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*

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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.

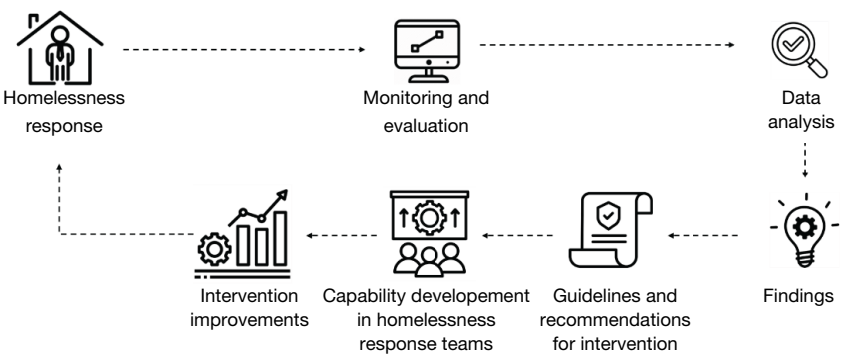
Beyond assessing effectiveness, one of the key benefits of establishing robust M&E systems lies in the analytical potential of the data collected throughout the intervention process (Crook et al., 2005). Strengthening these systems is essential for capturing the dynamic nature of homelessness, improving 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



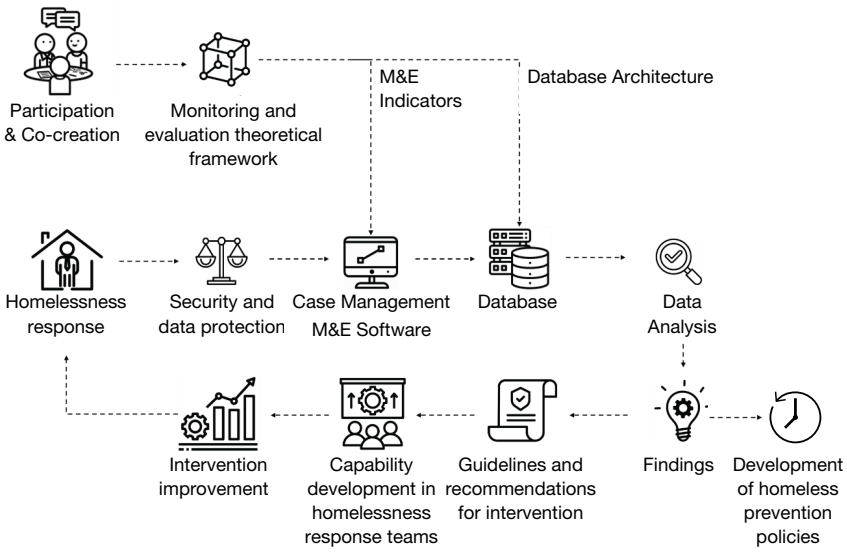
Source: Translated from Rodilla, 2024.

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.

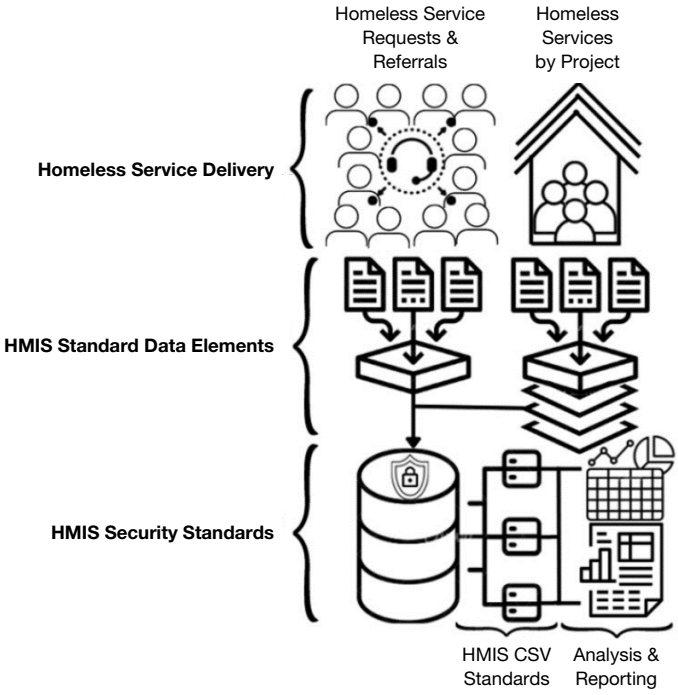
Data collected through this system is stored in a centralized database, where it is structured for subsequent analysis. Through analytical processes, such as longitudinal tracking, comparative analysis, or cluster analysis, researchers and service managers can extract actionable findings. This approach 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.

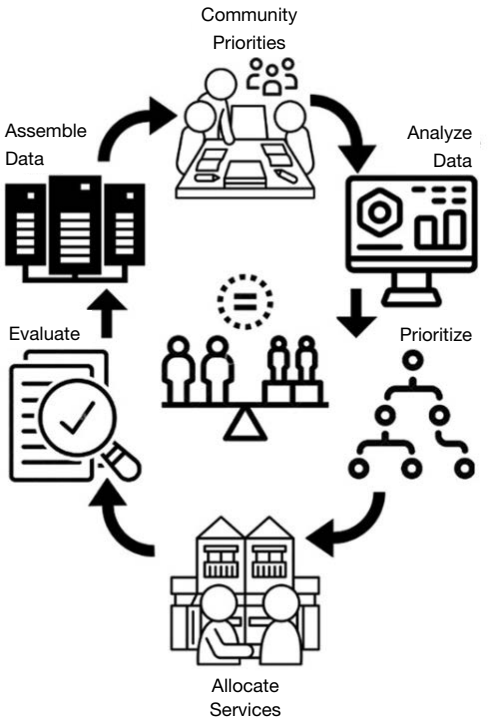
Figure 3. Data architecture of the Homelessness Management Information System (HMIS)



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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