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***Homelessness in EU Cities and Towns
Before and During the Covid-19 Pandemic:
Main Challenges and Ways Forward***

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Measuring homelessness in and of itself presents a significant challenge. Measuring it in a comparable way adds to this challenge in many ways. First, the challenge begins with using a common definition of who is homeless – what categories are included, are we actually talking about people sleeping on the street, users of shelters, those in position of hidden homelessness, or also those in precarious housing conditions? Of course, the way we define the subject of our research has a significant impact on the results we obtain. As such, several authors have emphasised that what is considered to be homelessness is often based on very narrow or biased definitions that exclude a significant portion of this population, and result in a specific profile and characteristic of the homeless (see for example O’Sullivan, 2020; O’Sullivan et al., 2020; Pleace, 2016; Fitzgerald et al., 2001). The next step is to determine how to measure the selected categories, using either existing administrative data (e.g., from shelters), or different types of counts and surveys. These different methods can in turn affect the result of what can be counted, how reliable these counts are, and also how comparable they are. Despite these challenges, there is an urgent need to count the homeless population so that policymakers can build on a solid base of data and knowledge about this social problem. In this context, the comparative dimension also plays an important role, the ability to measure the phenomenon comparatively is the basis for learning from others and comparing the success of different policies applied in Europe. The report on *Homelessness in EU Cities and Towns Before and During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Main Challenges and Ways Forward* can be seen as one relevant endeavour in this sense, and therefore has a particular value in its promotion of the comparative measurement of homelessness agenda at the European level.

The report presents a study summarising the results of a survey conducted among a sample of European cities and towns, composed of 133 local administrations across 16 EU Member States. The adapted classification ETHOS light was used as the basis for the definition of homelessness, demonstrating the relevance and

applicability of this commonly adopted definition. Nevertheless, the survey refers to the homeless mainly in terms of “people with no fixed address”, as this was the predominant definition used within the observed municipalities (88%) (p. 16), indicating the prevalent use of a still relatively narrow approach to people experiencing homelessness at the administrative level in several EU countries.

In the Definition and Primary Data Collection chapter, the authors point out some of the challenges in measuring homelessness, and then in the next chapter describe the empirical strategy and data collection used in this report. Data for the study were collected through an online survey of municipalities in the EU. The survey conducted in 2021 covered the topics of data on homelessness; existence of strategies and policies to address homelessness; changes during the Covid-19 pandemic; and the availability and conditions within public/social housing in the municipality.

The results section of the report presents the proportions of the homeless population that range from zero to 0.95%. The results are also analysed by city size, which, as the report’s authors describe, “allows for the detection of possible differences in terms of homeless people, profiles, trends and policies between cities” (p.1). This is a laudable effort, but it may not accomplish what it sets out to do. As the sample itself does not allow us to draw firm conclusions because we have to consider the large national differences that go beyond differences in city size, differences in definitions and measurement methods, and sample bias, as most of the small cities in the sample come mainly from two countries – Italy and Portugal. The authors are aware of this shortcoming and point out that number and geographical scope of the response cannot be considered representative of the situation of the homeless in Europe; however, these limitations could be stressed even more, as they hinder a reliable comparison by the city size. The same issues also make it difficult to compare the profile of people experiencing homelessness in different cities and towns and to assess the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on homelessness trends.

One of important findings of the report is that all large metropolitan areas and medium sized urban areas included in the survey have specific strategies in place to address homelessness, indicating a very positive policy trend. Not surprisingly, the share is much lower in smaller towns, where a quarter of them have adopted specific strategies. Moreover, the report also points to the relevance of housing led strategies, as “about a quarter of the cities that have a policy in place, implemented housing first or housing led approaches” (p 4). On the other hand, the report also highlights the structural problem of low housing supply of affordable housing in the overview of social housing accessibility in the surveyed municipalities, as the average waiting time for social housing was three to four years, and even more than 10 years in six cities.

Despite its drawbacks in providing a comparative picture according to the size of cities, the relevance of the report is that it approaches the measurement of homelessness in a comparative manner, and also points to an important additional dimension within the cross-national comparison, namely the size of cities. Thus, the relevance lies in the comparative perspective that is brought forward, and the overview of differences in definitions and policy approaches in studied cities. But these strengths, on the other hand, are also the weaknesses, as the report illustrates well the difficulty and challenges that arise in comparative research on homelessness, both across countries and in terms of city size, and the enormous difficulties encountered in making such comparisons. Thus, we can only support the authors' call made in the concluding section of the report, in which they emphasise that there is a strong need for better data to provide the basis for better policies and greater awareness of the extent of the phenomenon among local communities.

› **References:**

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