



Peer Review on “Homelessness from a child’s perspective”

Horizontal Overview Summary Paper

**Homelessness among children in
comparative perspective**

Belgium, 27-28 June 2018

DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

Written by Isabel Baptista, Independent expert.

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Contact : Flaviana Teosodiou and Bent-Ole Grooss

E-mail : EMPL-SPSI-PEER-REVIEWS@ec.europa.eu

Web site:

<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=1024&newsId=9103&furtherNews=yes&furtherNews=yes>

European Commission

B-1049 Brussels

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Introduction

Homelessness among children and young people is a violation of children's rights which needs to be tackled by an integrated approach, structured around children's and youngsters' needs and built on experiences across the different EU Member States.

One of the main aims of the Peer Review on 'Homelessness from a child's perspective' is to provide room for an exchange of knowledge and experiences between the host country and the participating peer countries.

Five countries – Czech Republic, Denmark, Lithuania, Portugal and Romania – expressed their interest to participate in the peer review and to use this opportunity to join the discussion around the policy initiative taken by the Flemish Commissioner of Children's Rights in a dual perspective: learning from the experience and providing inputs which may contribute to improve the initiative's policy impact.

Thus, the preparatory work for the peer review included developing a questionnaire to collect existing relevant information at the national level on: 1) statistics on homelessness among children, 2) governance arrangements regarding policies related to homeless children, 3) existing accommodation and other support services for homeless children, 4) existing policies to prevent homelessness among children and 5) the role of the housing allocation system in ensuring access to permanent housing among homeless children and families. The questionnaire was circulated by the Mutual Learning Services (MLS) team among the five peer countries.

The aim of this paper is to provide a comparative analysis of the peer countries responses and to draw on that analysis in order to identify relevant elements for the peer review discussion.

The first section provides a short overview of the relevant EU policy framework, namely regarding EU commitments with regard to the protection of children's rights and progress achieved in recent years. Section two is structured around a comparative analysis of the main topics covered by the five questionnaires complemented with additional information from different available sources. This section provides a critical overview on the national scenarios covered by the questionnaires. The final section draws on the comparative analysis performed and identifies some key topics which may contribute to steering some of the discussions which will take place during the peer review exercise.

1 EU policy background

Children in EU Member States are entitled to enjoy the full range of human rights safeguarded by the European Convention on Human Rights, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and other international human rights instruments. These include civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

Progress has been achieved, over the last 20 years, in legislation and policy aiming at improving the protection of children's rights. Yet, evidence across Europe shows that children's rights continue to be violated on a daily basis. Child poverty and social exclusion continue to affect children in a disproportionate way. According to Eurostat, children are the age group at the highest risk of poverty and social exclusion: EU-28 data from 2015 shows an AROPE¹ rate of 27% among children between 0-17 years old, compared to 25% among adults aged 18-64 years old and 18% among the age group 65 years old and above.²

¹ AROPE – at risk of poverty or social exclusion.

² Data available at: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/images/5/58/Population_at_risk_of_poverty_or_social_exclusion%2C_by_age_group_overview%2C_2014_%28%25%29.png

The European Commission has taken several steps to assist Member States in addressing child-poverty and social exclusion, since the launching of the EU Strategy to combat poverty and social exclusion in Lisbon in 2000.

In recent years, several EU level initiatives directly addressed those issues. In 2013, the European Commission issued a Recommendation (EC, 2013) on 'Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage' - a key element of the Social Investment Package (SIP) - setting out a common European Framework for tackling child poverty and social exclusion and promoting child well-being. This aimed to help Member States 'strengthen synergies across relevant policy areas' as well as 'review their policies and learn from each other's experiences in improving policy efficiency and effectiveness through innovative approaches, whilst taking into account the different situations and needs at local, regional and national level'.

In April 2017, the European Pillar of Social Rights was launched, aiming at strengthening Europe's social dimension. According to one of its key principles - Childcare and support to children -, 'Children have the right to protection from poverty. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the right to specific measures to enhance equal opportunities.' (EC, 2017a: 8).

