lots and lots of scrutiny that F1 probably weren't prepared for. So, that was probably quite a painful journey."

It was originally assumed that the longstanding relationship between the local authority and O4 would expedite that contractual negotiation. F1 staff were consequently surprised when the process took longer than anticipated and delayed the leasing of SIP properties. This interacted with the property constraints mentioned above. Procurement and letting consequently took longer than the F1 staff originally anticipated. Local authorities also varied in the efficiency of their benefit system. SIP tenants relied on Housing Benefit to pay rent. Housing Benefit is allocated by local governments and, therefore, subject to organisational variation. Although administrators at O2 and O4 said their local authorities quickly and accurately processed Housing Benefit applications, an administrator from O1 reported long delays in their authority, with two clients in constant debt with the council and one tenant with substantial arrears because the local authority didn't recognise the property was supported living accommodation and refused to pay all the rent. Delayed changes to Housing Benefit both hindered economic returns and potentially set up conflicts with tenants that could undermine their rapport with caseworkers. Local governments also interrupted rent payments with annual reviews. If clients failed to notify caseworkers about the review, then their Housing Benefit would be terminated, and rent arrears would increase:

> "Local authorities pick cases for Housing Benefit reviews. When that happens, they suspend the Housing Benefit award. They send letters and communication to the tenants, saying your Housing Benefit award has been suspended. If the tenant does not respond to the request [or] does not report the communication

> to us, then the suspension after three months becomes a termination of the Housing Benefit. Then, we need to reinstate the Housing Benefit, and again we have £5 000 of arrears." [O1 caseworker]

Like delayed changes, a termination interrupted capital flow and risked conflicts with tenants. Because caseworkers managed SIP properties, they were also the point of contact that clients blamed when things went wrong. Gidi's previous example showed that tension between caseworkers and tenants could undermine service engagement and the social impact of a SIP programme. The limitations of local government in processing Housing Benefit claims were therefore a barrier to SIP implementation that investees had to manage.

The authors also considers implementation from the perspective of investors. DLUHC staff who were interviewed said the SIP's novelty initially made it difficult for them to plan implementation. Whereas traditional grants had clear reporting processes to measure performance by trusted partners, the SIP ceded more discretion and control to third-party agencies with whom DLUHC was unfamiliar. The delegation of control to third-party agencies was complicated because DLUHC staff reported to Ministers who were politically accountable to voters. Failure of investees to meet economic and/or social targets could jeopardise DLUHC. Beyond financial reporting, investors had to create new mechanisms to report economic returns that are absent from traditional grants. Investors quickly developed a new reporting system that was appropriate for the SIP. Working out appropriate data flows that met requirements for data confidentiality and appropriate data sharing was sometimes complex. A set of KPIs was ultimately selected that BSC used to produce quarterly reports for DLUHC staff. At accompanying quarterly meetings, DLUHC staff received progress updates and asked questions about implementation issues that had emerged.

Lastly, the organisational processes of investees complicate implementation. Here, we focus on two processes that are related to topics that were previously discussed. Procurement is the first process. Some investees helped their fund manager buy properties. Because some investees were service providers who had only leased properties, they had to develop knowledge about the procurement process while implementing the SIP. This slowed procurement with mistakes that investees committed while learning the process. Investors reported that procurement was also slowed by bureaucratic processes that the investees used to procure units, including practices such as approvals to buy properties going to a monthly trustees meeting or board meeting.

In addition to procurement, organisational capacities also complicated data production for and sharing with investors. Investors identified that assembling evidence of impact was a key risk to the programme.

> "I think one really key risk is evidence risk, which isn't necessarily the impacts not being delivered, but it's on the reliance on the operational processes to collect that data consistently. To do that in a way that is rigorous to be reported regularly in the right places. We have been suffering from some challenges around data collection." [Investor]

Inadequate data made it hard for BSC to give DLUHC updates on SIP progress. An administrator from F1 attributed their data lags to inadequate guidance given to investees:

> "The bigger challenge has been actually getting the data… We probably didn't do a good enough job of expectation setting around all the data we required. And I think we viewed the data in two groups. There's output data and the outcomes data. The outputs data sits on housing partner systems… The outcome stuff we probably haven't done a very good job so far of establishing that with all housing partners."

This quote highlights the salience of data policies to SIP implementation. Establishing clear data policies at the front end of the pilot would have smoothed communication between each stakeholder. Given the novelty of using this asset class to address homelessness and the dearth of research on its efficacy, it is reasonable to assume sceptical private investors will understandably expect quality data for quarterly reports.

Discussion

This paper analysed the use of social investment to address homelessness in the UK. A multi-sector partnership collaborated in 2021 to purchase affordable housing for homeless households with social investment (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2021). The SIP had dual purposes. On the one hand, it protected vulnerable people during COVID-19 from infection. This, in turn, would help limit hospitalisation and preventable deaths. On the other hand, the SIP tested a long-term solution to homelessness. The expansion of public debt during COVID-19 and subsequent inflation crisis constrained national governments in Britain from independently stemming the growth of homelessness. Multi-sector partners financed a three-year evaluation study to grow the evidence base and market for this asset class. Previous studies have either ignored the asset class discussed in this paper (George, Rogers, and Roberts, 2020; Sebag and Pellizzari, 2020; Wang and Xu, 2022) or neglected the experiences (s) of different stakeholders involved with this asset class (Jarvis, 2020). As a result, housing scholars and policymakers lack knowledge about the implementation problems that stakeholders face with this product. The authors helped fill that knowledge gap with a qualitative analysis of SIP implementation.

Although programme implementation has been successful, the authors identified three general barriers that complicated the process: market constraints, tenant characteristics, and organisational incapacities. These findings extend Jarvis (2020) with evidence that housing price inflation slowed or impeded procurement in several case studies. This prevented some clients from receiving optimal accommodation in every SIP programme, regardless of the lease model. For programmes that provided temporary accommodation, inflation has complicated the move-on to independent housing and might undermine the social impact of those programmes. This observation contributes to the literature on social investment by identifying an implementation problem associated with an under-researched asset class (Jarvis, 2020; Wang and Xu, 2022) and housing studies by demonstrating how market constraints affect homeless service delivery in an unexamined context (see Painter and Culhane, 2021). The authors also showed that the characteristics of tenants created implementation problems. For programmes that delivered treatment first, tenants with complex needs required long-term rather than temporary support and struggled to prep for move-on when their lease ended. Housing First tenants also had complex needs, but accessed permanent accommodation that let caseworkers provide long-term support. The main implementation problem that some Housing First tenants posed was property relocation. If O2 did not have available units, those clients would not have moved, and their tenancy may have eventually been terminated. Findings on tenant characteristics are consistent with those reported by the literature on Housing First implementation in standard rental markets (see Carvalho and Furtado, 2022). The primary contribution of this paper to that literature is showing that social investment does not fix those problems. Lastly, the authors identified several organisational incapacities that hindered implementation. Some local governments complicated lease negotiations and the delivery of housing assistance to SIP tenants. Investors had inadequate evidence to plan the SIP and create performance measures that aligned with data protection rules. This unfortunately reflects an ongoing problem that has been noted elsewhere (Maduro, Pasi, and Misuraca, 2018; Muir et al., 2018). Some investees lacked knowledge of procurement and lagged with data production. These observations extend support for previous findings about the problems knowledge gaps create for social investment, but extend that literature by demonstrating the salience of local government to economic returns and investees to procurement.

A few limitations should be noted about this study. The first limitation is restricted access to case file data. The authors were unable to access case files from two case studies. As a result, they depended on interview data with staff to understand the implementation problems that investees faced in those agencies. This reduced the richness of the data that was used to analyse those cases. The second limitation is reliance on interview and archival data to conduct the analysis. Participant observation would have given detailed accounts of implementation problems that were unobservable with other kinds of qualitative data. A lot of important details may have consequently been excluded from this paper. The third limitation is gaps in the interviews that were conducted with investees. The authors were unable to interview caseworkers who delivered supportive services to O4. This made it difficult for the authors to know if implementation problems experienced by other investees were shared at that agency. More fundamentally, the study is restricted to evaluating a social investment programme. The use of social investment raises broader questions about the use of private finance and market-oriented solutions in tackling homelessness and whether the greater use of social investment is a desirable policy goal. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address this wider issue, although the evidence base to make direct comparisons between social investment and traditional forms of public financing is very limited (Fraser et al., 2018b; Wang and Xu, 2022).

Based on our analysis, we make the following policy recommendations. Policymakers should consider the needs of clients when selecting a leasing model. Clients with complex needs, in particular, need a long-term rather than temporary support. This means policymakers need current person-level data on homeless service users to prepare social investments for this population. Providing long-term leases will require governments to allocate funding for wraparound services that are open-ended and available to clients after they are independently housed, unless they no longer think they need the support. In addition, fund managers should consider housing market constraints when choosing a target population for properties bought with social investment financing. Each property market varies in the units that fund managers can purchase. Some property markets are better suited for single households, while others can best accommodate families with a social investment. Where social investments cannot be used to rehouse a subpopulation, the government should step in to fill the void with traditional grants.

Housing scholars can extend this study in several ways. The first extension should examine the way private investors perceive social investments like the one discussed in this paper. Identifying concerns of that stakeholder would help housing scholars plan research that motivates and/or informs future social investments that address homelessness. Another extension is to examine the impact of social investments on key stakeholders. This paper hypothesized how some implementation problems could affect economic and social impacts, but a thorough consideration of those effects on each stakeholder is needed to justify the future use of this finance model. A third extension is needed to understand the implementation of social investments in other countries. The political economy of the UK is different from that of others. As a result, the implementation problems discussed in this paper may be more or less present elsewhere. Future research is needed to produce knowledge that can be used to design and implement social investments of this sort.

Conclusions

In sum, this paper analysed implementation issues that key stakeholders faced whilst using social investment to address homelessness. The authors used interview and archival data to answer two questions: What barriers complicated implementation? How did key stakeholders deal with those problems? Property market constraints, tenant characteristics, and organisational incapacities were the main barriers to implementation. The authors then recommended several policies to help stakeholders navigate those constraints in the future.

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Research Notes

Part B

Profiles of Homeless People without Legal Residence in the Brussels-Capital Region

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Abstract_ *Brussels has a long tradition in collecting data on people experiencing homelessness (PEH), including undocumented people. Therefore, this case can serve as an inspiration for other European countries so that detailed and objective data can support informed discussion and tailored interventions for undocumented PEH anywhere. The target group is elucidated through a profile analysis based on the new surveys conducted during the Brussels homeless count of 2022. This survey made it possible to obtain a larger range of profile data.*

Keywords_ *Homelessness, migration, undocumented, Brussels, homeless counts*

Introduction: The Invisibility of Undocumented People Experiencing Homelessness in Brussels

Undocumented people are an important subgroup among people experiencing homelessness (28,5% in our sample). But because they are generally assumed by the government to have left the territory, they are rarely discussed in politics and in the media. For the same reason, they do not appear in official databases. Despite their numerous presence in various European countries, including in the Brussels-Capital Region, they thus stay invisible. The debate on solutions for them is also very polarised and therefore often generalised, and more preferably avoided. But without solutions, they will remain homeless, which impacts themselves, the homeless sector and the local area. This Research Note aims to provide objective data to support informed debate and tailored interventions. Undocumented people experiencing homelessness are not a homogeneous group. Therefore, solutions

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cannot be one-size-fits-all. Migration stories vary by the situation in the country of origin, and personal factors influencing the undocumented and homeless status in Belgium also play a role. Also, profiles are often stereotyped. The idea that we are talking about young, healthy single men must be challenged. This Research Note, therefore, explores the question: Who are the undocumented homeless people? To answer this question, we use the Brussels-Capital Region as a case study. This quantitative research sheds light on who the homeless undocumented people are in the Brussels-Capital Region, for whom we have data. In the near future, these results will be supplemented and improved, among other things, by conducting qualitative research as well.

Relevance

Finding sustainable solutions for undocumented homeless migrants is challenging, but starts with knowing who they are. Hermans et al. (2020) noted that, although the lack of accurate data on homelessness among migrants was first raised in 2002 in Europe, 18 years later, Belgium was still without detailed data. This was despite recalls at an European level. For example, in 2010, the *European Consensus Conference on Homelessness* urged the Commission to study the link between migration and homelessness, including its extent amongst non-nationals, and its impact on the homelessness sector. It is called to analyse the different options to respond to the findings, (Vandenbroucke et al., 2010, p. 24). Later, in 2021, the Lisbon Declaration was signed by the EU-member states and supporting organisations such as FEANTSA. Its ambition is to end homelessness by 2030. The signatories reaffirmed the need to understand how homelessness affects different groups, including migrants (European Union, 2021). Still very recently, researchers Haj Ahmad and Busch-Geertsema (2024) addressed migrant homelessness in the EU, but confirmed that no reliable data exists on undocumented migrants. As for Brussels, the relevance of research has been confirmed in the Masterplan to end homelessness by 2030, written by almost all Brussels social stakeholders. The document stresses the impact on the Region of homelessness among undocumented and regularising migrants (Bruss'help, 2024).

Learning Opportunity for Brussels and Europe

The 2024 EU homeless count teaches us that undocumented people are still not always included in the local censuses (Hermans et al., 2025). This is often the case because they are not considered a responsibility of the government level that oversees the country. The Brussels-Capital Region decided not to follow this approach, which seeks to analyse this group and to learn from this. Also, Brussels has over 16 years of experience collecting data on homelessness (La Strada, 2008). In 2022, a nationally harmonised questionnaire replaced the previous one, and data collection was expanded.[1] This revealed previously unavailable insights. Many cities have no data collection or are starting up, and therefore might want to learn from this expertise. Thanks to its experience and a strong local network, Brussels achieves high participation in its homelessness count. For example, in 2022, some of the Public Centres for Social Welfare (PCSW) joined. PCSWs are centres on a municipality level that offer different types of social aid (financial, legal, medical, etc.). This gave us some insight into undocumented people experiencing homelessness who did not stay in conventional dwellings such as squats or with third parties, and thus covered all the Ethos Light categories. Apart from Belgium, only the two participating cities from the Netherlands to the European count (Nijmegen and West-Friesland) and Košice (Slovakia) managed to do so, but their samples of undocumented people were too small for an analysis (a maximum of 24 people in Nijmegen).

Brussels as a case study

According to Turner (2016, p. 681), undocumented people belong to *"a group of people who reside permanently in a foreign country, but enjoy only limited partial civil rights"*. Therefore, they are not visible in official databases. We often do not know whether they have left the country, and they usually do not want to be found. Estimates of the number of undocumented people in Belgium are rare, often outdated, and figures differ widely: from 85 000 to 200 000 people (Roberfroid et al, 2015; van Meeteren et al, 2007; Debruyne and Geldof, 2021). They include individuals who move between different countries (Graas and Lelubre, 2023). In April 2023, Surkyn et. Al. (2023) published a study in which they estimated the number of people without legal residence based on extrapolations from the number of deaths in Belgium between 2012 and 2016. They concluded that about 112 000 irregular third-country nationals live in Belgium, 52 000 of whom are in the Brussels-Capital Region. For unregistered irregular Schengen citizens, the ratio was reversed: 217 000 for Belgium, of whom 10 000 are in Brussels (Verhaeghe, 2023)[2]. This is the most recent known estimate made for Belgium and Brussels. This means that on January 1st, 2018, 10.54% of the official Belgian population resided in the Brussels-Capital Region (Statbel, 2018), compared with 18.84% of the Belgian undocumented population according to Surkyn et al.

1 The questionnaire is identical to the ones systematised in Flanders and Wallonia by KULeuven and UCLouvain as part of their censuses.

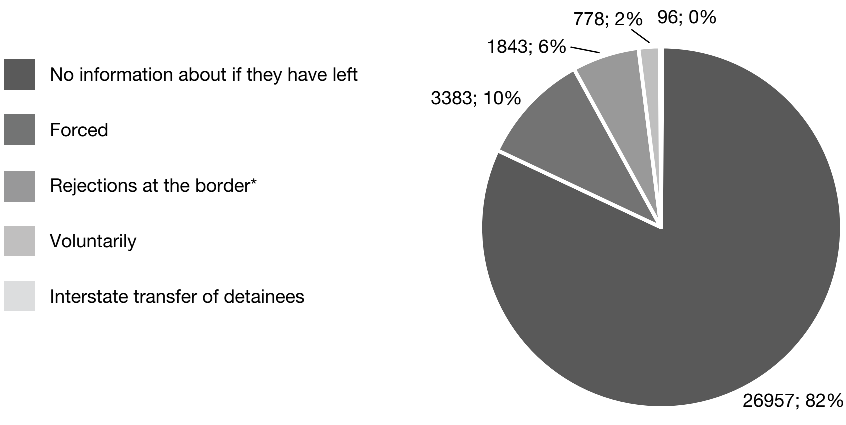
2 More information: MISAFIR: Population estimates and social composition of unregistered populations of the Brussels-Capital Region. Only the figure for the whole of Belgium was published in: "Migration and mortality: What do we know?"(Bircan et al., 2023)

When studying homelessness, similar difficulties are encountered. People experiencing homelessness are not always registered, and not all of them are easy to count or to obtain more information about. Yet we know that many people find themselves at the intersection of being homeless and being undocumented. On January 25, 2023, the coordinator of the homelessness sector in the Brussels-Capital Region, Bruss'help, calculated the percentage of undocumented people in almost all the emergency centres for homeless persons. On that day, 54.28% had no legal residence permit. This highlights that homelessness cannot be ended without taking them into consideration. It also shows that Brussels is an excellent place to study this target population.

Why are there Undocumented People (in Belgium)

Accurate data about the number of people who enter and leave Belgium does not exist. The only information available is that, according to the Belgian Foreign Affairs Service, in 2023, 33 057 orders to leave the territory were issued. This can mean that people have received multiple orders. In that same period, 6 100 official removals took place (Algemene Directie Dienst Vreemdelingenzaken [Department of Immigration] 2023, p. 4 and 2024, p.3):

Figure 1 - Number of orders to leave Belgium and the number of actual removals from the territory in 2023



** This means that foreign nationals and asylum seekers rejected at the border are returned to the country they came from." (Algemene Directie Dienst Vreemdelingenzaken, 2023, p.18)*

When interpreting Figure 1, one needs to consider that people do not always leave the territory within 30 days. They might do so in another year. Also, some will appeal against this decision. Some people also leave more than once within this period.

The reason why people stay was explained by Geert Devulder, from the Belgian service, who is responsible for the execution of the migration policy, explained why people stay (VRT, 2019): (in case of forced return) *"Many countries make it difficult to provide the necessary travel documents, especially if the person does not apply for them himself."* The nationality of the person must also be proven(De Windt and Temmerman, 2019). According to Ine Lietaert, professor from the University of Ghent, it is challenging for these countries to reintegrate people, especially large groups (De Windt and Temmerman, 2019). Thus, negotiations with them are necessary, which can be difficult. Furthermore, the policies their leaders pursue can sometimes be questionable on a human rights level (Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen, 2023 Human Rights Watch, 2023; Amnesty International, 2024).

"If the foreign national requests the travel documents [...], they will always be provided", Devulder confirmed. So once the decision is made, voluntary return is more effective. But when someone receives a negative decision in Belgium, he or she will be ordered to leave the territory within 30 days. This *"causes a panic reaction"*, professor Lietaert concludes, and *"then there is no mental space left to make such a life-determining decision"*(De Windt and Temmerman, 2019). This reduces the chance of voluntary return and increases the chance of homelessness. Professor Arjen Leerkens notes a paradox: as the difficulty and risk of reaching Europe increase, the importance of staying increases with it, even with an undocumented status (Nl Times, 2022).

Thus, although it is often seen by policymakers as the only solution (Radio 1, 2022; VRT NWS, 2023), the federal influx and return policy is unable to obtain what it tries to: not having undocumented people on its territory. Consequently, part of these people end up in the homeless sector, who have a hard time finding sustainable solutions for themselves (as they don't decide on migration policy). This 'elephant in the room' concept is also often present during political debates at the EU level. For example, the EU Migration Pact may tighten border controls and return procedures and provide a dispersal mechanism, but it also remains silent on those already in Europe without a legal residence status.

Methodological Framework

In English, people without legal residence are often referred to as undocumented people, or people without legal residence. In the Belgian Official Journal, they are referred to as *"foreign nationals who are present on a territory, but who do not or no longer meet the conditions to enter or to stay"* (Belgian official journal, 1980, Title 1, chapter 1, article 1, 4°). To be precise, people in a procedure are not considered to be undocumented in this analysis. For this Research Note, the ETHOS Light typology was used to define people experiencing homelessness. ETHOS Light is usually maintained at an EU level for statistical purposes to classify different living situations amongst these people. It consists of six categories (Edgar et al., 2007, p. 199):

1. People living rough
2. People in emergency accommodation
3. People living in accommodation for the homeless
4. People living in institutions
5. People living in non-conventional dwellings due to a lack of housing
6. Homeless people living temporarily with family and friends (due to lack of housing)

A category of people threatened with eviction was added for counting the homeless in the Brussels-Capital Region in 2022. A detailed definition of each category can be found on pages 10-17 of the counting report (Paquot, 2023).

Approach

For this research note, the database of the questionnaire from the November 2022 census was analysed, and the findings were supplemented with a literature review, as well as consultations with experts. The combination of experts by experience, professionals working with the target group, scientific experts in homelessness, statistics, and/or people without legal residence ensured an almost complete coverage of all available knowledge.

The Homelessness Census of 2022

The data collection for the homeless census of the Brussels-Capital Region consisted of three parts:

- During the night count, the people spending the night in public spaces on November 8th to 9th, 2022, between 11 pm and midnight, were counted (Paquot, 2023).
- Data centralisation is a collection of data encoded by 95 accommodation and reception facilities, related sectors, and Public Centres for Social Welfare (PCSW) covering all the Ethos Light categories. It contains the data of people who were assisted between 11 pm and midnight on the night of the census, as well as people who are in hospitals or people facing eviction who are estimated to become homeless within the 30 days following November 8, 2022. The data collected includes the number of people helped, the gender of the adults, the age group of the children, and the capacity of the organisation (Paquot, 2023).
- One questionnaire per supported person was completed by 42 organisations, being almost all officially recognised shelter services, multiple day services, and three PCSW. This happened for the people accommodated during the night of the count or accompanied between late October and mid-November. (Paquot, 2023) 37.9% of the questionnaires came from the PCSW of Brussels City, 16.4% from the New Samusocial, and 12.8% from the PCSW of Saint-Gilles. 2097 questionnaires have been retained after the cleanup (Paquot, 2023).

The night count and the data centralisation together form the official homeless census. Although the census is still an underestimation of the reality, as well as just a point-in-time count of a continuously changing situation, it offers the most complete overview of the homelessness situation in Brussels. Unfortunately, this database does not provide detailed information about the population. Therefore, the questionnaires were added.

Introduction of the Research Sample

Size and Number of Questionnaires per Group of Organisations

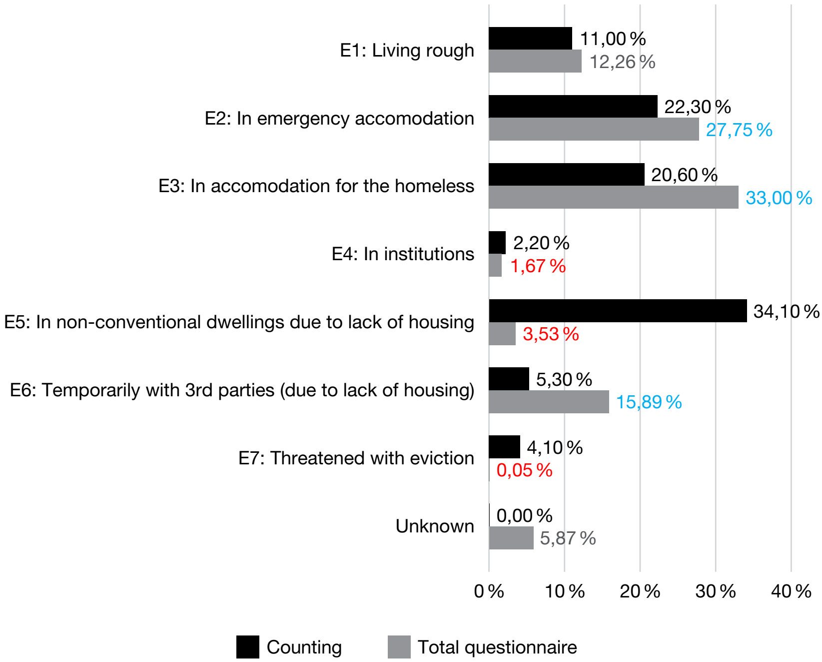
Five hundred and ninety-nine of the questionnaires collected were completed for undocumented people (28.5%).The 3 PCSW who participated in the questionnaires provided information about 309 undocumented homeless persons (51%). The 25 people for whom other centres approved by the government also completed a questionnaire, have been counted in the group of the PCSW. Two hundred and three people (34%) were identified across New Samusocial centres. An additional government-approved centre completed questionnaires for 25 of them, who are included in the New Samusocial count. Sixty-five people (11%) were assisted by 19 other centres approved by the government. Three-day services provided information about 22 people (4%).

