
Strengthening Responses to Homelessness in Portugal: The Importance of Addressing Victimization

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- **Abstract** *Empirical evidence reveals that people experiencing homelessness face heightened vulnerability to victimisation, a factor that significantly influences pathways into, through, and out of homelessness and housing exclusion. Despite Portugal's substantial progress in tackling homelessness through integrated strategies, a literature review has uncovered that victimisation remains an underexplored dimension in both research and policy frameworks. This study delves into the critical need to integrate experiences of victimisation into prevention and intervention strategies, underscoring its role in exacerbating vulnerabilities and hindering social inclusion. It discusses Portugal's ongoing measures while proposing further steps to address existing gaps. Incorporating this dimension into research, policy, and practice will enhance the comprehensiveness of responses to homelessness, strengthen Portugal's position as a reference in evidence-based policymaking, and contribute to fostering a safer, more inclusive society. Furthermore, the European Platform to Combat Homelessness provides a crucial opportunity to promote international exchanges of knowledge and best practices, which can support Portugal in addressing these challenges while sharing its own insights and achievements to advance collective efforts to tackle homelessness across Europe.*
- **Keywords** *homelessness; victimisation; vulnerability; social exclusion; public policies; Portugal.*

Introduction

A recent report estimates that 1 286 691 people in Europe are experiencing homelessness, whether sleeping on the street, staying in night shelters, or residing in temporary accommodation¹ (FEANTSA and Fondation Abbé Pierre, 2024). As stated in the report, this figure partly reflects an objective upward trend in homelessness in certain countries, but it also largely highlights improvements in the accuracy and scope of data collection. Nevertheless, there is still progress to be made in enhancing the comprehensiveness and comparability of data across Europe, as well as within countries, where inconsistencies in definitions, methodologies, and data collection practices often hinder the ability to accurately assess the scale and dynamics of homelessness and housing exclusion (Develtere, 2022; FEANTSA and Fondation Abbé Pierre, 2024).

In this light, the aforementioned figure conveys a limited conception of homelessness, capturing primarily its most visible and recognisable forms (Pleace and Hermans, 2020). These are typically the situations represented in empirical studies and those that enjoy the broadest consensus as operational definitions of homelessness (Baptista and Marlier, 2019). However, when we widen the scope and consider all possible manifestations and dimensions involved in homelessness and housing exclusion, it becomes evident that this social problem is far more extensive (see, for example, Eurofound, 2023; Eurostat, 2023; 2024a), especially in a context where 21.4% of the European Union (EU) population —equivalent to 94.6 million people— is at risk of poverty or social exclusion according to the latest data² (Eurostat, 2024b).

The growing availability of data, despite its limitations, has underscored the scale and urgency of homelessness and housing exclusion as pressing societal challenges with significant policy implications. This has catalysed a broader recognition of their significance and fostered a deeper exploration of the ways in which they are shaped by the complex interplay of structural, institutional, economic, socio-cultural, and individual factors (Agulles, 2019). Against this backdrop, a steadily growing awareness of the critical importance of tackling homelessness and housing exclusion with responses that embrace their multifaceted nature has emerged. Such understanding has driven endeavours toward the development of comprehensive and integrated interventions designed to effectively address the root

¹ These are categories 1, 2, and 3 of the typology ETHOS Light, a version of the ETHOS typology (FEANTSA, 2005) developed for statistical purposes (FEANTSA, 2017a).

² This figure corresponds to the AROPE (at risk of poverty or social exclusion) indicator, which refers to the sum of persons who are either at risk of poverty, or severely materially and socially deprived, or living in a household with a very low work intensity. Those who are in more than one of such situations are included only once (Eurostat, 2021).

causes, diverse expressions, and extensive repercussions of the phenomenon. Reflecting this pathway, on 16 December 2010, the European Commission emphasised the need for appropriate and integrated responses to both prevent and address homelessness and housing exclusion, framing them as a key element of the EU's social inclusion strategy. While the Commission's declaration represented a pivotal step in formalising and consolidating this approach at the European level, efforts to develop integrated strategies were already underway in some Member States. Notably, Portugal emerged as a pioneer among Southern European Countries with the enactment of its National Strategy for the Integration of Homeless People 2009-2015³ (Estratégia Nacional para a Integração de Pessoas Sem-Abrigo, henceforth referred to as ENIPSA —Instituto da Segurança Social, 2009—), the country's first national-level integrated strategy targeting this issue⁴ (GIMAE, 2018). Later on, Portugal renewed its commitment on this matter with the approval of the National Strategy for the Integration of People in Situations of Homelessness 2017-2023 (henceforth, ENIPSSA 2017-2023)⁵, which was extended until the end of 2024 (Resolução do Conselho de Ministros, 2024a). A new National Strategy for the Inclusion of People in Situations of Homelessness for the period 2025-2030 (ENIPSSA 2025-2030) has recently been approved (Resolução do Conselho de Ministros, 2024b).

