Lessons Learned from the Pilot Implementation of the Point-In-Time Method for Counting the Homeless in Six Municipalities in Greece

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❯ **Abstract_** *This paper is an extended research note which presents the experiences gained and the lessons learned from the Point-In-Time (PIT) count of people experiencing homelessness conducted in May 2018 in six municipalities in Greece. It first refers to the main dilemmas any effort for measuring people experiencing homelessness have to tackle. This is followed by a presentation of the procedures, the inadequacies, and the results of the pilot count of the homeless population in Greece. The main conclusion is that an accurate and strictly scientific enumeration of the homeless is impossible unless a huge number of resources are periodically devoted to this goal. At last, it proposes the combination of the PIT method with targeted qualitative field work as an optimal choice for measuring the homeless population.*

❯ **Keywords_** *homelessness in Greece, point-in-time, measurement, observational forms, questionnaires, survey.*

Introduction [1]

The measurement of the homeless population is one of the most difficult issues in social research. National censuses and surveys investigate people's characteristics by using sample frames based on city blocks and by defining the private household as the most appropriate sampling unit (Lynn and Lyberg, 2022). This approach de facto excludes a high proportion of people experiencing homelessness. According to Edgar (2009), national censuses and household surveys can provide information on those living temporarily with family or friends, in institutions and asylums, and those living in overcrowded conditions or in non-conventional dwellings. However, a high proportion of those experiencing homelessness do not sleep in private households or in collective domiciles or inside any building at all. Consequently, they are also not included in specific surveys (usually registered data) conducted in institutions (hospitals, hostels, care centres, prisons, shelters, camps, etc.). Under these circumstances, social scientists attempt to develop alternative methods for measuring the number of people experiencing homelessness and define their demographic and social characteristics by focusing on certain locations in cities and rural areas where people experiencing homelessness concentrate.

Most of these efforts could be classified according to three, binary questions that researchers attempt to answer: 1.) should we enumerate or estimate the number of people experiencing homelessness? ; 2.) should we observe them according to their own demographic and other characteristics, or to ask those experiencing homelessness about certain demographic, personal, and social characteristics? ; and 3.) should we classify them in separate subgroups (i.e. according to the duration, the reasons, or the place of their stay) or treat them as a homogenous and unified social group? Depending on the choices made in relation to the different options in these questions, researchers follow different approaches in the methods they use to determine the number of people experiencing homelessness as well as in the forms and types of the research instruments (e.g., questionnaires) they use. As a consequence, there is no clear road map for the reliable and valid measurement of people experiencing homelessness. In that framework, the social services community focuses on those methods that satisfy their operational purposes and enhance their ability to tackle the everyday problems people experiencing homelessness face. In this context, the so-called Point-in-Time (PIT) approach, despite its structural inadequacies, is considered the most appropriate (HUD, 2014; Bergmann et al., 2021).

Although, according to Berry (2007, p.170), "such a snapshot of the homeless population may only be of limited value, because the homeless population often changes in size and composition over time", it is an easily applied technique, efficient in terms of time and cost, and the researchers do not need to be highly trained. The PIT approach was developed to facilitate the enumeration of people experiencing homelessness in the locations where social services are committed to assisting them and, in addition, to extract information about their situation and needs. As such, they do not aim to satisfy strict scientific criteria. According to the HUD guide, different organisations participating in measuring the number of people experiencing homelessness are not obliged to follow nation-wide, accurately defined procedures, but they can choose from the alternatives included in the national framework of minimum standards (HUD, 2014).

These standards prompt enumerators to choose their own method for measuring homelessness in their area of commitment and include the use of three complementary survey tools: a very short observational form, a short questionnaire, and/or a longer version of a questionnaire. Which form is to be completed each time during the survey is at the discretion of the investigator (Bergmann et al., 2021). Although this flexibility facilitates the collection of valuable information from people experiencing homelessness, it also creates high standard errors (Bergmann et al., 2021).

In order to minimise the chances of a non-response, financial and other kinds of incentives for those who agree to complete the long version of the questionnaire are also suggested. However, some people experiencing homelessness do not answer or are not honest in their responses to those questions which refer to sensitive issues (Bergmann et al., 2021). In the following sections are the most critical points concerning the previous methodological dilemmas as they were revealed during the pilot implementation of the PIT method in six urban areas in Greece.

