Policy Brief on Affordable Housing

Better data and policies to fight homelessness in the OECD

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Homelessness is difficult to measure and even harder to compare across countries. There is no common definition of homelessness, and countries' data collection efforts differ in their method, scope and frequency.

Homelessness affects less than 1% of the population across the OECD and Brazil, but nevertheless concerns more than 1.9 million people – and this is likely an underestimate.

Homelessness imposes high costs on individuals. It drastically affects individual health outcomes, with the homeless dying up to 30 years earlier than the general population on average.

People experience homelessness in different ways. A small but visible group comprises the chronically homeless, who generally require a complex web of supports. Meanwhile, a large and, in some countries, growing number of people are temporarily homeless.

The faces of homelessness are increasingly diverse. In many countries, homelessness has become more prevalent among women, families with children, youth, migrants and seniors.

Homeless solutions should be tailored to the varied needs of the homeless. In addition to preventive measures, 'Housing First' approaches that provide immediate, permanent housing to the homeless, along with integrated service delivery, may be most effective for the chronically homeless. Emergency support, including rapid rehousing, can help the transitionally homeless.

The high cost of homelessness in the OECD

Homelessness is the most extreme form of housing and social exclusion. Homelessness has emerged as a pressing challenge, in view of the increasing number of homeless people in many – but not all – OECD countries. At the European level, homelessness has moved up on the policy agenda over the past decade, and notably figures in Pillar 19 in the European Pillar of Social Rights, adopted in the autumn of 2017 which calls for Adequate shelter and services to be provided to the homeless in order to promote their social inclusion (European Commission, 2017[1]).

Homelessness has significant human costs and increases mortality rates drastically. In France, researchers reported a 30 to 35-year difference in the average age of death between the homeless and the general population (Cha, 2013[2]). A Polish study found that the average life span of a homeless person was 17.5 years shorter than that of the general population (Romaszko et al., 2017[3]). In Dublin, mortality rates were 3-10 times higher for homeless men and 6-10 times higher for homeless women compared with the general population (Ivers et al., 2019[4]). Further, homeless people are at increased risk of diseases, as well as mental illness, substance abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, and other health disorders (Fuller-Thomson, Hulchanski and Hwang, 2000[5]).

Homelessness also generates costs for governments. Direct public costs of homelessness include, for instance, health treatments and counselling services, housing assistance, interventions by relatively expensive emergency services (such as accommodation, medical and other health services), and the criminal justice system (OECD, 2015[6]). The level of resources required depends on the extent of the needs of the homeless individual. For instance, an individual who may be homeless for only a short period (i.e. "transitionally homeless", which may be triggered, for instance, by a loss of job or housing, a family or relationship breakup, or a transition out of institutional care) may benefit most from temporary financial assistance to secure a more stable housing solution. Meanwhile, people who are homeless for prolonged periods of time (i.e. "chronically homeless") may require a range of longer-term – and more costly – housing, health and employment services. Across countries, it is hard to estimate public spending on homelessness, since relevant services tend to be fragmented across different ministries, different levels of government and non-public service providers.

Who is homeless in the OECD?

What do we mean by "homeless"?

Who is homeless across the OECD? The answer depends on how you define "homeless", which varies across – and even within – countries. There is no internationally agreed upon definition of homelessness, though there have been efforts at standardisation through a common typology at the European level (Box 1). In some countries, the definition of homelessness is restricted to people who are living on the streets or in public spaces (i.e. "sleeping rough"), and/or living in shelters or in other emergency accommodation; this is the case in Austria, Chile, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain and the United States. Other countries apply a broader definition, which also includes people who are living in hotels and are doubled up with friends and family; this is true for Australia, Canada, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Greece, Luxembourg, New Zealand, Norway and Sweden. Moreover, different definitions of homelessness can exist within the same country, depending on the purpose and the collecting authority, producing vastly different homelessness estimates over the same territory (see indicator HC3.1 in the OECD Affordable Housing Database, OECD, 2019[7]).