As will be discussed throughout this paper, Portugal has made significant progress and demonstrated a sustained commitment to combating homelessness and housing exclusion, having implemented practices and policies and cultivated expertise that position it as a reference point for other countries. However, the complexity of the phenomenon calls for the consideration of additional factors that have proven to be relevant in the dynamics of homelessness and housing exclusion and, consequently, in pathways into, through and out of these situations. Among such factors, experiences of victimisation emerge as a critical dimension, often exacerbating the vulnerabilities of homeless individuals and hindering trajectories toward social inclusion. Nevertheless, victimisation remains underrepresented in

³ The strategy was in effect until 2013, and work in this area was not resumed until 2016 (Grupo para a Implementação, Monitorização e Avaliação da Estratégia Nacional para a Integração das Pessoas em Situação de Sem-Abrigo 2017-2023 —Group for the Implementation, Monitoring, and Evaluation of the ENIPSSA 2017-2023, GIMAE—, 2018). An analysis of the evolution of the strategy and the reasons underlying its discontinuation can be found in Baptista (2013).

⁴ Concerning the drafting process of the strategy and the circumstances that favoured it, see Baptista (2009).

⁵ Estratégia Nacional para a Integração das Pessoas em Situação de Sem-Abrigo. Approved by the Resolution of the Council of Ministers (Resolução do Conselho de Ministros) n.º 107/2017, of 25 July and modified by the Resolution of the Council of Ministers n.º 2/2020, of 21 January. A detailed analysis of the context within which the new strategy was born, its new features, and their implications can be found in Baptista (2018).

most frameworks addressing homelessness. This article explores these issues in the context of Portugal, analysing how accounting for victimisation in prevention and intervention strategies can enhance the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of responses to homelessness.

The Evolution of Portuguese National Strategies to Tackle Homelessness and Housing Exclusion

As previously mentioned, the ENIPSA was not only Portugal's first national integrated strategy to address homelessness but also the first initiative of its kind among Southern European Countries. According to Baptista (2009), the strategy had the virtue of including the problem of homelessness on the political agenda in a context where public interest in the issue was only modest and had never been fully recognised as a public or political concern, thereby creating an opportunity for change.

The conception of a homeless person adopted by the ENIPSA followed the ETHOS typology (FEANTSA, 2005) and alluded to someone who, regardless of their nationality, age, sex, socioeconomic situation, and physical and mental health condition, was either roofless (living in public spaces⁶, staying in emergency shelters⁷, or residing in precarious locations⁸) or houseless (staying in temporary accommodation for people experiencing homelessness⁹). With respect to the latter, temporary accommodation facilities aimed at specific population groups in vulnerable situations (i.e., children and young people, elderly people, people with disabilities or with care dependencies, families, people with AIDS, individuals with addictive behaviours or substance dependencies, and victims of domestic violence) were excluded.

The subsequent strategies have preserved the core of the concept while broadening the 'regardless' clause to encompass additional factors. Specifically, the ENIPSSA 2017-2023 introduced racial or ethnic origin, religion, gender —replacing sex—, and sexual orientation. Building on this, the ENIPSSA 2025-2030 further expands the scope by including documentation status¹⁰ and disability status, while

⁶ Spaces for public use, such as parks, metro/bus stations, bus stops, parking areas, promenades, etc.

⁷ "Any equipment accommodating immediately, free of charge and for short periods, people lacking access to another place to spend the night" (Instituto da Segurança Social, 2009, p.49).

⁸ "A place that, due to its conditions, allows for a public use, such as abandoned cars, stairwells, building entrances, abandoned factories and buildings, abandoned houses or others" (Instituto da Segurança Social, 2009, p.49).

⁹ "Facilities for the accommodation, for a limited period of time, of adult people lacking access to permanent housing that promotes their social integration" (Instituto da Segurança Social, 2009, p.49).

¹⁰ Importantly, the ENIPSA already specified that the concept included "all situations involving foreign nationals who meet all other conditions (...), regardless of their legal status in the country" (p.49).

also reverting to the previous formula by replacing gender with sex. It is worth noting that the ENIPSSA 2017-2023 also replaced the term ‘homeless person’ with ‘person in a situation of homelessness’, thus recognising that homelessness is not a permanent condition but rather “a situation that may characterise a specific phase in a person’s life and which is intended to be transitional” (GIMAE, 2018, p.9).

As it can be observed, a narrow definition of homelessness has been adopted.¹¹ The ENIPSA indicated that this approach represents a compromise, balancing the need for a manageable, operational framework with the complexity of capturing all dimensions of homelessness. While this limited perspective poses certain challenges, the proposal to use a harmonised concept of homelessness at the national level across public and private agencies working in this field offers significant advantages, as outlined in the strategy itself. First, establishing a unified concept of homelessness is essential for ensuring consistent procedures and providing a solid foundation for developing effective intervention measures. This common concept also allows for systematic and accurate measurement of the phenomenon, enabling the collection of comparable and reliable data across different regions and over time. A shared understanding facilitates the development of coordinated strategies that address the full complexity and multidimensionality of homelessness, thus fostering a more complete and accurate view of this issue which moves beyond simplistic or reductive representations and promotes a deeper understanding of its diverse causes and manifestations. This, in turn, contributes to demystifying negative social representations that hinder the promotion of human dignity and the recognition of the rights of those affected, and ensures that resources are directed toward genuine needs. Finally, by relying on a European typology, this approach aligns with standards used in other countries, improving the comparability of data and sharing of best practices across borders.

