

# POLAND



## KEY STATISTICS

There is no national data collection strategy for homelessness in Poland. Homelessness was addressed by the 2001 and 2011 Housing and Population Censuses, but there were considerable limitations to the methodologies and definitions used.

The Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy collects annual Social Welfare Statistics from all social welfare centres in Poland, including statistics on homeless assistance. The regional authorities also hold registers of homeless service providers. Furthermore, since 2011, the Ministry has produced a biennial national study on homelessness. However, NGOs in the homelessness sector have many objections to the research methodology used and therefore consider the figures to be inaccurate.

NGO service providers collect homeless data in some regions. The Pomeranian Forum in aid of Exiting Homelessness (PFWB), for example, carries out very comprehensive biennial surveys of homelessness in the Pomeranian region. The "Shipyards" Foundation for Social Innovation and Research in Warsaw has developed a data-collection standard for homeless service users and a methodology for aggregating data on unique users of various services. Unfortunately, as for many other NGOs' recommendations, it was never implemented in the nationwide study.

### Census Data 2011:

- Number of people sleeping rough: approx. 9,600 on any given night (ETHOS 1.1, Census 2011 - 15/16.04.2011)
- Number of people living in group accommodation facilities for longer than 3 months: 14,500 on any given night (ETHOS 2 and 3, Census 2011 - 15/16.04.2011)

Total: 24,100

Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy<sup>1</sup> data on homelessness gathered in a point-in-time headcount of February 2019:

- Number of people rough sleeping: 6,007 (ETHOS 1)
- Number of people living in overnight shelters and homeless hostels: 24,323 (mostly ETHOS 2.1, 3.1, 4.1 and partly 11)

Total: 30,330

Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy welfare services yearly statistics of 2018:

- Number of people who were provided with shelter: 19,449 (mostly ETHOS 2.1, 3.1 and 4.1)
- Number of people who received financial support because of homelessness: 38,449

### Other

According to quantitative analysis (performed within the "Housing First – Evidence Based Advocacy" project) of raw data collected by the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy during the 2013 National Homeless Count and Sociodemographic Survey, at least 5,338 of over 29,000 people surveyed were chronically homeless (over three years with the "disabling feature" of substance abuse declared as a cause of homelessness). Compared to the remaining population, they were more often found in non-shelter housing situations, used low-threshold short term support, generated income from informal jobs and welfare benefits and had disability status. Less often they declared having no income at all and having access to publicly funded health services.

## INCREASE/DECREASE IN NUMBER OF HOMELESS PEOPLE

After the sudden 17% increase (total: 5,740 people) in the Ministry's biennial national study on homelessness of