How homelessness is measured affects who is counted – and who is left out

There are significant methodological challenges that make it difficult to assess the full extent of homelessness. Homelessness is, by its very nature, a difficult circumstance to assess, as homeless individuals may be more or less "invisible" to public authorities and support institutions. Authorities may use administrative data (such as registries from shelters and local authorities), point-in-time estimates (such as street counts, which are often conducted annually at a given time of year), or a combination of both. Both methods provide only a partial picture of homelessness, and neither effectively captures the "hidden homeless" – people who may not be visibly homeless or appear in official statistics, either because they do not seek formal support or they seek shelter with family or friends, or live in their car. For instance, the London Assembly estimated that around one in ten people in London experienced hidden homelessness in a given year, and that one in five 16 to 25 year olds "couch surfed" in 2014 – roughly half of them for over a month (London Assembly Housing Committee, 2017[9]). Hidden homelessness tends to be more prevalent among women, youth, LGTBI, victims of domestic abuse, asylum seekers, or people living in rural areas and smaller communities (where shelters and social support services are less prevalent and which are not covered in homelessness surveys) (National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services, 2014[10]). Furthermore, incomplete geographic coverage and limited frequency and consistency of data collection represent additional methodological challenges (see indicator HC3.1 in OECD, 2019[7]).

Official homeless counts vary widely across countries

This brief reports homeless statistics based on the national statistical definition, and presents homelessness trends within countries when such data are available and comparable across time. More data on homeless rates by country can be found in indicator HC3.1 in OECD, 2019[7].

Box 1. A common typology for measuring homelessness

A common typology has been developed at the European level to define the scope of data collection on homelessness and facilitate a common language across countries: ETHOS (the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion) and a shorter version, "ETHOS Light". Not all countries characterise individuals in each of the categories below as "homeless".

Table 1. A harmonised typology of homelessness: ETHOS Light

	Operational category	Living situation
1	People living rough	Public spaces / external spaces
2	People in emergency accommodation	Overnight shelters
3	People living in accommodation for the homeless	Homeless hostels Temporary accommodation Transitional supported accommodation. Women's shelters or refugee accommodation
4	People living in institutions	Health care institutions Penal institutions
5	People living in nonconventional dwellings due to lack of housing	Mobile homes Non-conventional buildings Temporary structures
6	Homeless people living temporarily with family and friends	Conventional housing, but not the person's usual place of residence

Source: Adapted from FEANTSA, 2018[8].

Although the homeless account for less than 1% of the population in all countries surveyed, they represent roughly 1.9 million people across the 35 countries for which data are available. Moreover, this figure is likely an underestimate. There is a significant range in homeless estimates across countries, measured in terms of absolute numbers: from over 550 000 in the United States to between 100 000 and 140 000 people in Australia and France; to fewer than 7 000 people in Finland, Japan, Iceland, Norway and Portugal. The percentage of homeless people as a share of the total population ranges from 0.9% and 0.8% in New Zealand and the Czech Republic, respectively, to between 0.2% and 0.5% in, *inter alia*, Austria, the Netherlands, the Slovak Republic and Sweden, and to less than 0.1% in Chile, Iceland, Israel, Japan, Poland and Portugal (see HC3.1 in OECD, 2019[7]).

Definitional differences explain part – but not all – of the cross-country variation in homeless estimates. For instance, Australia, the Czech Republic and New Zealand – which adopt a broader definition of homelessness – report a higher incidence of homelessness compared to countries with a narrower definition, such as Chile, Portugal or Japan. But even some countries with a broader definition report among the lowest rates of homelessness in the OECD: Denmark, Finland, Norway and Poland.

The faces of the homeless have become increasingly diverse

The homeless population is heterogeneous – and increasingly so. A small, but more visible share of the homeless population in many countries is chronically homeless, with higher social support needs. Meanwhile, there is a growing number of people across the OECD who are temporarily or transitionally homeless (OECD, 2015[6]). For instance, in Denmark, the transitionally homeless represent about two-thirds of the total homeless population. The transitionally homeless population was almost five times bigger than the chronically homeless population in the United States in 2018; four and a half times bigger in Chile in 2019, and nearly four times bigger in Canada in 2016. The magnitude of the difference also depends on the scope of the official homeless definition in a given country.

