

NETHERLANDS



KEY STATISTICS

In 2016 the homeless shelters that are members of Federatie Opvang (The Dutch Federation of Shelters) reported having assisted 60,000 people¹. This was a slight increase from 2015 (58,000). There are no national figures in 2016 on the number of women and children assisted by the women's shelters. The numbers of the homeless shelters cover all categories of the ETHOS definition of homelessness.

In 2019, the national statistics office (CBS) estimated that there were approximately 39,300 homeless people aged between 18 and 65 in the Netherlands, more than twice as much as in 2009, when 17,800 homeless people were counted².

This estimate was based on four surveys of homeless people and covered:

- People sleeping rough (ETHOS 1.1)
- People staying in homeless shelters (ETHOS 1.2)
- People staying in short-term accommodation (ETHOS 3)
- People staying with friends, acquaintances or relatives on an irregular basis (ETHOS 8.1)

Over 37% of this population was concentrated in the major cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht (known as the G4). Almost half of the homeless people between 18-30 years old are found in the G4. The definitions which are used by the Federatie Opvang and the CBS differ. The CBS counts homeless people who are registered with a local authority. The Federatie Opvang counts all people who have requested and received assistance from a shelter organisation.

INCREASE/DECREASE IN NUMBER OF HOMELESS PEOPLE

The number of homeless people is (with the exception of stabilisation between 2012-2014) growing year by year. The start of a national strategy in 2005-2006 resulted in less than 50,000 homeless people in shelters for the homeless in 2009. Since then, the number of people in different types of shelters seems to fluctuate around 60,000 homeless people annually. The CBS statistics office counted 17,000 registered homeless people in 2009. Since then, there has been an increase leading to almost 40,000 registered homeless people in 2018. In relative terms, the number more than doubled in the period 2009-2018: from 17 to 37 per 10 thousand inhabitants aged 18 to 64.

CHANGE IN PROFILE OF HOMELESS PEOPLE

According to the numbers of the CBS statistics office, youth homelessness is increasing. Homelessness among 18 to 29-year-olds tripled over the period 2009-2019. The number of homeless people with a non-Western migration backgrounds tripled as well. On average, homeless people with a non-Western background are younger: 39% were 18 to 29 years of age, against 27% of homeless with a native Dutch or Western background. A relatively large proportion of non-Western homeless are found in the four largest municipalities³.

POLICIES & STRATEGIES

National Strategy

2020 saw the biggest national policy impulse in years and, one could argue, the biggest national effort since the Strategic Plans for Social Relief: 2006-2010 and 2011- 2014.

¹ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2017/12/22/cijfers-maatschappelijke-opvang-2016>

² <https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/news/2019/34/homelessness-more-than-doubled-since-2009>

³ For example: https://hvoquerido.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/G4_rapportage-feitelijkdaklozen-2019.pdf

Under the title, ‘A home a future’⁴, government announced a broad and ambitious strategy to break away from the shelter model and put prevention and rapid re-housing at the core of its approach to reduce the ‘unacceptable large number of homeless people.’⁵ The government pledges to create 10,000 extra places to live as independently as possible and allocate €200 million extra for the guidance of homeless people moving to these places. 4,500 homes are estimated to be set up before the end of 2021⁶. With these investments the Dutch government wants to make ‘a good start with a real solution for this vulnerable group of people. This approach should be a breakthrough in a system that is stuck’⁷. The implementation of the plan started in 2020.

Other ambitions for the coming years include limiting the stay in shelters to a maximum of three months and viewing this as the last and least preferable option. At the same time large dormitories should be converted into single and double rooms and the number of shelter/reception places reduced after improving the possibilities to leave shelters and enter adequate housing with support. In addition, the reception in shelters should also focus on tailor-made guidance, day care and the support of experts with experience.