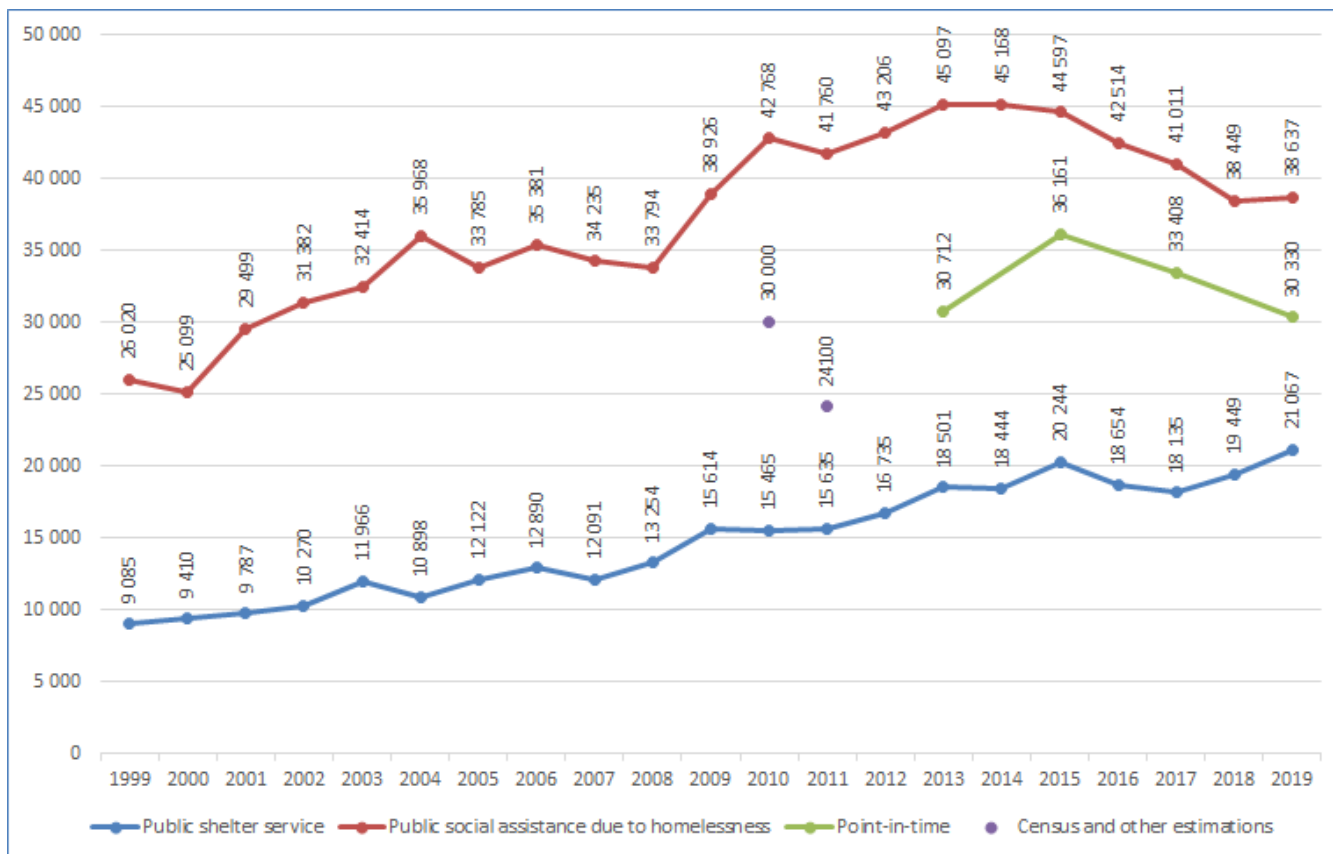
<sup>1</sup> Reorganised into Ministry of Family and Social Policy in 2020

2015, the studies of 2017 and 2019 show a gradual drop of nearly 16.1% (total: 5,831 people compared to 2015). Allegedly, the 2015 headcount suffered from a methodology flaw which caused a significant overestimation. However, the prevalence data (welfare services yearly statistics) indicate that after the 2013-2014 peak (exceeding 45,000 people) the number of homeless people using public social assistance system has been slowly decreasing since then (ca. 38,600 in 2019). There is no new national policy to combat homelessness, therefore the decrease may be caused by a combination of positive macroeconomic measures, EU funds application and new tools in general social assistance, especially the 'Family 500 Plus' programme introduced in early 2016 thanks to which every Polish family, regardless of their financial status, receives a monthly payment of 500 PLN (ca. €110) per child. A significant drop in the number of homeless children according to the 2019 headcount (47.6% compared to 2015 and 37.9% compared to 2013) seems to support the hypothesis of the major influence of the programme on child homelessness in Poland (the programme's efficiency is already well proven in the area of general children poverty in Poland).

There is no clear information on the impact of COVID-19 on the size of the homeless population in Poland. The surveys conducted by Polish National Federation for Solving the Problem of Homelessness were inconclusive on this subject, while anecdotal data from outreach organisations shows some growth in the number of rough sleepers in major cities. The national headcount at the beginning of 2021 could give an answer to this question, but it has been officially delayed until further notice due to the pandemic.

## CHANGE IN PROFILE OF HOMELESS PEOPLE

The nationwide socio-demographic data on homelessness in Poland is very scarce. There is only the Ministry's biennial headcount, which is contested by the stakeholders for its methodological flaws (however, the Ministry seems to be eager to cooperate with the NGO sector - for example by adding a new 18-25 age category in 2019 study).



Homelessness statistics in Poland 1999-2019

The most recent study of 2019 shows the ageing of the homeless population (the percentage of homeless people in the 'above 60' group grew from 21.7% to 33.0% compared to 2013) and a continuing over-representation of adult men (growing from 80.6% in 2013 to 82.1% in 2019). While the decrease in the number of homeless children is clearly visible, conclusions regarding the young adult group (18-25) - which is under a serious homelessness threat in several other EU countries - cannot be drawn from the Ministry's study (in the 2019 study this age group was surveyed for the first time revealing only 784 people countrywide).