Accompanied Minors

For ethical reasons, a questionnaire has been completed for each adult and for each unaccompanied child. Accompanied children have been included in the questionnaire of one of their parents. Altogether, 106 children under 18 years old were indicated for 67 single or two-parent families. 40 of them accompanied one child, 21 accompanied two children, 2 had 3 children with them, 2 had 4, and 2 had 5 children. Only the family composition, the number of children, and their ages were asked. Since we don't have other information, unless indicated otherwise, this group has been left out for this first analysis. Caution is needed when considering this group, as their residence status was not asked.

Representativeness of the Questionnaires compared with the general Count Database

Figure 2 - Representativeness questionnaires compared to general counting database



Despite being still incomplete (certainly for categories 1, 4, 5, and 6), the counting database is the most comprehensive there is. So, when we compare the representativeness of the questionnaires, we see that people in categories 2, 3, and 6 are far more represented in the questionnaire, and that people from categories 5 (and 7) are underrepresented. Certainly, for the squats, this could cause a bias in the results, which should be considered as a limitation of this pilot study.

Limitations

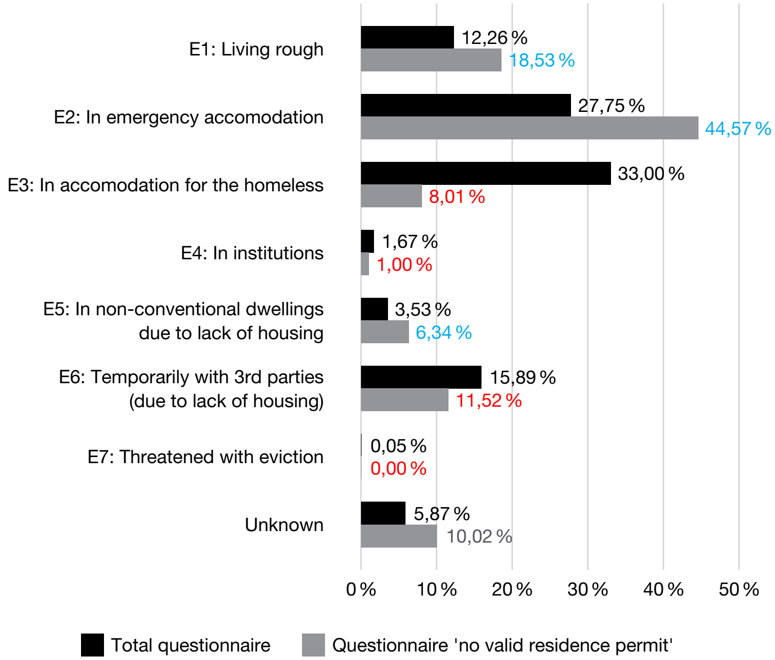
The author of the homeless census report, however, notes that the questionnaire is a pilot project needing improvement and broader institutional participation for more representative results(Paquot, 2023). Despite possible future improvements, we must bear in mind that it is often in the interest of the undocumented person to stay hidden and withhold certain information. Finally, the author warns that information about subjects such as health is not always precise because the questionnaires have mostly been completed by the social worker on his or her own (94.49%), and only 5.51% together with the person. One shall bear in mind that it's a point-in-time count of people in a situation that is constantly changing. Also note that only PCSW and municipalities can verify the residence status in the Population Register. Finally, as will be recommended in the next chapter, some questions must be redrafted.

Profile Analysis: main results

Living Situation

ETHOS Light Category

Figure 3 - Representation of undocumented people for each Ethos Light category (housing situation)



Looking at the situation of undocumented people in terms of distribution by housing in the survey, we expectedly find a significantly larger representation in Ethos Light categories 1, 2, and 5 compared with the survey as a whole. What is interesting is the lower representation in category 6. The expert committee noted that most undocumented people lack Urgent Medical Aid and thus are not known to the PCSWs who give access to this right, and who provided 51% of the questionnaires. This complements the scientific committee's observation that this result may introduce bias, as undocumented individuals have strong incentives to remain hidden.

Profile

Sex/Gender

Of the 19 people aged 18 or younger for whom an individual questionnaire was completed, 17 were men. The gender distribution amongst undocumented homeless individuals is very similar to the distribution of the entire population of the questionnaires: 33% to 35% are women, 65% to 64% are men, and 2% to 1% of people did not identify themselves with their assigned gender at birth ('X').

Age

Of these 599 people, 19 unaccompanied foreign minors were aged 18 or younger, with 15 of them aged between 16 and 18 years, and 4 younger than 16 years. It is recommended that for the next census, the age group should end at 17 years of age to capture the number of UFM.

Age	Figure 4 - Number of accompanied minors
0	11
1	11
2	16
3	9
4	9
5	11
6	3
7	11
8	1
9	1
10	5
11	3
12	3
13	3
14	2
15	2
16	1
17	3
Unknown	1
Total	106

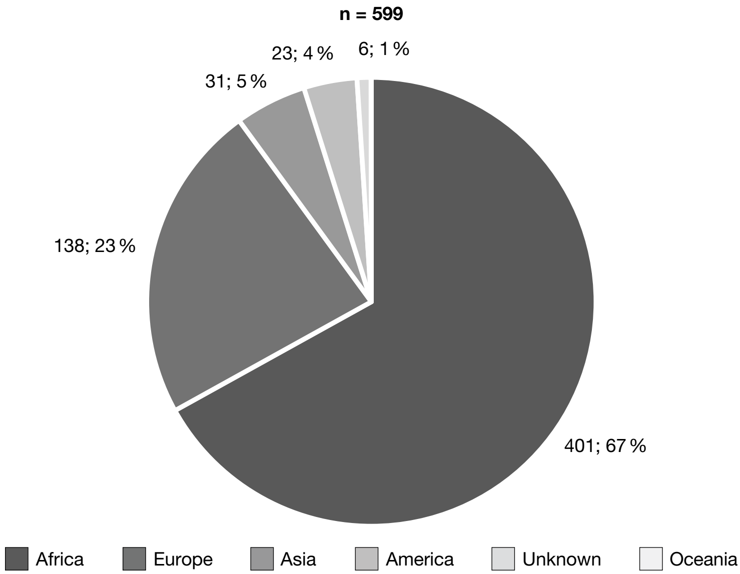
Age	Figure 5 - N° of adults and unaccompanied minors
Less than 16 years	4
Between 16 and 18 years	15
Between 19 and 24 years	36
Between 25 and 29 years	55
Between 30 and 39 years	138
Between 40 and 49 years	153
Between 50 and 59 years	104
Between 60 and 69 years	67
Between 70 and 79 years	17
80 years or older	6
Unknown	4
Total	599

The median age of the 67 accompanied children is notably low (four). For adults and UFM, the median age ranges from 40 to 49. 15.69% of this latter group are at least 60 years old.

Nationality

Eighty percent of the undocumented people in our database (481 persons) hold nationalities from outside the EU. 19% (112 persons) are EU-citizens, and for 1% (6 persons) the nationality was unknown. To verify the reliability of our database, we compared the ratio of irregular third-country nationals to irregular Schengen citizens with the study by Surkeyn et al. This team estimated that on an average day between 2012-2016, there were approximately 83.87% irregular third-country nationals and 16.13% irregular Schengen citizens in the Brussels-Capital Region. The researchers believe their estimation of irregular third-country nationals is likely quite accurate. However, they consider the estimation for irregular Schengen residents to be potentially an underestimation due to the criteria of free movement within the Schengen area (Verhaeghe, 2023). In our database, the ratio of non-Schengen citizens to Schengen citizens is 86.85% to 13.15%. No new countries joined the Schengen zone between 2012 and 2022. If we subdivide into regions according to the 'Standard country or area codes for statistical use' of the United Nations(United Nations, n.d.), we see that the majority of the population comes from Africa (67%) and Europe (23%).

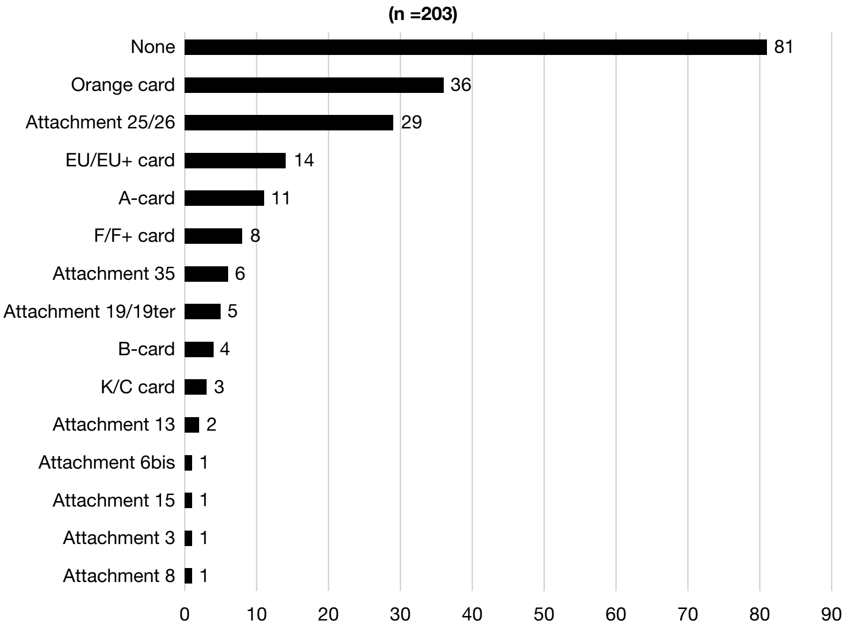
Figure 6 - Regions



If we go into more detail about the countries, we see that 49% of the people (296) come from only 4 countries being Morocco, Congo, Algeria, and Poland.

Former Residence Status

Figure 7 - Last residence permit



The last residence permits of 396 out of 599 people were unknown, so they were excluded from this analysis. This may introduce a bias. Of the 203 individuals, 39.9% (81) never had a residence permit before becoming undocumented. Some still may have applied for regularisation—such as family reunification or humanitarian grounds—but during these procedures, one does not receive a temporary permit (Fedasil, 2024b). The same applies to those seeking recognition as 'non-removable' (AgII, 2024a; AgII, 2024c), meaning they were refused at first, but cannot return to their country of origin due to risks like persecution (Danckaerts, 2022) or because their country of origin refuses to give them a document that gives permission to pass (Devillé, 2008) (e.g., in the absence of a readmission agreement).

Consider that in Belgium, lacking a residential address limits access to regularisation procedures like humanitarian or medical regulation (9bis, 9ter) (AgII, 2024b; AgII, 2024d). We also noted that certain presumed residence documents do not allow a legal stay. This highlights the policy volatility and complexity of residence statuses, making accurate data collection challenging. Nearly 17.73 percent (36 out of 203) held an Orange card, indicating a pending regularisation procedure, which gives them a temporary residence permit. The submitted request could be: international protection, family reunification, studies, medical regularisation, a victim of human trafficking and smuggling, and non-accompanied minors (AgII, 2023a). Given these challenges, future surveys could ask about the reason/type of request and the residence permit duration rather than the permit type.

Family Composition

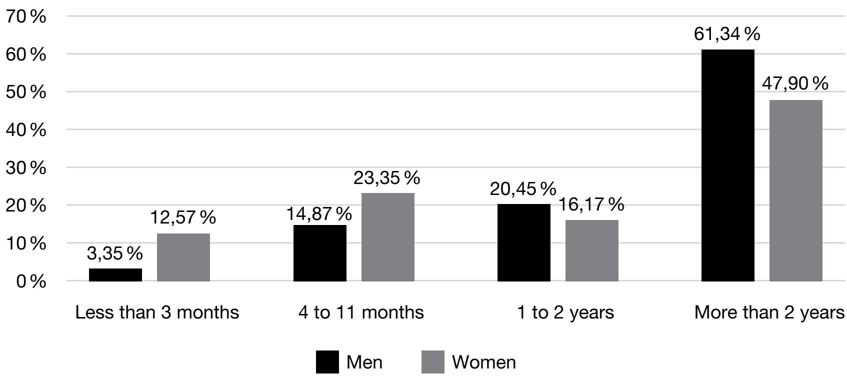
As to the family composition, unsurprisingly, as for the sample as a whole, the vast majority (or 87%, or 508 people out of 582 for whom the family composition was known) were single without children. 55 people (10%) were single with (a) child(ren), 12 (2%) were couples with a child(ren), and 7 (1%) were couples without children. Children refer to the person's own children. Some additional information was provided for 8 single individuals without children. Five of them lived together or were in the company of a sibling, 2 singles lived together with a third party, and 1 single adult was accompanied by his parents. This example shows that being single without children does not automatically mean that these people do not have close relationships with other people in Belgium. Only 1 person (single, without children) in our sample had a domestic animal (a dog). Comparing men and women, 97% (367 men) of all men were single without children. Similarly, 68% (131 women) of the women were single without children, but 29% (55 women) were also single with a child (ren).

Situation of Homelessness

Duration of Homelessness

Most of the 599 undocumented people in our sample were homeless for more than 2 years (56 %).

Figure 8: Period without stable housing (M vs. W). n = 436



Excluding the unknown, and considering both genders as 100%, we see that women are slightly less represented in groups that stay 1-2 years or more than 2 years homeless, although this still applies to 64.07% of them. Comparing individuals with and without health problems (leaving out the 138 persons for whom the health situation is unknown again, as well as the 98 persons for whom the duration is unknown), analysis shows that 67,78% (183 people) of the 270 individuals with health problems experience a duration of over two years of homelessness, whereas this is the case for 31,18% (29 out of 93 people) without health problems.

Health and Help

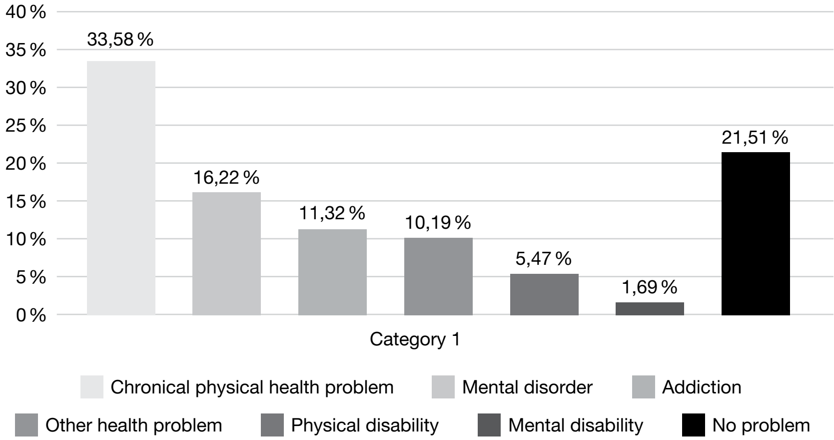
Health Insurance

The PCSW is the institution allocating the Urgent Medical Aid (UMA). This is often the only official aid available to undocumented individuals in Belgium (families with minor children may also be eligible for housing at a reception centre). This aid covers a range of situations, from serious accidents or diseases to a simple visit to the GP (FOD MI, 2016). Most undocumented homeless individuals known by the PCSW have UMA (98%). This is significantly lower for other institutions (56%). Hence, these statistics are probably more accurate. However, considering that these institutions also often try to facilitate UMA access for all, this figure is still likely to be an overestimation when compared with the entire undocumented homeless population. This is probably because individuals not identified by any institution are likely to be the most marginalised in terms of access to their rights.

Health Situation

When interpreting the health situation, some limitations need to be considered: The questionnaires have been completed by the social worker, not by medical professionals. Also, not all medical information is known and frequently based on assumptions (Paquot, 2023). The 138 people for whom this information is not known were removed from the sample. Further, since the PCSW allocates the UMA, the prevalence of health problems has also been investigated separately for these centres. This allows us to observe that the prevalence of people without medical problems is higher for institutions that are not PCSW (32.52% to 15.74%), which is probably a more accurate percentage.

Figure 9: Prevalence of the health problem (n=599)



Chronic physical health problems are most prevalent amongst undocumented homeless individuals with known health status in our database (33.58% or 178 times), followed by mental disorders (16.22% or 86 times). Attention: Some people have multiple types of health problems. The figure above shows how common a particular type of health problem is in relation to the others. Chronic physical health problems include conditions like cancer, diabetes, chronic hepatitis, HIV, arthritis, etc. Mental disorders encompass depression, trauma, schizophrenia, eating disorders, etc. We have no insight into the prevalence of the specific diseases.

Legal Assistance and Future Orientation Support

The questionnaire only asks about legal aid from a PCSW, which undocumented people don't receive. However, various regional and non-profit initiatives do offer socio-legal aid. Fedasil itself also has an information point and, since 2020, a mobile team. Though awareness about this among the target group is uncertain. Furthermore, helping people without stable housing is also challenging. Federal voluntary return programmes have existed since 1984 (Fedasil, 2009). Additionally, since 2021, there are so-called 'ICAM coaches' to whom people are invited by letter or can make an appointment themselves. If a legal stay seems possible, the person themselves must apply. Otherwise, a return is arranged. If the person refuses, the risks of illegal stay are explained (the risk of forced return and a possible entry ban), and the trajectory ends (Fedasil, 2024a; Dienst vreemdelingenzaken, 2024).

As mentioned earlier, once the decision is made, voluntary return is more effective than forced return. Yet, we also saw that there were only 778 departures in 2023. A 2015 KU Leuven study for Fedasil found that discussing voluntary return is difficult: social workers report defensive reactions (Bossens et al., 2015). A holistic approach called ‘future orientation’ was recommended. This was developed by some organisations in Brussels after the last big regularisation campaign in 2009. Hereby, all the options are discussed: from return to legalisation, to staying in Belgium undocumented. In 2024, the PCSW of Brussels City successfully started inviting undocumented people with relatively stable housing to reflect on their future. Inspired by a Utrecht model (the Netherlands), similar projects started in Ghent (2022) and other cities (all providing housing), in collaboration with Fedasil and others.

As announced in their Masterplan to end homelessness by 2030, Brussels social stakeholders recommend expanding the Brussels City project to other PCSWs and offering people accommodation during their trajectory. Doing so, homeless people could also qualify. Entering this trajectory is voluntary, and for those who don’t join, the Masterplan explores expanding temporary housing options. A review of past and current initiatives is underway to shape and adapt the trajectory over time. Success will depend on reaching and convincing the target group, providing stabilising accommodation, psychological counselling, sufficient and skilled staff, strong partnerships, and so on. Smooth processing of applications is also key.

External factors also matter. For instance, except in 2023, humanitarian regularisations have declined since 2011 (Myria, 2024; Algemene Directie Dienst Vreemdelingenzaken, 2024). Some realism will also be necessary. Probably not everyone will find a solution, but documenting these cases could inspire future policy decisions.

Conclusions

Collecting data is crucial to counter stereotypes about undocumented PEH, such as the majority being former applicants for international protection or that most homeless people are undocumented. Therefore, this study responds to the European and academic call for data. The 2024 EU homeless count teaches us that undocumented people are still not always included in local censuses (Hermans et al., 2025). The EU capital, with its long experience in data collection on PEH, including undocumented people, offers a valuable case study to inspire other European cities. Subsequently, we recommend using these data to discuss undocumented people at all political levels, especially national and European levels. This study provides objective insights into the scale, urgency, and diversity of the population concerned, encouraging tailor-made solutions.

In Belgium, a lever for debate could be the upcoming interregional cooperation agreement (Accord de coopération concernant le sans-abrisme et l’absence de chez-soi, forthcoming), in which all signatories will commit to ending homelessness by 2030 by aligning policies and cooperation. At the European level, a renewed version of the Lisbon Declaration should mention that eradicating homelessness requires addressing the issue of undocumented people. In this respect, the elephant in the room needs to be made visible.

The scientific committee of this study and the Brussels homeless sector stress that the situation of undocumented PEH and the pressure on the EU capital and its homeless sector must be acknowledged, as migration and homelessness are interconnected. This can be extrapolated to other places in Europe. It must also be noted that leaving this target group in the streets, squats, or emergency accommodation is not a solution. In this respect, the jury of the European Consensus Conference on Homelessness in 2010 stated that legal barriers may trap them in staying long-term in emergency accommodation, harming well-being and contradicting the goal of the homeless sector to provide long-term solutions (Vandenbroucke et al., 2010).

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The Role of Real-Time Data in Ending Homelessness: Insights and Perspectives from Nordic Countries

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Abstract_ *This paper examines how real-time data can accelerate progress towards ending homelessness across the Nordic countries. Drawing on OECD recommendations, it contrasts the limits of infrequent point-in-time counts with dynamic systems, such as by-name lists and integrated homelessness information platforms. A municipal case from Kolding, Denmark, shows how a by-name list and dashboard support early identification, coordinated responses, and monitoring of inflows, outflows, and returns. A European comparator, Ireland's PASS, illustrates standardized monthly and quarterly reporting that informs policy while supporting case management. Using research literature and the authors' practical experience in homelessness work, the paper examines data practices in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. It then maps implementation barriers—privacy laws, fragmented governance, uneven IT capacity—and opportunities, including leveraging existing administrative registers and shared standards. The paper argues for cross-Nordic data strategies that pair real-time measurement with policy and service reforms, aiming for homelessness to be rare, brief, and non-recurring.*

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Introduction: Understanding the Problem

Despite strong welfare systems, Nordic countries continue to struggle with homelessness. A key challenge lies in insufficient data collection methods that fail to capture the dynamic nature of homelessness. The OECD's *Toolkit to Combat Homelessness* (OECD, 2004) and *Monitoring Framework to Measure Homelessness* (OECD, 2025) highlight data gaps as a major barrier to effective policy making. The OECD recommends the adoption of dynamic data systems, such as case management platforms and real-time monitoring, to improve service coordination and early intervention. The challenge is no longer whether data matters—but how quickly governments can transition to dynamic, actionable data systems that drive meaningful change.

The article describes the current state of data collection on homelessness in the Nordic countries and the emerging use of real-time data, using the OECD recommendations and the ETHOS typology [1] as key reference frameworks. Methodologically, this article is based on relevant research literature and the practical experiences of the authors, all of whom are engaged in homelessness work through research, NGOs, and public agencies in their respective countries. Their firsthand knowledge of measurement practices and ongoing developments provides the foundation for a comparative analysis, highlighting implementation barriers and emerging opportunities to enhance decision-making, resource allocation, and coordination among stakeholders through the use of real-time data.

In the Nordic countries, service-based counts have played a crucial role in estimating the number of people experiencing homelessness, and have been instrumental in shaping both local and national homelessness strategies. The counts conducted in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland have provided long-term, comparable trends that have formed the basis for strategic initiatives and action plans (Benjaminsen et al., 2020). In contrast, Iceland has relied on occasional local counts, such as those recently conducted in Reykjavik (Deild málaflokks heimilislausra, 2021).

[1] ETHOS – European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion. https://www.feantsa.org/download/ethos2484215748748239888.pdf

The relative simplicity and efficiency of nationwide mapping studies of homelessness have favoured the use of this method to inform national policymaking, especially for long-term planning that relies on broad trends. These methods offer valuable overviews, especially to produce national-level data statistics, but also provide data at the municipality and city level. It largely covers all the ETHOS light categories (OECD, 2025). Comparisons between countries and locally are also possible. A strength of the service-based method is that a wide range of informants, from institutions and prisons to outreach workers, participate, but it requires a large number of services nationally. This is a demanding process, and the counts cannot be conducted annually. They are carried out over a single week every 4th year in Norway, every 6th year in Sweden, Denmark counts every other year, and Finland every year, but with a simplified method. A weakness of service-based methods is that the number of homeless people may be underestimated and that people who are not in regular contact with services may be under-represented (Braga et al, 2024). The service-based mappings, which are carried out on a point-in-time basis, can fail to capture the dynamic aspects of homelessness, such as shifts in demographic trends and the duration of homelessness. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize the need for more frequent and granular data collection in line with the OECD recommendations.

By-name lists and/or homelessness information management systems address some limitations of PIT counts while supporting homelessness response at the local level. By tracking homelessness across multiple agencies and services over time, they allow for the identification of trends, evaluate the effectiveness of implemented policies/working methods, allocate resources effectively, and respond proactively. The focus is usually not only on immediate housing needs but also on relevant underlying individual circumstances, such as mental health problems, substance abuse, family dynamics, or financial instability, offering opportunities for predictive analysis, targeted prevention, early intervention, and tailored support.

Real-time data has the potential to reshape not only homelessness policy but also the way homelessness itself is conceptualised. Traditional counts define homelessness as a status measured at a single moment, reinforcing a static understanding of the phenomenon. This risks overlooking people who cycle in and out of homelessness, as well as those in informal or hidden living situations, and thereby narrowing both the perceived scale of the issue and the range of legitimate policy responses. In contrast, continuous monitoring through by-name lists or integrated homelessness information systems frames homelessness as a dynamic process. This approach enables policymakers to assess inflow, duration, and returns to homelessness, shifting the focus from reporting prevalence to evaluating system performance. When designed to include individuals beyond formal service pathways, such systems provide a more ethical and realistic foundation for prevention, early intervention, and resource allocation.

This paper builds on the OECD recommendations and examines the state of real-time monitoring systems in the Nordic countries, and considers the challenges and opportunities to upgrade the homelessness measurement methods currently in use. The starting point is a case study from Kolding Municipality (Denmark), which offers a concrete example of how real-time tracking is implemented in a Nordic setting. Then, the paper offers a comparative analysis with Ireland's data-driven approach, which represents a benchmark in this area for the ability to produce monthly and quarterly national statistics on homelessness and service use. The paper continues by offering perspectives from Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden – showcasing regional experiences with homelessness data and policy. We conclude with a shared vision for the future. By strengthening data-driven approaches, Nordic countries can move from reactive responses to proactive interventions, paving the way for a future where homelessness is rare, brief, and non-recurring.