While single adult males continue to dominate the homeless population, homelessness among youth, families and seniors is rising in some countries. For example, homelessness among youth aged 15-29 has increased by 20% in Australia between 2011 and 2016 and by as much as 82% in Ireland over the 2014-18 period. Over the same period, family homelessness almost quadrupled in Ireland; it rose by 42% in England (UK) between 2010 and 2017. Often these increases occurred whilst overall employment conditions were improving, but with housing prices rising faster than wages, opportunities for youth and families to find affordable housing were curtailed. Emergency shelter use among seniors increased by about 50% from 2005 to 2016 in Canada (Government of Canada, 2019[11]); senior homelessness rose in England (United Kingdom) (Bulman, 2018[12]) as well as New York City (US) – where homelessness among seniors has more than tripled over the past decade (CBS New York, 2019[13]). In many countries, homelessness is also prevalent among migrants; in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States, Indigenous populations are overrepresented among the homeless.

Is homelessness getting worse?

Homeless trends vary across OECD countries

Homelessness has increased in about one-third of OECD countries in recent years. Measured as the number of homeless people as a share of the total population, the homeless rate has increased in Australia, Chile, England (UK), France, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Scotland (UK), the United States and Wales (UK). In some cases, the increase has been considerable: homelessness rose by 168% in Iceland between 2009 and 2017 and by 107% in Ireland between 2014 and 2018 – albeit in each of these countries, the homelessness rate remained at less than 0.15% of the population (see HC3.1 in OECD, 2019[7]). More nuanced trends can be observed in countries that collect homelessness data on an annual basis: for instance, following an overall decline in homelessness by 15% between 2007 and 2018, homelessness increased slightly in the United States between 2017 and 2018 (US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), 2018[14]).

By contrast, the rate of homelessness has fallen or remained stable in about a quarter of OECD countries, including Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Israel, Norway, Poland and Sweden. The most significant drop in the homelessness rate was recorded in Norway (40% decline between 2012 and 2016) and Finland (39% decline between 2010 and 2018) (see HC3.1 in OECD, 2019[7]). A smaller decline in the homelessness rate was recorded in Canada (14% as measured among shelter users between 2010 and 2016), Austria (12% between 2013 and 2017), Israel (11% between 2010 and 2018), Sweden (7% between 2013 and 2017) and Poland (1% between 2013 and 2019). In Denmark, homelessness declined slightly between 2017 and 2019 (from 0.12% to 0.11% of the population), after progressively increasing since 2011.

National estimates mask big differences within countries, however. Homelessness tends to be concentrated in big cities. Dublin accounted for around 66% of the national homeless population in Ireland in 2019, even though it only represents about a quarter of the country's total population (Department of Housing, 2019[15]). More than three-quarters of Latvia's homeless population was concentrated in Riga in 2017, whilst the cities of Tel Aviv (Israel), Auckland (New Zealand) and Santiago (Chile) accounted for roughly half of the national homeless population (OECD, 2019[7]). In the United States, half of the homeless population is concentrated in just five states, with a quarter of the total homeless population in the state of California (US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), 2018[14]).

Better homelessness data should be a priority for many countries to assess and monitor homelessness trends. Depending on the country, this could imply more regular data collection, investments in the integration of different data sources to better assess and support the homeless, along with efforts to expand the methodological toolbox to collect data. Innovative approaches to link

administrative and survey data can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and needs of different homeless populations. For instance, researchers in Scotland (UK) linked homelessness and health datasets to find that at least 8% of the Scottish population in mid-2015 had experienced homelessness at some point in their lives – a much larger share than expected (Waugh et al., 2018[16]). The Australian government has bilateral agreements with all state and territory governments to work together to share and link datasets. In some cases, researchers are using big data to identify households at risk of homelessness, which could enable authorities to reach out *ex ante* to such households with prevention services. Canada has had success in systematising homelessness data through its homeless management information systems (Box 2).

What is driving homelessness?

Structural, systemic and individual factors contribute to homelessness

The drivers of homelessness are multiple and complex, resulting from structural factors, institutional and systemic failures, individual circumstances – or a combination of these.