Within the Commission's stocktaking exercise on the implementation of the 2013 Recommendation, a Staff Working Document accompanied the publication of the Pillar. The document points out the higher vulnerability of children living in poverty and without a home. It notes that rising housing costs are increasingly overburdening for families with children; the increasing number of children living in homeless shelters in some countries; the high incidence of severe housing deprivation among poor children; and the serious impacts of housing exclusion and deprivation across multiple dimensions of children's lives. (EC, 2017b)

In 2017, a synthesis report (Frazer and Marlier, 2017) assessed the implementation of the Recommendation since 2013 and its impact on child and family policies. The analysis identified some worrying outcomes in the housing and living environment domain. Overall, across Member States there were more setbacks than positive developments in this area: '(...) the situation has weakened in seven countries whereas it has been strengthened in only three.' (Frazer and Marlier, 2017: 22). As regards progress made on housing and living environment within Pillar 2 of the Recommendation - Access to affordable quality services - the scenario was also not promising among the countries involved in the current peer review. Policies in this area registered little change in the Czech Republic, Lithuania and Portugal, whereas in Belgium, Denmark and Romania housing policies are considered to have weakened since 2013. (Frazer and Marlier, 2017)

Child poverty has been identified as an important risk factor for homelessness among children. More specifically, children living in poor housing conditions, children living in temporary accommodation arrangements (either private or institutional) and youth transition from state care into adulthood may fall into homelessness trajectories, whenever adequate and comprehensive support is not timely provided. FEANTSA - the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless - has long been raising public awareness on the issue of child and youth homelessness, advocating for housing rights, and for the development of prevention and housing-led approaches (Avramov, 1998; Feantsa, 2007, Feantsa 2017).

2 Homelessness among children in comparative perspective

2.1 Possible data snapshots on a hidden reality

A recent study on homelessness among families with dependent children in Europe³ (Baptista et al, 2017) argues that existing data on family homelessness is often incomplete and unreliable, namely because families may experience high rates of hidden homelessness, and also because many homelessness definitions do not encompass such 'hidden' situations.

The information provided by the five peer countries – the Czech Republic, Denmark, Lithuania, Portugal and Romania – seems to confirm these challenges, namely in terms of the lack of regular and systematic data collection as well as data reliability.

Even in Denmark which has a well-developed system for the collection of data on homelessness and an 'inclusive definition', there are indications that the number of homeless children may be underreported due to difficulties in the use of registering instruments (Benjaminsen, 2017). In Romania, where the reality of street children is dramatic, regular counts are also carried out on this group of children. Yet, there may be gaps in validation procedures at the source of the data collection (Briciu, 2017).

The table below summarizes the information collected from the questionnaires provided by the peer countries regarding the existing statistical information on homeless children in 2017.

Table 1. Comparative overview on existing statistical information on homeless children 2017

ETHOS LIGHT ⁴ operational categories					
Peer countries	People living rough (1) No of children	People in houseless situations (2 & 3) No of children	People living in institutions (4) No of children	People living in non-conventional dwellings (5) No of children	People living temporarily with family and friends (due to the lack of housing) (6) No of children
Czech Republic	No record	8 150	No data	No data	No data
Denmark	39				
Lithuania	No record	No data	No data	No data	No data
Portugal	No record	1 005*	No data	No data	No data
Romania	428**	No data***	No data	No data	No data

* In refuges for domestic violence victims – 772 children; in social emergency shelters - 147 children; in temporary shelters – 86 children; all living with their mothers and/or parents

³ The study covered a total of 14 EU Member States: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

⁴ ETHOS Light is a simplified version of the harmonised definition of homelessness - the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) – developed by FEANTSA in the context of a 2007 European Commission study: Measurement of Homelessness at European Union Level. It is a pragmatic tool for the development of homelessness data collection, rather than a conceptual and operational definition to be used for a range of policy and practice purposes. It aimed at improving understanding and measurement of homelessness in Europe. Further info on ETHOS available at: <https://www.feantsa.org/en/toolkit/2005/04/01/ethos-typology-on-homelessness-and-housing-exclusion>

** Living in the street with the family – 260; living in the street without the family – 168

*** although the questionnaire indicates the existence of statistics on the children living in homeless shelters, such data has not been provided

Looking at the figures provided by the peer countries, with the exception of Denmark, the lack of data becomes apparent. Given the comprehensive homelessness definition used in Denmark, the figure provided for homeless children for 2017 actually encompasses all ETHOS light categories (with the exception of refugees for women experiencing domestic violence). In spite of the lack of reliable statistics in the Czech Republic, Lithuania and Portugal, none of these countries records the existence of children sleeping rough.