Anecdotal evidence from the service providers indicates that there is a very slight growth in this area, but NGOs working directly with youth with housing problems claim that young people refuse to use institutional help, therefore they elude the surveys and mainstream homelessness NGOs. The debate on how to determine the scale of youth homelessness in Poland has become quite intense in recent years.

Another extremely important factor is the growing length of periods of homelessness experienced by people (details in table below), showing the severe inefficiency of a shelter-based system in the area of reintegration. The percentage of people experiencing homeless for more than 5 years grew from 43.0% in 2013 to 54.6% in 2019.

Years spent in homelessness	2013	2019
0-2	33.4%	23.3%
3-5	23.6%	22.0%
6-10	22.4%	27.8%
11-15	11.6%	12.6%
16-20	5.6%	8.1%
above 20	3.4%	6.1%

Length of homelessness episodes in 2013 & 2019

## POLICIES & STRATEGIES

- **National Strategy**

There is no national integrated homelessness strategy. Between 2008 and 2010, work on such a strategy was undertaken by the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, upon the request of the Parliamentary Commission for Social Policy and the Family.

In 2014, five out of six Polish FEANTSA members produced proposals for a homelessness strategy entitled "National Programme for Combating Homelessness and Housing Exclusion 2014-2020". The proposals were rejected by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, since in August 2014 a wider strategy called "National Programme for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion" was adopted by the Government. One of its priorities refers directly to housing insecurity and homelessness. It seems though, that the document is more of a set of guidelines for EU projects aimed at combating poverty than an actual national strategy.

In 2020 work on a new version of the above Programme was undertaken by the Ministry in cooperation with a group of NGO experts. The new programme set for 2021-27 period is supposed to be a framework for the process of deinstitutionalisation of social assistance services in Poland, including homelessness services.

- **Budget evolution**

According to the data published by the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, there was a remarkable and steady growth of funds for shelter services and social benefits for homeless people in the period 2010-2018.

- 2010: 138,420,514 PLN (ca. €34,954,675; €1 was 3,96 PLN on 31 December 2010)
- 2012: 166,781,665 PLN (ca €40,777,913; €1 was 4,09 PLN on 31 December 2012)
- 2014: 222,445,368 PLN (ca. €52,217,222; €1 was 4,26 PLN on 31 December 2014)
- 2016: 224,595,004 PLN (ca. €50,813,349; €1 was 4,42 PLN on 31 December 2016)
- 2018: 270,781,419 PLN (ca. €62,972,423; €1 was 4,30 PLN on 31 December 2018)

On the other hand, there is a constant, significant lack of funds for investments (new shelters, meeting quality standards) and housing services. This seems to have changed recently – in autumn 2018 an additional 15 million PLN budget (ca. 3.5 million EUR) was assigned by the government for meeting quality standards in NGO institutions for homeless people. Unfortunately, this development did not continue in 2019.

# REMARKS ON KEY POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

## Positive

The quality standards framework prepared by a partnership of Polish FEANTSA Members called “Municipal Standard of Leaving Homelessness” was accepted by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. With the amendment of the Act on Social Assistance in July 2015, the framework was also partly amended – mostly by authorising the Minister of Labour and Social Affairs to issue a Regulation on the standards of homeless services, standards of buildings in which the services are provided and standards of personnel providing the services.

New social policies, including the Family 500 Plus child benefit (described above) have had a major impact on reducing children poverty, including homelessness.

In December 2017, the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy proposed an amendment to the Social Assistance Act which imposes a tighter control on municipalities’ fulfilment of their obligations towards homeless people. It came into effect in 2018 and gives the service-providing NGOs a better position in negotiating their contracts with municipalities.

In the last few years, a growing prominence of homelessness advocacy has been observed, mostly from Citizens’ Rights Ombudsman (who established an expert group on combating homelessness and evictions) and the National Federation for Solving the Problem of Homelessness (a national NGO Umbrella). Occasionally, the advocacy reaches the mainstream nationwide media. Since 2018, the advocacy has had a strong focus on homeless people’s rights (including introduction of the Homeless Bill of Rights in Poland). The city of Gdańsk has introduced the Bill in 2020 and a few other major cities delared interest in introducing the Bill in the near future.