The Preparation of the Pilot Study in Greece

Based on previous experiences for enumerating the homeless, the Greek Ministry of Social Solidarity decided in 2018 to establish a permanent mechanism for measuring the number of people experiencing homelessness in Greece. This jurisdiction is given to municipalities, and they have the duty to include NGOs who work with the homeless in the project. The Ministry decided to adapt the PIT approach to Greek reality, and for this purpose funded a pilot study in six municipal areas. In addition, the ETHOS definition of homelessness was officially adopted. However, the Ministry decided to include in the pilot count only roofless and houseless people, thus excluding those who are being temporarily accommodated in camps

(refugees and Roma) from the count. Additionally, for safety reasons, those living inside empty or occupied buildings were excluded. The processes and the results of this pilot will be analysed in the following section.

The aim of the pilot enumeration of people experiencing homelessness in six municipal areas in Greece was to test and evaluate the rules, procedures, research tools, and the role of national and local organisations in the periodic measurement of the number of homeless people nationally. The areas selected for the pilot were three municipalities in the metropolitan area of Attica (Athens, Piraeus, Nea Ionia), one in the metropolitan area of Thessaloniki (Municipality of Thessaloniki), and two large non-metropolitan municipalities (Ioannina and Heraklion). For the administration and coordination of the project, a high-level committee was formed in the Ministry of Social Solidarity, and they were assisted by a research team from Panteion University. The members of the organising committee were delegates from the participating municipalities, national organisations which design and implement policies for people experiencing homelessness, NGOs, and the Hellenic Statistical Authority (ELSTAT). The task of the research group was, in consultation and agreement with the organising committee, to refine and propose for legislation the rules, procedures, and tools for the periodic PIT enumeration of people experiencing homelessness in Greece.

The preparation of the pilot study lasted five months. During this period, 11 joint meetings of the coordination committee and the research team took place and, in consultation with NGOs and the municipalities, all the actions necessary for the implementation of the project were refined. Based on the previous experiences of social services and street workers, as well as on previous efforts by municipal services and NGOs to measure homelessness, the research team pin-pointed on the maps of the participating towns all the locations where people experiencing homelessness have previously been present. They also looked for volunteers and motivated them to participate as surveyors and to register on a special list of volunteers compiled by the research team. The delegates on the committee were also tasked with providing suggestions about the proper time for the implementation of the pilot as well as the content of the questionnaires.

Following these procedures, the research team canvassed the areas that the surveyors were to screen and outlined their borders on the map. Additionally, the research team included on each map two to four randomly assigned canvassed areas in which there was no mention of the presence of people experiencing homelessness with the goal of checking possible areas not recognised as refuges for the homeless by NGOs. Each canvassed area contained 32-36 city blocks, depending

on the density of previous observations for the presence of people experiencing homelessness. Road and pavement surveyors walked through and screened each canvassed area, for an approximate distance of 8-9 000 metres.

Table 1. Key indicators for the pilot measurement of homelessness in six municipalities in Greece 2018.

Municipal area (Town)	Number of canvassed areas	Number of homeless shelters and services surveyed	Number of survey teams	Number of surveyors
Athens	48	20	58	182
Thessaloniki	14	6	14	60
Piraeus	6	4	10	42
Heraklion	10	8	18	58
Ioannina	2	2	2	8
Nea Ionia	2	-	2	7

Source: Author's own compilation, based on data from the pilot

The research team and the central organising committee decided that the survey was to be conducted by groups composed of three surveyors each. One member of the group was to be an experienced street worker or social worker who would act as the coordinator of the group and had the duty to approach and speak to each person who appeared homeless. Another member was to be a university student hired to conduct the survey by the research team whose duty was to record the responses of the interviewee in the special online app, uploaded onto his or her smartphone. The third member had the task of observing the area and any people in the vicinity and to offer each person approached the incentive of a snack (a croissant and a small carton of fruit juice), donated to the project by two companies.

The survey teams undertook a three-hour training course 10 days before the enumeration was conducted. The survey teams were also provided with a written guide containing all the information about the procedures they were to follow and their tasks in detail. The surveyors were also provided with a personal password and encouraged to download the digital app containing the questionnaires, developed by the e-Government Centre for Social Security Services (IDIKA SA), onto their smartphones and to study them before the survey. However, they were not pre-allocated to the areas to be canvassed in order to avoid the risk that an area would not be investigated if any member of a group was absent on the night of the survey. As a result, the surveyors were not able to visit the area they were to survey in advance and familiarise themselves with it.