The fact that children tend to be subsumed with families may contribute to their higher invisibility within available data collection exercises. Street children in Romania remain quite visible because those living in the street without any family cannot be statistically subsumed in any group.

Moreover, there is evidence from some countries (Lithuania and Portugal) that unaccompanied children will be taken care of by Child Protection Services and will therefore not end up in existing homeless shelters. In Denmark, there is also evidence that municipalities engage in stronger efforts to find alternative accommodation whenever there are children involved.

2.2 Shelter and support systems for homeless children

The presence of children in homeless shelters is only possible when children are accompanied by at least one of their parents (CZ, LT and PT). In Denmark, children with families in general cannot use ordinary shelters for homeless people.

In the Czech Republic, Denmark, Lithuania and Portugal there are specific temporary accommodation solutions for families with children which try to provide, as much as possible, child-friendly environments and facilities. In this regard, privacy in accommodation (CZ, DK, PT), availability of play areas (CZ, DK) and dedicated professionals are some of the elements identified by the questionnaire respondents.

The Romanian questionnaire focuses on existing support for street children by reporting the availability of recreational and social activities organized by the respective support services: 'The service for street children ensures the necessary conditions and materials, according to the age and options of the children, for the recreation and socialization activities within the center and in the community.' In fact, according to existing research on the Romanian situation there are very few temporary accommodation solutions, apart from very basic shelters, for homeless people and even less for families. One exception is Casa Iona which is a family focused service, providing a wide range of social support services, aiming at ensuring sustainable independent living for families (Briciu, 2017).

Access to education for homeless children is reported by all peer countries as a right which all children, including homeless children, are entitled to, inclusive by mandatory legislation. In Portugal, access to education is granted by local education services in the community whereas Romania reports the existence of mandatory minimum standards for services to protect street children, which include the provision of an educational programme adequate to the child's age, needs, development, potential and specific attributes.

However, the questionnaire does not provide an assessment of how the right to education among homeless children is actually offered, taking into account the difficult living conditions of these children whose lives are being affected by the lack of privacy, instability, economic hardship, relationship ruptures, among others.

However, the enjoyment of the basic right to education among street children in Romania seems to encounter implementation obstacles: according to the 2014 study of

Save the Children in Bucharest only 28% of the school aged population of children living in the streets is enrolled in education facilities.

The identification of possible interventions which would be necessary to adapt homelessness services to the needs of homeless children triggered diverse responses from four out of the five peer countries, ranging from the identification of more structural responses to the introduction of more specific interventions.

The provision of a state-wide social housing system is mentioned by the Czech Member State representative as an important structural response to addressing homelessness among children in the country.

Recent research on family homelessness has shown that homeless families with dependent children face significant barriers to access affordable and adequate housing, even in countries with relatively extensive social housing provision (Baptista et al, 2017).

The Danish questionnaire identifies the launching of Housing First for Youth in 2018 by the National Board of Social Services as an important response to addressing youth homelessness. There is extensive evidence in Europe and elsewhere of the success of Housing First programmes with chronic homeless individuals. Housing First is a support programme which comes with housing and it is based on the assumption that housing is a right with no pre-conditions. Housing First for Youth is already being implemented in Europe and it aims at providing safe and affordable housing and appropriate support for the needs of adolescents and young adults (FEANTSA, 2017).

Lithuania argues that in order to adapt homelessness services to the needs of homeless children it would be crucial to better acknowledge the actual reality in the country, bringing visibility to the phenomenon.

Portugal points out that shelters need to ensure that homeless families with children are provided with specific residential care which allows more privacy, using facilities exclusively dedicated to homeless families and not to the general homeless population given the different characteristics of 'traditional' homelessness profiles and family homelessness.

2.3 Access to permanent housing: between dream and reality

Although available data on the characteristics of homeless families are not abundant, existing studies have shown that homeless families are less likely to be characterized by high, complex support needs (e.g. mental health, addiction and disability related needs) compared to lone adults experiencing recurrent and long-term homelessness (Baptista, et al, 2017).

