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National strategies to fight homelessness and housing exclusion

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**ESPN Thematic Report on
National strategies to fight
homelessness and housing
exclusion**

Belgium

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Summary

In Belgium, there is no common definition of homelessness and housing exclusion (HHE). Political, public and private stakeholders each have their own definition. The lack of a common framework to comprehend homelessness is reflected in the lack of a coherent information system. Therefore, there is no obvious way to grasp the prevalence of homelessness, to study its causes and to sketch a profile of it. A recent research project (MEHOBEL) was primarily aimed at developing a long-term strategy to measure and monitor homelessness in Belgium. Although a nationally coordinated monitoring system is still lacking, measurements conducted by various organisations in different parts of Belgium show that HHE is on the rise – in particular in the Brussels Capital Region, where the figures almost doubled in less than 10 years¹.

In general, the policy framework to tackle HHE is designed by the regional authorities. Objectives, goals and targets are primarily formulated by these authorities. Nonetheless, both the federal and municipal authorities have competences as well. This makes policy coordination all the more difficult. In order to integrate the policies at different policy levels, a cooperation agreement on homelessness was reached between the federal state, regions and communities in 2014. However, up until now, the inter-ministerial conference that would ensure follow-up and implementation has not taken place, which means that the agreement has not been put into practice.

The main service providers are spread across different policy levels and mainly include the Public Centres for Social Welfare (federal legislation and locally organised), Centres for General Welfare (Flanders), Social Links (Wallonia) and La Strada (Brussels Capital Region).

In Belgium, policy to fight homelessness is mainly oriented towards social emergency and night shelters in winter, and various forms of temporary accommodation. Although continued investments in emergency shelters remain necessary, a more structural preventive policy approach that does not solely focus on the most visible group of homeless persons (mostly rough sleepers) is needed.

On the one hand, in recent years Belgian authorities have increasingly invested in more structural solutions to tackle HHE. An important initiative in this respect is the further roll-out of the 'Housing First' model in Belgium, which proved to be a cost-effective way of housing and reintegrating homeless people. On the other hand, prevention policies generally make up a small part of the overall framework. Consequently, the main weaknesses – such as increases in rent prices in the private market, the insufficient supply of social housing, and long waiting lists – are persistent, and imply that affordable housing remains out of reach for many households. Although all regions continue to invest in supplementary social housing facilities, a substantial extension of the sector is needed. Outsourcing new tasks to the private commercial sector in social housing could offer opportunities. For this purpose, fiscal or other financial incentives (e.g. VAT reductions) could be considered.

¹ Based on headcounts, the number of homeless people in the Brussels Capital Region (rough sleepers, people staying in emergency shelters and other accommodation for the homeless, and people staying in non-conventional dwellings due to lack of housing) rose from 1,771 to 3,386 between 2008 and 2017.

1 The nature and extent of homelessness and housing exclusion

1.1 Definition and typology of homelessness and housing exclusion

In Belgium, there is no common definition or typology of homelessness and housing exclusion (HHE). The lack of a common understanding, however, should not be interpreted as the lack of a definition or typology altogether. The only definition that can be considered as a *national* definition, to some extent, is the one used by the municipal Public Centres for Social Welfare (PCSWs), which provide a substantial part of assistance to homeless people throughout the country (see Table A1 in the Annex). The definition of homelessness used by the PCSWs is provided by the law of 26 May 2002 concerning the right to social integration. This federal/legal definition has a strong focus on (material) housing. Here a homeless person is described as: '*A person who does not have his own housing, who does not have the resources to provide this on his own or is residing or staying temporarily in a home until housing is made available*' (POD Maatschappelijke integratie, 2002).

Next to the PCSWs, a variety of other organisations offer help to homeless persons. These organisations differ from region to region, and even within regions, in terms of their definitions of target groups, as follows.

- In *Flanders*, the Centres for General Welfare (CAWs) are the main providers of support for homeless people. The CAW definition of a homeless person focuses on their personal, relational and social vulnerability: '*Homeless people are those who are unable to acquire or retain a home due to financial-economic, social and/or psychological causes and circumstances*' (Van Menxel et al., 2003).
- In the *Brussels Capital Region*, HHE policy is a shared responsibility of different actors (see Section 2.1). The target group for the residential services funded by the French Community Commission (COCOF) is defined as '*adults, unaccompanied minors, underage mothers, pregnant minors and their children with relational, social and material vulnerability, who are unable to live an independent life*' (Communauté française, 2017).
- In *Wallonia*, the 'Relais Sociaux' ('Social Links') coordinate action targeted at people in four kinds of precarious situations: (1) night shelters; (2) day care; (3) social emergency; and (4) street work. While this is the main basis for fighting homelessness, the target group is wider and there is thus no specific definition of homelessness in the relevant legal texts (Service Public de Wallonie, 2018).

Although the definitions used by the various organisations differ, some similarities can be found. Most definitions are focused on the problem of being roofless or houseless, rather than having insecure or inadequate housing. This does not mean that inadequate or insecure housing is considered to be a minor problem; but it is not (yet) seen as connected with roof- and houselessness.