For every four groups of surveyors, the research team selected a coordinator who had the duty to assist and answer any questions the surveyors had during the survey and to contact their supervisor if any issues arose. Each supervisor had responsibility for 12 groups of surveyors and three coordinators and was tasked

with contacting the research team, which was located in a meeting hall that could easily be reached by all teams. In Athens, Piraeus, and Thessaloniki the research team appointed another two teams of surveyors who were not allocated specific areas to act as auxiliary surveyors. Their task was to assist the teams in those areas where the surveyors were having difficulties in screening the streets or were encountering a large number of people experiencing homelessness and were thus unable to complete the survey on their own.

In terms of research tools, the organising committee and the research group requested the surveyors to note and to interview all people experiencing homelessness in their investigated area and to ask as many of them as possible detailed questions, although without any pressure or coercion for them to answer. It was also decided to use one observational form and three different questionnaires: one questionnaire for those identified as homeless in roofless public places (parks, squares, streets, and in day services such as soup kitchens); another for those who were staying in night shelters and day centres for the homeless during the count; and a different questionnaire for those staying in supported apartments paid for by social services as temporary dwellings for the homeless.

During the design of the four survey tools, there were disagreements between the NGOS, municipal services, and the research team about their content. The municipal social services and the NGOs wanted to include many sensitive questions, which the research team opposed, arguing that this would create biases and add extra standard errors into the analyses. However, the research team did eventually agree to include several sensitive variables in the questionnaire, with the goal of checking their actual validity and gathering evidence to be taken into consideration during the final refinement of the questionnaires. The second, latent, goal for this agreement was to avoid the risk of dampening the enthusiasm of the NGOS and thus reducing their engagement in the project. A core of common variables (age, sex, nationality, whether permanent or temporarily homeless) was also included in all the questionnaires, and also in the observational form, in order to facilitate harmonisation and comparability between the different types of homelessness.

As for the time and date of the count, the organising committee and research team agreed to conduct the pilot surveys in May 2018. Cold winter days, such as the last days of January, are the norm for enumerating the homeless in the USA and are recommended as the most appropriate timeframe by HUD. They were excluded here, however, because Greece lacks the sufficient provision of emergency services for people experiencing homelessness. This means, according to the experience of street workers, that many people experiencing homelessness do not visit emergency shelters and instead prefer to stay in empty or occupied buildings that are not accessible to researchers. Additionally, in May the weather in Greece is

moderate and many people experiencing homelessness are present outside buildings early in the night, thus reducing the need to fill in observational forms as a substitute for the questionnaires.

It was also agreed to conduct the survey from 20: 30 in the evening to 2: 30 in the morning, with the consideration that during these hours most people experiencing homelessness can be approached by surveyors. The summer period was excluded as an option for the count because social services argued that during the summer many people experiencing homelessness move from urban neighbourhoods to rural and tourist areas in search of seasonal employment. They believed that the count should be done in mid-May, starting late in the evening, following the previous positive experience of the research team that conducted the count of the homeless in the Spanish city of Girona (Calvo and Carbonell, 2017). Last but not least, on 18 December 2017, a pilot PIT survey was done by the Municipality of Athens and Bloomberg Associates, and we believed that running our pilot in May would provide us with a good opportunity to compare the number of people experiencing home-lessness in downtown Athens between the two surveys.

In each municipality, one local organising group was composed of staff from municipal services and NGOs. Although it was not part of the initial design, in each local organising group a leader emerged informally. This person was the most active and recognised by the other members of the group as having good manage-ment skills. The role of the local leader (coordinator) was crucial for the communica-tion and preparation of all procedures (training of volunteers, collection of data for outlining the canvassed areas, reproduction of materials locally, composition of survey teams, supervision and coordination of the surveyor groups, solving minor problems, etc.).

The leaders (coordinators) that emerged were as follows: in both Nea Ionia and Ioannina, they were a social worker from the municipal social services; in Thessaloniki, a social worker from an NGO; and in Heraklion, two academics from the local university who are also homelessness activists. In Athens, there were two coordinators (the principal researcher from Panteion University and the coordinator of the Central Organising Committee). In Piraeus, the municipal services were not willing to participate in the count and hence the leader was the coordinator of the Central Organising Committee, assisted by an NGO.

Last but not least, the research team prepared a short evaluation questionnaire with 34 questions, 15 of which were on a Likert scale, and the rest open-ended. The evaluation questionnaire was uploaded in a codified Google form and surveyors were asked via personal e-mails to complete it within five days after the actual count. In total, 121 surveyors responded and completed the evaluation form.