The endorsement of a unified concept has proven to be widely impactful. A study carried out in 2018 yielded that 81% of the organisations which integrate the Local Councils of Social Action (Conselhos Locais de Acção Social or CLAS) and the Hubs for the Planification and Intervention on Homelessness (Núcleos de Planeamento e Intervenção Sem-Abrigo or NPISA) employed the concept introduced in the ENIPSA (Grupo de Trabalho para a Monitorização e Avaliação da ENIPSSA¹², 2020a). Even so, a recent report highlights ongoing challenges in the consistent application of the concept across local entities, noting that certain

¹¹ As will be discussed below, notably, the ENIPSSA 2017-2023 drew attention to key at-risk scenarios relevant to prevention (ENIPSSA, 2017), aligning with situations categorised as insecure or inadequate housing under the ETHOS typology (FEANTSA, 2017b). Consequently, even though a restricted definition of homelessness is used, a broader spectrum of situations is considered in targeted interventions.

¹² Working group for the Monitoring and Evaluation of the ENIPSSA 2017-2023.

interpretations still diverge from the established definition, impacting data accuracy and intervention effectiveness (Secretaria-Geral do Ministério do Trabalho, Solidariedade e Segurança Social, 2023).

The ENIPSA was built on a human rights-based approach and adopted a person-centred perspective, establishing integrated measures for prevention, intervention, and follow-up. These measures, encompassing the coordinated mobilisation of all required services, the involvement of public and private entities, and the alignment with individual assessments and specific needs, were rooted in a recognition of the multidimensional and complex nature of homelessness. Notably, prevention was identified as a fundamental pillar of the strategy, focused on addressing the root causes of homelessness and reducing the risk of individuals entering or remaining in this situation.

The strategy underscored the critical importance of updated, systematic, and comprehensive knowledge on homelessness as a cornerstone for developing evidence-based responses that meet the real needs of people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, evaluating their appropriateness and effectiveness, and ensuring their adaptability to new scenarios over time. Moreover, this commitment to knowledge was regarded as instrumental not only in guiding interventions, but also in actively challenging and dismantling negative social representations that hinder the advancement of human dignity and the recognition of the rights of individuals undergoing processes of social marginalisation.

The human rights-based approach, the person-centred perspective, the emphasis on prevention, the consideration of the multidimensional and intersectional nature of homelessness, the promotion of coordinated action across sectors and governance levels, and the pursuit of rigorous, thorough, and up-to-date knowledge have not only remained central guiding principles but have also been significantly reinforced in subsequent strategies. Among the most remarkable advancements, the ENIPSSA 2017-2023, while maintaining a strict definition of homelessness, introduced a third category of at-risk situations to be considered in prevention efforts, thus broadening the scope of interventions. This expanded framework includes: individuals in shelters for victims of domestic violence; those residing in healthcare or other institutions for prolonged periods due to the lack of housing solutions prior to or following institutionalisation; people in correctional facilities who lack stable housing upon release or are at risk of losing it; those living in unconventional or unsuitable housing, such as caravans or precarious/temporary structures; individuals temporarily staying with family or friends in conventional accommodations due to the lack of alternatives; and those experiencing insecure housing situations following eviction notices (ENIPSSA, 2017). The incorporation of these situations,

which align with the categories of insecure and inadequate housing outlined in the ETHOS Typology (FEANTSA, 2017b), contributes to recognising the diverse forms that homelessness and housing exclusion can take.

Building on this foundation, the new ENIPSSA 2025-2030 places even greater emphasis on prevention by prioritising the early identification of risk factors and the regular monitoring of social and housing vulnerabilities. This approach is supported by the planned implementation of an Integrated System of Alert and Prevention to address these risk factors and vulnerabilities. The strategy also reinforces inter-institutional mechanisms to prevent re-entry into homelessness and promotes collaborative, networked efforts among local entities and partnerships. Furthermore, it aims to foster a culture of prevention within organisations and communities by raising awareness and combating stigma associated with homelessness.

Another key principle of the ENIPSSA 2025-2030 is the participation of people experiencing homelessness in all stages of the strategy, from planning to evaluation. In this regard, Objective 3.3 of Strategic Axis 2 aims to ensure that every NPISA implements participation actions that engage homeless individuals. These initiatives are intended to foster their inclusion in community life and contribute to making sure that their unique perspectives and needs inform the development of effective and responsive solutions¹³.

Homelessness in Portugal

The first series of national studies on individuals experiencing homelessness was conducted between 2004 and 2005 by the Institute of Social Security (hereinafter ISS). Since then, there has been a steadily increasing attention to this social issue, accompanied by a progressively more thorough approach to understanding and addressing it, as reflected in subsequent studies.

¹³ Importantly, in April 2024, the ENIPSSA 2025-2030 was approved, establishing the Technical Commission for Support, Monitoring, and Evaluation (Comissão Técnica e de Acompanhamento, Monitorização e Avaliação, CtAMA) as a replacement for the GIMAE (Conselho de Ministros, 2024c). The commission included homeless individuals as participants to ensure their contribution to the strategy's governance, thereby embedding their lived experiences into decision-making processes and increasing accountability. However, in December 2024, this version was revoked and replaced by the definitive strategy, which omits the commission and no longer incorporates specific mechanisms to formalise the participation of people experiencing homelessness. This removal represents a setback in efforts to ensure meaningful participation of homeless individuals in shaping policies that affect their lives.