- ***Structural factors*** include tight housing market conditions, labour market changes, poverty, a shrinking social safety net, increased migration and, in particular, reductions in housing allowances. Research has identified a correlation between homelessness and rising housing costs; other studies have pointed to a link between homelessness levels and increasing rates of poverty and evictions (Baptista and Marlier, 2019[20]; Quigley, Raphael and Smolensky, 2001[21]).
- ***Institutional and systemic failures*** refer to the higher risk of housing instability among people transitioning out of institutional settings (such as foster care, the criminal justice system, the military, or hospitals and mental health facilities). In France, for instance, around one in four homeless adults born in the country was previously in foster care or known to child welfare services (Fondation Abbé Pierre, 2019[22]).
- ***Individual circumstances,*** including traumatic events, such an eviction or job loss, a personal crisis (family break-up or domestic violence), child poverty, and health issues (mental health or addiction challenges) are also correlated with homelessness (see, for instance, Johnson et al., 2015[23]; Ministry of Housing, 2019[24]; Piat et al., 2015[25]).

What can be done to reduce homelessness?

The policy response to homelessness comprises a patchwork of support services

The current policy response to support the homeless is comprised of a patchwork of services managed by a range of public and non-public service providers. The authorities may offer homeless individuals *different forms of direct housing support* (e.g. emergency shelter, temporary accommodation, rapid rehousing, supported housing, subsidised housing or housing vouchers). Accommodation services may be combined with *other types of social supports* (e.g. health services, counselling, substance abuse treatment or employment services). *The length of support* provided for the homeless may be short-term, time-limited or permanent. The target of *public support* may aim to reach the chronically homeless with high needs, the transitionally homeless, or both. While a diversified provision is necessary to address the multiple needs of many homelessness individuals, it can pose co-ordination problems and can potentially result in costlier support, should individuals receive support that they do not need.

Nevertheless, accommodation in emergency shelters remains the dominant form of homeless support in many OECD countries. While cross-national data are scarce, emergency shelters represented a large share of housing solutions for the homeless: 86% in Chile, 75% in Italy, 72% in Poland and 62% in Lithuania in the most recent year. However, while emergency shelters may keep people from sleeping rough, they do little to address the root causes of homelessness. Moreover, they tend to be "oversubscribed, insecure and unsuitable", as

Box 2. A systemic approach to homelessness data: Spotlight on Canada

The government of *Canada* promotes the use of homelessness management information systems, including Homeless Individuals and Families Information System (HIFIS), a data collection and case management system that allows multiple service providers in the same community to access real-time data and to increase coordination of services. HIFIS supports daily operations, data collection and the development of a national portrait on homelessness. By using a common homelessness management information system, communities are using the same terminology to describe homelessness in their communities. The Government of Canada has developed user guides for these communities.

The experience of the Canadian city of Medicine Hat in developing a Homeless Management Information System has been instrumental in helping the city reduce chronic homelessness over the past decade. Data collected through a systems approach to tackling homelessness are analysed and embedded in decision-making to monitor individual needs and programme outcomes, allowing authorities to make adjustments to interventions in real time.

Source: Government of Canada, 2019[11]; Government of Canada, 2019[17]; Government of Canada, 2018[18]; Medicine Hat Community Housing Society, 2014[19].

documented in a recent report on homelessness in Europe (FEANTSA and Fondation Abbé Pierre, 2019[26]).

Across the OECD, measures have been adopted, particularly at local level, that criminalise the behaviour associated with homelessness. Such measures are implemented with the objective to improve the quality of life of the broader community. These include, for instance, laws that prohibit sleeping or camping in public, panhandling, loitering or sleeping in vehicles, or measures that restrict the use of public spaces; violations may imply fines or jail time. While local authorities must ensure public health and safety standards, criminalisation measures have been shown to be costly and do not reduce homelessness overall: the US government compared the cost to local governments of jailing a person for one day (USD 87) to the cost of providing shelter (USD 28) (United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2010[27]). Criminalisation measures make it difficult for people to exit homelessness, as criminal records can prevent people from getting a job. More emphasis should be placed on rapid rehousing with access to integrated services.

Measures to reduce homelessness

In addition to efforts to improve data collection, there are a several directions for policy makers to improve action for homelessness.