Taking into account the patchwork of authorities/organisations involved, and therefore the prevalence of numerous definitions regarding HHE, the formulation of a common definition should be a political concern. A common conceptual and even operational framework would facilitate mutual exchange, not only between the different policy levels, but also between the different stakeholders.

Due to the lack of a common definition in Belgium, the recent research project MEHOBEL (Measuring Homelessness in Belgium) used the ETHOS² Light typology to define homelessness in a more integrated manner. For this reason, one of the main recommendations of the study was to integrate ETHOS Light into all registration systems and administrative databases of services that interact with homeless persons (especially

² European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion.

among the PCSWs) (Demaerschalk et al., 2018). In the *Brussels Capital Region*, a policy paper on homelessness (see Section 2.1) announced a second action plan and legislation on homelessness. The main goals of this second action plan will include the introduction of ETHOS and ETHOS Light to define homelessness (Fremault & Smet, 2016).

1.2 Extent and evolution of HHE

Table A2 in the Annex summarises the available (fragmented) statistics on the size of the HHE problem. Although recent efforts to measure homelessness have been made at local and regional levels, **a nationally coordinated monitoring system is still lacking**. Among other reasons, this is caused by the complex division of responsibilities between the national, regional and local levels (Hermans, 2012).

The *federal* Public Service for Social Integration (PPS Social Integration) provides figures on the number of homeless people who receive an installation premium³ (see Section 2.3.1). The number of installation premiums can be used as a proxy for the number of people who exit homelessness, albeit sometimes only temporarily. The annual total number of people who received an installation premium or a contribution to installation costs rose sharply from 1,680 in 2003 to 10,731 in 2016 (POD Maatschappelijke integratie, 2016).

One of the most comprehensive efforts to count the homeless population is made by the homeless organisation, La Strada (see Section 2.1), in the *Brussels Capital Region*. Since 2008, La Strada has organised a periodic point-in-time count (2010, 2014, 2016, 2017) to understand the nature and scope of homelessness and the needs of homeless people in the Brussels Region. The point-in-time count focuses on rough sleepers, people staying in emergency shelters and other accommodation for the homeless, and people staying in non-conventional dwellings due to a lack of housing. The November 2017 count found 3,386 homeless individuals (including children) in the Brussels Region: although this was lower than the 4,094 found in March 2016, it still represented **nearly double** the number in 2008 (1,771). The 30% increase since the count in 2014 (2,603 homeless persons) was mainly due to a sharp increase in the number of people actually living on the streets (Mondelaers, 2017). It is not clear what contributed to the rise of homelessness in Brussels, but with Europe having undergone a recent migrant crisis, it is suspected that many squatters from the recently demolished 'Jungle' in Calais have moved to Brussels. Moreover, it is alarming to note that Belgium is the European country where inequalities between nationals of non-EU countries and Belgian nationals are the highest in terms of overcrowded housing (FEANTSA, 2018a).

In *Flanders*, a project aimed at collecting comprehensive data was commissioned by the Flemish Minister of Welfare. A count was carried out between 15 January and 15 February 2014 covering: (1) users of winter and night shelters; (2) users of residential CAWs; (3) people staying temporarily in PCSW housing; and (4) court eviction orders received by PCSWs. This first measurement showed the following global results: 711 adults and 53 children were roofless (those staying in winter and emergency shelters); 3,019 adults and 1,675 children were homeless (staying in accommodation for homeless people of CAWs and emergency housing of PCSWs) and 599 orders for evictions in 179 PCSWs (Meys & Hermans, 2014).

There are no similar data available for the Walloon Region.

1.3 Profile of the homeless population

Profile data relating to homeless people are scarce and fragmented. In 2018, nearly 300 roofless people in the Brussels Capital Region were interviewed about their experience as a homeless individual, and their housing needs. The findings emerged during the

³ An installation premium is granted to a homeless person who finds a home.

campaign '400 Toits', the aim of which is to find 400 flats by the end of 2020. Out of the 276 people agreeing to take part in the survey, 84% were men and 81% said that they usually slept outside. 14% were aged under 25 years, 44% 26-45, and 38% above 45. 33% were of African origin, 20% from Belgium, and the rest mainly from other European countries. 1 in 4 declared they were asylum seekers. One-third of survey participants said that they suffered from a chronic illness affecting one of the vital organs. 1 in 2 people said that they had suffered physical abuse since being homeless. Compared with the previous survey, conducted in June 2017, the proportion of people with the highest degree of vulnerability remained constant (according to a standardised scale). However, the number of people coming from Africa and the number of women had both increased since 2017. Moreover, the proportion of women who had spent over a year on the streets, and those whose lifestyle included elements dangerous to their health (examples being prostitution and exchange of needles), had also increased (400 Toits/Daken, 2019).

Other data relate to evicted households. There has been a sharp rise in evictions since the outbreak of the crisis in 2008 (20% between 2008 and 2014). The main causes appear to be over-indebtedness, the excessive burden of housing costs, and dwellings declared uninhabitable (Verstraete & De Decker, 2015). In 2014, children were involved in 25% of eviction procedures in Flanders. At the end of 2014, approximately 1,800 children in Flanders lived in homelessness services, including night shelters and transit housing (European Commission, 2018). In some cities, such as Antwerp, swift intervention by municipal social services has helped to prevent many evictions.