With limited exceptions, initial works almost exclusively focused on the ‘roofless’ category of the ETHOS typology (ENIPSA, 2012; FEANTSA, 2020; GIMAE, 2017; Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2012). The focus on data collection broadened with the implementation of the aforementioned Survey on Utilized Concepts and Local Information Systems, which first applied the ENIPSSA definition to gather information on the number of individuals experiencing homelessness as of December 31, 2017 (Grupo de Trabalho para a Monitorização e Avaliação da ENIPSSA, 2020a). One year later, the first wave of the Survey for the Characterisation of People in Situations of Homelessness¹⁴ was conducted, marking the beginning of an initiative that has since been carried out annually. The most recent available data refer to 2023. An analysis of the annual results for the period 2018-2023 (Grupo de Trabalho para a Monitorização e Avaliação da ENIPSSA, 2020b; 2020c; 2021; 2022; 2023; GIMAE, 2024) reveals an upward trend in the figures, with a 117.2% increase in the population experiencing homelessness documented at the end of 2023 compared to the data recorded at the end of 2018. The statistics have been steadily increasing with year-on-year growth rates ranging between 12.2% and 21.9%, accompanied by a rising prominence of ‘roofless’ situations at the expense of the ‘houseless’ group: while the number of individuals in the latter situation has grown by 50% during the whole period, the figure for roofless people has escalated by more than 217%. In 2023, a total of 13 128 people were experiencing homelessness in Portugal, 58.7% of them in a situation of rooflessness and the other 41.3% in a situation of houselessness (see table 1).¹⁵ Globally, 28% were women, and the remaining 72% were men. However, in the case of the situation of rooflessness, the proportion of women reached 32%, while for the situation of houselessness it was 23%. People experiencing rooflessness also tended to remain in this situation for longer periods, with the most common category being ‘between 1 and 5 years’ (24% of cases), compared to houseless individuals, for whom the category ‘up to 1 year’ was the most prevalent (37% of the sample). Furthermore, 10% of houseless individuals had been in this situation for 10 years or more, whereas this figure rose to 22% among those experiencing rooflessness (GIMAE, 2024).

¹⁴ Inquérito de Caracterização das Pessoas em Situação de Sem-Abrigo.

¹⁵ It is important to note that two Censuses (XVI Population Census —XVI Recenseamento da População— and VI Housing Census — VI Recenseamento da Habitação—) were conducted in 2021, which considered the population experiencing homelessness. As in the 2011 Censuses, only people in situations of rooflessness were accounted for. However, this time, the scope was expanded to include individuals living in dilapidated or abandoned buildings or in natural shelters, such as caves (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2021; Lopes, 2021). Notably, despite using a seemingly similar operational definition, the 2021 Censuses reported a significantly lower number of people experiencing rooflessness in Portugal compared to the surveys (2 127 vs. 4 873) (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, s.f.).

Table 1. Results of the Survey for the Characterisation of People Experiencing Homelessness for the period 2018-2023

Year (data at 31st December)	Participation	People experiencing homelessness
2018	97.5% (271 of the 278 mainland Portugal municipalities)	Total: 6 044 • Roofless: 2 428 (40%) • Houseless: 3 616 (60%)
2019	91.4% (254 municipalities)	Total: 7 107 (+17.6%) • Roofless: 2 767 (39%) • Houseless: 4 340 (61%)
2020	98.9% (275 municipalities)	Total: 8 209 (+15.5%) • Roofless: 3 420 (41.7%) • Houseless: 4 789 (58.3%)
2021	99.6% (277 municipalities)	Total: 9 604 (+17%) • Roofless: 4 873 (50.7%) • Houseless: 4 731 (49.3%)
2022	100% (278 municipalities). Validated response rate: 98.6%	Total: 10 773 (+12.2%) • Roofless: 5 975 (55.5%) • Houseless: 4 798 (44.5%)
2023	99.6% (277 municipalities)	Total: 13 128 (+21.9%) • Roofless: 7 705 (58.7%) • Houseless: 5 423 (41.3%)

Source: prepared by the author based on data provided by Grupo de Trabalho para a Monitorização e Avaliação da ENIPSSA and GIMAE.

For a proper interpretation of the figures gathered throughout the preceding lines, we must ponder the challenges associated with accessing the population affected by homelessness and housing exclusion. In studies like the ones examined, there is commonly an overrepresentation of 'identifiable' homeless individuals on the streets or in institutions, as well as service users (Aldeia, 2012).

Homelessness and Victimisation

People experiencing homelessness as a particularly vulnerable group to victimisation

A number of studies conducted in diverse settings have consistently yielded that rates of victimisation among individuals experiencing homelessness are notably high and significantly surpass those of the population not facing this situation (see, for example, Ellsworth, 2019; García Domínguez and Vander Beken, 2023; Jasinski et al., 2010; Lee and Schreck, 2005; Leomporra and Hustings, 2018; Meinbresse et al., 2014; Newburn and Rock, 2005; 2006; Nilsson et al., 2020; Robinson, 2010). These rates increase significantly among those spending the night in public spaces (Nyamathi et al., 2000; Puente, 2023; Sanders and Albanese, 2016; Wenzel et al., 2000).

What factors may underlie this reality? From a broad perspective, as noted by Dahlberg and Krug (2002), violence is a complex phenomenon which results from the interplay of individual, relationship, social, cultural, and environmental factors. Nevertheless, while all social groups are susceptible to experiencing violence, not all are equally so, with some being particularly vulnerable. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2003, p.8) has defined vulnerability as “a state of high exposure to certain risks and uncertainties, in combination with a reduced ability to protect or defend oneself against those risks and uncertainties and cope with their negative consequences”. Homelessness encompasses both elements, placing those who experience it in a disadvantaged position in relation to the satisfaction of their basic needs and the exercise and protection of their rights (Aldeia, 2014a; Sánchez Morales, 2010).