There was a growing tension between NGOs and the Government regarding the question of denying access to shelters for people who are not self-reliant due to their illness, disability or age. After continuing pressure on the Government, the Social Assistance Act saw an amendment introducing homeless hostels with care services, designed for homeless people who are not self-reliant, yet do not require 24-hours care in a nursing home or other similar facility. The new type of institution was introduced in spring 2018 and since then the number of these sheters is

growing (though not as quickly as desired), stabilising the situation of homeless people who are not self-reliant.

The first two implementations of Housing First started in late 2019. One has 20 apartments in Warsaw, the other (implemented by FEANTSA members) has 30 apartments in Warsaw, Wrocław and Gdańsk (10 in each city). The projects are implemented under an ESF transnational cooperation priority – the former with Y-Foundation (Finland), the latter with AEIPS (Portugal). The latter project has recently undergone a retention test showing high retention. Even though both projects were significantly delayed due to the COVID-19 outbreak, they already show very positive results and are a subject of a high interest for NGOs and local authorities, with at least two NGOs declaring a high degree of preparation for implementation of their own Housing First projects at the end of 2020. At the same time there is an effort to introduce Housing First into the National Recovery and Resilience Programme.

Legislative works undertaken in 2020 introduced Social Rental Agencies into the Polish law system and allowed a better usage of domestic housing funds for NGOs by lowering the cofinancing threshold.

The COVID-19 outbreak (despite severe problems depicted in ‘negative’ below) has shown some positive aspects: most importantly, the morbidity rate among homeless people is relatively low and there is very close cooperation between the Ministry of Family and Social Policy and the NGO sector in solving current issues. All evictions have been suspended for the duration of the pandemic and people living in collective institutions (incl. homeless shelters) were listed as top priority for vaccination. Finally, the failure of the shelter system in the face of pandemic has largery fueled the discussion on deinstitutionalisation.

## Negative

The COVID-19 outbreak has significantly obstructed access to homeless shelters (in most cases newcomers are required to isolate themselves in ‘buffer’ shelters or have themselves tested). Usage of empty hotels and other tourist infrastructure is almost nonexistent – instead, ‘buffer’ shelters are created in chosen existing shelters or parts of them, living quarters or even gyms. Testing availibility for homeless people is low, due in part to health insurance issues (see below). Cases of staff shortages (due to quarantining) have been reported as well as quarantines imposed on entire shelters.

While temporary health insurance coverage exists, some homeless people still encounter difficulties in accessing health services due to bureaucratic requirements and due to the reluctance of healthcare institutions to apply the relevant legislation. There was a government initiative to introduce general free health services instead of health insurance announced in 2017, but it has been abandoned.

The National Housing Programme adopted in 2016 became a subject of criticism. Despite its general aim to largely support combating homelessness, there are many details that may prove to be counterproductive. These include a persisting focus on the development of the system of shelters instead of a gradual shift to housing-led services and a lack of reliable financing tools for investment in the infrastructure of homeless services. Furthermore, the legislation based on the programme became subject of a wide criticism due to lack of tenants' rights protection to ease eviction procedures.

The major issue behind the problems with the National Housing Programme (from the homelessness perspective) seems to be the inability of cooperation between the ministries responsible for the Programme and housing issues in general and the Ministry of Family and Social Policy (responsible for combating homelessness). In December 2015, the Citizens' Rights Ombudsman asked the Prime Minister to appoint a Government Plenipotentiary (interdepartmental coordinator) for Combating Homelessness. The answer was negative, as the responsibilities of the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy supposedly fulfil the needs in this area. The prime Minister was addressed on this subject again in 2018 (by National Federation for Solving the Problem of Homelessness with FEANTSA's support) and in 2019 (by the Ombudsman again). The answer was negative in both cases.

Finally, there is a lack of initiatives to improve the knowledge of the real costs of the current public homelessness policy (e.g. costs of employment-led policy, costs of dwelling in public space) and a lack of efficiency requirements for existing mainstream services i.e. shelters and programmes for exiting homelessness (also those provided by NGO service providers).