2 Relevant strategies and policies tackling homelessness and housing exclusion

HHE is in principle a 'regional' competence. 'Regional' should be understood here as a competence of both the regions themselves (Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels) and the communities (French, Flemish, German-speaking). The regions have authority over matters concerning property, and thus housing and housing exclusion. The communities are competent in matters that concern people, and thus homelessness. Moreover, the municipalities have certain competences as well – mainly through the actions and policies developed by the PCSWs.

2.1 Strategies addressing HHE

To date, there is no integrated national homelessness strategy in Belgium, even though the fight against homelessness is one of the four main priorities of the current Belgian action plan on poverty reduction (2016-2019). The plan contains a number of concrete priority action points, as follows.

- The *federal* government will ensure that **the cooperation agreement on homelessness of 12 May 2014 between the federal state, regions and communities** will be implemented. The State Secretary for Poverty Reduction will supervise the necessary measures in order to guarantee the supply of shelter for homeless people in large cities during the winter period. This agreement determines the role and responsibilities of the federal government and of the regional, provincial and local authorities. Cooperation and structural dialogue between the various levels is to become standard – facilitated by clear agreements on common efforts, and in active dialogue with those directly involved and with the organisations in the field. The cooperation agreement also describes arrangements for winter shelters for the homeless. All parties are to make particular efforts so that each homeless person can have a place to sleep and/or social assistance during the winter period.

- The '**Housing First**' experiments (subsidised by the *federal* government) in the cities of Antwerp, Ghent, Brussels, Charleroi and Liège will be extended for one year. The pilot project was extended to three new partner municipalities: Hasselt, Namur and Molenbeek-Saint-Jean. The results obtained will be used for an efficient transfer of knowledge to the regions and communities, in order to further develop the Housing First methodology on a structural basis (Sleurs, 2016).

Taking into account that housing policy is the responsibility of the regions, there has been progress towards regional strategies to tackle HHE in the last decade.

The third *Flemish* Action Plan on Poverty Reduction (VAPA), which was launched in 2015 for a four-year period (2015-2019), is aimed at establishing a preventive and housing-led policy for Flanders. With regard to homelessness, it is aimed at preventing homelessness and providing good-quality housing for those who become homeless. Recently, a first Flemish integrated action plan on homelessness was developed for 2017-2019 by a multi-stakeholder steering group. Based on input by FEANTSA⁴, the plan includes four strategic goals to end homelessness:

- preventing **evictions**;
- avoiding **youth** homelessness;
- tackling **chronic** homelessness; and
- developing an **integrated** homelessness policy (FEANTSA, 2013).

For each goal, several sub-goals and corresponding actions are described. Follow-up of actions and results is provided by a collective homelessness platform set up by a diversity of Flemish housing and welfare actors. Monitoring and evaluation of the goals is envisaged as part of the plan (Gezamenlijk Platform Dak- en Thuisloosheid, 2017).

In the *Brussels Capital Region*, policy on homelessness is a shared responsibility of the Joint Community Commission (GGC/CCC), COCOF and the Flemish Community Commission (VGC). Their competence on personal matters, health and welfare, is linked to activities and organisational matters. The bilingual GGC/CCC is competent as a consultation and coordination body between the French community and the Flemish community. Only the GGC/CCC can take measures applying directly to individuals and institutions not attached to one of the communities. The government of the Brussels Capital Region has regional competences in housing and employment: its most important recent policy initiative regarding HHE was a policy paper on homelessness in 2016, which announced a second action plan and legislation on homelessness (Fremault & Smet, 2016). A corresponding legislative proposal was submitted in 2018. This new attempt to restructure the homeless sector has the following general objectives:

- the introduction of ETHOS and ETHOS Light to define homelessness (see Section 1.1);
- the updating of the legal framework to include day-care centres, night shelters, Housing First and 'house hunting services' (i.e. persons in charge of helping precarious people in their search for adequate housing) to support homeless persons and services;
- strengthened cooperation with the Brussels PCSWs;
- creation of a regional public institution with overall responsibility for homeless persons, coordination of homeless services and research on homelessness; and
- a common registration tool for electronic client files, based on a national identification number, to allow sharing of client information with all relevant services and field workers (Demaerschalk et al., 2018).

⁴ Fédération Européenne des Associations Nationales Travaillant avec les Sans-Abri (European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless).

In *Wallonia*, the 2015-2019 'Plan for the fight against poverty' was the government's policy paper in this domain. It addresses housing issues in the first chapter, including access to housing, creation of a common fund of rent guarantees, and the extension of house-hunting services. However, the plan does not deal explicitly with homelessness, nor does it propose specific measures in this field. The change of the government majority in 2017 did not affect the existing plan. However, the policy measures announced by the Minister-President in October 2017 in relation to fighting poverty (cancellation of TV tax, reduction of inheritance taxes, tax reduction for student housing) are even further away from specifically tackling homelessness (Gouvernement de la Wallonie, 2018).

In addition to specific measures to combat HHE, the regions are responsible for general housing policies that have a (direct or indirect) impact on the homeless population. A central theme in this respect is the provision of **social housing**.

2.2 Monitoring practices

The European Commission calls on member states to tackle homelessness through comprehensive strategies based on a housing-led approach and prevention of evictions.