In light of this perspective, a substantial portion of the heightened vulnerability of this group to violence can be attributed to the living conditions inherent in homelessness, serving as victimogenic factors.¹⁶ In this regard, the Lifestyle-Exposure Theory, formulated by Hindelang et al. (1978), appears as a uniquely fitting theoretical framework to address the victimisation experiences of people experiencing homelessness: the living conditions imposed by homelessness act as victimogenic factors by shaping risk-prone lifestyles, contributing to the perception of homeless individuals as convenient, desirable, and vincible victims, limiting their availability, and restricting their ability and willingness to turn to potential sources of protection (Puente, 2023). In the same vein, Gaetz (2004) argues that the social exclusion associated with this situation places homeless individuals in locations and circumstances that condition their capacity to adequately ensure their protection and safety, thereby increasing their risk of experiencing victimisation. In view of these observations, it can be concluded that any effort to eliminate violence against people experiencing homelessness must prioritise addressing homelessness itself, as implementing adequate preventive and intervention measures to combat homelessness would simultaneously mitigate or eliminate the factors that are closely associated with this situation and contribute to the heightened risk of victimisation faced by homeless individuals (Puente, 2023; Tyler and Beal, 2010).

Notwithstanding the above, it does not seem that the heightened exposure of these people to risky circumstances, stemming from the situation they are going through and its implications for all areas of their lives, constitutes the sole reason for their increased likelihood of experiencing episodes of victimisation. Finkelhor and Asdigian (1996) have suggested that some characteristics and attributes of indi-

¹⁶ Morillas et al. (2014, p.205) define them as “those factors that favour the victimisation of an individual; that is, the conditions or situations of an individual that make them prone to becoming a victim”.

viduals increase their vulnerability to victimisation, independent of lifestyles. According to the authors, that is because such characteristics and attributes “have some *congruence with the needs, motives or reactivities* of offenders” [emphasis in the original] (Finkelhor and Asdigian, 1996, p.6). Since certain offenders are drawn to or react to certain types of victims or their characteristics, such victims are more vulnerable, a process that has been called ‘target congruence’.

Among the specific ways in which this process increases the risk of victimisation, Finkelhor and Asdigian (1996) propose *target antagonism*, which refers to “qualities, possessions, skills, or attributes that arouse the anger, jealousy, or destructive impulses of the offender” (p.6). The situation of homelessness, given its associated stigma (Aldeia, 2014b), could represent one of such characteristics in hate crimes and incidents motivated by aporophobia. Aporophobia refers to the “rejection, aversion, fear, and contempt towards the poor, towards the destitute who, at least in appearance, cannot offer anything good in return” (Cortina, 2017, p.14). In a similar vein, in the framework of the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske et al., 2002; 2007), people experiencing homelessness constitute an extreme out-group characterised by a combination of low perceived competence and low perceived warmth, thus eliciting the worst type of prejudice: the contemptuous prejudice, which provokes emotional reactions of contempt, disgust, anger and resentment (see, for example, Robillard and Howells, 2023).

Based on the above, the boundary between violence against homeless individuals motivated by aporophobia and that which is not is often blurred. The distinction between opportunity and prejudice concerning this social group proves challenging, and likely, in most cases both dimensions play a role to varying degrees. Taking this into consideration, addressing this issue requires a dual approach: evidence-based strategies aimed at preventing and tackling homelessness and its associated risks, and broader efforts to drive social change. Social change must focus on deconstructing the stereotypes and negative social representations that foster aporophobia, promoting empathy, and recognising the inherent dignity and rights of individuals experiencing homelessness. Public awareness campaigns, educational programmes, and community engagement initiatives are essential to counter the stigma associated with homelessness and to build more inclusive attitudes. Furthermore, policy reforms should aim at reducing structural inequalities and fostering environments where homelessness is not just seen as an individual failure but as a societal challenge requiring collective action.

Impact of victimisation experiences in trajectories into, through, and out of homelessness

A growing body of literature underscores the relevance of addressing victimisation experiences when designing strategies to prevent and tackle homelessness and housing exclusion. Research consistently demonstrates how victimisation not only contributes to pathways into homelessness but also perpetuates and exacerbates the challenges faced by individuals while enduring homelessness. Understanding these dynamics is therefore crucial for developing comprehensive and effective interventions.

Victimisation and pathways into homelessness

Victimisation often plays a critical role in leading individuals into homelessness. Experiencing maltreatment during childhood has been strongly associated with an increased likelihood of adult homelessness (Liu et al., 2021). This includes earlier onset of the first episode, as well as heightened risk of repeated episodes of homelessness (Bassuk et al., 2001; Koegel et al., 1995).

Childhood abuse and an adverse home life are common in the backgrounds of people experiencing homelessness, particularly among women (Rodríguez-Moreno et al., 2021; Sundin and Baguley, 2015). These early adversities often lead to long-term consequences, including physical and mental health problems and problematic substance use later in life (Bassuk et al., 1998; Booth et al., 2002; Guillén et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2021; Rattelade et al., 2014; Wong et al., 2016), thereby having the potential to indirectly contribute to housing instability and homelessness (Aubry et al., 2012; Aubry et al., 2016; McVicar et al., 2015; Sullivan et al., 2000). Such experiences have also been connected to a heightened risk of victimisation among individuals experiencing homelessness (Edalati and Nicholls, 2019).