Learning from Case Studies

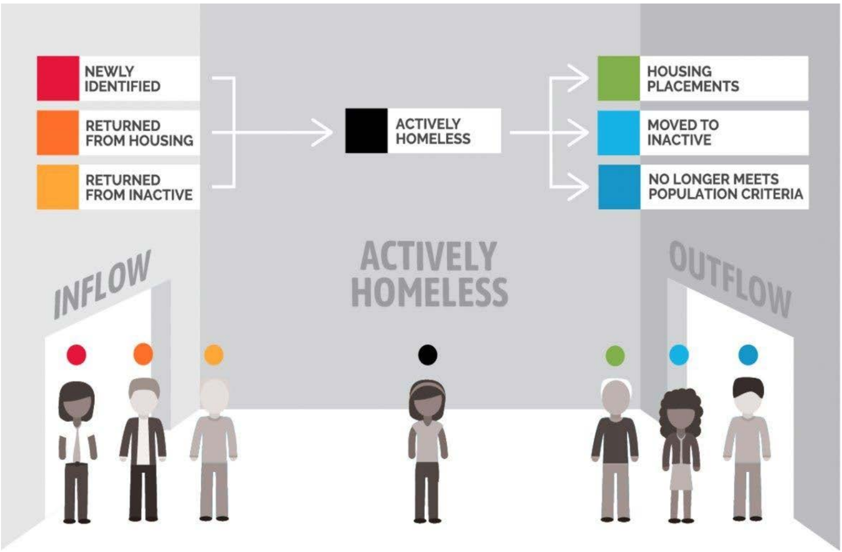
Kolding Municipality: Leading the way in real-time data for homelessness intervention at the local level

Kolding Municipality, Denmark, has been at the forefront of utilizing real-time data to address homelessness through its collaboration with Hjemløsninger, [2] a non-profit organization inspired by an approach called Built for Zero [3], developed by the non-profit Community Solutions.

2 See: https://hjemloesninger.dk/

3 See: https://community.solutions/built-for-zero/the-movement/

Figure 1 – Illustration of key data points in the By-Name List, borrowed from Community Solutions



Kolding launched a By-Name List (BNL) and dashboard system in June 2024 in collaboration with Hjemløsninger, with funding from Oak Foundation Denmark. The BNL is a dynamic, real-time database that provides case managers with person-specific insights into individuals' needs, housing status, and systemic barriers, enabling immediate interventions. It is structured around seven key data points (see Figure 1) that ensure accurate tracking and targeted support. The BNL covers the same homelessness situations used in the Danish national homelessness count, with the planned inclusion of domestic violence shelters. In addition, a dashboard system aggregates data from the BNL, offering decision-makers a strategic overview to identify trends, address bottlenecks, and optimize resource allocation.

In Denmark, responses to homelessness are primarily the responsibility of municipalities, which operate or fund most relevant services. Consequently, most data in the Kolding system stems from municipal actors, where information is recorded as part of daily service work across internal departments. The municipality also collaborates with external partners such as regional psychiatry services, the Danish Prison and Probation Service, housing associations, and civil society organizations. These actors do not input data directly but, based on the necessary consent, notify the municipality when they encounter people in or at risk of homelessness. Municipal caseworkers then register these cases in the BNL.

Since both internal and external actors report, when they identify people who have lost or are at risk of losing their homes, the system captures a wide range of situations. This includes people staying temporarily with friends or relatives or facing eviction, meaning that hidden homelessness is largely visible in the local data.

Extracts from the notes of a meeting between Kolding Municipality and Hjemløsninger on February 5, 2025:

"Real-time data allows us to intervene before individuals reach shelters or the street. By pinpointing risks early, we can shift from crisis management to proactive prevention, ensuring timely support that keeps people in stable housing and out of homelessness altogether" (Marianne Petersen, Center Manager for Social Pedagogical Guidance and Drop-in Centers in Kolding Municipality)

"With real-time data, we gain a precise, dynamic picture of homelessness, allowing us to act faster and more strategically. We can identify at-risk individuals before they lose their homes, deliver targeted support to those currently homeless, and prevent recurrence by tracking past cases – ensuring not just faster exits from homelessness, but long-term stability. This isn't just about saving lives; it's about optimizing public resources and designing a system that prevents homelessness from happening in the first place." (Ulrich Guldahl Poulsen, Center Manager for Substance Abuse Treatment and Socially Vulnerable Groups in Kolding Municipality)

Although still in its early stages, Kolding's framework has accelerated progress in the local homelessness response system. Progress refers primarily to system capacity rather than an immediate fall in total homelessness. Process indicators show faster exits among rehoused individuals, and a first positive systemic shift occurred in March 2025, when monthly outflows had met or exceeded inflows. By continuously tracking homelessness inflows and outflows, the system in Kolding supports immediate assistance and also helps uncover systemic barriers, such as landlord discrimination and mismatches between housing supply and individual needs. This data-driven approach provides a foundation for achieving a measurable end state where homelessness is rare, brief, and non-recurring. As a pilot municipality, Kolding has invested time in translating the approach to a Danish municipal context. With the core elements defined, subsequent municipalities are expected to implement and accelerate progress faster.

Consistent with findings from a recent Danish PhD on systemic change in municipal welfare systems, population-level effects typically follow capability-building (Lindegaard 2025). Over the next two years, an independent evaluation will be conducted to assess the systemic changes and economic benefits resulting from the implementation in Kolding.

In a European context, the Built for Zero methodology, which underpins Hjemløsninger's approach, has also been successfully implemented in British communities, such as Brent, Calderdale, and Rhondda Cynon Taff, with the British non-profit organization, Crisis, as a supporting backbone organization. These communities, like Kolding, use real-time data systems to track individuals experiencing homelessness, uncover systemic barriers, and foster cross-sector collaboration. They demonstrate how shared methodologies can adapt to different contexts and community sizes, while maintaining a common focus on systemic improvement and timely interventions.

The Pathway Accommodation and Support System (PASS) – A National Approach to Homelessness Data in Ireland [4]

The Pathway Accommodation and Support System (PASS) is an online emergency bed management and client support system used across all 31 local authorities in Ireland. It is managed by Dublin City Council via the Dublin Region Homeless Executive (DRHE) and is designed to ensure standardized national data collection and reporting on homelessness. Under Section 10 of the *Housing Act 1988*, all homeless service providers receiving state funding are required to input data into PASS. The system is structured around nine regional authorities, each responsible for governance and reporting within its respective areas.

PASS compiles and reports homelessness data on a monthly and quarterly basis, offering a consistent and comparable dataset across all municipalities. The metrics range from the use of housing services (e.g., stays in emergency or temporary accommodation), reasons for homelessness (e.g., evictions), homelessness exits, cases where homelessness was prevented, [5] and include some demographic information of the clients (age, gender, nationality, household composition). In addition, PASS allows for the tracking of Housing First tenancies on a monthly/quarterly basis.

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4 This section is based on information from Pathie Maphosa (Head of Research, Dublin Region Homeless Executive) sent to Louise Marie Pedersen, Hjemløsninger, November 11, 2024. Draft fact-checked by Pathie Maphosa on February 26th 2025. Further details on the origins of the PASS data and some of the modifications made to the system over the past decade can be found in an appendix to Baptista et al. (2022).

5 For example, this is the case of households presenting to local authorities who are subsequently rehoused without entering emergency accommodation.

This data is extracted at fixed intervals, ensuring comparability between municipalities and allowing for trend analysis over time. The PASS data has also been used for more in-depth analyses, including a cluster analysis of homelessness in Dublin (Waldron et al., 2019), studies on service use patterns and the needs of homeless families in Dublin (Waldron et al., 2024), and investigations of the causes of homelessness as well as to prevention and exit among young people and families experiencing homelessness (Maphosa and Mayock, 2025; Maphosa, 2025). While PASS does not provide real-time public reporting at a national level, it does facilitate real-time case-specific tracking of households. Local Authority Housing Support Officers use PASS to track households and provide housing support. Additionally, state-funded NGO homeless services are mandated through Service Level Agreements to provide client support, which is documented in PASS to facilitate tailored pathways out of homelessness.

Comparison Between PASS and Hjemløsninger

Both the system in use at Kolding and PASS contribute to homelessness management and data collection, but their approaches differ in scope and emphasis. PASS is designed as a standardized national data collection system that supports long-term policy analysis. PASS ensures consistent and aggregated data collection for government decision-making while also assisting local authorities in case management. In contrast, Hjemløsninger integrates real-time individual tracking only at the municipal level and prioritizes direct intervention and localized service adjustments, allowing the municipality to respond dynamically to immediate homelessness challenges.

PASS plays a crucial role in daily homelessness operations, supporting processes such as bed bookings and comprehensive client case management. Local Authority Housing Support Officers rely on PASS to make informed decisions about resource allocation, particularly regarding bed availability and housing support services. The system also helps identify individuals who lack formal housing applications, enabling targeted assistance to those at risk. PASS primarily tracks individuals in emergency accommodation and those engaging with local authorities. It is unable to systematically track all forms of hidden homelessness at a national level, though prevention officers at the local level document at-risk cases and attempt to implement advocacy and interventions.

Hjemløsninger, on the other hand, provides a dashboard system that aggregates municipal data, enabling authorities to monitor homelessness patterns over time and analyze systemic barriers. By registering all individuals in various homelessness situations according to the ETHOS Light definition, Hjemløsninger captures a broader dataset that includes those in insecure or inadequate housing.

Figure 3 -PASS and Hjemløsninger compared

Feature	PASS (Ireland)	Hjemlosninger (Denmark)
Scope	National system covering all local authorities	Localized system targeting specific municipalities
Data Collection	Real-time updates to bed bookings and client case management functions	Individual tracking of all individuals experiencing homelessness for case management and interventions
Reporting	Standardized monthly and quarterly reports; NGO-funded services also submit KP/s monitored quarterly by the DRHE National Quality Standards team	Daily real-time updates on individuals, supplemented by at least monthly aggregated local trend analysis
Focus	Aggregate data for policy evaluation and funding; also facilitates care and case management by NGOs	Real-time individual tracking for dynamic case management and system-level adjustments, ensuring timely interventions and cross-sector coordination
Decision-Making	Supports long-term policy development and facilitates localized resource allocation, including bed capacity management	Enables immediate interventions and localized resource allocation
Outcome Measurement	Measures national homelessness trends; used daily for operational processes, including bed bookings, care, and case management	Tracks real-time individual progress and local trends

The Benefits of Real-Time Data

Real-time data systems can drive systemic change because they provide a significantly improved foundation to:

- *Respond swiftly:* Enable early intervention to prevent long-term homelessness.
- *Optimize resources:* Ensure housing and support services are allocated where they are most needed.
- *Enhance accountability:* Track progress through measurable goals and performance indicators.
- *Increase visibility and transparency:* Offer a clearer understanding of homelessness trends and the impact of interventions, enabling real-time evaluation and evidence-based decision-making.

- *Foster cross-sector collaboration:* Strengthen partnerships between municipalities, service providers, and national policymakers by creating a shared, data-driven approach to homelessness solutions.

In Kolding, real-time data has played a crucial role in uncovering systemic barriers. These localized insights have not only improved immediate responses but also revealed trends and challenges that informed broader national strategies. For example, by continuously tracking inflows and outflows, Kolding has generated actionable data that highlights gaps in housing systems or service delivery, providing critical evidence for national policy adjustments. By leveraging local data to identify systemic issues and inform evidence-based interventions, Kolding strengthens the connection between municipal action and national policymaking. This integrated approach ensures that local successes contribute to a broader understanding of homelessness, enabling more responsive and effective national strategies.

Implementing Real-Time Data Across the Nordics: Challenges and Opportunities

The implementation of real-time data systems in homelessness interventions presents both challenges and opportunities across the Nordic region. While Nordic countries share a strong welfare foundation, differences in political priorities, data collection methodologies, and administrative structures create diverse landscapes for adopting dynamic data systems. This section examines how real-time data fits into the current homelessness responses in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, drawing on a collaborative and comparative qualitative methodology.

The authors of this paper all work with homelessness through research, NGOs, and agencies in their home countries, and they contribute with their expertise through cross-national exchanges on how real-time data systems are being developed and applied at the national level. National contributors shared insights on policy frameworks, administrative arrangements, service delivery models, and technical aspects of data systems. These inputs were reviewed and discussed collectively to identify shared themes and country-specific differences. The analysis follows a qualitative comparative framework, aiming to highlight key implementation barriers and explore how real-time data can enhance decision-making, resource allocation, and coordination among stakeholders. While the collaborative process reflects a diversity of perspectives, the findings are contextual and exploratory, offering a synthesized understanding of common challenges and emerging opportunities rather than exhaustive national case studies.

Denmark

Real-time data in homelessness response. Denmark's homelessness response relies on biennial national surveys by VIVE - The Danish Center for Social Science Research. While valuable for monitoring broad trends, these methods provide only static snapshots, failing to capture homelessness dynamics throughout the year. The latest VIVE report (VIVE, 2024) estimates that 12 000-15 000 people experience homelessness annually—far exceeding official point-in-time survey results. This underscores the need for real-time data to track inflows and outflows for a more precise and responsive approach. Denmark's National guidelines for Homelessness Response (Socialstyrelsen, 2020) emphasize systematic documentation of social interventions, yet there is no unified national approach to data collection. Currently, Kolding Municipality is the only one implementing real-time data in its homelessness response. The absence of similar initiatives highlights the need for national guidance on standardized data collection and cross-sector collaboration.

Challenges in implementing real-time data. While real-time homelessness data has the potential to transform local service delivery, only Kolding Municipality has begun implementing it. This makes it difficult to predict the exact challenges other municipalities might face, but several structural and financial barriers are anticipated. There are no national guidelines or standardized frameworks for implementing real-time data tracking at the municipal level. As a result, local governments must navigate the process independently, leading to uncertainty about best practices and technical requirements. While existing municipal IT systems can be adapted to support real-time data, municipalities lack guidance on how to do so effectively.

Financial and technical constraints also pose challenges. Smaller municipalities may lack the resources to upgrade IT infrastructure and train staff to handle real-time data securely and correctly. Additionally, concerns about data protection and compliance with GDPR can make cross-agency data-sharing complex. Finally, real-time data is not explicitly prioritized in national homelessness policies, meaning municipalities have little external incentive to invest in implementing these systems. Without political and financial support, local governments may struggle to justify the costs of implementation.

Potential benefits of real-time data. Despite these challenges, real-time data offers significant advantages for local homelessness responses. By continuously tracking inflows and outflows from homelessness services, municipalities can respond more effectively to emerging trends such as seasonal fluctuations in rough sleeping or sudden increases in housing demand. Kolding Municipality's efforts highlight the potential for improving resource allocation. With real-time tracking, municipalities can align housing and support services with actual demand, ensuring shelter occupancy is optimized and people transition to permanent housing more quickly. Real-time data would also enhance local service coordination. By integrating information across shelters, social services, healthcare providers, and employment agencies, municipalities can provide more personalized and timely interventions. Beyond immediate crisis management, real-time tracking strengthens prevention efforts. Identifying individuals at risk of homelessness early allows municipalities to intervene before they lose housing, potentially preventing homelessness altogether.

While Kolding is currently leading the way, scaling to larger municipalities in the Nordic context is primarily organisational, since municipalities run the homelessness response and already hold most relevant administrative data. A practical path is to centralise existing feeds in a municipal hub under shared standards and extend coverage one priority population at a time (e.g., chronic homelessness, people sleeping rough, single adults) until citywide; larger cities take longer because more partners and workflows must align, not because the technology changes. International precedents show feasibility at metropolitan scale—for example, Chattanooga, United States (Quality Data for all single adults); [6] Thurston County, United States (Quality Data for all single adults); [7] Simcoe County, Canada (countywide by-name data via HIFIS); [8] and Adelaide inner city, Australia (public monthly dashboard and by-name list). [9] With clear implementation guidance, dedicated funding for integration, and a shared municipal framework, other Nordic municipalities can adopt the model to speed responses, improve resource allocation, and strengthen prevention.

Finland

*Real-time data in homelessness response***.** The Housing Finance and Development Centre of Finland (Ara) has published an annual national report on homelessness statistics since 1987. Ara gathers data from municipalities through a comprehensive survey that considers service users as of November 15th. The survey relies on various sources, including social welfare and housing service registers, municipal rental housing applicant lists, the Social Insurance Institution's records, and the Population Information Register. The methodology and sources for data collection differ from one municipality to another, and the reliability of the information is difficult to evaluate. Furthermore, the survey only collects information on the number of homeless people, and lacks insights into the profile of the homeless, or

6 See: https://community.solutions/case-studies/chattanooga-achieves-quality-data-milestone-for-all-single-adults

7 See: https://community.solutions/case-studies/thurston-county-washington-certified-for-quality-data-for-all-single-adults-experiencing-homelessness

8 See: https://caeh.ca/bright-spot-simcoe-county-by-name-data-hifis/

9 See: https://saaeh.org.au/azp-monthly-dashboard/

the reasons that have caused homelessness and barriers to acquiring housing. Despite its limitations, Ara's approach is regarded as best practice for integrating multiple data sources (OECD, 2024).

The information published by Ara does not have the status of Official Statistics of Finland (OSF). Data collection for the national PIT count is not legislatively regulated and relies on municipalities voluntarily responding to the survey. In 2023, Statistics Finland assessed the feasibility of using register data to quantify homelessness but faced significant obstacles, such as the unreliability of national registers to follow the dynamics of homelessness and delays in accessing local register data due to GDPR. Consequently, annual PIT counts involving municipalities will continue. The current national program to end long-term homelessness highlights the need for improved data collection, encouraging organizations to focus on data needs. [10]

*Challenges in implementing real-time data***.** Since national register data cannot be used for the homelessness counts, and thus a national level bureau cannot be responsible for performing the actual counting process, the question of who should be responsible for or have ownership of real-time data is open. The 21 well-being service counties, established by the 2021 social reform, now manage social and healthcare services, including those for homelessness. They possess local register data that offer insights into service usage and (in some cases) housing status. These registers constitute the best platform to obtain real-time data on homelessness at the local level. However, the well-being services counties cover the services of bundles of several municipalities, while homelessness concentrates for the most part only in the biggest municipalities.

Producing real-time data at the national level appears more problematic. Homelessness work is organized differently across the nation, so introducing a uniform way of collecting data would be difficult, especially as homelessness counts have so far not been statutory. In addition, well-being services counties use different customer and patient information systems, adding obstacles to data collection harmonization. Several issues need to be addressed, and there might not be any organizations that would volunteer to take on the task, as it is not clear who would benefit from this goal, and on what legislative basis to proceed.

Potential benefits of real-time data. Finland's approach to homelessness is founded on the Housing First principle, which received a positive evaluation from an international panel of experts (Pleace et al., 2015) and is now widely acknowledged as a model of best practice (OECD, 2025). The primary issue in the response to homelessness is currently the lack of supported housing and resources to provide adequate support. This often results in individuals being placed on waiting lists

10 For more information see: https://ym.fi/hankesivu?tunnus=YM075:00/2023 instead of receiving housing immediately. The housing allocation system does not rely on a centralized platform and requires social workers to contact supported housing providers individually.

Real-time data could bring two main benefits in this context. First, the lack of affordable and supported housing could be made more salient and quantifiable, aiding future housing stock planning and enhancing accountability among policymakers. However, there are doubts as to whether PIT counts are good enough and cost-effective for these purposes. Developing the PIT counts to gather information also on demographic characteristics and barriers to housing could be a good enough solution to reach the Finnish goal of ending homelessness. Second, establishing a real-time platform could optimize collaborations among social services and housing and service providers, facilitating better resource coordination. This initiative would benefit from strong public sector encouragement in funding applications.

The latest homelessness count (Ara, 2025) showed not only a general rise in homelessness, but also the doubling of the number of homeless people living outside, in stairways, or emergency shelters. Addressing such acute situations could benefit from developing real-time data and ensuring that the system is able to address people who are currently outside the service system and/or paperless. The benefit of real-time data would be particularly important for cities with the highest number of homeless people.[11]

Iceland

Real-time data in homelessness response. Iceland's homelessness data collection has primarily relied on national counts based on data from municipalities and domiciles. The most recent national census, conducted in 2021 by The National Statistics Office (Hagstofa Íslands), estimated that 1 271 individuals were experiencing homelessness. However, this census relies on municipal-level data, and because the definition of homelessness differs between the state and municipalities, the reliability of the data is compromised. Additionally, interpretations of the Laws of Municipal Social Services (Law 40/1991) vary, leading to inconsistencies in how homelessness is defined and how services are provided across different municipalities. In contrast to the national approach, Reykjavik city has been collecting more detailed data using the ETHOS classification system, including shelter use per person (gender, age, citizenship, domicile), housing status, and outreach service usage.

Challenges in implementing real-time data. A major challenge in implementing real-time data systems in Iceland is the lack of coordinated data collection across different levels of government and NGOs. The state, municipalities, and NGOs do

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11 In 2024, nine cities made up for 80% of homelessness in Finland (ARA, 2025).

not collect data on the same basis, leading to inconsistent and unreliable information. Without a standardized approach, it is difficult to obtain a clear and comprehensive picture of homelessness in Iceland. To address this issue, Iceland needs a national framework that provides clear guidelines on data collection and an action plan to combat homelessness. There must be a designated organization responsible for hosting and overseeing the data collection process, ensuring a holistic overview of homelessness trends. Additionally, there must be a clear division of responsibilities between the state and municipalities, so that data collection efforts are aligned, and municipalities know what data needs to be collected and reported.

Potential benefits of real-time data. Implementing a real-time data system in Iceland would significantly improve the country's ability to address homelessness effectively. A common understanding of homelessness, based on standardized data collection, would allow for a holistic and evidence-based approach to policy making. With accurate and up-to-date information, policymakers could better assess the needs of homeless individuals, allowing them to develop more targeted housing and support solutions. Additionally, greater visibility of the issue through real-time data could create pressure on decision-makers to act more urgently. The ability to track trends in real-time would provide stronger justification for resource allocation, ensuring that funding and services are distributed efficiently to meet the actual demand. This could also accelerate the development of housing solutions and lead to faster implementation of homelessness interventions.

Norway

Real-time data in homelessness response. Norway is among the countries in Europe that have had the best data and knowledge about homelessness. This is largely due to the national surveys that have been conducted regularly since 1996 (Dyb and Zeiner, 2021). The 2024 survey in Norway has unfortunately been cancelled. This is due to problems related to privacy and confidentiality in social services. Norway currently lacks updated information on homelessness. However, approval has been obtained for a new survey in late 2025, but this is simplified and lacks a good deal of information that was previously surveyed. Husbanken – the Norwegian State Housing Bank – prepares annual estimates, but these are subject to uncertainty. This is challenging in a period where all signals point to a large increase in the number of homeless people. This can be observed through an increase in the use of acute and temporary housing by 60 percent.[12] Better access to real-time data would have been of great help. Social services will normally have up-to-date information on who is in emergency and temporary housing. They will

12 For more details see Statistics Norway at: https://www.ssb.no/en/statbank/table/12015/ 12015: Temporary residents and night homes, by region, contents and year. Statbank Norway

also register the housing situation, including homelessness, for people applying for social benefits. There is no administrative data or other approaches to collect data on homelessness.

Challenges in implementing real-time data. The government remains committed to its zero-homelessness vision, but at the same time, the national social housing program expired without plans for a new one. This creates strategic uncertainty in relation to further work with data collection and real-time data. At the same time, Husbanken is experiencing increasing interest in data and information about homelessness. The difficult situation many are experiencing in the housing market also contributes to the need for new, updated data. Legislation regarding privacy and confidentiality in services is also a challenge in the work to obtain better data. At the same time, work is underway to provide new legal bases that will improve the basis for collecting data. Municipalities in Norway have relatively high levels of autonomy and are generally reluctant to collect data locally. Central authorities are also cautious about requiring municipalities to report data. Therefore, a clear regulatory framework is important in working with real-time data. Like the other Nordic countries, Norway has relatively few homeless people per capita. Combined with many municipalities with small populations, the cost-benefit of having its own systems is limited. Homelessness is mainly a problem in the larger cities.

*Potential benefits of real-time data***.** Kobo is Husbanken's digital system to support municipalities' work with social housing using housing registers, processing of housing applications, and citizen services. Kobo has been developed together with several municipalities since 2021, and all municipalities are offered the opportunity to use the solution. By the end of 2024, a total of 122 municipalities had signed agreements to use Kobo. Although Kobo is mainly used for processing applications and providing an overview of the housing stock, there are opportunities for further development. A project is currently underway that looks at the possibilities of assisting people in transitions from treatment and serving time in prison to prevent homelessness. As it appears that Kobo will be widely used, this will be a good starting point for working towards real-time data on homeless people.

This requires system development, but when this is linked to an established system, it will be easier for municipalities to implement new functions. Kobo also safeguards privacy and access to sensitive information, which is an important aspect. In addition, Husbanken also has a role as a data processor for the system and is therefore responsible for providing data for statistics and research. Such an expanded function will both provide real-time data for the services that follow up on the homeless and better data for central authorities.