An essential part of a national strategy against homelessness is a validated information and monitoring strategy. However, at the moment there is no clear picture of the information collected, either in Belgium or in any of the regions. Given the absence of a comprehensive monitoring strategy in Belgium, the MEHOBEL project was launched in 2018. The main goal of the project was the development of a long-term strategy to measure and monitor homelessness in Belgium. One of the conclusions of the research project was that the monitoring strategy needs to be based on a set of principles that have been identified in conjunction with relevant stakeholders:

- the monitoring strategy needs to be part of a national action plan to fight homelessness;
- the monitoring strategy should be based on a mixed-method approach so that no subgroup is disregarded;
- all relevant stakeholders should be involved in all steps of the monitoring process, including during the process of interpreting the data collected;
- a clear engagement at all policy-making levels is needed to base future policies on the results of the monitoring strategy; and
- the collection of information should have no adverse effects on the homeless people themselves (Demaerschalk et al., 2018).

Despite the lack of an integrated monitoring strategy in Belgium, there are some piecemeal monitoring instruments aimed at tackling HHE, as follows.

At the *federal* level, an **inter-ministerial conference** should ensure follow-up and implementation of the cooperation agreement for the fight against poverty. The working group is also responsible for coordinating data collection and exchange at various levels. However, since 2014, this inter-ministerial conference has not been convened, which means that the agreement has not been put into practice.

The Housing First programme was monitored and assessed by an evaluation team over two years. Developments within the target group (tenants) were compared with the trajectories of homeless people who followed the traditional pathway of assistance in Belgium. In total, 378 people were regularly visited by an evaluation team. In parallel, an efficiency analysis has been carried out (examination of the cost-impact ratio) by an external group (IDEA Consult) (Housing First Belgium, 2019). The main findings are summarised in Section 3.3.

Belgian policy-makers rely partly on national studies to evaluate housing policies. In these studies, EU indicators are often used to evaluate policy developments, for example as follows.

- In a study verifying how housing outcomes vary between the Belgian regions, affordability was assessed by reference to the housing cost overburden rate – defined as the proportion of the population whose housing costs exceed 40% of their total disposable household income (Winters & Heylen, 2014).
- The National Bank of Belgium (NBB) uses data from the Household Finance and Consumption Survey (HFCS) to identify pockets of risk in the Belgian mortgage market. It takes into account distributional aspects of debt and assets, with a special focus on the coverage of households' mortgage debt by (liquid) financial assets. It identifies the share of outstanding mortgage debt that is possibly at risk, and the parts of the population most affected, on the basis of income and assets-related debt indicators (Du Caju, 2017).

Although the aforementioned studies do not exclusively focus on HHE, they address subgroups confronted with financial difficulties who have a higher risk of becoming homeless.

2.3 Funding mechanisms

Because (on the one hand) HHE policy in Belgium is spread across different policy levels and (on the other hand) an integrated strategy is currently still lacking (see Section 2.1), it is difficult to provide an accurate picture of the funding mechanisms specifically aimed at tackling HHE. However, a closer look at the financing of certain measures that have a (direct or indirect) impact on HHE policy will contribute to a better understanding of the financing mechanisms to address HHE.

2.3.1 National funding

The *federal* government provides financial **support for people's access to housing** by granting an installation premium for homeless individuals who move into a house. With this one-off installation premium of approximately €1,200, the local PCSW can provide clients with extra support to furnish their home. According to the annual report of the PPS Social Integration, 10,731 installation premiums were paid in 2016, amounting to an annual budget of more than €12 million. Nearly 36% of these installation premiums went to people who were given refugee status (Agentschap Integratie & Inburgering, 2019).

In the 2014 cooperation agreement, the *federal* government emphasised the need for **supplementary financial support for temporary emergency shelters** during the winter period. The agreement concluded on this subject concerns the five major cities (Brussels, Antwerp, Liège, Charleroi and Ghent), for which a subsidy of €50,000 per city was provided (Sleurs, 2016). In addition, the regional governments provide extra funding for emergency shelters. In the *Brussels Capital Region*, the Council of Ministers chose the Federation of Brussels PCSWs as a partner to strengthen the provision of emergency shelters. The federation received a €500,000 subsidy to strengthen, both qualitatively and quantitatively, the support provided to homeless people in Brussels. This includes an increase in the number of beds provided and in the daily duration of support, together with the extension of the reception and reinforcement of the services that provide health and legal assistance during the day.

With regard to funding for **social housing facilities**, the *Flemish* government is making significant efforts to renovate existing social housing and to build additional social housing. During the 2016 budget audit, investment by the Flemish Agency for Social Housing (Vlaamse Maatschappij voor Sociaal Wonen) was increased by €200 million, from €630 million to €830 million. Despite these efforts, the number of potential tenants on the waiting list for social housing keeps growing. In addition to the traditional candidate tenants in lower-income groups, there is an increased influx of people granted

refugee status who are looking for affordable rented accommodation (Vlaamse Overheid, 2017). In May 2017, the *Brussels* government validated the principles of the next four-year funding programme for the renovation of social housing for 2018-2021. According to Housing Minister Céline Fremault (Christian Democrats [cdH]), shortening the implementation deadlines by anticipating the preparation of projects will be prioritised. In particular, it was decided to reserve a new budget of €300 million, allocated to the regional heritage and renovation compliance policy, which will promote both housing security and the quality of life of tenants. The new programme will make it possible to meet the priority objectives of the Brussels Region, aimed at guaranteeing the security of housing while promoting its sanitation and conformity in terms of the equipment required in the dwellings. Emphasis will also be placed on the fight against, and prevention of, unoccupied accommodation, as well as on the energy performance of the housing in order to reduce the energy bills of tenants (Dimelow, 20.05.2017).