Domestic violence, particularly when perpetrated by the male partner, is another critical factor that directly contributes to homelessness among women. Studies consistently highlight its role as a primary precipitating factor for female homelessness (FEANTSA, 2019; Mayock et al., 2016). Many women remain in violent homes or return to their abusers once they have left due to the lack of housing alternatives (Marpsat, 2000; Mayock et al., 2015).

Victimisation during homelessness

For those already experiencing homelessness, victimisation further compounds their vulnerabilities. For instance, in a study involving individuals experiencing homelessness with serious mental illness, Lam and Rosenheck (1998) found that recent victimisation was significantly associated with longer periods spent on the streets and in shelters, as well as with diminished overall quality of life, during follow-up interviews conducted at three and 12 months after baseline. They also identified an inverse relationship between the number of victimisation types experienced and

employment, with increases in victimisation correlating with fewer days worked. Importantly, the strongest predictor of victimisation at follow-up was having been recently victimised at baseline, suggesting a cyclical and reinforcing pattern.

Perron et al. (2008) complemented these findings by delving into the psychological impacts of victimisation. They found that non-physical victimisation was associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms. Additionally, they hypothesised an indirect relationship between physical victimisation and depression, mediated by perceived safety. Specifically, they suggested that physical victimisation may cause greater trauma, thereby exerting a stronger influence on how individuals perceive their immediate environment. This diminished sense of safety was proposed to exacerbate depressive symptoms. In contrast, non-physical victimisation, often normalised as part of life in the context of homelessness, was assumed to have a lesser impact on perceived safety.

Research has consistently shown that sexual violence is markedly prevalent in the life histories of women experiencing homelessness, with rates significantly higher than those observed among both homeless men and women in the general population (see, for example, Goodman et al., 2006; Heerde, et al., 2015; Jasinski et al., 2005; Moss and Singh, 2015). Evidence further indicates that the physical and mental health consequences of victimisation, particularly in cases of sexual violence, are often more severe for homeless women (Phipps et al., 2019; Tinland et al., 2018). These findings underscore the critical importance of integrating gender-sensitive approaches into the design and implementation of interventions to address the unique vulnerabilities and needs of women experiencing homelessness.

Additionally, substance use has been proposed as a coping mechanism for victimisation among individuals facing homelessness (Heerde and Hemphill, 2014; 2016). While this may provide short-term relief from the psychological burden of victimisation, it often perpetuates cycles of exclusion and risk, further entrenching individuals in homelessness.

All these findings reaffirm the critical importance of prioritising research on victimisation experiences among individuals experiencing homelessness. Such knowledge should inform the development of targeted, evidence-based interventions that address the multifaceted nature and intricate dynamics of this issue.

Prior Research on Victimisation Experiences of Individuals Affected by Homelessness in Portugal

A non-systematic literature review has been conducted on publications about homelessness in Portugal, with the aim of identifying works that have addressed episodes of victimisation experienced by individuals while in situations of homelessness, either specifically or within the framework of other approaches to the phenomenon. For this purpose, keywords in Portuguese ‘sem-abrigo’, ‘sem abrigo’ (homeless), ‘sem tecto’ (roofless), ‘sem casa’ (houseless), both independently and together with ‘violência’ (violence), ‘vitimização’ (victimisation) and ‘vitimação’ (victimation), as well as the English terms along with ‘Portugal’, were input into the search engines of various electronic databases: Google Scholar and bibliographic catalogues of the University of Porto library¹⁷ and the municipal libraries of Porto.¹⁸ The documents section of the ENIPSSA webpage¹⁹ was also consulted. Additionally, experts from both the academic and the intervention fields were contacted, providing insights into homelessness and responses to it in Portugal, along with relevant publications.²⁰

The initial search for works was conducted in February, March, and September 2020, during which both electronic resources and printed materials available in libraries in Porto, Portugal, were reviewed. Subsequently, this search was extended in time, focusing exclusively on electronically accessible publications, with updates carried out until December 2024.

The main finding was that research on this topic in Portugal is undeniably limited. Among all the consulted publications, only a few had addressed the experiences of homeless people with violence and victimisation, including the contributions of António Bento, Elias Barreto, and their colleagues in the context of their work, primarily in the area of mental health, with individuals living in the streets in Lisbon. First, these authors synthesised information obtained through interviews conducted between September 1994 and September 1995 by the Street Team of the Renascer Project²¹ with 156 roofless people. They found that 55 individuals (47 men and 8 women) had been victims of theft or assault, accounting for 71% of the 77 known cases²² (Bento et al., 1996). Similar figures were obtained in two subsequent studies with larger samples, a result of the team’s ongoing efforts over time. Thus, 62% of the 511 people interviewed by the Street Team of the Center for Social Support of

¹⁷ <https://catalogo.up.pt/>.

¹⁸ <https://bmp.cm-porto.pt/bpmp>.

¹⁹ <https://www.enipssa.pt/documentacao>.

²⁰ They are cited in the acknowledgements section.

²¹ Promoted by Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa.

²² No information was available on this matter in 82 cases.

S. Bento (Santa Casa da Misericórdia de Lisboa) between September 29, 1994, and March 12, 1999 had experienced victimisation (Bento et al., 1999). The percentage reached 64% of the sample of 1 000 individuals who had been assisted by the team until 2002 (Cruz et al., 2002). The work carried out by these authors serves as an excellent example of a comprehensive approach to homelessness, acknowledging the importance of considering the multiple dimensions this social problem entails.