Also relevant here is the ‘action programme’ for youth homelessness (18-27 yr) that is carried out by 14 pilot municipalities, several ministries and a wide range of social organisations. It aims at radically reducing the number of homeless young people: no young person should stay in a shelter for more than 3 months. This should be achieved by a more integrated approach to finding housing solutions for youth and continuing to help and support young people, including those leaving youth care institutions.

Scope

The care for homeless people is the responsibility of 43 municipalities and their regions. The new law on Social Support (Wmo2015) made the 43 municipalities also responsible for around 40,000 psychiatric patients living in supported housing facilities. The municipalities are required to develop new regional plans where they combine homelessness prevention policies with policies for supported housing for people with mental

health problems, addiction problems or learning difficulties.

Resources

The budget for regional and local strategies consists of a special allowance for the 43 municipalities. In 2017, this annual budget was €385,000,000. For protected housing for people with chronic mental health care problems another 1.4 billion euros was decentralised to the municipalities. The budget is divided among the 43 municipalities according to an allocation formula. In 2017, 35 municipalities received an additional €107,959,001 for the implementation of policies and services relating to domestic violence. Another €135,000,000 is available from the justice system, from donations and from contributions from service users (service users pay a certain contribution from their social security allowance towards room and board).

The recent attempts to break away from the shelter-system and to reduce the number of ‘protected housing’ (with 24hour care) facilities will lead to shifts in available budgets, but to what extent is not clear yet. The new ‘a home, a future’ plan was launched with a national €200 million investment in floating support for people living in the extra 10,000 new homes and a €100 million investment to speed up programmes for (temporary) housing of homeless people.⁸ Other financial efforts are expected from housing associations, commercial real estate developers/owners and charitable funds.

Governance

The Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports (VWS) has overall responsibility for the implementation of the legal system and monitoring of decentralisation and policy development. The 43 municipalities are responsible for developing and implementing regional and local policies. Further decentralisation of responsibilities for homeless people or people at risk of becoming homeless to all 355 municipalities in the Netherlands will become reality from 2022 on⁹. Because of the decentralisation, the ministry of VWS is no longer responsible for monitoring the progress. All municipalities are required to report to their local council.

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<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/kamerstukken/2020/06/03/kamerbrief-over-een-thuis-een-toekomst-de-aanpak-van-dak-en-thuisloosheid>

⁵ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2020/06/03/10.000-woonplekken-extra-voor-dak--en-thuisloze-mensen>

⁶ <https://vng.nl/sites/default/files/2020-12/voortgangsrapportage-beschermd-wonen-en-maatschappelijke-opvang.pdf>

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ <https://vng.nl/sites/default/files/2020-12/voortgangsrapportage-beschermd-wonen-en-maatschappelijke-opvang.pdf>

⁹ <https://vng.nl/sites/default/files/2020-12/voortgangsrapportage-beschermd-wonen-en-maatschappelijke-opvang.pdf>

The minister of VWS reports on progress on homelessness at least once a year. Regular consultation takes place between Vereniging Valente (previously Federatie Opvang), local authorities organised in the National Association of municipalities (VNG), health insurance companies and client organisations. The ministry of VWS gives a subsidy to the VNG so that they can support the municipalities in developing policies on homelessness. The VNG facilitates a platform of civil servants and municipal executives which meets and discusses the progress and the obstacles which they experience in developing and implementing homeless policies. The new 'a home, a future' plan was developed by the ministries of VWS, Internal Affairs and Social Affairs in close collaboration with municipalities, housing associations, service providers and client organisations.

REMARKS ON KEY POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

Positive

The National Association of Local Authorities (VNG) has developed quality standards for homeless shelters and protected housing for people with mental health problems. The standards have been developed in cooperation with service users and service providers. In addition, many services work with self-designed auditing processes aimed at raising awareness for the need to improve quality and risk-containment procedures.

Service users have some power to influence/maintain the quality of the services, but exercising these rights is difficult for people in marginalised positions.