According to the intergovernmental Combat Poverty Service ('Steunpunt tot bestrijding van armoede, bestaanonzekerheid en sociale uitsluiting')⁵, the creation of additional housing is indeed a fundamental need given the serious shortage of affordable and decent housing facilities. The Service argues that investments in housing units subject to rent regulation (such as social housing) should be prioritised. In doing so, it should be ensured that the groups that encounter most difficulties benefit the most from the increased supply (Steunpunt tot bestrijding van armoede, bestaanonzekerheid en sociale zekerheid, 2014). Admittedly, rent-subsidy schemes could help to ease access to housing in the private rental market in the short term. Until now, there has been no large-scale housing allowance scheme in Belgium: this generates a *de facto* discrimination between households that get access to social housing and private-sector tenants who mostly do not get any support (Steunpunt tot bestrijding van armoede, bestaanonzekerheid en sociale uitsluiting, 2017; Van den Broeck et al., 2017).

2.3.2 EU funding

Thanks to the **Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived Persons (FEAD)**, Belgium receives money from the EU to contribute to food aid and/or material aid. The PPS Social Integration manages a budget of approximately €88 million for the 2014-2020 programming period. With the support of this money, the PPS Social Integration annually provides around 358 PCSWs and 419 organisations – in cooperation with the country's nine food banks – with goods to be distributed free of charge to the most deprived persons in Belgium. Although FEAD funds are not directly targeted at homeless people, many homeless individuals can benefit from the initiatives financed by the FEAD (POD Maatschappelijke integratie, 2019).

As **Housing First** is still at an early phase, it requires special financial support. Currently, the project has not been financed by EU funds. However, there are EU funds that can be used to support such policy innovations. These include the European Social Fund (ESF), of which 20% is earmarked for fighting poverty and social exclusion; the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), which might be used to enlarge countries' housing stock; and the FEAD. All of them support innovative ways to tackle homelessness, and could be used to 'scale up' Housing First. However, there is fierce competition for EU funds at national level from stakeholders of other policy measures (mainly labour market activation) (European Commission, 2016).

Although the Belgian authorities can count on EU funding (ESF, ERDF, FEAD), the vast majority of the initiatives financed by such funds seem to focus on major themes such as access to the labour market and the reintegration of disadvantaged groups into society. Currently, EU funds are not specifically used in the fight against HHE in Belgium. The use of the ESF in the further extension of the Housing First model would therefore be an important step forward.

⁵ <https://combatpoverty.be>.

3 Analysis of the current patterns of service provision and challenges in implementing Belgium's responses to homelessness and housing exclusion

3.1 Main types of support services

In general terms, a distinction can be made between two types of shelter for homeless people in Belgium. On the one hand, there is **emergency/temporary accommodation**, which allows the homeless to take shelter from the cold during the night, especially in winter. With approximately 2,600 people sleeping rough in the capital, the majority of emergency accommodation in Belgium is concentrated in the Brussels Capital Region. In 2018, over 1,200 places in homeless shelters were available for the winter season and an additional 300 recently opened after new legislation was enacted to address the growing demand. These shelters provide beds, showers, hot meals and medical and psychiatric assistance for those attending (Samusocial, 2019).

On the other hand, there are also organisations working on **more structural solutions**. They support the homeless until they have a permanent roof over their heads again and find their place in society. Two main types of this more structural approach that have been adopted in (certain parts of) Belgium are targeted at prevention and housing-led approaches, as follows.

- **Targeted prevention.** The *federal* law on the 'humanising of judicial eviction' states that all PCSWs have to be informed of all eviction procedures so that they can provide support. The court informs the PCSWs when landlords request an eviction. Clients who are already known to the services are contacted directly by a social worker. Unknown clients receive a letter and an invitation to come to the service for a first meeting.
- **Housing-led approaches.** The most important housing-led approaches used in Belgium are Housing First Belgium; the provision of social housing; and the mediating role of social rental agencies (SRAs).

Housing First

In 2013, a two-year project using Housing First began in the cities of Brussels, Antwerp, Ghent, Charleroi and Liège. It was extended in 2016 to three additional cities: Hasselt, Molenbeek-Saint-Jean and Namur. Under Housing First, homeless people move into permanent housing as quickly as possible, and receive intensive floating social support according to their needs (i.e. either individual case management (ICM) or assertive community treatment (ACT)); if needed, they can also receive critical time intervention (CTI) (European Commission, 2016).

Direct provision of social housing

Social housing is meant for single people or families with a limited income. Most social housing consists of houses or apartments offered for rent at a moderate (means-tested) price. In addition, potential purchasers of property may be able to find a cheap mortgage. Social housing is the responsibility of the regions. The conditions thus vary from one region to another (*Steunpunt tot bestrijding van armoede, bestaansonzekerheid en sociale zekerheid*, 2016).