Focusing on female homelessness, Nobre (2021) conducted a qualitative study involving 34 women who were experiencing diverse situations of homelessness. The study examined, among other aspects, their encounters with victimisation across various contexts and stages of their lives, including their trajectories of homelessness. Concerning the latter, accounts of theft were particularly prominent. Some participants also reported having suffered episodes of sexual violence and instances of physical aggressions and verbal abuse. In a similar vein, Costa (2012) presented a case study of a women who had become homeless due to domestic violence and subsequently endured or witnessed, during her time on the streets, forms of victimisation akin to those identified by Nobre (2021).

Although identifying victimisation during homelessness was the primary objective, the literature reviewed also revealed insights into other forms of violence. As highlighted by Costa (2012) and Nobre (2021), domestic violence often serves as a precipitating factor for homelessness among women. For instance, nine out of the 16 participants in Nobre's study who reported experiences of domestic violence identified it as directly linked to their situation of homelessness.²³ Furthermore, Bento et al. (1996; 1999; Cruz et al., 2002) and Nobre (2021) both noted that experiencing or witnessing violence during childhood was a common element in the backgrounds of many participants.

Finally, Valério (2021) examined the impact of interventions based on the Housing First model on the safety, integrity, autonomy, and recovery of a representative sample of women experiencing homelessness who were survivors of violence. Unfortunately, only the abstract of this work was accessible at the time of this review.²⁴ A request for a full copy of this contribution was submitted, but it was not available by the closing date of this document.

Beyond the studies already cited, no further publications were identified that addressed the victimisation experiences of individuals affected by homelessness in Portugal, whether as a secondary topic or as the primary focus, as of the closing date of this document (December 2024).

²³ Another notable approach to female homelessness in the Portuguese context that discusses the link between domestic violence and homelessness can be found in Martins (2017).

²⁴ The contribution is a Master's thesis.

Discussion and Conclusions: Integrating Victimization Into Research, Policy, and Practice on Homelessness in Portugal

This study has underscored the significant, yet often overlooked, role of victimisation in shaping the trajectories of individuals experiencing homelessness and housing exclusion. Empirical evidence demonstrates that victimisation influences pathways into, through, and out of these situations. Histories of childhood abuse, domestic violence, and/or victimisation during homelessness are common among individuals experiencing homelessness, exacerbating their vulnerability and hindering their social inclusion. Recognising and addressing this dimension is therefore critical for designing strategies to prevent and combat homelessness and housing exclusion effectively.

Portugal has made substantial progress in tackling homelessness through comprehensive approaches like the ENIPSSA. However, the dimension of victimisation remains largely absent from research and policy frameworks. Integrating this perspective would enhance the effectiveness of existing measures by fully acknowledging the complex, multifaceted, and intersectional nature of homelessness.

Although a notable gap remains in understanding the prevalence and impacts of victimisation among homeless populations, it should be noted that Portugal has already implemented measures that, while not explicitly targeting victimisation, can contribute to reducing the risk or mitigating the impact of these experiences. Embedded in the ENIPSSA 2017-2023 and reinforced in the 2025-2030 strategy, these measures include:

- Community-based participatory approaches, as reflected in the work of the NPISA, which play a key role in identifying vulnerabilities and fostering prevention at the local level.
- Integrated support services that deliver coordinated responses to the complex needs of individuals experiencing homelessness.
- Permanent supportive housing solutions, emphasised through commitments to stable and long-term housing initiatives, such as Housing First programmes.
- Prevention and early intervention mechanisms, such as the Integrated System of Alert and Prevention proposed by the ENIPSSA 2025-2030, aimed at identifying risk factors and monitoring social and housing vulnerabilities, with the goal of ensuring timely and coordinated responses once implemented. Indeed, a key goal of Portugal's approach to homelessness has been to ensure that no one has to remain on the streets due to a lack of support (Instituto da Segurança Social, 2009; Conselho de Ministros, 2017; 2024b).

- Public awareness campaigns and educational initiatives aimed at challenging stigma, fostering empathy, and promoting societal responsibility toward homelessness. These efforts help create safer and more empathetic environments for individuals experiencing homelessness. Acknowledging that all individuals, regardless their characteristics and circumstances, are equally worthy of their rights being guaranteed, protected, and fully exercised, is certainly the foundation for preventing violence.

The relevance and effectiveness of these measures in enhancing safety and alleviating the effects of victimisation experiences within the homeless population have been documented in various international contexts (see, for example, Broadway et al., 2011; Goering et al., 2014; Johnson and Chamberlain, 2015; Panadero and Vázquez, 2022; Santos-Olmo et al., 2024; Zaykowski et al., 2019).

Portugal has thus made notable strides in addressing homelessness and housing exclusion through a holistic, rights-based, and person-centred approach. By combining prevention, rapid intervention, integrated support, and public awareness, these efforts reduce susceptibility to victimisation and alleviate its consequences among populations experiencing homelessness. This progress provides a solid foundation for further advancements. Building on these achievements, the following paragraphs outline key steps to address existing gaps and further integrate the dimension of victimisation into research, policy, and practice.