Sweden

Real-time data in homelessness response. Sweden has undertaken a national survey every six years since 1993 to monitor homelessness. These surveys are conducted by the National Board of Health and Welfare, with the most recent survey carried out in 2023 (Socialstyrelsen, 2024). This survey serves as a point-in-time measurement and has determined that there are approximately 27 000 homeless individuals in the country. Sweden's definition of homelessness encompasses four categories: acute homelessness, institutional care (including category housing and penal institutions), long-term housing solutions, and short-term housing solutions. Most of the homeless people live in long-term housing solutions.

Real-time data is increasingly being recognized as a valuable tool in addressing homelessness in Sweden. The Swedish government has outlined a strategy to combat homelessness (2022–2026), which, among other things, emphasizes the importance of data collection and analysis. This strategy aims to improve the understanding of homelessness and enhance the effectiveness of interventions. Many municipalities in Sweden are measuring the number of homeless individuals more frequently, such as on an annual basis. However, no municipalities have yet implemented real-time data systems to track and respond to homelessness more effectively.

Challenges in implementing real-time data. Implementing real-time data in Sweden's homelessness response presents several challenges. Ensuring the privacy and security of individuals' data is essential. Real-time data systems must comply with these regulations. There is often a lack of coordination between different municipalities and the state, leading to inconsistencies in data collection and usage. Implementing real-time data systems requires significant investment in technology and training, which can be financially and logistically challenging for smaller municipalities. While there is political support for using data to address homelessness, it may not be sufficient to drive the widespread adoption of real-time data systems. Aligning national and local policies to support the use of real-time data can be challenging due to differences in priorities and approaches. Ensuring effective communication and information sharing between different data systems requires standardized protocols and systems.

Potential benefits of real-time data. Real-time data has significant potential to enhance homelessness interventions in Sweden. The development of digital platforms and data analytics tools has made it easier to collect and analyze real-time data. Real-time data provides up-to-date information, allowing policymakers and service providers to make informed decisions quickly. This can lead to more effective and timely interventions, allowing for faster provision of services such as emergency shelter, healthcare, and social support. By analyzing trends and patterns, real-time data can help predict future homelessness risks, enabling proactive measures to prevent homelessness before it occurs. Real-time data helps identify where resources are most needed, ensuring that support is directed to the areas and individuals who need it most. With detailed, real-time information, interventions can be tailored to the specific needs of individuals, improving the chances of successful outcomes. With real-time insights, resources can be reallocated dynamically in response to changing needs, improving the overall efficiency of homelessness services. Real-time data can facilitate better communication and coordination between different agencies, municipalities, and non-profits. By integrating data from various sources, real-time systems can provide a comprehensive view of the homelessness situation, helping different actors work together more effectively. Overall, the use of real-time data can transform how homelessness is addressed in Sweden, making interventions more timely, efficient, and effective.

Comparative insights across the Nordics

Real-time data is not yet a standard feature in homelessness management across the Nordics, but its potential to improve interventions is widely acknowledged. While approaches to homelessness data collection vary across the region, we can identify common challenges and opportunities.

Table 1. Challenges and Opportunities in Implementing Real-Time Data for Homelessness Response Across the Nordic Countries

Challenges:

- Legal and privacy constraints: GDPR regulations limit data-sharing across agencies.
- Fragmented data collection: Decentralized governance results in inconsistencies, hindering national tracking.
- Lack of policy integration: Few national strategies mandate real-time data use, leaving municipalities without clear guidelines.
- Financial and technical barriers: Many municipalities lack the IT infrastructure to support real-time tracking.
- Coordination gaps: Effective data collection requires collaboration across social services, healthcare, and housing agencies.
- Underreporting vulnerable groups: Many homeless individuals, such as undocumented migrants or couch surfers, remain invisible in existing data.

Opportunities:

- Existing administrative systems (municipal social service data, housing registers) can support real-time tracking.
- Growing international attention from the EU and OECD emphasizes the need for harmonized, dynamic data systems.
- Scalable models like Kolding's By-Name List and Norway's Kobo system show how real-time data can drive policy improvements.
- Cross-Nordic collaboration in data standards and digital infrastructure can ensure that homelessness interventions rely on accurate, timely data.
- Real-time data can reduce long-term costs by improving intervention effectiveness, enhancing resource allocation and reducing chronic homelessness.
- Implementing real-time data encourages municipalities, NGOs, and national agencies to work together, improving service coordination and overcoming coordination gaps

To move forward, Nordic countries should develop comprehensive national and local data strategies that align with homelessness policies. Addressing legal barriers to secure and responsible data-sharing will be essential, alongside standardizing data collection for comparability across regions. Equity must remain central in data use to ensure vulnerable populations are not overlooked, and municipal roles should be clearly defined to ensure real-time data directly inform homelessness responses. Additionally, service providers must be held accountable for data quality and outcomes, with stronger incentives to maintain accurate and actionable information.

Investments in technology and training will better equip municipalities for real-time tracking, ensuring that frontline services can respond effectively and more efficiently while overcoming current coordination gaps. Strengthening cross-Nordic collaboration will allow countries to share the best practices and technical expertise, fostering more coordinated efforts. Existing models, such as Denmark's Kolding approach and Norway's Kobo system, provide scalable blueprints that could be tailored to different national contexts and needs. By implementing these steps, the Nordics can work toward a future where homelessness is rare, brief, and non-recurring, with standardized, high-quality data driving both national and regional solutions.

A Shared Vision for the Future

To end homelessness, we must have a clear goal and a way to measure progress. The OECD highlights the need for dynamic measurement rather than static snapshots, ensuring that policies and resources are continuously adjusted based on real-world trends. A shared vision for the future must include both the ambition to end homelessness and the tools to track our progress toward that goal. Nordic countries can work together towards the adoption of real-time data in homelessness response, enabling shared learning, the adoption of best practices, and more effective interventions through common methodologies and data systems; Kolding's experience highlights how this approach accelerates progress, providing an opportunity for the region to scale it through shared investment and commitment.

Real-time data is a starting point. It highlights what works, what doesn't, and where innovation is needed, but it relies on systems, funding, and policy changes to turn insights into lasting solutions. A clear goal, backed by reliable, real-time data, is what ensures that we stay on the right path—continuously adapting and improving until homelessness is no longer a reality. However, real-time data is not a solution in itself. It provides the visibility needed to understand the full scope of homelessness, uncover hidden dynamics, and track whether interventions are moving us toward the ultimate goal: a society where homelessness is not just reduced but prevented entirely. Data must be combined with bold action: developing affordable housing, addressing systemic inequities, and building comprehensive support systems. Real-time data serves as the map to navigate these solutions, but without action, the systemic changes required to end homelessness remain out of reach.

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Self-managed Transitional Housing as part of Recovery from Problematic Substance Use for People who are Homeless

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Abstract_ *Addressing problematic substance use amongst people who are homeless is challenging, as for many, this is part of survival. Streetscapes, a non-profit organisation based in Cape Town works with the entrenched homeless offering programme participants protected work and, more recently, space in a large communal house. This paper draws on nine qualitative interviews done with residents and staff of Streetscapes, as part of a broader evaluation. The context of people who are homeless is more complicated in the resource-limited environment of a developing country. This housing intervention drew on lessons from housing first and harm reduction to provide self-managed transitional housing for people who have been homeless, living on the street, or in temporary shelters, for more than five years. The residents could use the space to reduce their substance use and refocus their lives. Key to their personal change was having personal security, not having the constant temptation of substance use, and the support and respect they received from each other and Streetscapes staff. The provision of housing, with other key supports, can provide the necessary space to reassess their own substance use.*

Keywords_ *Homeless, South Africa, substance use, housing, evaluation*

Introduction

This Research Note looks at the impact of the provision of self-managed transitional housing on the continuation of substance use among people who have been homeless for more than five years and use substances to cope with their context. This approach attempted to draw on lessons from the Housing First intervention model. Following the housing first approach is not possible in developing world settings, due to the reduced level of state and other resources available, and the expected higher prevalence of people who are homeless, both due to economic underdevelopment (Kriel, 2017; Raitakari and Juhila, 2015). The model emphasizes providing a more comprehensive service to allow for a break from street life and supporting accompanied care, including having a key service provider accompany the homeless person in particular interactions with service providers (Atherton and Nicholls, 2008; Baxter et al., 2019; Juhila et al., 2022; Raitakari & Juhila, 2015; Tsemberis et al., 2004). A larger change to end homelessness requires strong political commitment to adequate affordable housing, service provision, and an undertaking to prioritise care for the population(Parsell et al., 2025).

The services offered by Streetscapes, described in this paper, attempt to learn from international models in a context of inadequate resources. Streetscapes mainly work with people who have been living on the street for more than five years, which is also referred to as an entrenched homeless person. The organisation's original function centred on providing basic protected work, done in exchange for a stipend of R2 500 (+-€125) per month. The work includes growing vegetables to sell, cleaning streets and litter collection, plus other small operations such as a small climate-friendly laundry. Work served to provide training and employment in a protected setting, offering money that does not require begging or illegal activity. It also provided access to other services, such as counselling, social work, assistance in interaction with state services, including the police, and provided space for them to develop a sense of self-pride. Housing provision became a natural and necessary extension of Streetscapes' work. Clients could not access other accommodation options because of their substance use, and couldn't work on their substance use because they were still trapped on the streets. Reducing problematic substance use was a part of moving people off the street into homes and employment, as this type of use undermines all efforts at change. Streetscapes differed from many other NGOs in applying a modified harm reduction approach. People did not have to stop using to move into a house, but could not use inside the house. The commitment by the organisation is to provide a structured path off the street that is navigable by these members of the homeless community.

A survey of people who are homeless in Cape Town in 2019, found significantly higher use of both alcohol and other substances among the entrenched homeless than among other people living on the streets. This survey, and this study, applied a definition of people living on the streets or in shelters established for the temporary care of people who are homeless(Busch-Geertsema et al., 2016). Alcohol use was reported at 65%, with 25% reporting using four or more times a week. Other substance use was 60% with 38% reporting use more than four times a week (Hopkins et al., 2024; Skinner et al., n.d.). Problematic substance use can present a crucial problem in the readaptation of homeless people back into regular society. Substances are used as a protection from cold, pain, sadness, and discomfort to allow homeless people to manage their lives and anaesthetise themselves for periods. Something as simple as sleep is often only possible in the street context when substances are used(Golembiewski et al., 2017; Mathebula & Ross, 2013; Tsemberis et al., 2004).

People who are homeless may use substances to contain their symptoms and responses to the trauma, particularly as they have few other outlets for treatment or management of the resultant anxiety and other symptoms(Mabhala et al., 2017; Olufemi, 2000; Yohannes, Målqvist, et al., 2023). Sharing of substances can also be a rare point of companionship in the streets and has become a part of street life culture (Mabhala et al., 2017; Osei Asibey et al., 2020a). There are formidable challenges to recovery. A first step has to address concerns around survival and maintenance of life of the streets, and to at least contain the impact of trauma. Addiction on its own is complicated and even in the most supported context many people with problematic use break down under the physical, psychological and social components of addiction(Moyo et al., 2015; Osei Asibey et al., 2020b; Yohannes, Berhane, et al., 2023). Many service providers in South Africa will not work with homeless people who are still using substances, which creates problematic reoccurring hurdles (Mabhala et al., 2017; Moyo et al., 2015).

Methodology

This paper draws on a larger evaluation done of a house set up by Streetscapes to provide a transitional home for some of the homeless who are taking part in their programmes in the City Centre. The broader methodology included the use of organisational data, house evaluation surveys, and qualitative interviews. For this paper, the focus will be on the nine qualitative interviews that were conducted. The study used a participatory approach in which the staff of Streetscapes played a key role in the design, implementation, and analysis of the data.

Unstructured interviews were done with the leader of Streetscapes, a peer supervisor, a female peer who cooks, and six residents of the house. The interviews focused on their reason for moving in, their experiences in the house, what worked for them and what they did not like, and how they perceived their future in relation to the house. The interviews ranged from 30 to 70 minutes and were all recorded and later transcribed. The lead author led the analysis of the data, first drawing out the themes based on a detailed reading of all the interviews and on discussions with Streetscapes staff. The interviews were coded in Atlas ti. A phenomenological approach was used to maintain focus on the material while not restricting new ideas and themes. The final analysis was checked against the interviews and with the Streetscapes team to reduce potential bias.

The lead author is a clinical psychologist who has worked extensively in qualitative and participatory research and aligns himself with the philosophy of health for all, and in providing support and opportunities for people who are homeless, leading to them moving off the streets. The second author is the director of Streetscapes and was involved in all aspects of the study. All the authors align with the philosophies expressed in this paper.

Results

The results follow the process of setting up the house, the problems in the early phase, soon after setting up, and their resolution, before looking specifically at the concerns related to substance use. The addition of the house to the services of Streetscapes, grew out of the development of Streetscapes as an organisation and the realisation of the needs of their clients. Beginning with the provision of protected work and focused services, the organisation has moved into providing temporary shelter where the homeless residents themselves can control the functioning and operations. This is part of a broader development of services for homeless people in South Africa(Hopkins et al., 2021).

History of the house

The house was set up in May 2020, near the city centre, where many of the homeless community are located. Twenty-six people moved in, including single men, single women, and couples. The residents played a part in establishing and agreeing to the house rules, and over time controlled who could move in. This control of the space was important to residents. The setting up of the house coincided with the national lockdowns set up to reduce COVID-19 transmission, which put pressure on Streetscapes to include as many as possible in the house. The alternative living arrangements that existed for the homeless over the period of lockdown were poor, with some verging on abusive(Cogger, 2020; Institute for

Justice and Reconciliation, 2020; Kiewit, 2020; Stent, 2020). The rules of lockdown in South Africa included a ban on alcohol and cigarette sales, which increased problems and tensions in the household.

A restricted harm reduction approach was applied in relation to substance use, in which residents were free to use substances, but not within the house. If they were high or drunk in the house, they had to maintain themselves in a manner that did not interfere with others. The early phase in the house was characterised by the breaking of these rules around substance use, conflict, sometimes leading to violence, and theft from the house and its residents. Many of the core problems described in the house at this phase were linked back to substance use. The restrictions on movement imposed by the lockdown also made it difficult for residents to leave the house to take their substances. When high or intoxicated, the control of behaviour was inadequate for the close living conditions, leading to residents being loud, demanding, and easily triggered into conflict.

> Our main challenges in the house was when they were either intoxicated, there would be physical fights and physical fights resolved sometimes in a stabbing or pulling hair or a fist fight and that type of thing. Um the worst that we've actually had was a physical attack on our night supervisor because the one was high on tik,……… We also had several attempts, suicidal attempts, specifically around two females, they were struggling with their own personal issues, they're currently not in the house anymore. (director)

During the COVID-19 lockdown, most standard methods for earning money, such as begging, guarding cars, collecting recycling, and small jobs were not available. Theft became a more favoured option, and again, given the context of a lockdown, there were few options for stealing other than in the house they lived.

> look it was not a shock or a surprise when anything went missing because it was to be expected so when you see the kettles now there and then the kettle is gone and then another kettle will come and then eventually there is not going to be a number of kettles………… so we worked our way around that because they will be theft, we do have lockers in our room also, so they got us lockers in our room. (peer supervisor male)

Over the period of the lockdown, it was difficult to enforce rules or to remove any person from the house. So, Streetscapes had to ride out the first period of about 6 months, experiencing high levels of conflict and substance use. Even with these problems, most of the residents preferred the house to being on the street. Despite the disturbances and problems, the house still constituted a better space for them. The residents described the threats of violence and abuse, much worse for women, the harshness and discomfort, the powerlessness and lack of self-worth associated with life on the street, and temptations on the street, especially around substance use.

> I was like drowning in drugs throwing myself away sleeping here, sleeping there and I was like, no and also after that I was getting this virus and that was the biggest shock to me anything could have happened worse to me and then I decide after that I'm rather going to come back to the house and stay here and rather look after myself and try to leave drugs, so ja that was and that's what I am basically doing now. (peer supervisor female)

System applied in-house

The situation in the house improved dramatically once lockdown ended. The most important change was a stricter implementation of the rules, as established by the residents themselves, governing the house. After the problems in the beginning, the leadership of Streetscapes identified the need for "stricter rules and procedures and protocols put in place, versus when there was nothing". This was supported by the remaining residents who pushed for a tighter implementation of the rules. There was a real push from the residents to clean up the house. In the beginning, all the residents had contributed to setting out the rules of the house and how it was to be managed.

> It's a struggle but we win so far and for now what makes it easier for us is if anyone come now there is already rules in place here, there is already a system going so they won't come with their own thing they need to follow the system. (resident male)

A system for managing incidents was also reinforced. A meeting would be held, generally including a senior staff member from Streetscapes, one or more supervisors, and some or all residents of the house. They would listen to a description of the event, hear from the person responsible, consider mitigating issues, and how the person concerned is responding to the meeting. Details were also recorded in a logbook to make sure that problems were not forgotten or passed over.

> We address it with the client and they will be you know 'ok yes, I was intoxicated, I know what I did or I can't remember I was too far off, but I apologise and all of that'. So depending on the severity of the incident that will determine what the consequence will be. So consequence can vary from a verbal warning to maybe a suspension either from work or suspension, if it is really really bad, a suspension from the house. (peer male)

A better intake system to regulate access was introduced after a series of very negative effects. Important checks now include criminal record in terms of repeat violent offences, and mental health. The residents felt it was important to control their space, so they decided that for this house that people can only stay if they don't have a violent record, and where required, they remain on their medication and are well controlled. The latter stipulation came after a supervisor was stabbed by a resident with uncontrolled and unknown schizophrenia. It is important to note that these decisions were made by the resident community, as they were most concerned about disruptions and wanted a more peaceful and safe living environment.

> New clients coming into the program from say last year know from day one that this is a program um it's about a recovery program, it's about changing your habits, it's about personal development and it also has the program, a housing program which gives you the opportunity of staying off the streets and being in a housing setting. (director)

There was a regular narrative from residents wanting to use the space to bring their substance abuse under control. A key subtheme was the need to be in a space where drugs are not used and there is a sober atmosphere, which reduced triggering their own desire to use. The combination of the reinforced system and the residents' own commitments to change resulted in better control of substance use in the house. Having better control reduced the level of residents being triggered into problematic mental states, and overall reduced the tension in the space, enhancing its ongoing impact.

> This house is doing much better for me, nobody is using in the house no one's drinking in the house and if it can be longer like this then I know that I can be stronger in the house (resident female)

> they do make an active choice to want to be better to want to better themselves because on the street what happens you have to be drunk or drugged in order to have maybe a peaceful sleep, so ahm when you are in the house it becomes more you don't have to worry about anything, I can lekker nice put my head down, watch TV till u want to and then go sleep or I can have a chat with anyone. (peer female)

The modified harm reduction approach was maintained and continues to facilitate processes in the house. As before, the house rules are that residents may not use in the house, and when they return to the house under the influence, they have to maintain a standard of behaviour and not disturb other residents. This was augmented by a decision by many to actively work on reducing their own usage. The house provided a space of comfort for people to sleep, being less threatened by criminals and police, and feeling supported and cared for, thereby undermining some of the principal motivations for usage on the streets. An important additional narrative centred on the residents finding better ways to deal with their own painful memories and trauma. The containment provided by the combination of house, workspace, and additional professional support from Streetscapes appeared to be key.

> If I look at total reduction then I think it's very good because it's like we are taking baby steps to get them where we want them to be and it's working so far. (resident male)

Streetscape's use of peer counsellors, people who used to live on the street and are now living in their own homes and working, improved the understanding between the residents and those providing oversight. The supervisors spoke with great care and concern about their work and their commitment to their task. They feel they have a better understanding of the problems of the homeless based on this commonality of experience and so can assess behaviour better, understand problems and suggest solutions, and interact meaningfully with the residents.

> I wouldn't say as a career its there's this passion within me it's like a hunger that I have to help these people and to rehabilitate drug addicts as well. (peer male)

Connection to rehabilitation facilities is now also easier as they have a home where they can process the information obtained and get support, and are not being triggered into use by their context.

> I was a guy that was using, like smoking you know and drinking but since I started now in matrix in the drug program that they have after that I stopped everything only smoking cigarette now, I stop all that substance. (resident male)

Understanding the role of a house and work in facilitating change

It is clear that the residents believed that living in the house reduced their need to use substances and provided motivation to stop or reduce usage, despite the entrenched patterns of use. The home provides a place of consistency, a roof, and a place where they can have possessions and be safe from attacks, criminals, police, and the public. The role the house played fitted with the workplace, which provided income and purpose. Core to the running of the house was to generate support, tolerance, and understanding around the real difficulties of the transitions being made, including moving off the street and reducing \ stopping substance use. There was a sense of camaraderie in the house later with the sense "All in this together".

> It's fantastic, we like family everything that happens we deal with it now and its over after that we just go one with our lives understanding is fantastic. (peer female)

> Sometimes you get in trouble because you keeping bad company, I come back home if I am doing my things like go to the shop, go to Shoprite to go buy my things whatever I buy nice things I come back I don't go up and down and up and down. I think that the house for me, it keeps me far away from trouble. (resident male)

Streetscapes has also modified its approach over time to become more explicitly focused on personal development among their clients. This has been a natural development over time in the organisation. The development included the addition of peers as described above, social workers, and other forms of care such as counselling, drama therapy, and group support.

> It's not about the stipend it's about your own personal development and where you want to be and that the house program is also there for your availability….. it is not something that we force on them. (director)

Potential for breakdown and catering for it

With any treatment system, relapses are inevitable and part of the recovery journey. This was partly catered for by the harm reduction approach of allowing use. There were initial problems: "at the beginning, it was not clear to them where the boundary was; now I don't have a problem with that at all." The system introduced does allow for relapse and errors to be made before deciding to expel someone from the house. People using substances often try but relapse, so an open-door approach is applied. Some residents spoke of their initial difficulties in controlling their use and how they are now trying again.

> Actually, all of them wanted to come back now again, you understand because they realised now that ahm you only realised that something is valuable when you don't have it anymore. (resident male)

The system does have limitations and did not work for all. Some residents left as they wished to avoid being under the control of others. This often resulted in some conflicts within the house and became the focus of the meetings described above. Some objected to paying over part of their stipend as rental. Even here, the offer remains for people to return and some who left or were expelled have returned to the house.

> I had to leave house so ahm I had to go out that was the punishment and then I could come back again after when everyone is coming back so it was like now I have to go to my own family………… I was like clean for three weeks and then I had to go to my sisters place and that is when I relapse and I was feeling so bad about my relapse because how can you be three weeks clean and only now because of one packet you are back its almost like that three weeks don't count anymore for now this house is doing much better for me (peer female)

Streetscapes' director highlighted the importance of exercising caution in passing judgment on the homeless, given our limited understanding of the challenges they face. This community, lacking in power and living outside societal norms, is particularly vulnerable to stigmatization. Such stigma often perpetuates a stereotype that attributes their situation to failure rather than acknowledging progress. Recognizing the genuine hardships they endure enables the establishment of a system that tolerates setbacks and embraces the capacity for individuals to return and make renewed efforts.

Testimony of residents

The testimony of a peer supervisor on his recovery brings the real difficulties and process into clarity, but also shows how progress is made. He addresses the real challenge he faced while on the streets, how he sought a place where he could recover, and the real mental, emotional, and physical challenges that came with stopping substance use. He is now trying to use that knowledge to facilitate the journey of other homeless.

> I also came from such a life you understand, I was also twenty, twenty years on drugs, so the best person that I see who can help them is our people that come from that route because if that person now say they want to smoke I know exactly how he feels, I even know what can go through his mind, the next thing is to get something, they need to steal something whatever the case, so I know what to look out for I know how to even take his brain away from that (peer male)

This resident spoke of her conflicts, which were typical of the stories presented by the residents. She wanted to move off the street and get out from under the influence of the drugs she was taking. In the quotes below, she shows her conflict between the need for the drugs and the difficulty of moving into a house with its system of controls. The house became a target and the potential start of a new life. Once in the house, she was happy to realise that the homeless people in the house could gather as a community, work together, and enjoy sharing a space.

> I want to get out get out of the drugs but it is too tight for me and everything, I want to move into the house to stay out of trouble because you stay outside you are always doing drugs always doing stupid things so I was trying to I see that the drug is beating me but I am feeling alright now…………………… its nice we make coffee and be happy together its making something you feel you are in a home, its making you forget about everything outside but if you come and you making my mind very mad you see we drink coffee, we make coffee for each other make like a family (resident female)

Discussion

Substance abuse is notoriously difficult to treat with low success rates. This is complicated in the homeless population as substance use is part of survival against physical discomforts of cold and hunger, the impact of stigma, and the symptoms related to past trauma. Those who have been on the street for longer periods require additional structure and support to manage usage. The Streetscapes approach set up a stable base of protected work with a stipend, other support, and developmental services, and now a shared home to use as a base for starting again. Developmental services include providing skills, space for recuperation, job training, support, and assistance in reconnecting with family and friends(Hopkins et al., 2021). It cannot provide guarantees, especially in a developing world setting. Recognising the concerns raised about the nature of substance use amongst the chronically homeless, a modified harm reduction approach was applied. The house initially had severe problems. The restrictions placed on the community by COVID-19 lockdowns, together with a lax application of the residents' own rules, meant that the house was constantly disrupted with problems often relating to substance abuse. Once lockdown restrictions were reduced, some household members left, and other residents who wished to stay sought to enforce rules and systems. The house began to operate more smoothly and residents could focus on their own efforts to reduce usage. The house has been operating on this basis since around June 2021 and has seen no repetition of the disruption that occurred initially.