Provision of social housing through SRAs

SRAs are non-profit housing institutions that address the housing needs of poor and vulnerable people. In the Belgian context, SRAs have tended to be rooted in homelessness services. SRAs are active in all three of Belgium's regions (Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia). Their main advantage, compared with social housing companies, is their ability to rent, renovate and sub-let at an affordable rent to low-income tenants without having to invest in the construction of new real estate. SRAs act as mediating agents between private landlords and people in housing need. In principle, the conditions

for access to SRA housing are the same as those for social housing; however, in practice SRAs focus on households who are the most vulnerable in the housing market and who face specific barriers to accessing housing (Vlaamse Overheid, 2019).

3.2 Main service providers

A substantial part of existing support for homeless people in Belgium is provided by the **PCSWs** at the municipal level. Present in each of the 589 Belgian municipalities, they are responsible for the granting of social assistance benefits and provide general social support as well as a variety of financial support measures specifically addressing homeless people – such as an installation premium. They can also grant reference addresses or offer people who seek help an integrated social integration project (GPMI/PIIS). In addition, several PCSWs also have their own housing stock and can offer temporary housing for a person in need. Other important service providers that operate in the three regions are the SRAs (see Section 3.1).

Taking into account that housing policy in Belgium is a regional competence, the service provision and thus the most relevant actors providing those services differ from region to region.

In the *Brussels Capital Region*, the parliament approved a proposal to reorganise the homelessness services. Under the new proposal, the work would be taken over by two new non-profit organisations: Bruss'Help, which would coordinate the various services and dispatch homeless persons to the right services; and New Samusocial, which would be in charge of providing shelter for the homeless (Boulet, 03.05.2018). In addition, La Strada is also an important player in HHE policy in the Brussels Capital Region: as a support centre for the homeless sector, its role is to support stakeholder dialogue/participation and data collection on homelessness. Meetings between service providers, public authorities and other stakeholders take place every two months with a larger meeting once a year. The aim is coordination, information sharing, practice development, mutual learning and overall exchange to enhance service delivery in line with needs (La Strada, 2019).

In *Flanders*, the **CAWs** are the main providers of help for homeless people. They run night shelters (mainly financed by the municipalities) and day centres, and they provide ambulant and floating social support and accommodation for the homeless (Centrum Algemeen Welzijnswerk, 2019).

In the *Walloon Region*, the **Social Links** (Relais Sociaux) are active in the major urban areas (i.e. Liège, Mons, Charleroi, Namur). Although their services are not identical across cities, all of them comprise social emergency services such as: (1) day and night accommodation; (2) general and mental healthcare; (3) outreach work; and (4) food distribution (Fédération des CPAS, 2014).

3.3 Effectiveness of existing responses to tackle HHE

3.3.1 Housing First

Belgium's governmental structure required a cooperation agreement between the different entities for the fight against homelessness. This complex structure proved a bonus as it gave each city's project team considerable leeway and flexibility in how they ran the scheme. The only condition was that all teams had to focus on the target group of chronically homeless people with high and complex needs. Each city took a strong bottom-up approach and networked successfully, sharing experiences with other cities. While cities have the flexibility to decide how Housing First should operate, some general principles must be applied. The basic tenet is that Housing First works well in housing the long-term chronically homeless who have severe needs. At the two-year follow-up stage, the results of the Housing First approach inspire enthusiasm: 90% of tenants are still

living in regular accommodation (against only 48% among similar homeless people who got support from 'traditional' services). Despite their highly vulnerable profile, these people are demonstrating their capacity to manage their homes. Moreover, the welfare of tenants supported by Housing First teams improves by more (based on self-reported measures) than in the two comparison groups. There is a positive development in self-esteem, empowerment, health (compliance with treatment), decreased attendance at hospitals and the start of social activation steps (integration activities, skills training, etc.) (Housing First Belgium, 2019).

Housing First has proved to be a cost-efficient way of housing homeless people with multiple needs. However, while it may reduce other budgets, such as health, this saving is not necessarily passed on to welfare or housing budgets, since they usually operate separately. But one could claim, more importantly, that it improves the lives of the people concerned by fostering their social inclusion and by contributing to society in general. Nevertheless, more efforts and innovative approaches are needed to prevent vulnerable people from becoming homeless (e.g. to prevent eviction), using increased 'floating' support services.

3.3.2 Provision of social housing

According to the most recent statistics (2016) from the interfederal Combat Poverty Service, the percentage of social housing in relation to the total housing market is very low in Belgium, with 5.6% in *Flanders*, 5.3% in *Wallonia* and 7% in the *Brussels Capital Region* (Steunpunt tot bestrijding van armoede, bestaansonzekerheid en sociale zekerheid, 2016).

Consequently, the shortage of social housing facilities remains an important problem in Belgium. In recent years, the three regions (see below) have set goals for increased investment in social housing, but the level remains low compared with current needs.