Invest in homeless prevention, including by making housing more affordable

Some homelessness strategies propose measures to prevent homelessness by identifying at-risk populations and intervening before people become homeless. This may include efforts to identify vulnerable households or individuals, such as the "risk of homelessness index" developed in Australia, which captures a series of pathways to homelessness, such as a financial shock or job loss; a family breakdown; mental health issues or substance abuse, among other factors. The index was then mapped to identify geographic areas with a large share of people at risk of becoming homeless (Souza, Tanton and Abello, 2013[28]). Some countries provide support to at-risk populations before they become homeless, such as temporary financial assistance, legal support, or mediation services for landlords and tenants. In the United States, comprehensive homelessness prevention programmes have been effective in reducing the number of people who enter homeless shelters; temporary financial assistance can reduce the average time spent in homeless shelters; and legal assistance to households facing eviction can also improve housing outcomes for renters (Evans, Phillips and Ruffini, 2019[29]). Scottish research shows that there is a spike in the use of health services *before* people are assessed as homeless, a sign that that system can play an important role in homeless prevention (Waugh, Rowley and Clarke, 2018[30]).

At the same time, homelessness prevention should encompass a broader range of housing support measures provided to low-income households that – even if it is not the explicit aim – can help to prevent homelessness. Such support may be in the form of housing allowances (as in the vast majority of OECD countries, social (subsidised) housing or mortgage relief for homeowners in financial distress (see indicator PH1.1 in OECD, 2019[7]). Broader efforts to boost the supply of affordable housing or curb rising housing prices can prevent a higher incidence of homelessness; a discussion of the various measures can be found in OECD (OECD, 2020 forthcoming[31]). Norway's successful efforts to reduce homelessness have been part of a broader strategy to increase the affordable housing supply (Box 3).

Tailor support to the diverse needs of the homeless population

The increasing diversity of the homeless population – as well as the different drivers that lead to homelessness across the OECD – calls for tailored housing and service solutions. For instance, in addition to housing support, homeless youth, veterans, migrants, women who are victims of domestic violence, or Indigenous populations may require additional social support (e.g. health services, counselling, childcare, language classes or labour market support); meanwhile, people facing financial difficulties may only require temporary emergency housing support as a means to get back on their feet. The type and level of support should be adapted to the needs of the diverse homeless population, as well as the specific needs of particular groups and local specificities.

While Housing First strategies are increasingly prevalent across the OECD, the models vary widely in their implementation, and in most countries – with a few notable exceptions – they still cover only a minority of the homeless. Thirteen OECD countries report housing first strategies at the national level: Canada, Chile, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Ireland, Japan, Luxembourg, Norway, New Zealand, Poland and the United States. Such approaches have been adopted at the regional and/or municipal level in Australia, Austria,

Box 3. Homelessness is (also) a housing problem: Spotlight on Norway

A housing-led approach coupled with sustained investment in affordable housing has contributed to *Norway's* success in reducing homelessness. Since 2010, homelessness prevention has been emphasised as a key pillar of the successive national strategies, with targets to reduce evictions, eliminate homelessness, and limit stays in temporary accommodations (Dyb, 2017[32]). The current national strategy, *Housing for Welfare: National Strategy for Housing and Support Services 2014-2020*, brings together five ministries working on different dimensions of welfare, and emphasises policy co-ordination with neighbourhood development, housing quality and local planning.

Source: Dyb, 2017[32]; OECD, 2019[7].

Box 4. Long-term political support as a key to overcome homelessness: Spotlight on Finland

In *Finland*, homelessness declined by 39% between 2010 and 2018, driven by a Housing First approach launched in 2008 as part of the National Programme to End Long-term Homelessness (PAAVO). The strategy's major innovation was to replace temporary accommodation with permanent rental housing for the long-term homeless population. Sustained political support and coordination across ministries and levels of government has been central to Finland's success, continuing through the second national homelessness programme (PAAVO II), and the subsequent *Action Plan for Homelessness in Finland 2016-2019*. The Action Plan aims to prevent social exclusion through mainstreaming the Housing First approach as national policy; in practice, this means ensuring that housing is secured, whenever an individual enters the social service system.