The context of people who are homeless must be considered, as there is an approximate 20% of households living in informal housing in Cape Town (Policy and Strategy Dept, 2022), and current sleeping spaces for homeless people, including temporary shelters, cover a small portion of the need. The people included here have been on the streets for over five years and are distanced from family and other parts of society. This increases dependency on substances and each other to maintain themselves day to day.

Key to establishing this space for residents is the consistency in approach across their worksite and home, and over time. Streetscapes manage both the work and home sites, reflecting a management and philosophical approach of care, acceptance, and impartial support that governs all their work. The structure used by Streetscapes of teams working and living together has the advantage of providing ongoing group reflection, support, and encouragement as the group moves through this transition. The social group also reduces the risk of isolation. The disadvantage of the arrangement could be that there is no escape if irritation arises with each other. There is also a lack of privacy in the house, with residents having to share rooms.

Having the residents play a key role in the management of the house facilitated the approach of self-development and of reducing their substance use. The residents were core to the change in the house, with them initiating a new house culture and reestablishing the operational rules and principles. They continue to be invested in the system, assessing rule violations, contributing to the house operations, and deciding who can move in. Peers or previously homeless people fulfil the role of supervisor and give leadership within Streetscapes, understanding the context and the real difficulties of street life. They also come from the same background, so they will not stigmatise the residents. Importantly, they are also respected at work by NGO leaders and professional staff, providing an important example.

The harm reduction approach, even in the modified version applied here, does allow for residents' space for relapses, to set achievable goals, and allows the person to adapt at a realistic pace. Beyond that, it is important that the team, including the fellow residents, understand that relapse is part of the process and respect renewed efforts to change. This community is both giving up substances and the lifestyle they adopted when they felt rejected by mainstream society. Even if they leave the house, they have the space to return and continue their recovery.

Limitations

This study does have major limitations, particularly a very limited sample of nine interviews based around a single housing case study. The group received multiple interventions, so the housing must be seen as part of a larger set of interventions that contributed to making a difference. This is a pilot project attempting to use existing knowledge in a more resource-restrained environment. There is a need to replicate this work in a larger study and to assess the model in other similar contexts.

Conclusion

This housing intervention drew on lessons from housing first and harm reduction to provide self-managed transitional housing for people who have been homeless, living on the street, or in temporary shelters, for more than five years. After a period of disorder, due to the COVID-19 lockdowns and needing to find the right system, the house is now operating as a part of the Streetscapes systems of services. This paper presents qualitative evidence that the members of the house are able to use the space to control their own usage or stop using substances, including alcohol. The key factors that make up the programme were having a protected work and home space, providing a base for the participants to make changes to their lives and substance use as part of moving off the street. The residents run the house along with the supervisors on a participatory basis, having drawn up the rules and systems themselves, so they have a clear sense of control over their lives. A modified harm reduction approach was applied, with provision made for participants to relapse and recover, and to allow the participants to move at their own pace in controlling their use of substances. Within both work and home spaces, there is an atmosphere of respect and acceptance, with stigma being avoided on all counts. This is reinforced by using peers as supervisors in the house, as they have a greater sensitivity to the lives and context of homelessness, as they have been there themselves.

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Basic Concepts for Evidence-based Practices to Address Homelessness

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Abstract_ *This Research Note explores foundational concepts for designing evidence-based practices on homelessness, with a focus on the European context. It identifies three major gaps hindering the development of evidence-based policies: the limited availability of large-scale data, the lack of contextualized research aligned with diverse welfare regimes, and the scarcity of longitudinal and impact-oriented studies. We discuss the analytical and strategic potential of monitoring and evaluation for designing evidence-based practices, emphasizing their role in enhancing data collection, improving service evaluation, and informing preventive interventions. Drawing on European frameworks and typologies, such as the conceptual framework behind ETHOS, we propose a conceptual model for embedding monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to promote evidence-based practice. These systems are positioned not only as technical tools but also as instruments of policy reform, capable of supporting the strategic shift toward improving the effectiveness of existing services and generating the evidence base necessary for preventive strategies.*

Keywords_ *Homelessness; Evidence-based Practice; Monitoring and Evaluation; EPOCH*

Introduction

The European Platform on Combating Homelessness (EPOCH) was established by the European Commission in June 2021 in the context of the Lisbon Declaration. The Platform aims to eradicate homelessness by 2030 by promoting person-centred approaches, exchanges of best practices, and evidence-based strategies. Among other recommendations, the Lisbon declaration highlights the need to strengthen analytical work and data collection in order to promote evidence-based policies and initiatives addressing homelessness.

This Research Note examines key challenges that hinder the development of evidence-based policies in response to homelessness. It first reviews the factors that limit the production of robust research evidence in the European context, including a lack of large-scale data collection, contextualized research, and scarcity of longitudinal and impact studies. It then analyses the fundamental principles of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in homelessness services, highlighting their potential to strengthen data systems, evaluate the effectiveness of existing services, and generate evidence supporting more informed policymaking. Building on this foundation, we introduce a conceptual model for embedding M&E mechanisms within homelessness response structures. This model aims to institutionalise evidence-based practice by establishing systematic data collection, analysis, learning, and feedback processes that can enhance service effectiveness, guide decision-making, and ultimately support the transition toward evidence-based management across the homelessness sector.

By addressing these aspects, we seek to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on effective homelessness interventions within the European Union. Strengthening the connection between research, policy design, and practical implementation is essential for developing comprehensive, evidence-based strategies to respond to, and ultimately prevent, homelessness across Europe.

Evidence-Based Practice and major gaps in scientific evidence in Europe

Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) originated in the health sciences in the 20th century as a response to the need for more rigorous, transparent, and effective decision-making in medicine (Steglitz et al., 2015). In its classic definition, EBP consists of "*the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of the best current evidence*" when making decisions about patient care, integrating that evidence with clinical expertise and patient values (Sackett, 1997). Sackett defines the three basic pillars of evidence-based practice as research evidence, clinical expertise, and patient values.

In the social sciences, particularly in initiatives addressing homelessness, evidence-based practice represents a shift away from traditional models of delivering services. Emphasizing not only the activity of programs but, the application of interventions whose effectiveness has been scientifically demonstrated through experimental research (SIIS, 2019). While in other continents the evidence-based practice paradigm is more common (Kube et al., 2023; Kaleveld et al., 2018), at the European level, this approach has been hindered by a lack of robust research evidence.

The lack of robustness in scientific evidence within the European context can be attributed to three major gaps: large-scale data collection, research conducted within the contexts of diverse European welfare states, and increased attention to longitudinal and impact studies (Toro, 2007; Philippot, 2007; Pleace, 2016).

Table 1. Strategic axes for advancing homelessness research in Europe

LARGE-SCALE DATA	CONTEXTUALIZED RESEARCH	LONGITUDINAL & IMPACT STUDIES
Reliable, comprehensive datasets	Adapted to each welfare state´s realities	Tracks individuals over time
National data systems (Denmark, Finland)	Avoids over-reliance on foreign models	Identifies casual relationships
Enables cross-national statistical comparisons	Supports locally relevant policy development	Supports evidence-based design

Source. Translated from Rodilla, 2024.

Large-scale data collection

Despite increasing recognition of homelessness as a key policy issue in Europe, major challenges persist in achieving large-scale, continuous data collection. One of the primary obstacles is the heterogeneity of data collection methods, definitions of homelessness, and reporting standards among different countries (OECD, 2025; Hermans, 2024). This fragmentation hampers the comparability of data and limits the ability to conduct cross-national analyses that could inform effective policy responses.

According to the OECD Monitoring Framework to Measure Homelessness (2025), homelessness data are collected using a variety of complementary approaches, each with its own characteristics, objectives, and limitations:

Table 2. Common approaches to collecting homelessness data

CODE	METHOD	AIM
MF2A	Street Counts	Provide a snapshot of rough sleeping (visible homelessness) at a specific point in time. Raise public awareness.
MF2B	Service-Based Methods	Profile service users, estimate the flow of people using homelessness services, assess service capacity.
MF2C	Population Census & Household Surveys	Understand the broader housing situation, hidden homelessness, and structural factors behind homelessness.
MF2D	Administrative Data	Monitor trends, evaluate policies, track individual trajectories, and support data linkage across sectors.
MF2E	Advanced Sampling Methods	Produce statistically accurate estimates of total homelessness (including hidden populations).
MF2F	By-Name Lists & Information Systems	Enable personalised case management, real-time monitoring, and co-ordination of support services.

Source: Adapted from OECD, 2025.

The OECD report identifies service-based methods and street counts as the most common data collection approaches in OECD and EU countries, currently implemented in more than 20 member states. Street counts (MF2A) contribute to providing a snapshot of the number and characteristics of people sleeping rough at a specific point in time. As a limitation, street counts contribute to a disproportionate emphasis on profiles associated with mental illness and substance use (Shinn & Khadduri, 2020; O'Sullivan et al., 2020), an issue discussed further in the following sections. Service-based methods (MF2B) collect data from service providers supporting individuals experiencing homelessness. These methods can generate more detailed information on individuals' demographic characteristics, support needs, and service use patterns, and may also provide estimates of the flow of people accessing homelessness services over time. However, MF2B tends to exclude individuals who are not in contact with the homelessness support system, such as chronically homeless people sleeping rough or those experiencing hidden homelessness (Pleace, 2019).

By-name lists and information systems (MF2F), when implemented within service-based frameworks, offer a powerful tool for tracking homelessness across services over time. These systems are capable of generating large volumes of case-level data, enabling personalised monitoring and the identification of entry and exit pathways through the homelessness system. However, MF2F remains one of the least commonly used approaches among OECD and EU countries, currently present in only 11 national contexts. This method typically relies on homeless management information systems (HMIS) embedded in service provision structures or administrative data, supporting real-time monitoring and evaluation processes. HMIS have been commonly used in the U.S. for decades (Culhane, 2004; Nannery, 2007; Aykanian, 2022; BHBH, 2025).

Research in diverse European welfare states

Beyond data infrastructure, an equally important gap lies in the failure to adapt research to the institutional diversity of Europe's welfare regimes. The importance of generating context-specific knowledge in Europe aligns with theoretical perspectives proposed by several authors (Stephens and Fitzpatrick, 2007; O'Sullivan, 2010; Benjaminsen, 2024), which assert that welfare systems, housing laws, housing policies, and homelessness are interconnected.

Evidence indicates that countries with welfare states marked by higher levels of inequality and poverty tend to produce larger homeless populations composed mainly of individuals or households facing barriers to accessing or affording rental housing. In contrast, countries with stronger welfare systems and lower inequality often display a higher proportion of homelessness cases linked to alcohol or drug dependency and mental health disorders (Benjaminsen, 2015; Stephens & Fitzpatrick, 2007). However, even in highly developed welfare systems, some individuals with multiple and complex needs can still 'fall through' the safety nets provided by social protection, facing an increased risk of homelessness. These dynamics highlight that welfare policy alone has limited capacity; addressing homelessness effectively requires transformative and integrated strategies tailored to the characteristics of each welfare regime (Benjaminsen, 2024).

Therefore, if countries with different welfare models generate distinct homelessness profiles and exit pathways, this underscores the need for context-specific analyses of methodologies and effectiveness before implementing structural changes. This approach is supported by the observations of Johnson et al. (2012) and Johnsen & Teixeira (2012), urging caution in adopting foreign-developed theories and intervention models without first generating local knowledge, pilot programs, and comparative evaluations that can inform the comprehensive improvement of a country's entire homelessness support system.

Focus on longitudinal and impact studies

The third and final strategic axis is the recommendation to orient research toward longitudinal studies and impact evaluations instead of cross-sectional studies like the ones coming from street counts. This recommendation is supported by the EBP evidence hierarchy conceptual framework, a rank of research designs according to the strength and reliability of their evidence in determining cause-and-effect relationships (Steglitz et al., 2015). Under this framework, longitudinal and impact evaluation are ranked as moderate to strong evidence (level 3), while cross-sectional studies are ranked in weaker evidence (level 5).

Longitudinal studies allow researchers to observe the socioeconomic trajectories of individuals over time. Despite the growing recognition of their importance in international homelessness research, such studies remain scarce in these contexts (Klodawsky et al., 2009; Caton et al., 2005). Longitudinal studies are valuable because they provide essential information for identifying entry and exit pathways from homelessness (Benjaminsen et al., 2005), as well as the risk factors that trigger homelessness (Basque Country Homelessness Strategy 2018–2021).

Referring to effectiveness and impact studies, the European Commission's report *Fighting Homelessness and Housing Exclusion in Europe* (Baptista & Marlier, 2019) highlights a clear lack of rigor, monitoring, and evaluation of the effectiveness of homeless services in most European countries. The report emphasizes that only Denmark and Finland have a well-established framework for monitoring and evaluation linked to the implementation of programs, allowing for continuous assessment of service delivery effectiveness. This lack of evaluation mechanisms is also reflected in the scarcity of publications on the effectiveness of interventions within the European context (Munthe-Kaas et al., 2016) and by the methodological weakness of the existing evaluations of homelessness response programs in the European context (Rodilla et al., 2023).

The UK Centre for Homelessness Impact (Rodriguez-Guzman et al., 2021) highlights several important factors for building a solid and extensive evidence base to identify the most effective interventions for people experiencing homelessness. First, it underscores the need to build evaluation capacity within the academic sector engaged in homelessness research, allowing for robust evaluations in the European context. Second, it calls for reducing reliance on external knowledge, particularly from North America or unrelated disciplines such as medicine, and instead developing locally relevant data collection tools and study designs that can inform policymaking on the most effective strategies to end homelessness.

Evidence-based practices, monitoring, and evaluation in homelessness services

The evidence-based practice pillar of EBP refers to the systematic collection and use of data to determine what works, for whom, and under what conditions (Sackett et al., 1996, 1997). In homelessness services, M&E (MF2F under the OECD framework) directly corresponds to this pillar because it transforms service delivery data into actionable knowledge that supports evidence-based decision-making.

Drawing on Perrin's (2012) framework for NGOs, three interrelated yet distinct components can be identified: monitoring, evaluation, and impact evaluation.

- Monitoring: A continuous process of collecting and analysing data to track the execution of a set of objectives in an intervention. The goal is to make modifications or adjustments to the intervention during its execution based on the progress toward goals and any issues that arise.
- Evaluation: A systematic and critical analysis of the functioning of a program by checking whether the objectives have been met, identifying any variations that occurred during its implementation, and assessing the benefits provided to the beneficiaries. The aim is to compare the intended outcomes with what was actually achieved and generate lessons learned for future improvement.
- Impact Evaluation: A specific type of evaluation aimed at measuring the actual impact of the program on the target population, as well as any unexpected indirect effects. Impact evaluation focuses on identifying causality, ensuring that the results can be directly attributed to the intervention and not to external factors. To achieve this, it must include appropriate methodologies, such as control or comparison groups.

Table 3 below outlines the main distinctions between these three approaches:

Table 3. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Impact Evaluation: Some Basic Characteristics

Monitoring	Evaluation	Impact Evaluation
• Periodic, using data gathered routinely or readily obtainable, generally internal, usually focused on activities and outputs, although indicators of outcome/impact are also sometimes used • Assumes appropriateness of program, activities, objectives, indicators • Typically tracks progress against a small number of preestablished targets/indicators • Usually, quantitative • Cannot indicate causality • Difficult to use by itself for assessing impact	• Generally episodic, often external • Goes beyond outputs to assess outcomes • Can question the rationale and relevance of the program, objectives and activities • Can identify both unintended and planned effects • Can address "how" and "why" questions • Can provide guidance for future directions • Can use data from different sources and from a wide variety of methods	• A specific form of evaluation • Sporadic, infrequent • Mostly external • Generally, a discrete research study • Specifically focused on attribution (causality) in some way, most often with a counterfactual • Generally focused on long term changes, such as in the quality of life of intended beneficiaries • Needs to take into account what was actually done (e.g., through M&E) as well as identify impacts

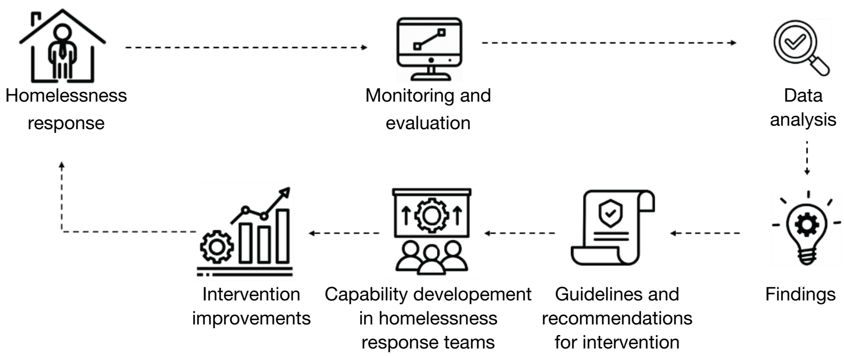
Source: Perrin, 2012.

Beyond assessing effectiveness, one of the key benefits of establishing robust M&E systems lies in the analytical potential of the data collected throughout the intervention process (Crook et al., 2005). Strengthening these systems is essential for capturing the dynamic nature of homelessness, improving comparability across programs and jurisdictions, and informing evidence-based policymaking. For example, data analysis can support the identification of subgroups within the homeless population (Somerville, 2013), thereby allowing interventions to be tailored more precisely to the specific needs and characteristics of these groups (Muñoz et al., 2005). This aligns with critiques of the "new orthodoxy," which conceptualizes homelessness as a homogeneous phenomenon (Pleace, 2016), rather than recognising the internal diversity that shapes pathways into and out of homelessness (Somerville, 2013).

The lack of monitoring and evaluation structures poses a significant challenge for the field. On the one hand, it limits the ability to compare the effectiveness and efficiency of different intervention models. On the other hand, it contributes to concerns over methodological inconsistency and weak empirical foundations. These concerns are reinforced by the scarcity of comparative studies (Munthe-Kaas et al., 2016), methodological critiques raised in academic literature (Baxter et al., 2019; Groton, 2013; Rodilla et al., 2023), and the predominance of evaluation reports published as grey literature rather than peer-reviewed research. Altogether, these factors underscore the urgent need to strengthen methodological rigor in the homelessness sector.

An early proposal of a conceptual model for embedding monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to promote evidence-based practice (Figure 1) could be found in Rodilla (2024):

Figure 1. Monitoring and evaluation as a mechanism for improving intervention



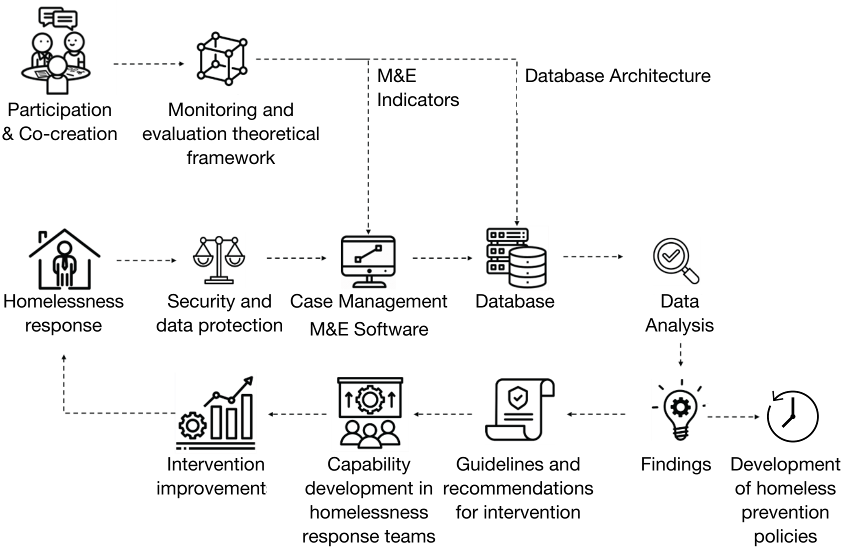
Source: Translated from Rodilla, 2024.

The diagram illustrates the interdependent components necessary to sustain evidence-based practices, demonstrating how data collection, analysis, and feedback processes collectively drive service improvement. This model has proven useful in evaluating the effectiveness of homelessness services (Rondino

& Rodilla, 2022), identifying the most impactful income pathways for exiting homelessness (Rodilla et al., 2023), or determining key success factors in addressing homelessness among people with co-occurring mental health conditions (Rodilla et al., 2025).

The model was later refined in order to be incorporated in the COMHOM project, Advancing Data-Driven Solutions to Combat Homelessness in Europe. COMHOM was launched in January 2025 as a three-year initiative with 9 European partners funded by the European Social Fund. The project aims to transform homelessness responses across Europe by generating a standardized M&E framework, leveraging data in different welfare state models, obtaining ethical standards and guidelines, and generating digital tools (European Commission, 2025).

Figure 2. Leveraging M&E to Inform Evidence-Based and Preventive Responses to Homelessness



Source: COMHOM project, 2025.

At the core of this model is the Monitoring and Evaluation Theoretical Framework, which defines the objectives, scope, and principles guiding the system. The importance of theory in guiding evaluation has been highlighted by Duflo et al. (2006), both for identifying which evaluations to conduct and which indicators to apply, and for interpreting the results. Banerjee (2005) underscores the role of theoretical frameworks in confirming or refuting existing theories. Similarly, Pauly et al. (2014)

stress the importance of theory-driven evaluations to better understand the effectiveness of programs within specific socio-political and economic contexts. From this foundation, a set of M&E indicators is developed to systematically measure outcomes, track service effectiveness, and monitor user trajectories. These indicators inform both the design of the database architecture and the configuration of the case management M&E software, which serves as the operational interface for data entry and monitoring. To systematically and consistently collect data on people's housing situations in Europe, the conceptual framework behind the ETHOS should be used as a standard tool to define and classify different types of housing status (Puchol et al., 2023).

The process begins with the homelessness response, where frontline services interact with individuals experiencing homelessness. The framework conceptualises the homelessness response within a positivist epistemological tradition, adopting a black-box model consistent with those used by Brousse (2004), Edgar et al. (2007), and Edgar (2009). In this model, interventions are represented through a linear flow of inputs and outputs, with the internal processes of the service, the box, assumed to produce the changes or outcomes observed.

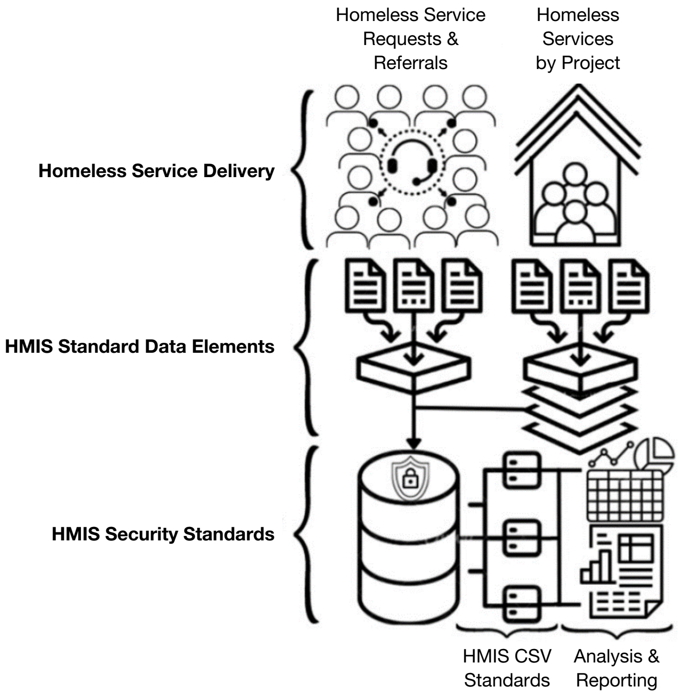
To ensure ethical and effective data management, security, and data protection protocols are integrated from the outset (Culhane, 2016). These safeguards govern the handling of sensitive personal information within the case management software, which is designed to capture both administrative data and user-centred information relevant to intervention planning. Crucially, the system enables the longitudinal tracking of individuals' trajectories across time and services.

Data collected through this system is stored in a centralized database, where it is structured for subsequent analysis. Through analytical processes, such as longitudinal tracking, comparative analysis, or cluster analysis, researchers and service managers can extract actionable findings. This approach has already proven valuable, for example, in demonstrating how longitudinal data can be used to identify trajectories and risk profiles (Benjaminsen, 2015) or in showing how usage patterns help classify homelessness duration and stability (Bairéad and Norris, 2022). These findings then inform the development of guidelines and recommendations for intervention, which are translated into capacity development initiatives for homelessness response teams. This monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) loop enables the refinement of practices based on empirical evidence and supports intervention improvements, in line with the recommendations of several international organizations (UNICEF, 2025; FAO, 2023; World Bank, 2023).

What distinguishes this model is its ability to extend beyond responsive intervention to inform preventive policy design. By analysing data on the early indicators of housing insecurity and identifying structural risk factors, policymakers can translate findings into preventive measures (Culhane et al. 2011). These may include targeted support for at-risk populations, early intervention protocols, eviction prevention strategies, or cross-sectoral coordination with health, employment, and social services (Gaetz & Dej, 2017). This M&E system supports a dual purpose: to improve the effectiveness of existing services and to generate the evidence base necessary for forward-looking, preventive strategies.