More and more, people with experiences of homelessness, mental health problems or addiction problems are working as paid workers in shelter organisations.

Housing First initiatives have spread to 17 cities (2016) and continue to grow. Mixed co-housing projects (intentional communities) based on Housing First or housing led principles have also developed quickly over the past few years. Homeless people can live there in self-contained apartments or studios. Sometimes in temporary accommodation (mostly 5-12 years), but increasingly in a permanent home¹⁰.

¹⁰ <https://www.internationalhu.com/research/projects/mixed-housing-the-lessons-learned-in-practice>

Negative

The shortage of affordable housing in The Netherlands is enormous and still growing. The housing market is extremely difficult to access; both qualifying for a mortgage or a commercially rented house requires a high income. Waiting lists for socially rented housing are up to twelve years.

Debt is an increasingly important barrier to housing.

There is a big risk of putting too much effort into creating temporary accommodation with the help of for-profit/private parties without a clear vision for the sustainable social integration of people living in such accommodation.

The idea of the 2015 (Law on Social Support) decentralisation boost was that local authorities are best placed to develop policies around care for vulnerable groups, including people who experience homelessness. A market-driven tender system would also allow new service providers to compete for parts of the social services market, thus fostering innovation, better quality of services and tailor-made solutions for social problems. Five years later, in 2020, local authorities find themselves overburdened. The annual budget they receive from the national government leaves them stretched. Six out of every ten local authorities have a budget deficit. As a consequence, over the past few years, local authorities have cut spending on work in social services and have decreased the volume of care and support that a client is entitled to.

To stop the 'race to the bottom' in service provision expenditure and quality of services, national government introduced a new law on fair tariffs. This law obliges local authorities to pay a price for social services which allows social services to at least pay salaries in conformity with (national) Collective Labour Agreements. At this moment it is too early yet to judge whether this new law is effective.

If there are several people in a household who receive social security benefits, they will all get a cut on the benefits they are receiving. This policy has resulted in people not any longer being willing to share a house with a homeless relative or friend, because they would get less benefits.

There is still not an adequate transition process for young people leaving care (18-18+), resulting in many

young people becoming homeless. The national action programme on youth homelessness tries to focus on the continuity of care and bringing down barriers between policy domains and services.

Nation-wide access to homeless services is granted by law. However, the use of the 'local-connection criterion' still excludes homeless people from services as evaluations show.¹¹¹² Local Audit Offices point to other reasons for the failure of municipalities to give the right support to homeless people: homeless people are sometimes refused when they have some kind of roof above their head (for example 'couch-surfing' with family or friends), failing to show an identity card, the presumption of being too difficult for the service (mental health problems, aggression), or the opposite i.e. supposedly being too self-sufficient.¹³.

¹¹ Planije, M., Lange, A. de, & Kroon, H. (2017). *Praktijktest toegankelijkheid maatschappelijke opvang 2017*. Utrecht: Trimbos Instituut [Reality check accessibility services for homeless people]

¹² Minister of Health, Welfare and Sports (2017). *Toegankelijkheid van de maatschappelijke opvang en beschermd wonen*. Brief aan de colleges van Burgemeester en wethouders van de gemeenten. 22 december [Accessibility of homeless services and sheltered accommodation. Letter to the local municipal executives]

¹³ <https://rekenkamer.rotterdam.nl/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/G4-onderzoek-opvang-en-ondersteuning-dak-en-thuislozen-1.pdf> and Rekenkamers Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Den Haag, Utrecht (2018). *Onderzoek G4-rekenkamers naar de opvang en ondersteuning voor dak- en thuislozen (brief aan de gemeenteraden, 24 mei)*. [Research biggest four Cities (G4) on shelter and support for homeless people. Letter to the city councils] Available at: https://www.utrecht.nl/fileadmin/uploads/documenten/7.extern/Rekenkamer/20180524_G4_Onderzoek_daklozen_brief_aan_gemeenteraden_def.pdf