On the contrary, existing evidence seems to indicate that family homelessness has a more direct relationship with poverty and access to housing (e.g. housing affordability, housing supply, evictions) than homelessness among lone adults. (Baptista et al, 2017)

Even when families with dependent children are given priority access to social housing, either statutory priority (e.g. UK and France), or priority in practice (e.g. DK, LT, CZ and PT), pressure on the existing social housing stock may continue to hinder actual access to permanent housing, particularly in contexts of high level of need.

In Romania, homeless families and children are only prioritized in access to social housing in case they meet a set of priority criteria which is established by law (e.g. families evicted or to be evicted from houses returned to former owners, young people up to 35 years of age, young people released from social protection institutions after the age of 18, families with people with disabilities, pensioners, veterans and war widows, among others). In reality, some authors (Briciu, 2017) argue, homeless people are generally excluded from social housing programmes managed by local authorities

because they are deemed unfit to cover the costs of the (low) rent and necessary utilities.

Only three peer countries were able to identify instruments and procedures – both at the national and at the local level – which are necessary to ensure that homeless families with children are able to make a quick transition from homeless shelters to more permanent housing.

At the national level, three main aspects were referred to:

- A robust homelessness prevention system (CZ);
- An effective social housing system (CZ);
- Legal instruments directly supporting transition to own housing, e.g. the application of the 25% right of access to public housing⁵, granting of deposit loans, administration of rents, rent subsidies, among others (DK).

At the local level, two main features were identified:

- Fast and effective referral procedures between the relevant authorities based on a rigorous need assessment of applicant homeless families (DK);
- Strong cooperation mechanisms between competent bodies and the families themselves, including housing providers, children rights protection services, homelessness service providers, and social support services (DK and LT).

2.4 Policy planning and service delivery: a shared responsibility

Strategic and integrated responses to family homelessness imply the development and implementation of effective coordination mechanisms across different areas, and levels of governance.

According to the questionnaires received from the five peer countries there are different relevant governance levels in addressing homelessness policy planning and service delivery.

One important preliminary finding is that there are no strategic policy frameworks addressing homelessness among children. In countries like the Czech Republic, Denmark and Portugal where National Homelessness Strategies are in place, the policy focus on homelessness does not differentiate with regard to children as a specific target group.

Overall, policy and strategic planning on homelessness, housing and child protection as well as the process of preparing legislation and defining quality standards for the provision of services is mainly a central level task. However, shared responsibilities between national, regional and local levels on the homelessness arena are widespread, with a strong focus on the local delivery of services and on a strong responsibility of municipalities.

'The state prepares the policies and allocates finances, regions reallocate finances according to regional situations to services operating on a local level. Municipalities play a key role in combating and preventing homelessness.' (CZ)

'We have an overall political focus and a national strategy to combat homelessness. However, it is the local municipality's responsibility to

⁵ Municipalities may refer up to 25% of all vacancies to people in acute housing need, according to given social criteria. Whether homeless families will get this possibility will depend on local circumstances and on the actual situation of the family (Benjaminsen, 2017).

provide efforts to support children, young people and adults, who are homeless.' (DK)

'The issue of homelessness among children is the direct responsibility of the local authorities, who have responsibilities in identifying this category of children, assessing their needs, providing services for them (...). At central level is the setting up of the legal framework applied to the field of child rights protection, the quality standards of social services, the strategies and policies applied within this field. (...) the National Authority for Children Rights' Protection and the Ministry of Labour and Social Justice have responsibilities in: strategy and planning, regulation, synthesis, coordination, monitoring, inspection and control of the social services; it also finances programs for the development and sustainability of social services from the state budget.' (RO)

The questionnaires do not provide information on how this shared responsibility between different levels of government and different sectors are translated into actual and consistent cooperation work. This would however be an important aspect to be considered. In fact, smooth and effective coordination between different policy areas (e.g. housing, welfare, justice, health, child protection, employment, education, migration) is a pre-condition for achieving integrated and effective implementation of policies and delivery of support to children and families experiencing homelessness.