A practical example of a similar conceptual model is the study Community- and data-driven approach to homelessness prevention in the United States (Kube et al. 2023). In the study, data collected from homeless individuals and families through local homelessness response systems are systematically recorded in a Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS). This standardized data collection process (Figure 3), guided by the HMIS Data and Technical Standards established by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, is subsequently analysed to support decision-making and optimise the allocation of resources.

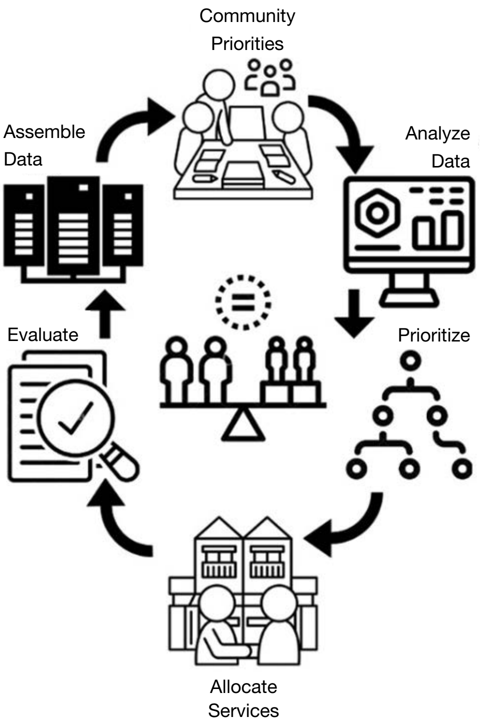
Figure 3. Data architecture of the Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS)



Source: Kube et al. (2023)

Nevertheless, while the conceptual model proposed by Rodilla is designed primarily to embed monitoring and evaluation mechanisms within a homelessness response service, it creates a structured infrastructure for continuous data collection, longitudinal follow-up, and iterative program improvement. The framework proposed by Kube et al. pursues a different objective. Their model leverages system-wide administrative records and counterfactual machine-learning methods to predict which type of intervention will most likely prevent re-entry into homelessness for individual households, then aggregates these predictions across subpopulations to generate transparent prioritization rules (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Community- and data-driven procedure for efficient and equitable homeless services.



Source: Kube et al. (2023)

In this way, Kube et al.'s approach aims to optimize scarce resources in terms of both efficiency and equity at a population level. Whereas our model emphasizes internal learning, service fidelity, and long-term evidence building, theirs emphasizes resource allocation, predictive targeting, and system-wide optimization.

These differences reflect complementary, rather than competing, uses of data: one for strengthening the capacity and accountability of providers, the other for strategic, equity-oriented service allocation at scale.

Discussion and Conclusions

The conceptual models reviewed lie under a complex systems perspective. A complex systems approach considers homelessness as a result of a dynamic interaction of many factors, such as poverty, lack of affordable housing, and mental and physical health issues. This approach provides insights into the dynamics underlying coordinated responses to homelessness, ranging from prevention, rapid rehousing, and supportive housing (Fowler et al., 2019). Complex systems provide a valuable framework for evaluating coordinated responses, reinforcing the view that effective intervention models must be built on the systematic generation of knowledge, pilot initiatives, and comparative evaluations (Johnson et al., 2012; Johnsen & Teixeira, 2012). Processes enabling comprehensive improvements across the full set of mechanisms and services involved in a country's homelessness response.

The conceptual model proposed by Rodilla (2004) and the data-driven prioritization framework developed by Kube et al. (2023) offer complementary yet distinct pathways for strengthening evidence-based policymaking in line with the objectives of EPOCH. Rodilla's model focuses on building the foundational infrastructure required for continuous data collection, longitudinal follow-up, and iterative program improvement within service environments. This constitutes an essential step toward addressing Europe's persistent gaps in data quality, cross-national comparability, and evaluation capacity (Hermans, 2024; O'Sullivan et al., 2020). By contrast, Kube et al.'s approach leverages machine-learning techniques and community-informed prioritization rules to optimize the allocation of scarce homelessness interventions, thus operating at the system-level rather than the service-level. Their framework provides insights that can refine service design, enhance targeting, and support preventive strategies (Culhane et al., 2011; Benjaminsen, 2015). Taken together, these models illustrate how European homelessness systems can advance toward a multi-layered evidence architecture that links frontline practice, analytical capacity, and strategic policymaking.

Nevertheless, the establishment of the conceptual models reviewed entails important challenges. The importance of developing a monitoring and evaluation framework, explicitly articulating the logic of change behind the intervention, and containing a brief set of indicators is recommended by the *OECD Toolkit to Combat Homelessness* (2024). Early efforts on the design of indicators for evaluation were developed by Brousse (2004) or Edgar et al. (2007). Nevertheless, despite the potential offered by the ETHOS framework, a shared evaluation framework for the European Union is still a work in progress (Rodilla et al. 2023).

Any effort to generate Large-scale data collection entails the creation of ethical frameworks, privacy-preserving technologies, and consent-driven data architectures (O'Brien, 2008; Thomas & Mackie, 2020). Even more when the development of HMIS and case management systems for homelessness is associated with algorithmic analysis or machine learning (Saltz y Dewar, 2019; Boppiniti, 2023). From an ethical perspective, these processes should be governed by principles of equity, transparency, participation, and human oversight (Ada Lovelace Institute, 2022) as essential conditions for ensuring that technology serves care, not control or exclusion (Eubanks, 2018) and contribute to building situated knowledge practices ethically committed to social justice (f<A+i>r, 2023).

A limitation of this paper is that it addresses only one pillar of EBD, the generation of robust research evidence. While the proposed conceptual model demonstrates how embedding monitoring and evaluation mechanisms can strengthen data systems and support evidence production in homelessness services, it does not fully engage with the other two pillars, professional expertise and service-user values, identified by Sackett (1997). Future work should incorporate structured mechanisms for integrating practitioner judgment, which is essential for interpreting findings and adapting interventions in complex practice environments (Johnson & Austin, 2006), as well as approaches that embed lived-experience perspectives, shown to enhance relevance and legitimacy in homelessness responses (Parsell et al., 2014). Addressing these complementary pillars is necessary to advance toward a comprehensive, fully evidence-based framework for homelessness policy and practice.

We have highlighted the need to strengthen the evidence base underpinning homelessness responses in Europe, where persistent gaps in data infrastructure, cross-national comparability, and methodological rigor may hinder effective policymaking.. The integration of coordinated data systems, rooted in frameworks such as ETHOS and complemented by by-name lists, information system methodologies, and data ethics, offers a viable pathway for generating high-quality, policy-relevant evidence. Such systems foster a culture of continuous learning by linking research, service delivery, and decision-making, while addressing many of the shortcomings identified in recent international efforts to end homelessness (Parsell et al., 2025). As European countries move toward the 2030 goals set by the Lisbon Declaration and the European Platform on Combating Homelessness, investment in methodological innovation, institutional coordination, and the standardization of key indicators will be essential. Without these foundational elements, homelessness strategies risk remaining fragmented and insufficiently grounded in robust empirical evidence.

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Digital Connectivity among Homelessness Service Users in Berlin: A Baseline Survey

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Abstract_ *Digital participation increasingly mediates access to basic needs, benefits, income opportunities, and social ties; for people experiencing homelessness, connectivity is often unstable. We report findings from a multilingual, interviewer-assisted survey (n=138) conducted across five Berlin homelessness day centres in March–April 2022, with eligibility aligned to ETHOS categories 1–8 and 11–12. Internet use in the prior year was widespread (87%), yet current device ownership lagged (61.6% any device; 59.4% smartphone), indicating reliance on borrowed/shared access. In practice terms, three-quarters of respondents charge their devices at NGOs, and many depend on public transport or public-space Wi-Fi, underscoring the value of safe charging infrastructure and reliable in-service Wi-Fi. This research note offers a first descriptive baseline for Berlin and identifies leverage points for service design.*

Keywords_ *Homelessness; Digital divide; digital inclusion; smartphones; connectivity; Berlin*

Introduction

Digital participation mediates access to many basic needs, from public benefits and healthcare appointments to income opportunities and social relations. Lacking stable digital connectivity consequently increasingly constitutes a significant burden. Many socioeconomically or otherwise marginalised people may face particular challenges in becoming and remaining stably digitally connected, reinforcing existing divides (van Dijk, 2020).

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This holds true for unhoused people (Buré, 2005; Humphry, 2014; Marler, 2022), many of whom experience connectivity as reliably unstable (Gonzales, 2016) – conditioned by precarious life circumstances often characterised by scarcity and insecurity. This research note attempts to measure these challenges in one particular context by providing a descriptive baseline for the context of homelessness in Berlin, the city in Germany with the highest number of unhoused people (Hundenborn and Hees, 2023).

We report findings from a multilingual, interviewer-assisted survey (n=138) conducted across five homelessness day centres in March-April 2022. The survey constituted one part of a broader mixed-methods research project on homelessness and digital media usage in Berlin. Any user of these day centres who had met criteria for FEANTSA ETHOS categories 1-8 and 11-12 (FEANTSA, 2017a) for at least one night in the last 12 months was eligible for participation. The survey instrument, co-developed with unhoused collaborators and informed by ethnographic fieldwork, adapts established constructs from digital divide research for the context of homelessness, draws on previous research on the intersection of homelessness and digital media, and adds items specific to the Berlin/Germany context.

Our agenda is straightforward and descriptive; where appropriate, some limited disaggregation is conducted. Figures on serial smartphone loss and challenges around SIM registration from our survey were cut for brevity and will be part of separate, forthcoming publications. We mark clear limits: The sample is not population-representative – as is common practice in survey research on homelessness and digital media due to the challenges surrounding random sampling (Galperin, Bar and Nguyen, 2021) – and likely diverges from existing citywide counts on citizenship composition. Additionally, the reference period of many items (the year preceding March–April 2022) may pick up on late-pandemic constraints that are specific to that period.

This research note constitutes the first descriptive baseline of digital connectivity among unhoused people in Berlin. It offers an overview with sufficient granularity to reveal leverage points for practice and to enable future research to replicate, extend, or compare with more rigorous designs. Although city-specific and non-representative, the patterns reported here may provide some initial insights beyond the Berlin context for practitioners and policymakers in comparable European urban contexts.

Methodology

Target population and sampling

The delineation of the survey's target population was informed by three sources: prior theoretical and empirical work, our own ethnographic fieldwork, and methodological considerations. Existing surveys on digital media use among people experiencing homelessness vary in their chosen field sites, focusing, for example, on users of the shelter system (e.g., Pearlstein et al., 2020) or on clients of specific housing programmes (e.g., Rhoades et al., 2017). From the outset, our intention was to capture homelessness in a broad sense as articulated by FEANTSA's ETHOS framework.

To best capture this breadth, we selected homelessness day centres as our field site – low-threshold spaces that offer daytime respite, hot meals, seating, and opportunities for social contact. Consequently, we do not capture people experiencing homelessness who do not use these services. Our target population is defined as users of homelessness day centres who spent at least one night in the past twelve months in ETHOS categories 1–8 and 11–12.

Fieldwork took place between 17 March 2022 and 29 April 2022 across five day centres in Berlin. Participants were chosen through convenience sampling, being approached by researchers or day centre staff.

A total of 141 individuals completed the survey. Three reported having slept exclusively in a flat with their own rental contract during the preceding twelve months and were excluded from analysis. The resulting analytic sample comprises 138 participants.

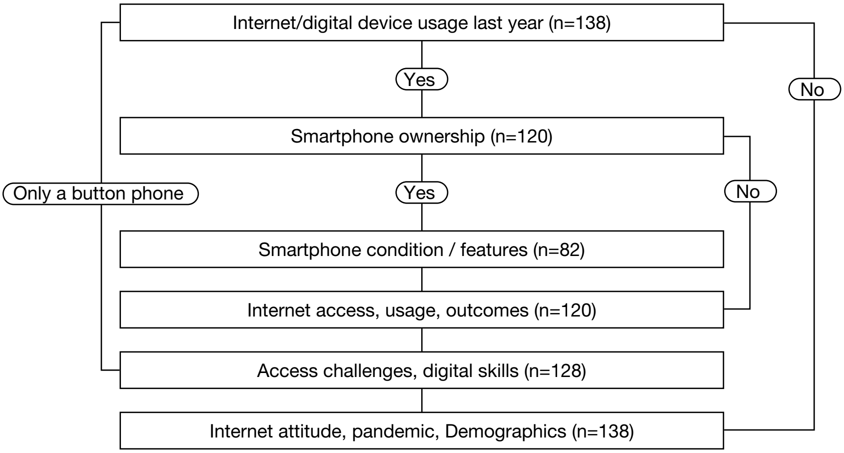
Survey development

The survey was co-developed with unhoused collaborators as part of our ongoing ethnographic research. Between early 2020 and March 2022, field experiences helped identify salient domains, and multiple unhoused people provided feedback on both content and format. We piloted the instrument with unhoused participants to identify and remedy issues prior to full deployment (for more detail, see Lowis, 2025b).

Where possible, we adapted established measures from the digital-divide literature to maximise construct comparability, supplemented by items specific to Berlin/Germany and to homelessness service use. Appendix 1 maps constructs to their sources.

Our final survey entailed 119 items in total, many of which were Likert-type matrix questions. We employed skip logic, so not all respondents saw every item; consequently, base n varies across tables. A flow diagram of sections and skip logic is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Survey Flow and Skip Logic



Read from top to bottom. Not all sections included here; graphic constitutes an overview.

Survey Administration

Five interviewers administered the survey: three project researchers, one student assistant, and one expert with lived experience.

The survey was implemented in Google Forms and available in German, English, Russian, Polish, and Romanian, with translations performed by an accredited firm. Interviews were conducted on laptops with interviewer assistance, a modality chosen, among other reasons, in light of variability in reading proficiency. We acknowledge that interviewer-administration may introduce social desirability effects.

Typical completion time was 20-30 minutes, with a range from 10-45 minutes. Participants received €10 as compensation – indexed to the approximate 2022 minimum hourly wage – to recognise their time and effort at a level intended to be fair but not coercive. Compensation was not contingent on completing the survey; this was clearly communicated as part of the informed consent script (see below).

Coding and data analysis

Responses from all language versions were harmonised to a single coding scheme using lookup tables that mapped translated labels to English categories. After harmonisation in Excel, the dataset was imported into SPSS for coding and analysis. Variable labels, value labels, and missing-data codes were applied via SPSS Syntax scripts; analyses were conducted in SPSS using unweighted frequencies and valid percentages.

We did not include a housed comparison group. Where comparable data is publicly available for the general population for key metrics, we report these figures alongside our own data; however, methodological differences preclude a direct comparison – they should therefore be read as directional context rather than benchmarks.

Earlier publications inadvertently included the three cases ineligible due to their housing status and minor miscoding from stray leading spaces. This produced small discrepancies in previously published figures. Corrections have been requested.

Our dataset and a corresponding codebook are accessible online for further analysis (Lowis, 2025a).

Ethics

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology and Ergonomics, Technical University of Berlin (Tracking No. MH_02_20200430). Informed consent was obtained through a checkmark in the survey programme below an informed consent script in the survey interface. The informed consent script was read aloud by the interviewers; a printed copy including contact information for the research team was provided to participants. All respondents consented; none chose to withdraw. With the exception of some critical items, questions were optional to reduce burden and respect participants' comfort.

Results

Sample Profile

Our sample is predominantly male (78.7%; n=107), with 18.4% (n=25) identifying as female and smaller shares identifying as other/transgender. German (68.8%; n=95) and English (54.3%; n=75) are the most widely spoken languages among our sample, with notable minorities speaking Polish (19.6%; n=27) and Russian (18.1%; n=25). We did not specifically ask about first language – English being widely spoken in the sample may reflect its status as a widely taught second language.

German proficiency is split: 51.4% (n=71) say that they are perfectly fluent/native, while 26.8% (n=37) say they have little/no knowledge. Citizenship is mixed – 53.1% (n=69) have German citizenship, 40.0% (n=52) other EU citizenships, with 6.9% (n=9) having non-EU citizenship. Homelessness is often long-term: 12 months–5 years is the most widely reported homelessness duration bracket at 40.6% (n=54).

Table 1. Sample Demographics

Category	Frequency (n)	Valid %
Gender (valid n=136)		
Female	25	18.4
Male	107	78.7
Transgender/Other	4	2.9
Languages spoken (valid n=138, multi-answer, all above 5% listed)		
German	95	68.8
English	75	54.3
Polish	27	19.6
Russian	25	18.1
Turkish	16	11.6
French	13	9.4
Bulgarian	11	8.0
Spanish	7	5.1
German language knowledge (valid n=138)		
No knowledge	13	9.4
Little knowledge	24	17.4
Intermediate knowledge	15	10.9
Proficient knowledge	15	10.9
Perfectly fluent / native	71	51.4
Citizenship (valid n=130)		
Non-EU	9	6.9
EU (not German)	52	40.0
German	69	53.1
Lifetime homelessness duration (valid n=133)		
<1–3 months	12	9.0
3–6 months	6	4.5
6–12 months	18	13.5
12 months – 5 years	54	40.6
5–10 years	24	18.0
> 10 years	19	14.3
Disability (valid n=126)		
No	95	75.4
Yes	27	21.4
Prefer not to say	4	3.2

Base n=138 (all participants). Percentages based on valid n for each question.

In Appendix 2, we conduct two one-sided tests (TOST) comparing our sample's demographics with the Wohnungslosenberichterstattung 2024 benchmark (Bohlender et al., 2024; Bundesministerium für Wohnen, Stadtentwicklung und Bauwesen, 2024). This count of unhoused people is, however, not a direct comparator due to definitional and methodological differences. Overall, our sample is broadly comparable to this benchmark on gender and age distributions, while citizenship diverges, with our sample skewing more German.

Table 2. Sleeping arrangements in the prior 12 months (n=138)

Sleeping place option	Frequency (n)	Valid %
Night shelter (have to leave every morning)	87	63.0
Living on the street, tent, in a park, or similar	75	54.3
Staying with friend or family member	44	31.9
Residence for homeless people (can stay for longer period of time)	42	30.4
Hospital / Psychiatric Facility	23	16.7
Supported Housing (where a social worker supports you)	20	14.5
Jail	16	11.6
Occupied house	13	9.4
Living in a flat share / flat without your own rental contract	10	7.2
Other	10	7.2
Living in a flat share / flat with your own rental contract	8	5.8
Tiny House	4	2.9

Base n=138 (all participants). Multi-answer. Percentages based on base n.

As can be seen in Table 2, respondents report a wide mix of places, reflecting movement across the care and housing landscape. Night shelters are most common at 63.0% (n=87), followed by unsheltered locations (living on the street, tent, park, or similar) at 54.3% (n=75). Interpersonal arrangements are frequent – staying with friends or family 31.9% (n=44) – as are longer-stay facilities – residences for homeless people 30.4% (n=42). Institutional touchpoints appear for a notable minority: hospital/psychiatric facility 16.7% (n=23) and jail 11.6% (n=16).

Overall, respondents reported between a minimum of one and a maximum of eight different types of sleeping arrangement in the last year, with a mean of 2.6 (SD=1.45).

Device Access

Most survey participants reported using the internet or a digital device in the past year, with 87.0% (n=120) indicating “Yes.” A smaller share reported no such use, 7.2% (n=10), while 5.8% (n=8) reported having only a button phone. For context, official German statistics indicate that in 2022 roughly 6% of people aged 16-74 in Germany had never used the internet – a stricter definition than our “no use in the last year”.

Table 3. Usage of internet/digital devices in last year (n=138)

Response	Frequency (n)	Valid %
No	10	7.2
Yes	120	87.0
Only a button phone	8	5.8

Base n=138 (all participants). Valid n=138. Percentages based on valid n.

As highlighted in Table 4, 61.6% (n=85) of respondents currently own any internet-enabled device (smartphone, laptop, or tablet), with 59.4% (n=82) owning a smartphone. This is substantially lower than the share of respondents who reported any internet/digital-device use in the past year (87.0%), indicating that many respondents accessed the internet recently but do not presently own an internet-capable device.

As a general-population benchmark at household-level – limiting comparability – German households in 2022 reported 88.1% with at least one smartphone, 75.5% with a laptop/notebook, and 55.0% with a tablet (Destatis, 2018[1]).

Table 4. Devices currently owned (n=138)

Devices	Frequency (n)	Valid %	General population (household-level) %
Internet-enabled devices			
Smartphone	82	59.4	88.1
Button phone	15	10.9	(-)
Tablet	13	9.4	55.0
Laptop	9	6.5	75.5
Any internet-enabled device (smartphone, laptop, tablet)	85	61.6	(-)
Peripherals and other devices			
Headphones	63	45.7	(-)
Powerbank	45	32.6	(-)
Radio	27	19.6	(-)
Camera	9	6.5	(-)

Base n= 138 (all participants). Multi-answer. Percentages based on base n. Ownership in general population in Germany at household-level for 2022 from Destatis (2018[1])

Beyond internet-enabled devices, headphone ownership is common – 45.7% (n=63) – which has practical implications for potential smartphone distributions: many recent phones lack a 3.5 mm jack, while Bluetooth sets add cost and require charging. In our ethnographic work, participants described headphones as useful for privacy and coping in crowded settings (e.g., shelters) and for media consumption when playing sound aloud is impractical. Powerbanks are also relatively widespread – 32.6% (n=45).

1 Publication date of Destatis figures has not been updated from earlier iterations.

Table 5. Information about smartphone

	Frequency (n)	Valid %
Acquisition route of most recent smartphone (valid n=81)		
Bought new	28	34.6
Bought used	23	28.4
Gift from family or friends	19	23.5
Donation from NGO	8	9.9
Found	3	3.7
Spend on most recent smartphone (valid n=78)		
Nothing	25	32.1
Less than 20 Euros	3	3.8
20-50 Euros	6	7.7
50-70 Euros	7	9.0
70-100 Euros	11	14.1
100-150 Euros	15	19.2
150-250 Euros	6	7.7
250-500 Euros	5	6.4
Working condition of most recent smartphone (valid n=82)		
Very badly	5	6.1
Badly	10	12.2
OK	19	23.2
Well	17	20.7
Very well	31	37.8
Number of smartphones currently owned (valid n=82)		
One phone	69	84.1
Two phones	9	11.0
Three phones	3	3.7
Four phones	1	1.2

Base n=82 (smartphone owners). Percentages based on valid n for each question.

Among current smartphone owners, acquisition routes include purchase and non-purchase channels. The largest single route is buying new at 34.6% (n=28), followed by buying used at 28.4% (n=23). Combining categories, purchases (new or used) represent 63.0% (n=51) of the most recent acquisitions, while non-purchase routes represent 37.0% (n=30).

A third of owners – 32.1% (n=25) – reported paying nothing for their smartphone, approximately tracking the figures for non-purchase acquisition routes. Among those who did pay, spending skews low: ≤100 € accounts for 34.6% of all owners (n=27; sum of “<20 €”, “20–50 €”, “50–70 €”, “70–100 €”), while 100–150 € is the single most common paid bracket at 19.2% (n=15); higher spend is less frequent. Retail benchmarks show that the median consumer price of smartphones sold in Germany was 626 € in 2022 (Statista, 2023).

A majority of smartphone owners reported their phone to be in good working order, with 37.8% (n=31) rating it as "very well" and 20.7% (n=17) as "well", for a combined 58.5% (n=48) rating the device positively. Most smartphone owners have one handset: 84.1% (n=69) report 1 phone. A smaller share reports 2 phones: 11.0% (n=9), while ownership of more than 2 devices is uncommon. The relatively low number of participants owning more than one smartphone contrasts with the strategy of "accumulating phones" identified by Marler (2019) in Chicago – perhaps due to the existence of the subsidised "Lifeline" programme in the United States, with no comparable programme existing in Germany.

Table 6. Laptops/Computers

	Frequency (n)	Valid %
Laptop/computer usage in the last 12 months (valid n=116)		
No	60	51.7
Yes	56	48.3
Computer/Laptop access sites (valid n=120, multi-answer)		
NGO/charity computer	27	22.5
Friends'/family computer	20	16.7
Internet café computer	16	13.3
Library computer	11	9.2
Own computer/laptop	10	8.3

Base n=120 (internet users). Valid n=116. Percentages based on valid n.

Reported laptop/computer use is split nearly in half among internet users: 48.3% (n=56) said they used a laptop/computer, while 51.7% (n=60) said no. In other words, even within a group that used the internet in the last year, about one in two did not use a laptop/computer.

Among internet users, the most frequently cited access points for laptops/computers are NGO/charity computers: 22.5% (n=27), friends'/family computers: 16.7% (n=20), internet cafés: 13.3% (n=16), and libraries: 9.2% (n=11), with own computer/laptop accounting for 8.3% (n=10). These figures indicate that institutional and interpersonal channels are the primary routes to non-phone internet access.

Internet Connectivity Modalities

Reported use frequency among internet users skews intensive: 36.1% (n=43) selected "more than four hours a day," and a further 33.6% (n=40) reported daily use; together, 69.7% (n=83) fall into daily or heavier categories. Less frequent patterns are less common: weekly use accounts for 22.7% (n=27), while monthly and less than monthly together comprise 7.6% (n=9).

Table 7. Internet connectivity modalities.