Source: Ministry of the Environment, 2016[34]; Pleace et al., 2015[35].

Germany, Iceland, Sweden and the United Kingdom (England). Nevertheless, there is wide variation in the implementation of Housing First models (Pleace, Baptista and Knutagård, 2019[33]).

Ensure long-term political support and sustained funding

The fight against homelessness isn't won overnight. Countries that have been successful in reducing homelessness, such as Finland, credit a long-term sustainable political commitment at all levels of government (Box 4). In parallel, sustained funding to address homelessness, in addition to investment in affordable and social housing, is needed. Insufficient and in some cases reduced funding to adequately address homelessness are considered major obstacles across European countries to support homeless households (Baptista and Marlier, 2019[20]).

Facilitate co-operation among national, regional and local authorities to tailor solutions to local needs

National and local authorities, along with non-governmental service providers, must work together to address homelessness. Countries that have been effective in tackling homelessness have often relied on a sustained political and strategic commitment by national government, working in close co-ordination with regional and local actors to develop tailored strategies. A number of countries, including Canada, Denmark, Finland, France and the United States, have adopted such an approach (Box 5). This is important to tackle effectively the very different homelessness challenges and populations that exist within countries. The Australian Government has bilateral agreements with state and territory governments under the National Housing and Homelessness Agreement (NHHA), which requires all state and territory governments to have a homelessness strategy that sets out reforms and initiatives that will contribute to a reduction in the incidence of homelessness. Co-operation across actors is essential, along with an ability to change often longstanding approaches and systems to homelessness. Local initiatives can be extremely successful: Medicine Hat (Canada) reduced shelter use by 41% between 2009 and 2015 through a "system reform" based on Housing First (Gaetz et al., 2016[37]).

Monitor the impacts of homelessness interventions

Policy makers should also do more to monitor the impacts of homeless support efforts. There is a lack of robust cross-country evidence and evaluation of what works among the diverse types of housing support in reducing

Box 5. National leadership with a strong territorial dimension: Spotlight on Denmark and France

Denmark has addressed homelessness as part of its national policy agenda since 2009, which includes close co-operation with municipalities in the implementation of the national strategy. In its most recent Action Plan, the central government has entered into agreements with 24 municipalities to provide different kinds of support, including an assessment to identify gaps in the current municipal approach to homelessness, advisory services to help municipalities implement Housing First principles, as well as funding for pilot projects. Funding is awarded to municipalities to pilot an innovative approach identified by the central government, or to implement a solution of their own design. In addition, the government is developing national guidelines and a compendium of best practices, based on inputs from a range of stakeholders working on homelessness throughout the country.

In *France*, the government's *Five-year Plan for Housing First 2018-2022* aims to mobilise regional and local governments in implementing Housing First principles throughout the country. The central government is supporting 24 regional and local governments for accelerated implementation efforts, with a focus on improving the overall co-operation and governance of the many actors engaged in homelessness and social services. Funding supports the territories in moving beyond pilot projects to implement structural reforms based on Housing First principles.

Source: Denmark: drawing on conversations with the National Board on Social Services (Denmark). France: Délégation interministérielle à l'hébergement et à l'accès au logement (DIHAL), 2018[36].

different forms of homelessness (is the direct provision of housing more effective than a housing subsidy, for instance?). In addition, more research is needed to assess the aggregate impact of homelessness interventions in reducing the total amount of homelessness in a community, beyond the individual-level studies that have been undertaken (O'Flaherty, 2019[38]).

Box 6. Tackling homelessness: Recommendations for policy makers

- Collect homelessness data on a regular basis, integrate diverse data sources and expand the methodological toolbox to get a better understanding of the challenges and needs of different homeless populations
- Invest in homelessness prevention, including by making housing more affordable
- Tailor support to the diverse needs of the homeless population
- Develop broad-based support for homelessness strategies
- Facilitate co-operation among government authorities at different levels of government, along with non-governmental actors, to develop and implement tailored local strategies
- Monitor the effects of homelessness interventions to identify the most effective housing and social support interventions and facilitate cross-country learning

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