The Enumeration

The actual implementation of the six pilot surveys took place during the night of 15-16 May 2018 in Athens, Thessaloniki, Heraklion, and Nea Ionia; the night of 16-17 May 2018 in Ioannina; and the night of 24-25 May 2018 in Piraeus.

On the night of the count, all the teams met together two hours before the start of the investigation in a special meeting hall, arranged to be open during the night in each municipal area, where they were provided with detailed maps of their registration sector and small snacks to offer each street-based sleeper they encountered. Each group of surveyors was also provided with 10 copies of the questionnaires, including guidance for how to use them if the online completion of the questionnaires was disrupted. The surveyors were also instructed to return to the meeting hall and upload the questionnaires that were completed in hard copy there, and to also give the coordinators brief oral feedback about their experiences and any difficulties they encountered. On the same day, and several hours before the count, the coordinators informed all police stations in the canvassed areas that they would be conducting the survey during the night.

The following morning, in all areas from 6: 00 to 8: 00, research groups visited the parks within or surrounding the canvassed areas and recorded any people experiencing homelessness that were present, also asking them if they had been interviewed the previous night. Additionally, in the afternoon of the following day, the research team visited the soup kitchens that were open between 13: 00-16: 00 and asked everyone in the queue if they were homeless and, if so, if would they agree to answer the questionnaire. If they declined to answer the questionnaire, the researchers also noted this on the observation form (Arapoglou et al., 2021).

During the survey, some groups encountered a much larger number of people experiencing homelessness than had been estimated and they were thus assisted by extra surveyors, who then left the survey after giving the coordinators their feedback. Most groups finished their tasks in three to four hours. However, two groups returned to the meeting hall after two hours, whilst three groups finished at 2: 30 (after six hours). Additionally, in some cases the surveyors were required to complete the questionnaires by hand as their internet connection was disrupted inside the sheds, among the tall city buildings. They then uploaded the questionnaires onto the digital platform when they had returned to the meeting hall at the end of the survey.

Results and Discussion

The total number of enumerated homeless in the six municipal areas was 1 276. The number of roofless that were counted was 625, whilst the houseless numbered 651. During the survey in the streets and parks, 33 people stated that they had already been interviewed that same night. Most of the roofless were only observed, whilst 46 people who were identified as roofless and were awake refused to answer the questionnaire (see Table 2).

In two of the canvassed areas in the Municipality of Athens where social workers recorded the presence of people experiencing homelessness, no roofless people were encountered by the surveyors, whilst in two extra canvassed areas, which were outlined randomly by the research team in different city places, three people were identified as homeless. Additionally, two groups of surveyors in downtown Athens reported that in the courtyard of two occupied buildings there were many people whom they were guided by the organising committee not to count for safety reasons.

Table 2. Numbers of roofless and houseless people interviewed on the street, or recorded by observation, interviewed in shelters and day centres for the homeless, and in supported housing by municipality.

	Roofless		Houseless		
City	Street homeless Interviewed	Observation only	In shelters and day centres	Supported housing	**Total**
Athens	92	250	213	73	628
Thessaloniki	53	87	126	49	315
Piraeus	61	33	117	0	211
Heraklion	20	13	21	29	83
Ioannina	4	9	9	0	22
Nea Ionia	2	1	4	10	17
Total	232	393	490	161	1276

Source: Dimoulas, 2018; Arapoglou et al., 2021

Although the count took place at a time that was not too late at night, most roofless people were not interviewed by the surveyors, and this caused a high standard error in the analyses of the personal and social characteristics of the homeless. As the most frequent reasons for not interviewing roofless people, the surveyors recorded that 34.9% were asleep, 20.2% refused to answer the questionnaire, 16% could not communicate for reasons other than their inability to speak Greek or English, and 12.9% were unable to communicate in Greek or English (Dimoulas, 2018).

The questionnaire was considered appropriate and easily managed by most surveyors. However, they faced difficulties in getting answers to the question regarding the sex of the roofless people (22.5% of those interviewed and 6.9% of those observed) (Dimoulas, 2018). The date of birth was completed for only 54.2% of those interviewed as roofless and was, moreover, not completed on 12% of the observational forms. In total, the age was provided for 88.7% of those who were counted (Dimoulas, 2018).