	Frequency (n)	Valid %
Internet use frequency (valid n=119)		
Less than monthly	6	5.0
Monthly	3	2.5
Weekly	27	22.7
Daily (less than four hours)	40	33.6
More than four hours a day	43	36.1
Wi-Fi usage in the last 12 months (valid n=119)		
No	8	6.7
Yes	111	93.3
Wi-Fi access sites in the last 12 months (valid n=112)		
Public transport	91	81.3
Free Wi-Fi Berlin (public places)	66	58.9
NGOs / charities	57	50.9
Shops	48	42.9
Friends and family	39	34.8
Restaurants	34	30.4
Cafes	29	25.9
Libraries	21	18.8
My own Wi-Fi in a flat/room	18	16.1
Data usage per month in the last 12 months (valid n=106)		
0 GB	12	11.3
1–3 GB	11	10.4
3–5 GB	13	12.3
5–10 GB	18	17.0
10–20 GB	32	30.2
More than 20 GB	20	18.9
Monthly phone spend in last 12 months (valid n=123*)		
0 Euros	12	9.8
Up to 5 Euros	5	4.1
5–10 Euros	15	12.2
10–20 Euros	51	41.5
20–30 Euros	12	9.8
30–50 Euros	15	12.2
More than 50 Euros	13	10.6

Base n=120 (internet users) for all variables except starred ones. Percentages based on valid n for each question.

** Base n=128 (internet users and button phone users).*

This compares to a median usage among the German general population of 160 minutes in 2022 (ARD/ZDF-Forschungskommission, 2023). Read alongside the earlier access figures, these figures suggest that once people are online, their engagement is typically regular and often high-intensity.

Wi-Fi use is near-universal among internet users in our sample: 93.3% (n=111) reported Wi-Fi usage. Reported access points cluster around public and third-sector infrastructure. Public transport is the leading node at 81.3% (n=91), followed by Free Wi-Fi Berlin (public places) at 58.9% (n=66) and NGOs/charities at 50.9% (n=57). Commercial venues are also important – shops: 42.9% (n=48), restaurants: 30.4% (n=34), cafés: 25.9% (n=29) – as are interpersonal channels (friends/family: 34.8% (n=39)). By contrast, owning Wi-Fi in a flat/room is much less common at 16.1% (n=18). This is consistent with the broader challenges of housing precarity regarding digital connectivity.

Reported mobile data usage concentrates at higher levels: 10–20 GB: 30.2% (n=32) and >20 GB: 18.9% (n=20) together account for 49.1% (n=52). Only 11.3% (n=12) used no data at all. As a benchmark for the general population, Statista (2023) estimates a monthly average of 5.65 GB per active SIM card in 2022. Notably, the valid number of respondents was relatively low for this question (n=106) in comparison with the base n of 120. It stands to reason that some participants were unsure about whether they used mobile data and if so, how much.

Spending is concentrated in the 10–20 € range: 41.5% (n=51) report this modal band, while a smaller group pays substantially more and a notable minority rely on ≤10 € or 0 €.

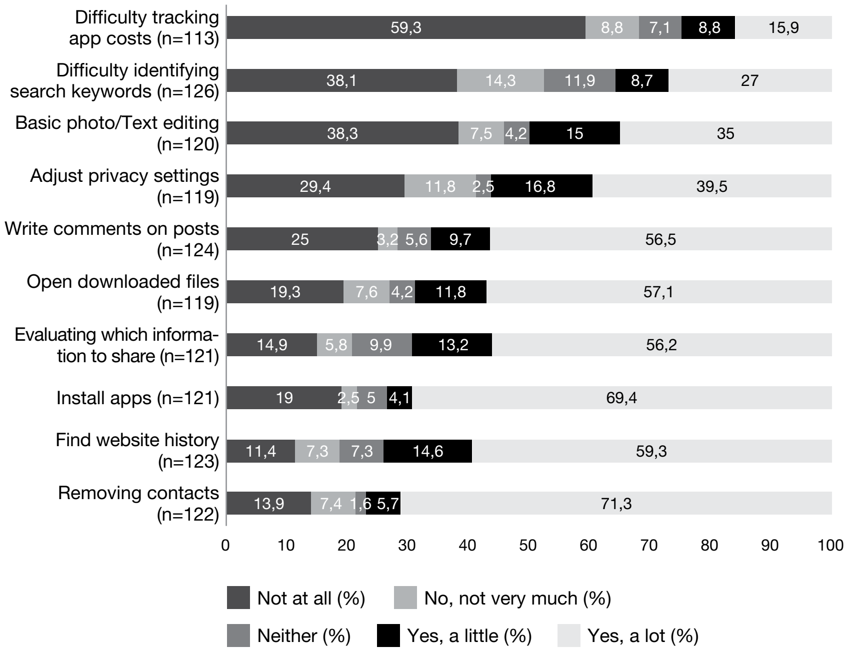
Skills and Attitude

Internet/phone users report strong competence on routine smartphone tasks: removing contacts (71.3% “Yes, a lot”), installing apps (69.4%), finding website history (59.3%), opening downloaded files (57.1%), writing comments on posts (56.5%), and evaluating which information to share (56.2%). Confidence is lower for adjusting privacy settings (39.5% “Yes, a lot”) and basic photo/text editing (35.0%).

Two items are phrased as difficulties and are reverse-coded in the skills index: most report little or no difficulty identifying search keywords (38.1% “Not at all,” 14.3% “Not very much”) and tracking app costs (59.3% “Not at all,” 8.8% “Not very much”), though notable minorities indicate a lot of difficulty (27.0% and 15.9%, respectively).

Overall, the pattern suggests solid everyday proficiency. However, these figures should be treated with care as they reflect self-reported proficiency.

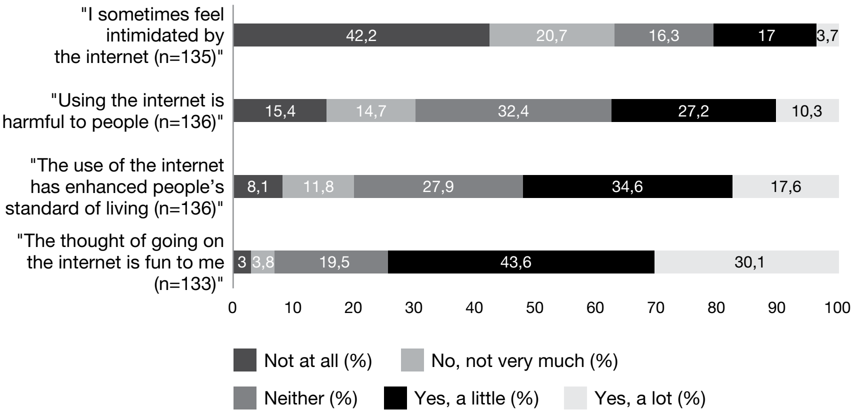
Figure 2: Internet Skills



Base n=128 (internet users and button phone users). Valid n ranges from 113-126. Percentages based on valid n.

Generally, internet/phone users' attitude towards the internet trends positive, as can be seen from Figure 3: a large majority find going online fun (30.1% "Yes, a lot"; 43.6% "Yes, a little"), and most agree that internet use has enhanced people's standard of living (17.6% "Yes, a lot"; 34.6% "Yes, a little"; 27.9% "Neither"). Views on harm are more mixed but tilt away from concern. Reports of feeling intimidated by the internet are also comparatively low, with only 3.7% responding "Yes, a lot" and 17.0% "Yes, a little".

Figure 3: Internet Attitude



Base n=138 (all participants). Valid n ranges from 133-136. Percentages based on valid n.

Internet Usage and Outcomes

Table 8. App Usage (n=120)

	Frequency (n)	Valid %
Messaging Apps		
WhatsApp	85	70.8
Email (Gmail, etc.)	70	58.3
Texting / SMS	69	57.5
Facebook Messenger	68	56.7
Telegram	25	20.8
Signal	14	11.7
Viber	10	8.3
Social Media Apps		
Facebook	76	63.3
Instagram	43	35.8
TikTok	43	35.8
Twitter/X	13	10.8
VK	2	1.7
Other Apps		
YouTube	105	87.5
Browser (Chrome, Safari, etc.)	77	64.2
Maps	73	60.8
Telephone	68	56.7
Weather apps	58	48.3
Music streaming	55	45.8
Music	44	36.7
Video streaming (non-YouTube)	37	30.8
Apps targeted to homeless people	26	21.7
Dating apps (Tinder, Grindr, Bumble,…)	15	12.5

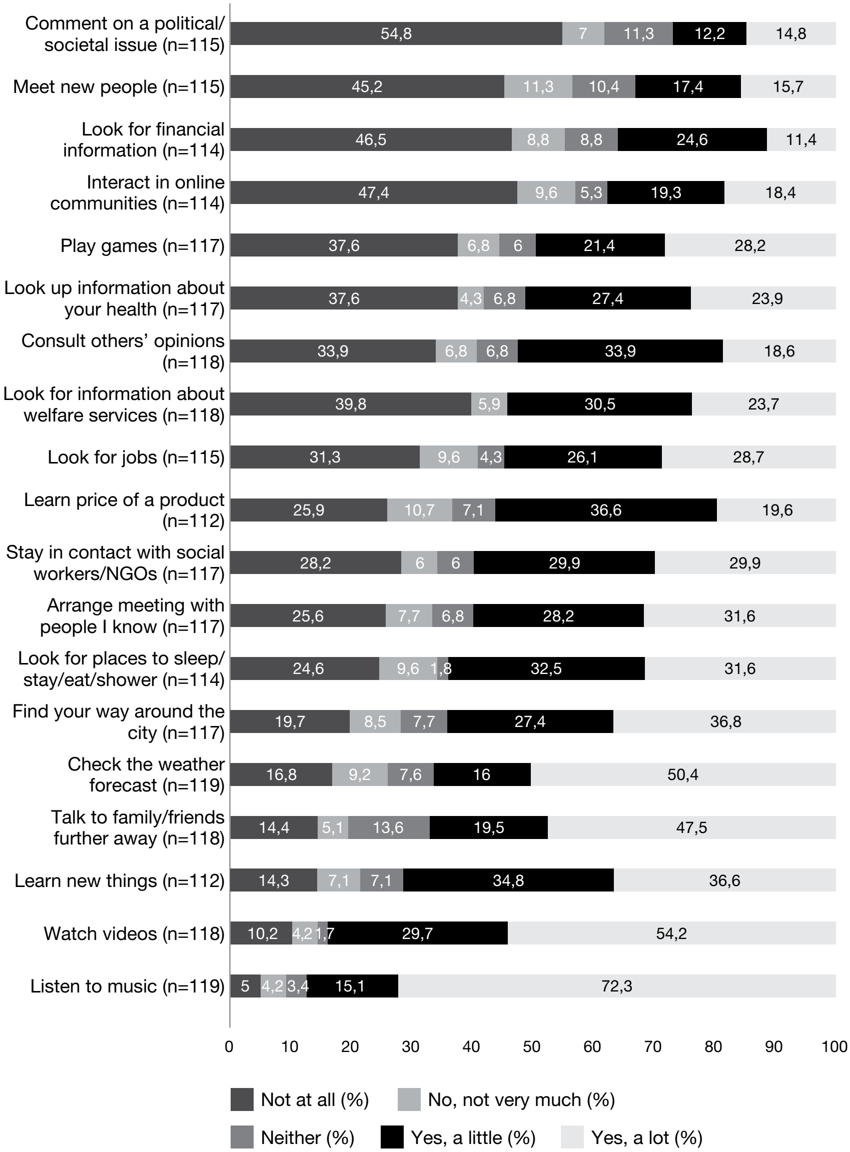
Base n=120 (internet users). Multi-answer. Percentages based on base n.

Messaging is near-universal and multi-channel: WhatsApp 70.8% (n=85), email 58.3% (n=70), SMS 57.5% (n=69), and Facebook Messenger 56.7% (n=68) are the most widely used communication tools. Facebook is the leading social platform at 63.3% (n=76), with Instagram 35.8% (n=43) and TikTok 35.8% (n=43).

Among other apps, YouTube is the clear standout – and overall most used app – at 87.5% (n=105), underscoring video as a central activity. Core utilities follow: browser apps 64.2% (n=77), Maps 60.8% (n=73), and telephone apps 56.7% (n=68). Everyday information and entertainment tools are also widely used – weather 48.3% (n=58), music streaming 45.8% (n=55), and music players 36.7% (n=44) – while non-YouTube video streaming appears for 30.8% (n=37). By contrast, apps targeted to homeless people are used by only 21.7% (n=26).

Everyday media and practical utilities dominate use cases as presented in Figure 5. “Listen to music” is most prominent with a majority selecting “Yes, a lot” (72.3%), followed by “Watch videos” (54.2% “Yes, a lot”) and “Check the weather forecast” (50.4% “Yes, a lot”). Communication and orientation are also central: “Talk to family/friends further away” (47.5% “Yes, a lot”) and “Find your way around the city” (36.8% “Yes, a lot”). Learning-oriented use is common – “Learn new things” (36.6% “Yes, a lot”) – as are practical needs tied to housing precarity: “Look for places to sleep/stay/eat/shower” (31.6% “Yes, a lot”), “Arrange meetings with people I know” (31.6% “Yes, a lot”), and “Stay in contact with social workers/NGOs” (29.9% “Yes, a lot”).

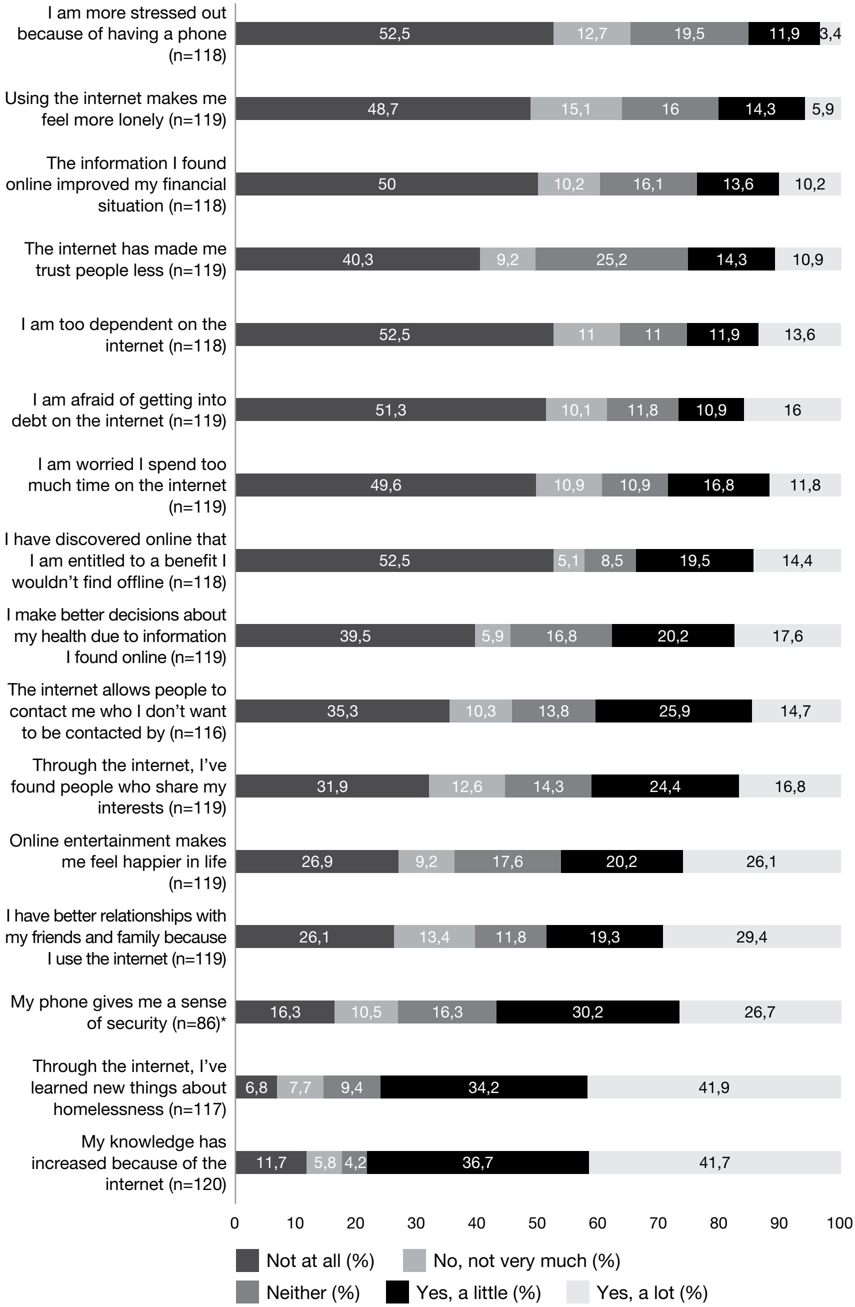
Figure 4: Use Cases



Base n=120 (internet users). Valid n ranges from 112-119. Percentages based on valid n.

Employment and service searches sit in the middle of the distribution – “Look for jobs” (28.7% “Yes, a lot”) and “Look for information about welfare services” (23.7% “Yes, a lot”) – while expressive or community activities are less common at the high-intensity level (e.g., “Comment on a political/societal issue” (14.8% “Yes, a lot”); “Interact in online communities” (18.4% “Yes, a lot”). Read alongside the app-usage results, use concentrates on media consumption and practical coordination/navigation.

Figure 5: Internet usage outcomes



Base n=120 (internet users). Percentages based on valid n for each question.

**Due to an error in the survey tool, this question was not included in the first few days of the survey and has a base n=86.*

Reported outcomes are predominantly positive or neutral. A large majority agree that “my knowledge has increased because of the internet” (41.7% “Yes, a lot”; 36.7% “Yes, a little”). Many also endorse “my phone gives me a sense of security” (26.7% “Yes, a lot”; 30.2% “Yes, a little”; note the smaller base for this item). Entertainment registers as beneficial for some – “online entertainment makes me feel happier in life” shows 26.1% “Yes, a lot” and 20.2% “Yes, a little”.

Potential downsides are less commonly endorsed at high levels: “using the internet makes me feel more lonely” is 5.9% “Yes, a lot” and 14.3% “Yes, a little”; “the internet has made me trust people less” is 10.9% “Yes, a lot” and 14.3% “Yes, a little”; and “I am afraid of getting into debt on the internet” is 16.0% “Yes, a lot” and 10.9% “Yes, a little.” Finally, “the internet allows people to contact me who I don’t want to” has a mixed profile (around two-fifths neutral/negative and roughly two-fifths positive), suggesting ambivalence about potential undesired contact.

Overall, respondents most clearly highlight knowledge gains and a sense of security (for many), with loneliness, mistrust, and debt concerns present but concentrated in smaller subgroups.

Key Takeaways

Internet use is widespread among unhoused people in Berlin, but device ownership lags behind, pointing to a structural access gap. While 87% of participants reported using the internet in the last 12 months, only 61.6% owned any internet-enabled device, and 59.4% owned a smartphone at the time of the survey. This mismatch suggests that many people are reliant on borrowed, shared, or temporary devices. For service design, this suggests potential value for targeted smartphone distributions, ideally pairing devices with practical accessories (screen protectors, robust cases with lanyards/cords) and options for safe storage in shelters. Where possible, devices should be chosen for stability, large batteries, and headphone jacks, and bundled with power banks and headphones. Because loss is frequent, distributions should plan for this, for example, by setting clear frequency limits and supporting account backup and cloud recovery at handover.

Among internet users, 93.3% used Wi-Fi in the last year; key locations included public transport (81.3%), Free Wi-Fi Berlin (58.9%), NGOs (50.9%), and shops (42.9%). As of 2022, this means that people were often relying on public spaces and transit for connectivity. This may, of course, be influenced by this survey being carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic – more recent research is needed here. Nonetheless, for service organisations, this points towards the importance of strengthening Wi-Fi availability, particularly across low-threshold services. Providing reliable Wi-Fi in these safer environments could help reduce reliance on precarious public access points.

Internet use among those who are connected is intensive: 69.7% of internet users go online daily, and 36.1% do so for more than four hours per day. Core apps reflect a mix of media, communication, and practical navigation: YouTube (87.5%), WhatsApp (70.8%), browsers (64.2%), Maps (60.8%), Facebook (63.3%), and Messenger (56.7%) are all widely used. Respondents also report generally positive attitudes toward the internet, as well as reporting mostly positive outcomes from their usage. Together, these findings suggest that digital channels are not marginal but central to everyday life for unhoused people who are online. Service design should therefore "meet people where they are" by using the messaging apps they already rely on for two-way outreach and appointment reminders, and by ensuring service point information (locations, hours, contact details) is up to date on maps platforms. Raising awareness of, and improving the perceived usefulness of, existing apps specifically targeted at unhoused people could build on these established digital habits with targeted offers, rather than trying to substitute them.

Self-reported digital skills among internet/phone users are generally good. Respondents were less confident around privacy settings and photo/text editing. These are areas where practical training could yield quick and meaningful gains. Supporting people in managing privacy settings could reduce vulnerability; basic media production/editing skills would make it easier to complete bureaucratic or productivity-focused tasks.

Finally, only around half of internet users in the survey had used a computer in the last year, despite many essential tasks – especially bureaucratic or administrative ones – not being optimised for mobile devices. Exclusive reliance on smartphones can make complex online processes harder to complete. Service providers could help address this by offering access to laptops or desktop computers in safe environments – if this is something that service users indicate they would find helpful.

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Appendix 1: Constructs and their Source

Table 20. Constructs and Sources

Construct	Source
Housing status	ETHOS (FEANTSA, 2017a)
Educational Level	ISCED 2011 (Schneider, 2013)
Means of subsistence	Ratzka & Kämper, 2018
Physical Health	Pérez-Zepeda et al., 2016
Mental Health	Ahmad et al., 2014
Alcohol Usage	M-SASQ (Kaner et al., 2009)
Drug Usage	Smith et al., 2010
Internet Attitude	Internet Attitude Scale (Joyce and Kirakowski, 2015)
Vulnerability	Vulnerability Assessment Tool (DESC, 2015)
Internet Skills	Internet Skills Scale (van Deursen et al., 2016)
Common app uses	Humphry, 2014
Internet usage diversity	van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019
Internet usage frequency	van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019
Internet Outcomes	van Deursen & van Dijk, 2019

Appendix 2: Equivalence Testing

There is no dataset directly comparable to our frame, but the closest is the state-level, disaggregated Wohnungslosenberichterstattung 2024 (Bohlender et al., 2024; Bundesministerium für Wohnen, Stadtentwicklung und Bauwesen, 2024), here shortened to WBE24, which uses a rigorous national methodology to enumerate homelessness in Germany. WBE24 reports two distinct counts: WBE24a (people in institutional accommodation) and WBE24b (people without accommodation or in hidden homelessness, aligned with ETHOS Light categories 1, 5, and 6, measured in the week prior to survey (FEANTSA, 2017b). Because the two counts use different frames, combined demographics cannot be derived. Our inclusion criteria – day-centre users falling into ETHOS categories 1–8 and 11–12 for at least one night in the last 12 months – do not align perfectly with either count. Nonetheless, WBE24b is the closer conceptual match for our sample, given that our sampling frame is day-centre users, a low-threshold service that primarily attracts people who are currently without accommodation or in unstable/hidden situations (e.g., rough sleeping, couch-surfing), because day centres provide unmet daytime needs.

We therefore compared our sample's demographics to WBE24b using a two one-sided tests (TOST) on differences in proportions as an equivalence test. We recoded our variables to match WBE24b categories (e.g. collapsing gender to male/female; dropping non-binary categories for this specific comparison). We treated both sources as samples and formed 90% CIs for proportion differences. We pre-specified ±15 percentage points (pp) as our equivalence bound, motivated by feasibility with n≈130 (tighter bounds would be under-powered), and frame/mode differences that justify a modest tolerance while still flagging meaningful composition gaps. We also report equivalencies at bounds of ±12.5 pp and ±10 pp. In practice, a confidence interval is the plausible range for the true difference between our sample and WBE24b. The equivalence margin (e.g., ±15 pp) is a tolerance band for "close enough" in practice. If the whole CI stays inside that band, we understand the groups as broadly similar with regard to that particular demographic variable.

Using 90% confidence intervals, our sex and broad age distributions are equivalent to WBE24b at ±15 percentage points (pp), while citizenship is not. Male share is +5.1 pp (90% CI −0.5, +10.8) and female −5.1 pp (–10.8, +0.5) – both within ±15 pp. Age shows a similar pattern: <30 is −6.3 pp (–11.4, –1.2) and 30+ is +6.3 pp (+1.2, +11.4), again inside the band. By contrast, citizenship differs materially: German is +19.9 pp (+12.6, +27.1) and non-German –19.9 pp (–27.1, –12.6), which exceeds ±15 pp. The sex and age findings also hold at ±12.5 pp, but not at ±10 pp (their CIs cross those tighter limits).

These findings provide bounded comparability on sex/age while highlighting a substantive gap in citizenship. Given frame and mode differences between our study and WBE24b, equivalence results should be read as a screen for major skews, not as evidence of representativeness or transportability. Future work on digital media use among unhoused people in Germany should, alongside efforts to improve sampling, harmonise inclusion criteria with WBE24 definitions where feasible to enable cleaner comparisons and/or potential post-hoc weighting.