2.5 Tackling homelessness among children: towards prevention centred-approaches?

'The causes of child homelessness seem to be a complex combination of structural, institutional, relational and personal factors.' (FEANTSA, 2007: 33)

Better understanding of homelessness among children and families is needed to implement effective policies towards eliminating this phenomenon. From the information provided by the questionnaires, it becomes obvious that the extent, nature and experience of children's homelessness has not been sufficiently investigated in any of the five countries participating in the peer review, albeit with relevant differences among them.

The comparative analysis of the information provided by the five countries regarding the main causes of homelessness among children and families in their national contexts shows some divergent patterns in terms of understanding the phenomenon.

The Czech Republic, Denmark and Lithuania identify important structural factors which help explaining why children and families become homeless: poverty, low income, unemployment, low educational attainment, lack of affordable housing and eviction. There is also acknowledgement that there are multiple and interrelated factors behind homelessness among children and families. Individual and family related reasons are also highlighted by all the responding countries, namely addiction, mental health problems, family neglect, family conflicts and children's exploitation.

System failures are also identified by one of the responding countries (DK) in relation to the situation of children or young people who have been placed in state care. This is an important risk factor of youth homelessness which has been identified, particularly affecting vulnerable youth transitioning from child care services to adulthood, to whom adequate support services are not being provided.

The comparative analysis of the main reasons for homelessness among children and families provided by the five peer countries clearly highlights the need for more detailed exploration of family homelessness overall. This is particularly true for those countries (e.g. Portugal and Romania) where there is a clear predominance of explanations based

on individual and/or family behaviors: holding families responsible for the risk of homelessness among children (e.g. child neglect, expulsion of children from home) or highlighting children's and youngsters' behaviors (e.g. fleeing from home, begging or doing other illegal activities).

Although there is less evidence around prevention for homeless families than for lone homeless adults, from a children's rights perspective, preventing homelessness is a compelling task for avoiding all human costs associated with it.

The identification of integrated and targeted interventions to prevent child homelessness across the five peer countries reveal strong imbalances in comparative terms.

It is important to highlight that the five countries represent very distinct welfare systems in terms of their scope and resources and this has inevitable impacts on the range of preventative services available and on their effectiveness.

Preventative social services in Denmark are generally quite effective. In the first place, homelessness prevention is mainly achieved by the existence of a large public housing sector accommodating many low-income families with children who have a higher chance of priority access to public housing, together with welfare benefits which are considerably higher for families with children. The early identification of evictions by housing associations also contribute to early assessment and intervention towards supporting families with children at risk of homelessness (Benjaminsen, 2017). The Danish response to the questionnaire describes the most recent initiative aiming at preventing homelessness among youngsters – the Housing First for Youth Project – which aims at early tracing of youngsters at risk of becoming homeless and providing the necessary support. The adoption of this type of targeted intervention is a good example of the outcomes of the Danish 'relatively advanced interplay between policy development and data collection' (Benjaminsen and Knutagard, 2016: 56). Indeed, the identification – through comprehensive national counts on homelessness – of an increasing number of young homeless people in Denmark in recent years (from 633 young homeless people to 1 172 from 2009 to 2015) has triggered the need for additional targeted responses towards this particularly vulnerable group.

In the Czech Republic, there is evidence of local homelessness policies and housing allocation systems prioritising families with children and thus addressing the risk of homelessness in a localised way. The lack of a 'national social housing system' pointed out in the response to the questionnaire reveals the concern with a general approach towards the existing hindrances in the Czech housing market where there is evidence of an increasing number of people being exposed to the loss of their home, in particular single mothers with children (FEANTSA, 2017). Several local projects aiming at the rapid re-housing of families with children are being implemented on the ground (e.g. in Brno).

The Lithuanian questionnaire highlights the fact that early intervention with families at risk of homelessness is an urgent issue, triggering the need for strong collaboration at the local level, between different local departments. Available statistical data shows that homelessness has been steadily increasing over the last decade, although the number of people in shelters and the number of people residing in crisis centers and shelters for mothers and children decreased slightly between 2014 and 2015 (FEANTSA, 2016). Overcrowding and severe housing deprivation are two major problems which contribute to high levels of housing exclusion in the country.