Filling the knowledge gap on victimisation

Possessing thorough and up-to-date knowledge about a phenomenon is crucial for understanding and addressing its complexities. The intersection between homelessness and victimisation remains an underexplored area in Portugal, as existing surveys and research initiatives fail to include victimisation as a focus of study or monitoring. To address this gap, future research should:

- Quantify the prevalence of victimisation among individuals experiencing homelessness in Portugal, investigate the associated risk and protective factors, and explore its intersectional dimensions. A first step could involve including specific questions about victimisation in the Survey for the Characterisation of People in Situations of Homelessness.
- Examine the role of aporophobia and societal stigma as drivers of violence and discrimination. In this context, studies by Miguel et al. (2010) and da Cruz (2018) revealed that a significant portion of participants in Portugal held negative views toward people experiencing homelessness.

This research would be a key step toward fully understanding homelessness and developing effective, evidence-based interventions.

Embedding victimisation into policy frameworks and indicators

From a policy perspective, integrating victimisation into homelessness strategies is essential to ensuring their effectiveness. It plays a crucial role in breaking cycles of homelessness and improving long-term outcomes. However, while the first strategic axis of the ENIPSSA 2025-2030 focuses on the identification, prevention, and minimisation of risk factors associated with homelessness, it currently does not explicitly consider the role of victimisation in shaping the experiences of homeless individuals. Incorporating victimisation into the framework would also align with the goals of the third strategic axis, which emphasises monitoring, evaluation, and innovation in public policies to combat homelessness. Key policy recommendations include:

- Developing indicators to monitor victimisation in national and local assessments. These indicators should capture data on the prevalence, forms, and impacts of violence across different regions and communities, providing insights into national trends as well as local strengths and vulnerabilities. Furthermore, tracking reductions in victimisation rates and its impacts over time would allow for an evaluation of the effectiveness of measures implemented under the ENIPSSA framework. The information system outlined in the ENIPSSA 2025-2030 could support these efforts by centralising and standardising data collection, enabling consistent monitoring and informed decision-making.
- Including victimisation as a priority focus within prevention and intervention strategies. This is particularly relevant for initiatives such as the Integrated System of Alert and Prevention introduced by the ENIPSSA 2025-2030. Adapting this system to actively detect, follow, and address risks or episodes of violence would ensure prompt and coordinated responses, reinforcing its capacity to prevent victimisation and mitigate its effects.
- Recognising the human rights implications of victimisation and embedding them into policy frameworks. Aligning responses with the ENIPSSA's guiding principles of equality, dignity, and non-discrimination is essential. This involves ensuring that interventions directly address systemic inequalities, reduce stigma, and protect individuals from further harm.

Promoting societal change to address aporophobia

In line with the first and second strategic axes of the ENIPSSA 2025-2030 (the second focusing on the promotion of social inclusion and empowerment for full citizenship), addressing the roots of victimisation requires tackling societal stigma and discrimination, with aporophobia as a critical focus. Public awareness campaigns and educational initiatives, already included in the ENIPSSA framework,

should be expanded to challenge misconceptions and emphasise the structural drivers of homelessness. Key actions include:

- Conducting research on aporophobia in Portuguese society to better understand its prevalence and impacts. Insights from this research could inform the design of public policies and awareness initiatives.
- Developing targeted campaigns to shift societal attitudes and foster empathy. These campaigns should challenge stereotypes, highlight the structural factors behind homelessness, and present evidence-based narratives to counter simplistic or stigmatising views.
- Engaging individuals experiencing homelessness in the design and delivery of awareness efforts, thereby promoting their inclusion, empowerment, and ensuring a more accurate representation of homelessness.
- Guaranteeing the dissemination of accurate and accessible information. Providing factual data that reflects the reality of homelessness can help counter misinformation, reduce stigma, and encourage evidence-based dialogue on the issue.

Fostering international collaboration and shared learning

Portugal's efforts to address homelessness through comprehensive and evidence-based strategies position it as both a recipient and a contributor in the international arena. By engaging in a reciprocal exchange of knowledge and best practices, Portugal can both learn from global experiences and share its own insights, particularly in the areas of prevention, rapid intervention, and integrated support systems. This mutual learning fosters a global perspective for tackling homelessness and housing exclusion and its correlates, enhances policy effectiveness across diverse contexts and strengthens shared responsibility in addressing these challenges.

The recent launch of the European Platform to Combat Homelessness —held in Lisbon in June 2021²⁵, highlights the importance of enhancing cooperation among stakeholders. This platform promotes transnational exchanges and evidence-based policymaking (EAPN, 2021), creating a timely opportunity for Portugal to:

- Broaden its focus by integrating underexplored dimensions, such as victimisation and aporophobia, into its homelessness strategy.
- Share its own achievements and lessons learned from initiatives like the ENIPSSA.
- Adopt and adapt successful international practices to further improve local responses.

²⁵ Lisbon Declaration on the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness, 21 June 2021. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/BlobServlet?docId=24120andlangId=en>.

Concluding Remarks

Incorporating victimisation into the agenda to address homelessness in Portugal represents an urgent step toward more inclusive, effective, and human-rights-based policies. By prioritising research, embedding victimisation into policy frameworks, and challenging societal stigma, Portugal can enhance its response to homelessness while contributing valuable insights to global efforts to tackle this complex issue.

Ultimately, addressing victimisation not only acknowledges its prevalence but also underscores its profound impact, increases awareness, and conveys an unequivocal rejection of such behaviours, coupled with a steadfast commitment to undertaking the necessary actions for their eradication. In doing so, it contributes to ensuring the safety, dignity, and rights of homeless individuals while fostering a more just and inclusive society for all.

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