Table 21. Two one-sided test analysis comparing our sample demographics with WBE24b

Measure	Our sample (n, %)	WBE24 (n, %)	Diff (pp) & 90% CI	Equiv ±15 pp	Equiv ±12.5 pp	Equiv ±10 pp
Gender – Male	132, 81.06%	6049, 75.94%	+5.12 [−0.54, +10.78]	Yes	Yes	No
Gender – Female	132, 18.94%	1916, 24.06%	−5.12 [−10.78, +0.54]	Yes	Yes	No
Age – <30	135, 14.81%	1681, 21.08%	−6.27 [−11.35, −1.19]	Yes	Yes	No
Age – 30+	135, 85.19%	6292, 78.92%	+6.27 [+1.19, +11.35]	Yes	Yes	No
Citizenship – German	130, 53.08%	2634, 33.21%	+19.87 [+12.62, +27.12]	No	No	No
Citizenship – Not German	130, 46.92%	5298, 66.79%	−19.87 [−27.12, −12.62]	No	No	No

Differences are our % – WBE24%. CIs are 90% Wald. Equivalence at a bound means the entire 90% CI lies within that ±pp band. Shaded cells within respective equivalence bounds.

Uncovering Complex Patterns of Hidden Homelessness (Couch-surfing) Across Space and Time in Australia [1]

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Abstract_ *This study investigates the state of hidden homelessness, measured by couch-surfing, in Australia, across space and time. It highlights how couch-surfing seems to have evolved over the past few decades in Australia. It shows, prima facie, evidence that couch-surfing has become more prevalent over the past 22 years. The results suggest a doubling of couch-surfing over time. This is the case despite potential non-random attrition that would be expected to lead to an under-estimate of couch-surfing over time. Coupled with this finding is the empirical evidence indicating that more remote locations are places associated with a greater likelihood of couch-surfing, statistically significant at the 1% level. Couch-surfing is more pronounced in more remote areas. Further research is needed to unpack precisely why this is the case and what can be done to remedy it.*

Keywords_ *Australia; Couch-surfers; HILDA survey; Hidden homelessness*

[1] This paper uses unit record data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey. The HILDA Project was initiated and is funded by the DSS and is managed by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research (Melbourne Institute). The findings and views reported in this paper, however, are those of the author alone and should not be attributed to either the DSS or the Melbourne Institute.

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Introduction

Conventional studies of homelessness focus on people in living on the streets or in shelters in urban areas. However, the experience of homelessness is far more diverse and research outside of urban areas remains uncommon in the literature (Waegemakers Schiff et al., 2016). Yet, throughout the world, rural[2] homelessness is considered a distinctive experience, characterised by the intersection of vast and sparsely populated places and minimal to non-existent social services (Buck-McFadyen, 2022a; Waegemakers Schiff et al., 2016). Not to mention, more rural areas are uniquely characterised by the high cost of private transportation; the absence of conventional public transportation systems (Buck-McFadyen, 2022a; Kauppi et al., 2017); and paired concurrently with less affordable and less suitable housing (e.g., no studio apartments or lone person dwellings) (Demaerschalk et al., 2019). It is the combination of these features that can make this experience of homelessness a very severe and unique one (Lawrence, 1995).

Outside of urban areas, homelessness is more prevalent, and it is also more hidden because people are living in tents or recreational vehicles, living in substandard housing, couch-surfing, living in overcrowded dwellings, engaging in survival sex, or staying in motels or single rooms. Similarly, people squatting or sleeping outside, living in bush camps, or sleeping in vehicles form part of this rural hidden homelessness to the extent that these people do not engage with homelessness services (Anthopoulou et al., 2019; Kauppi et al., 2017). Using the definition of hidden homelessness as a person '… living temporarily with family/friends or in non-conventional housing' (Demaerschalk et al., 2019, p.101). Demaerschalk et al. (2019) maintain that more than half of the homeless are cases of hidden homelessness. The implication of this is that the hidden homeless, in rural areas, are very numerous and that prevalence estimates based on people in contact with services considerably understate the actual extent of homelessness. Despite these caveats, where there is contact with services, it can be informative.

In Australia, the prevalence of people in receipt of specialist homelessness services is 3.8 times higher per 10 000 population in remote and very remote areas compared to urban centres. Homelessness is not just a serious issue germane to urban centres; it is an even more significant problem in more remote areas (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2025). In addition, among people who are in receipt of specialist homelessness services in more remote areas are more likely to be under ten years of age (18% in remote or very remote compared to 16% in urban areas) and are overwhelmingly Indigenous Australians (91%). Furthermore, almost all (99%) of service receipts born overseas are situated in urban centres. Moreover,

2 Throughout this study, rural is envisaged as a distinct point along what is thought of as a continuum of remoteness.

98% of people with a mental health condition received assistance from agencies in urban centres (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2025). These figures, derived simply from service users, rather than the hidden homeless, in Australia, paint a stark contrast between the character of homelessness by remoteness.

Limited research and scant data are available to understand the scope and dynamics of homelessness outside of urban centres (Waegemakers Schiff et al., 2016). Homelessness in this context is not well understood (Demaerschalk et al., 2019, p. 101). This has only recently been acknowledged (Waegemakers Schiff et al., 2016). Very little has been written regarding Australia. Although some earlier research indicates that housing options for people with a mental health condition in rural and regional areas are varied. Grigg et al. (2004) report that a substantial number of those who are case-managed experience difficulties with accessing services, and the affordability and safety of housing. However, nationwide studies of hidden homelessness are rare outside of the United States (Richard et al., 2024). Homelessness outside of urban centres is understudied and largely hidden in more rural communities (Carpenter-Song et al., 2016). Notably, some rural areas with low rates of sheltered and unsheltered homelessness have high rates of doubling up (Richard et al., 2024).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the state of hidden homelessness, measured by couch-surfing in Australia, across space and time. To do this, this study employs the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, a nationwide indefinite life panel survey, now spanning more than two decades. Specifically, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) How has the proportion of people couch-surfing changed over time? (2) How does the number of people couch-surfing differ by the degree of one's remoteness?

In doing so, this study charts key trends, highlights, and explicates the experience of couch-surfers throughout Australia. The findings presented make clear to decision makers the disjunction between urban areas and more remote areas. The following section describes the data and method.

Material and methods

Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey

This study employs the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, a nationwide indefinite life panel spanning more than two decades, a period from 2001 to 2022. The probability sample was selected using a multi-staged approach. Firstly, a sample of 488 areas was selected from across Australia; within each area, a sample of 22 to 34 dwellings was selected, depending on the expected response and occupancy rates of the area. Within each dwelling, up to three households were selected to be part of the survey. The frame of 488 areas was stratified by State, and within the five largest States in terms of population, by metropolitan and non-metropolitan regions (Watson & Wooden, 2002). Early evidence indicates that attrition from the panel data survey compared favourably to that of the German Socio-Economic Panel and the British Household Panel surveys (Watson & Wooden, 2004). In addition to significant re-engagement efforts (Watson & Wooden, 2013), a refreshment sample in 2011 of 3500 households mitigated the rate of non-response over time and improved the representation of otherwise underrepresented groups (e.g., immigrants). In all, in 2011, 68.8% or 8780 individuals from 2001 were responding (Watson, 2014; Watson & Wooden, 2012).

Methods

For this study, hidden homelessness (couch-surfing) is operationalised using a dummy variable which takes a value '1' where people have: (1) stayed at their current address for less than 12 months; (2) are very likely to relocate in the next 12 months; and (3) currently live rent-free. The couch-surfing variable takes a value of '0' otherwise. This definition shares some similarities with indirect measures of hidden homeless (couch-surfers) used in an earlier study published in the *European Journal of Homelessness* (cf. Lohmann, 2020).

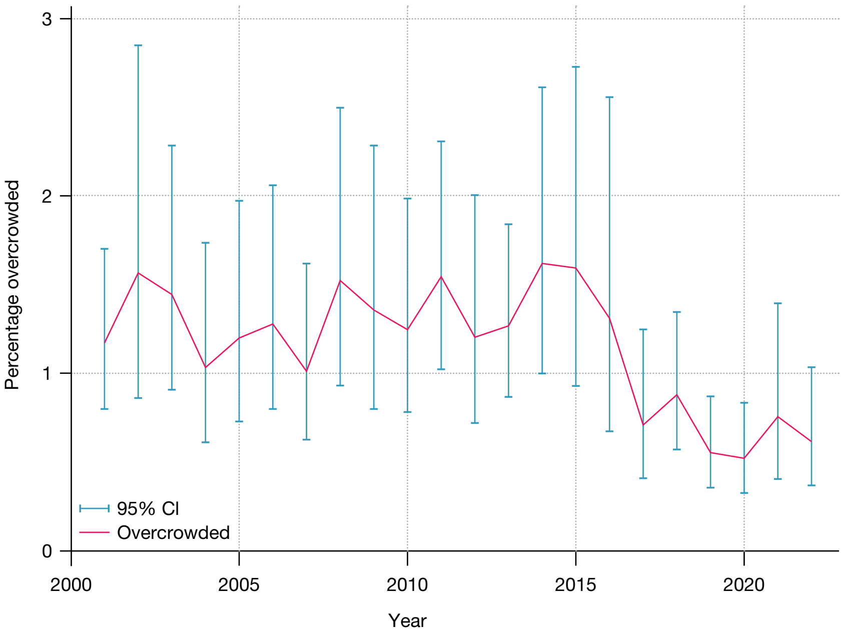
To address the first research question, differences are assessed over time using adjusted Wald tests. Standard errors are adjusted for clustering within the primary sampling unit, and population weights are used.

In order to address the second research question, an individual-specific random effects logistic regression model is estimated to utilise between-place variation. The Accessibility/Remoteness Index of Australia (ARIA) is used. An area is classified by its degree of remoteness (i.e., urban centre, inner regional, outer regional, and remote (or very remote)). StataNow/MP 19.5 is the statistical package used to undertake the analysis. Odds ratios are reported. The following section reports the results.

Results

RQ1: How has the proportion of people couch-surfing changed over time?

Figure 1 reveals how couch-surfing seems to have evolved over the past few decades in Australia. It shows, *prima facie*, that couch-surfing has increased over the past 22 years. From roughly 0.0013 in 2001 up to roughly 0.0026 in 2022, statistically significant at the 5% level. These results, their interpretation, and implications form part of the discussion.



Source: Derived from the HILDA survey

RQ2: How does couch-surfing differ by remoteness?

Table 1: Random effects logistic regression results

	(1)		(2)
Variable	**Couch-surfer**	**Variable**	**Couch-surfer**
Inner regional	1.2649***	Wave 16	3.0320***
	(0.0996)		(0.7612)
Outer regional	1.3494***	Wave 17	1.9103**
	(0.1398)		(0.5130)
Remote or very remote	3.2879***	Wave 18	2.3820***
	(0.5933)		(0.6215)
Wave 2	2.2255***	Wave 19	1.8802**
	(0.6035)		(0.5063)
Wave 3	1.8396**	Wave 20	1.8371**
	(0.5266)		(0.4979)
Wave 4	1.9944**	Wave 21	2.2794***
	(0.5643)		(0.6021)
Wave 5	2.9125***	Wave 22	1.9752**
	(0.7734)		(0.5358)
Wave 6	1.6445*		
	(0.4792)		
Wave 7	2.5384***		
	(0.6869)		
Wave 10	2.5939***		
	(0.6988)		
Wave 11	2.3765***		
	(0.6456)		
Wave 12	2.3887***		
	(0.6462)	*Summary statistics*	
Wave 13	2.2088***	Observations	334 880
	(0.5660)	Individuals	34 384
Wave 14	2.4009***	LR $X^2(24) =$	98.61
	(0.6269)	Prob > X^2	0.0000
Wave 15	2.8446***	Robust standard errors in parentheses	
	(0.7394)	* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$	

Table 1 indicates that more remote locations are associated with a greater likelihood of couch-surfing, statistically significant at the 1% level. Notably, inner regional 95% CI [1.0840, 1.4761], outer regional 95% CI [1.1015, 1.6532] and remote or very remote 95% CI [2.3085, 4.6829]. The following section discusses these results.

Discussion

This study investigates the state of hidden homelessness, measured by couch-surfing, in Australia, across space and time. It highlights how couch-surfing seems to have evolved over the past few decades in Australia. It shows *prima facie* evidence that couch-surfing seems to have increased, doubling over the past 22 years. From a proportion of roughly 0.0013 in 2001 up to roughly 0.0026 in 2022, statistically significant at the 5% level. However, it is important to consider that, despite the Melbourne Institute's and Roy Morgan Research's efforts in terms of maintaining good re-interview rates, there may be non-random attrition of people from the survey. People who couch-surf may experience greater uncertainty in their lives and hence may prove systemically more difficult to trace over time. Given this expected pattern, it is likely that this would lead to an under-estimate of couch-surfing over time. Hence, the finding that the proportion of people couch-surfing has doubled is meaningful, sizable, and statistically significant at the 5% level. Coupled with this finding is the empirical evidence indicating that more remote locations are places associated with a greater likelihood of couch-surfing, statistically significant at the 1% level. Couch-surfing is more pronounced in more remote areas. Further research is needed to unpack precisely why this is the case and what can be done to remedy it.

It is important to note that inner regional 95% CI [1.0840, 1.4761], outer regional 95% CI [1.1015, 1.6532], and remote or very remote 95% CI [2.3085, 4.6829] are independently and contemporaneously associated with a greater chance of couch-surfing compared to urban centres. Remote or very remote 95% CI [2.3085, 4.6829] is clearly distinguishable from inner regional and outer regional, statistically significant at the 1% level. As noted earlier of specialised homelessness service users, in remote or very remote areas, homelessness is experienced predominantly by Indigenous Australians. This is an area in need of further research, as observed by Moskos et al. (2025).

As demonstrated by Dockery et al. (2022) overcrowding, such as that which manifests itself in "doubling up" or "couch-surfing", is associated with diminished psychological well-being. Further, Dockery et al. (2022) maintain that this well-being effect operates mainly through a loss of one's locus of control and the absence of privacy one experiences as an association that is moderated by family functioning. While not replicated here, it follows that policymakers can expect couch-surfing to be detrimental to one's well-being. Moreover, it is also hard not to conclude that there is a need for structural upstream changes to really address the structural drivers of homelessness (Buck-McFadyen, 2022a).

In addition, the hidden homeless, by definition, do not make use of services. Policy makers need to consider: is this because formal shelters are not available nearby? Is this because people have had bad experiences in formal shelters? Is this because people fear the 'roughness' of formal shelters? Is this because people do not want the stigma associated with self-identifying as homeless (Demaerschalk et al., 2019, and references therein)? In particular, the stigma might be experienced particularly acutely amongst close-knit rural communities (Cloke et al., 2001).

Interventions to prevent and manage homelessness must be tailored to the unique spatial context (Buck-McFadyen, 2022b). Candidate interventions include "… expanding transportation, improving access to local services, and applying Housing First principles" (Buck-McFadyen, 2022b, p.407). These interventions need to be paired with further research. Indeed, "[f]urther research is needed to 1) explore the effectiveness of local, regionalized service interventions that benefit different homeless cohorts, and 2) highlight changes needed to the homelessness service system in regional, rural and urban contexts" (Zufferey & Parkes, 2019, p.7).

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Think Piece

Part C

A Proposal for a Good Homelessness Strategy

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Introduction

This Think Piece is an extract from a larger research project entitled *Homelessness Strategies in European Union Member States – The State of Play in 2024* (Szeintuch, 2024a). It follows on from a contribution in the previous issue of the European Journal of Homelessness *"Homelessness Strategies in Europe – A review of the literature"* (Szeintuch, 2024b). Having collected the existing international academic knowledge regarding homelessness strategies, as well as having analysed the European Union's existing national and other strategies, this proposal for a good homelessness strategy aims to give practical hands-on guidelines for those who want to develop or renew a homelessness strategy. The proposal contains all of the relevant components, which we believe are important for a good and successful strategy, and has enhanced potential for comprehensive implementation. It is intended for policymakers as well as government officials, civil society representatives, academics and people with lived experience of homelessness, and anyone else that will be undertaking the task of developing or renewing a homelessness strategy. As this proposal is based on the review of the literature, and on homelessness strategies found in the larger research paper (Szeintuch, 2024a), most of which are European, context-specific and local elements should be implemented into this skeleton to make it operational in your country, region or municipality.

The nine homelessness strategy building blocks of the OECD Toolkit (OECD, 2024), provide guidance to support policymakers throughout the policy design, implementation and management phases. The toolkit explains the relevance, operational issues, guidance, and good practices related to these building blocks, which are all represented in the skeleton presented here. In this Think Piece, we are using these building blocks, among other elements, as a starting point from which to delve into detail and offer ways to enact them.

Before outlining the elements of the Good Homelessness Strategy, some questions and issues regarding homelessness strategies are addressed below:

- What is a 'homelessness strategy'?
- Why should we have a homelessness strategy and what is it useful for?
- Who are the stakeholders that should be involved in developing a homelessness strategy in your area?
  - … and who are the stakeholders that should be involved in its implementation?
- How can we evaluate a homelessness strategy in a more elaborate way than just measuring the reduction in the number of people experiencing homelessness?
- How can we make sure to develop a strategy that transcends governments from different political orientations, so as to not end good programmes just because the ruling party changes?
- Should there be an EU homelessness strategy?
- Does *EPOCH – the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness* serve as this EU homelessness strategy, or should there be more to it?
- When developing a homelessness strategy what are the roles of each of the different levels – EU, federal, national, regional, municipal, as well as civil society, and people with lived experience of homelessness?
  - This question is relevant for the development stage of a strategy, as well as the implementation phase, with potentially different answers at each of these stages.
- The lead agency ideally plays an enabling role and adopts effective mechanisms for multi-level governance. The level of the political lead depends on how competences are organised in each country – when local government is on the frontline but cannot tackle homelessness effectively unless national/regional government provides a genuinely enabling framework. The question is what should be the level of the political lead?
- How do we shift from emergency shelter to long-term permanent housing without reducing shelter capacity at a time when there is not enough of it, and when many of the people that need it are not eligible for permanent support?
- Even though Housing First exists in 87% of EU strategies in 2024, and housing-led initiatives in 68% of them (Szeintuch, 2024a), how do we enlarge the actual proportion of these services across Europe, whilst bearing in mind that there is no one-size fits-all approach?

Are there people experiencing homelessness who are left out of the strategy? If so – how do we bring them in?

- There is a growing awareness that migration may have become a structural factor of homelessness (Hermans et al., 2020). According to the European Social Policy Network (ESPN), experts in 35 European countries cite, "experience of homelessness may be linked to ethnicity and to migrant status […] in more than half of the countries […] a majority of homeless people are nationals or belong to the national majority population, although in some of them there are reports of overrepresentation of some ethnic minority populations and/or of recent rising trends" (Baptista and Marlier, 2019: 43). Therefore, it seems that where relevant, homelessness strategies should consider incorporating migrants – regardless of their administrative status.
- Further, Roma people should also be included wherever relevant. In a European Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO) Network (2023) research, regarding Roma access to quality and affordable housing in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia and Spain, a consensus was established that, according to the ETHOS definition, most Roma experience homelessness. The research also found that there is a clear lack of data regarding Roma homelessness. The research mentions the EU Council Recommendation on Roma Equality, Participation, and Inclusion which, in its discussion regarding access to adequate desegregated housing and essential services, calls on Member States to enact "measures to provide social support and access to mainstream services for homeless Roma people" (Official Journal of the European Union, (19.3.2021): p. C 93/10, item f).

A few pointers regarding homelessness strategies:

- Implementation is key – There is a difference between good intentions – no matter how good the strategy development and structure – and implementation.
- Permanent long-term housing supply is key in any homelessness strategy.
- Consistency is important – a one-time homelessness count, or a one-time strategy for a limited period are not enough; people experiencing homelessness need a permanent long-term strategy or strategies to end homelessness, including monitoring and data collection.

Key Elements of a Good Homelessness Strategy

Below you will find some key issues and points that should be part of any good and effective homelessness strategy that may also be implemented in a comprehensive manner:

1. Legal framework
2. A human rights approach to homelessness
3. Mission, objectives, targets and goals
4. Collaboration
5. Implementation
6. Governance
7. Funding
8. Data collection
9. Prevention
10. Temporary accommodation
11. Permanent long-term housing solutions
12. An integrated approach
13. Time frame
14. Monitoring and evaluation

Below we will discuss each of these issues succinctly, and for elaboration, please see Szeintuch (2024a; 2024b).

Legal framework

The legal framework of the strategy should be stated, giving the strategy a legal basis which may be binding.

A human rights approach to homelessness

A human-rights-based approach to realising the right to housing and other rights for people experiencing homelessness should be reflected in the strategy.

Mission, objectives, targets and goals

Mission: Provide people experiencing homelessness with decent healthy lives and wellbeing.

Primary objective: Ending homelessness.

Secondary objective 1: Delivery of long-term permanent housing.

Secondary objective 2: Prevention.

Target 1: Reduce the number of people experiencing homelessness.

Target 2: Reduce the time spent in temporary accommodation.

Goal 1: Collection of data.

Goal 2: Building and securing enough long-term permanent housing.

Collaboration

The strategy should be developed and implemented in collaboration with all relevant stakeholders: different tiers of government at federal, national, regional and local level, as well as quasi-governmental and non-governmental agencies, including experts by lived experience of homelessness.

Implementation

Implementation should be at the heart of the strategy during the development stage, including clear guidance for its implementation.

Governance

Preferably one single agency should take the lead in the fight against homelessness. This agency will coordinate all the relevant agencies taking part in this fight.

It is advisable to address, from the outset, the potential pitfalls of coordination among different service providers and institutional systems in delivering services on the local level, such as social services, health services, criminal services, housing authorities, etc.

Funding

There should be significant investment in permanent housing, adequate financing mechanisms and increased budgets and funding. Funding should be appropriate and realistically able to achieve the mission, objectives, targets and goals of the strategy.

Data collection

The strategy should include a firm commitment to an on-going collection of measurable and reliable data about homelessness and available housing options.

Prevention

Strategies should be prevention oriented. This means they should strive to:

- Reduce poverty.
- Provide affordable housing.
- Reduce evictions.
- Identify people at risk of homelessness.
- Mainstream homelessness prevention across systems like welfare, health, migration, criminal justice and child prevention.

Temporary accommodation

Strategies should ensure an adequate level of temporary accommodation, ensure that shelter is dignified, and that it can fulfil its intended function as emergency, short-term provision. The length of time that people stay in temporary accommodation should be shortened, to eliminate bottlenecks between temporary and permanent accommodation.

Permanent long-term housing solutions

Strategies should incorporate a housing-led approach. This should include Housing First and/or other such programmes.

An integrated approach

In addition to prevention, temporary accommodation and permanent long-term housing solutions, homelessness strategies should incorporate an integrated approach, which brings together all relevant fields in managing homelessness while striving to end it.

Time frame

Strategies should consider committing to ending homelessness by the year 20XX. In the absence of such a commitment, strategies should state a firm timeline that coincides with clear goals.

Monitoring and evaluation

Strategies should incorporate annual or bi-annual reporting on progress, including various indicators, such as numbers of people experiencing homelessness, numbers of long-term permanent housing units built – and those converted from short-term to long-term – and numbers of evictions, etc.

Finally, a key question is for whom the strategy is being developed. In this context, the strategy developers may want to consider the following non-exhaustive list of specific target populations that may deserve special attention:

- Sheltered people experiencing homelessness
- Un-sheltered people experiencing homelessness
- People experiencing homelessness who do not access services
- Revolving door clients
- Roma
- Asylum seekers
- Refugees
- Internal EU migrants
- Undocumented migrants
- People with no legal right to reside in a certain jurisdiction
- Child welfare-involved families and youth
- LGBTQI+ people

- People with chronic health conditions and co-occurring disorders
- People with current or past criminal justice system involvement
- People with disabilities
- People with HIV
- People with mental health conditions
- People using drugs
- Pregnant and parenting youth
- Women
- Survivors of domestic violence, stalking, sexual assault, and human trafficking
- Children (younger than 12)
- Youth (age 12-17)
- Young adults (age 18-25)
- Families with minor children
- Older adults (age 55 and older)

Conclusion

Are homelessness strategies – in themselves, or as part of a wider housing strategy, anti-poverty strategy or another strategy – the way, or at least a brick on the path, to ending homelessness? This question is important also in relation to Ursula von der Leyen (2024), President of the European Commission's commitment to support Member States in addressing the housing crisis, including by appointing "a Commissioner whose responsibilities will include housing, [whilst putting] forward a first-ever European Affordable Housing Plan. This will address structural drivers, develop a strategy for housing construction, offer technical assistance to cities and Member States and focus on investment" (19).

Having a homelessness strategy can be extremely useful but is not a goal in and of itself. The mere existence of a strategy does not necessarily mean "better" policies, services or outcomes. Strategies can serve different purposes at different stages in policy cycles. For example, strategies can be used to build a homelessness system, to reform a homelessness system, to trigger innovation, to unlock funding, and to align stakeholders and set a policy direction. Finally, some countries with mature homelessness policies may have quite “light touch” strategies because much work was done under previous strategies.

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European Observatory on Homelessness

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The European Journal of Homelessness provides a critical analysis of policy and practice on homelessness in Europe for policy makers, practitioners, researchers and academics. The aim is to stimulate debate on homelessness and housing exclusion at the European level and to facilitate the development of a stronger evidential base for policy development and innovation. The journal seeks to give international exposure to significant national, regional and local developments and to provide a forum for comparative analysis of policy and practice in preventing and tackling homelessness in Europe. The journal will also assess the lessons for Europe which can be derived from policy, practice and research from elsewhere.

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