- In *Wallonia*, between 2015 and 2016 the number of social housing units even dropped by 193 – to approximately 101,000 – whereas the number of applicants continued to increase. In the period 2008-2016, the number of applicants increased by 23,000 households (Deffet, 25.10.2017).
- In the *Brussels Capital Region*, the government validated the principles of the next four-year funding programme for renovating social housing for 2018-2021. According to Housing Minister Céline Fremault, shortening the implementation deadlines by anticipating the preparation of projects will be prioritised. Increased investments in social housing facilities are all the more necessary given that the demand for social housing is twice as high as the supply, according to the annual welfare barometer. In 2016, the waiting list for social housing amounted to more than 48,000 households (Roelant, 18.10.2017).
- In *Flanders*, applicants for social housing face an average waiting time of three years. The waiting lists are longest in large and medium-sized towns. For example, in Ostend (west Flanders) and Turnhout (Antwerp province) those applying for social housing have to wait an average of 2,300 days (more than six years). In 2017, there were more than 120,000 Flemish households on the social housing waiting list (Belga, 10.12.2017). Roughly one-third of these applicants were households with children, and 61% had Belgian nationality⁶.

In order to cope with the shortage of social housing in Belgium, the Belgian government published a draft law (Programme Law) aimed at expanding the application of the current reduced VAT rate of 12% for the purchase and construction of social housing. Since January 2017, a number of other public companies and bodies are explicitly recognised by the VAT authorities as social housing companies (e.g. Vlaams Woningfonds, le Fonds

⁶ <https://www.vmsw.be/Home/Footer/Over-sociale-huisvesting/Statistieken/Kandidaat-huurders-en-kopers>.

du Logement des familles nombreuses de Wallonie, het Woningfonds van het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest). More importantly, the reduced VAT rate will also become applicable to every natural or legal person (private individuals as well as real estate developers), willing to buy, build, rebuild or lease a residence or housing complex in order to rent it out to social housing companies (Smaers, 2017).

According to the interfederal Combat Poverty Service, the creation of additional housing is indeed a fundamental need given the lack of affordable and decent housing facilities. The Service argues that investments in housing units subject to rent regulation (such as social housing) should be prioritised. In doing so, one should verify whether the groups that encounter most difficulties benefit the most from the increased supply (Steunpunt tot bestrijding van armoede, bestaansonzekerheid en sociale zekerheid, 2014).

3.3.3 Prevention of evictions

EU-SILC⁷ data demonstrate that the at-risk-of-poverty rate among tenants in Belgium increased from 28.6% in 2009 to 36.4% in 2017 (Eurostat, 2019). Compared with the rest of the population, a larger share of the at-risk-of-poverty population live in more overcrowded, lower-quality and less affordable dwellings. Winters (2017) concludes for *Flanders* that the right to affordable and decent housing is coming under increasing pressure. Regardless of tenure, a proportion of social tenants and owner-occupiers with a mortgage are being confronted with an unaffordable housing situation; the proportion is largest in the private rental sector, regardless of the method of measurement (expenditure to income or budget). Especially in the rental sector, about 1 in 3 tenants are considered to be facing unaffordable housing costs (Van Lancker et al., 2017). Moreover, the maximum deposit demanded by landlords has been increased from two months' rent to three in Flanders. The Anti-Poverty Network protested that this measure will affect people on low incomes. According to the organisation, tenants will now start off renting a home with more financial problems, which only increases the risk of payment problems and potential evictions (Legrand & Moens, 15.07.2017). According to the annual figures of the Association of Flemish Cities and Municipalities (VVSG), around 12,000 Flemish households are notified that they will lose their homes every year. In recent years, the number of evictions has remained stable without any structural improvement.

According to the *Flemish Platform of Tenants* (Vlaams Huurplatform), the CAWs have been commissioned to provide preventive housing guidance in the social housing sector, which successfully prevents evictions in that market. In the private rental market, where most evictions take place, far fewer people are reached. Since 2016, small-scale experiments have been started by the CAWs in the private rental market. Both social and private landlords can now report problematic situations. However, prevention of eviction in the private rental market appears to be much more difficult than in the social rental market. In order to effectively prevent evictions, the establishment of dedicated eviction prevention services should be promoted. These services are most useful if they have the competency, resources and personnel to make appropriate interventions (including home visits) to prevent evictions. Efficient intervention measures through such services could include: mediation between landlords and tenants, as well as between lenders and mortgagors; options to monitor the existing debt and arrears and allow occupants to remain in place; arrangements for legal aid, advice and assistance; and the capacity to allocate alternative housing where eviction cannot be avoided (Vlaams Huurplatform, 2016).

⁷ European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions.

3.4 Innovations in the provision of homelessness services

In March 2018, the *Flemish* public health and welfare minister Jo Vandeurzen approved annual funding of €1.2 million to create care networks that provide **assistance to social housing residents with significant psychological problems**. Funding was allocated to one network in every province. They will follow the lead set by the pilot project in the Antwerp province. If these five additional projects are successful, the system will be rolled out across Flanders. The programme, called SSeGa, aims at preventing homelessness among this vulnerable group. The main objective is that the mental health sector, in cooperation with neighbouring sectors, reaches out to people with mental problems who live in social housing facilities. This means that the social housing actors (social housing companies and social rental offices) try to reach out to people with mental health problems with multidisciplinary teams. These people will be screened by the team for mental health problems and, as soon as possible, guided to regular care (Vandeurzen, 29.03.2018).