In Portugal, the second National Homelessness Strategy (ENIPSSA 2017-2023) although holding to the relatively narrow definition of homelessness adopted in 2009⁶, continues to uphold the commitment to incorporate a preventative approach to homelessness. The

⁶ ENIPSSA definition: 'A person experiencing homelessness is anyone who, regardless of nationality, ethnic or racial origin, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, socio-economic status and mental and physical health, is roofless and living in a public space or insecure form of shelter or accommodated in an emergency shelter, or is houseless and living in temporary accommodation for homeless people', available (PT) at: <http://www.enipssa.pt/conceito-de-pessoa-em-situacao-de-sem-abrigo>

Portuguese response to the questionnaire identifies two relevant measures which are foreseen in the ENIPSSA action plan 2017-2018: a) promoting integrated support to individuals and families at risk of homelessness, which includes two relevant activities: 'identifying entities acting to prevent homelessness at the local level' and 'building up referral circuits and mechanisms which enable the provision of integrated support aiming at preventing new homelessness situations' (GIMAE, 2017: 21); b) updating the existing set of risk indicators and enhancing its implementation at the local level. These foreseen actions may bring relevant progress in the identification of homelessness risk situations and early intervention. Yet, at the present moment they have not yet reached the implementation stage. Thus, existing integrated and targeted interventions to prevent child homelessness are limited, within an overall context of difficult and lengthy access to affordable (social) housing, even if in practice families with children often get priority access through local level allocation practices. For instance, when families with children are threatened by eviction, there are legal mechanisms in place to postpone the procedure. However, immediate rehousing in eviction cases is often achieved through resorting to temporary accommodation solutions, rather than to permanent housing alternatives (Baptista, 2017).

Finally, in Romania the focus of the questionnaire response is centred on the situation of street children and the mechanisms in place to monitor the phenomenon. No preventative interventions regarding homeless children have been identified. Other reports (Briciu, 2017) highlight the inexistence of preventative services explicitly aiming at preventing homelessness or even at diminishing the duration and seriousness of homelessness situations. In fact, from a child's rights perspective the situation in Romania has been acknowledged as a very serious one, given the strong evidence of street homelessness among children: 'Data from Romania can only give rough indications on the extent of the problem of children in the streets. According to data collected by Child Protection Authorities, 695 children (0-18 years old) were registered in 2014 as living on the street, 194 of them permanently living there with their families, 165 on their own and 336 working on the streets and returning to their families during the night. Experts stated that real numbers, especially of those living on the streets, would be much higher. The organisation Save the Children in Romania carried out a study in 2014 on homeless children and youth (0-35 years old) using the capture-recapture methodology and found 1,113 individuals in Bucharest (58% of them living permanently on the streets and 42% only temporarily). Although the age limit is rather wide here, Romania was the only EU country in this study reporting a quite substantial number of families sleeping rough.' (Baptista et al, 2017: 24).

3 Concluding remarks

There are some limitations to this comparative analysis of the five peer country questionnaire responses across all areas. It was only possible to collect a small amount of information by using a format questionnaire which covers a limited number of issues. Moreover, the aim of this exercise was not to conduct primary research on the topic. However, there are some interesting conclusions to be drawn from this approach and which can be used for further discussion during the peer review, namely:

- Homeless children remain invisible and subsumed in other homeless categories, which hinders an actual assessment of the reality of children's homelessness; how to address this invisibility, allowing children to rise up as 'subjects' in data collection, research and policy initiatives?
- The presence of child protection systems across all countries focusing on the protection of children's rights suggests that there is potential for enhanced cooperation with the housing and homelessness sectors aiming at strengthening homelessness prevention mechanisms targeting children and young people;

- Impact assessment on shelter use by homeless children and families and on existing support services and programmes must be confronted with a child's perspective in the utilisation of such services and in their impact on their present living conditions and future prospects and expectations;
- The effectiveness of integrated responses to homelessness among children and families depends on a solid investment in consistent and regular multi-level and inter-sectoral work, underpinned by a shared cooperation model;
- Effective policies towards the elimination of homelessness among children and young people need to be structured around a comprehensive understanding of the multiple and interrelated causes of homelessness, supported by reliable evidence-base and research;
- The evident gendered dimension of homelessness among children and families which surfaces in the questionnaires' responses demands explicit policy and practice initiatives, namely as regards the necessary synergies with domestic violence policies and practices.

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