Most of the roofless who stated that this night was not their first street-based sleeping episode did not give any further information on how many previous times they had been roofless. With regard to the use of facilities and services for homeless and socially excluded people, 20.3% responded that they do not use any service or facility at all whilst 44% answered that they only use soup kitchens. Of the roofless who were interviewed, 46% said that they have children. However, more than half of them did not give any further information about them when asked. Last but not least, most of those who answered the questionnaire in supported houses did not give accurate information about the other members of their household.

The main results from the evaluation questionnaire that was completed by the surveyors are as follows:

- Of the 121 surveyors who completed the evaluation questionnaire, 18 responded that the canvassed area that they screened was too large and they were very tired by the end of the survey. Four surveyors who screened in areas where several drug users and people suffering from psychological distress were present believed that their group should have contained five instead of three members. Additionally, they suggested that the survey should have started earlier in the evening because most drug users move into empty buildings or to their back up supplies in the early night.

- Five other surveyors believed that the count should have started after 23: 00 because at that time of the year (mid-May) there were many people on the streets but not experiencing homelessness, and it was very confusing for them to distinguish who might be homeless in order to approach and interview them. Five surveyors responded that the digital app was not functioning properly, and they would have preferred to tick the responses of the interviewees on hard copies of the questionnaire and then upload the responses to the digital app afterwards. This option was available to those surveyors who had connection difficulties in certain places (e.g., at the corners of certain buildings). However, completing hard copies of the questionnaire made it difficult for the organising committee to pinpoint on the city map the accurate locations where the researchers identified people experiencing homelessness.

- Most of the surveyors responded that the length of the questionnaire was appropriate. Lastly, their opinions about which questions were difficult to collect accurate and reliable information for was identical with the questions that were shown as biased by the statistical analysis.

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

The accurate measurement of people experiencing homelessness is a very complex project that lacks the discipline of strict scientific standards. The vagueness, irregular mobility, and instability of street-based sleepers is impossible to contextualise through the presuppositions and rules of surveys, be they a census or based on sample selection. The various methods adopted for the enumeration or estimation of people experiencing homelessness cannot respond adequately to all criteria of accuracy and reliability.

Due to these restrictions, social services must gather information about the presence, demographics, and social characteristics of people experiencing homelessness, not by targeting the representativeness of the data they collect with special surveys on the homeless and their characteristics, but on the basis of the service they provide. In other words, they collect those types of data which permit them to focus their services on specific locations and subgroups of people experiencing homelessness.

From the literature review and the pilot surveys conducted in six municipal areas of Greece, PIT methods were found to be the most appropriate despite their structural inadequacies (e.g., no estimation of short-term or seasonal homeless and those sleeping in empty buildings, no valid assessment of their characteristics). This is also a method which absorbs a significant number of human resources and surveyors must have experience in communicating with socially excluded groups. This precondition is not satisfied in several PIT counts. The use of only occasional volunteers – who are the norm in several homeless counts – should be reduced by providing targeted incentives to those volunteers who wish to participate more than once in the count.

The successful implementation of the actual survey is promoted when local activists are engaged in the count and work under the supervision of an experienced and motivated local coordinator. As these individuals are normally very busy, some targeted incentives must also be provided to them in order to encourage them to dedicate the personal time and effort that is necessary for the count. The size of the canvassed areas is also crucial. From the experience of the pilot study in Greece, it is estimated that the appropriate length of roads and pavements that must be screened is around 5-6000 metres per survey group.

With regard to the time period, mid-May seems to be the best option for Greece and other Mediterranean countries. However, no specific hours appear to be the most appropriate. If the count starts early at night, then several people, usually with an addiction, can be approached by the surveyors. However, during these hours many people experiencing homelessness cannot easily be distinguished and recognised as specifically homeless as there are many other people present in the streets. Our survey demonstrated that even during those hours most street-based sleepers were not actually interviewed by the researchers and were only observed. Perhaps the best option is to screen the canvassed areas at two different times during the same night. However, this option greatly increases the requirements for human resources and the cost of the count.

Finally, the questionnaires must be very short and avoid including any sensitive questions. In several cases, accurate information for basic demographic variables (date of birth, sex, family situation, number of times homeless) is also not ensured.

In conclusion, the optimal choice for measuring the homeless population is to enumerate and pin-point on a map as many people experiencing homelessness as possible. This can be done by periodically (once a year or every two years) conducting a PIT survey on street-based sleepers through the completion of observational forms followed by an investigation of their personal and social characteristics by conducting targeted qualitative fieldwork shortly after the night of the count.

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