Another innovative practice is the **Belgian Homeless Cup (BHC)**. The BHC is an organisation that supports all initiatives that use football as a means to foster the social inclusion of homeless people in Belgium. The process can have a social objective (social assistance, a meaningful use of leisure time, building self-confidence and developing a positive self-image) or a professional objective (training and employment). There are also positive effects on people's physical health through the training sessions. Priority is given to the personal growth of the players within the group dynamics (Belgian Homeless Cup, 2019).

3.5 Weaknesses and priorities for improvement

The overview of the effectiveness of policies to tackle HHE has shown that more should be done to prevent homelessness in Belgium in a more structural manner. The available figures confirm that the share of homeless people and persons facing payment difficulties in the housing sector is increasing rather than decreasing. The following weaknesses need to be addressed.

- The **lack of a common framework** to comprehend homelessness is reflected in the lack of a coherent information system. As a result, there is no obvious way to grasp the prevalence of homelessness, to study its causes and to sketch a profile of it.
- In the *Brussels Capital Region*, an **increase of almost 100% in the number of rough sleepers** was observed over the nine years from 2008 to 2017.
- **Housing prices** in the rental market rose more rapidly than incomes in Belgium between 2008 and 2016. In 2016, poor households in Belgium spent 38.5% of their income on housing-related expenses, while the total population spent only 19.5%. Moreover, inequality in non-payment also increased between 2010 and 2016, with an increase in non-payment among poor households and a reduction in non-payment among non-poor households (FEANTSA, 2018b).

Taking into account the main weaknesses in HHE policy in Belgium, the following priorities for improvement can be identified.

- Since various types of **data collection** in the three regions have been elaborated but less streamlined, a balance should be found between 'quick wins' (pragmatic use of, and making small changes to, current data collection) on the one hand, and a coordinated, valid and reliable approach in the long term that elucidates the different types and external forms of homelessness. Quick wins are necessary to have enough critical mass to monitor homelessness, but since the current data-collection strategies in the three regions are poorly coordinated, a more long-term streamlining strategy is necessary.

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- In the *Brussels Capital Region*, **prevention policies** generally make up a small part of the overall framework. Temporary accommodation services are more developed. These temporary services are often conceived as emergency services and mostly do not follow a more comprehensive integration approach. Although continued investments in emergency shelters remain necessary, a more structural preventive policy approach that does not just focus on the most visible group of homeless persons (mostly rough sleepers) is needed.
 - Compared with many European countries, the **share of social housing** in the housing stock in Belgium is limited. The long waiting lists in all three regions indicate that the present social housing stock is far too small to accommodate all families in need of housing support. Satisfying these needs by supplying social housing would require a substantial extension of the sector. Outsourcing some tasks (such as construction of social housing) to the private business sector in social housing could offer opportunities. For this purpose, fiscal or other financial incentives (e.g. VAT reductions) could be considered. A mediating role for housing associations or social rental agencies in this case would be preferable in order to avoid negative selection. Complementing that approach, one option might be redistribution of the existing housing stock in favour of those on the lowest incomes and in the most vulnerable groups.

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ANNEX

Table A1: ETHOS Light categories defined as homeless in Belgium

As mentioned in Section 1.1, Belgian policy against HHE can be seen as an uncoordinated patchwork in which many organisations act on their own and use their own definitions. Consequently, this table looks at the definition that most qualifies as a 'national' definition, i.e. **the definition used by the PCSWs** (see Section 1.1).

| Operational category | | Living situation | | Definition | Defined as homeless in Belgium (*) |
|----------------------|---|------------------|---|---|------------------------------------|
| 1 | People living rough | 1 | Public space/ external space | Living in the streets or public spaces without a shelter that can be defined as living quarters | YES |
| 2 | People in emergency accommodation | 2 | Overnight shelters | People with no place of usual residence who move frequently between various types of accommodation | YES |
| 3 | People living in accommodation for the homeless | 3 | Homeless hostels | Where the period of stay is time-limited and no long-term housing is provided | YES |
| | | 4 | Temporary accommodation | | |
| | | 5 | Transitional supported accommodation | | |
| | | 6 | Women's shelter or refuge accommodation | | |
| 4 | People living in institutions | 7 | Healthcare institutions | Stay longer than needed due to lack of housing | NO |
| | | 8 | Penal institutions | No housing available prior to release | |
| 5 | People living in non-conventional dwellings due to lack of housing | 9 | Mobile homes | Where the accommodation is used due to a lack of housing and is not the person's usual place of residence | NO |
| | | 10 | Non-conventional buildings | | |
| | | 11 | Temporary structures | | |
| 6 | Homeless people living temporarily in conventional housing with family and friends (due to lack of housing) | 12 | Conventional housing, but not the person's usual place of residence | Where the accommodation is used due to a lack of housing and is not the person's usual place of residence | NO |

(*) In each cell the 'yes/no' relates to all subcategories (i.e. all living situations) included in the corresponding row.

Table A2: Latest available data on the number of homeless people in Belgium

Although recent efforts have been made at local and regional level to measure homelessness, a **nationally coordinated monitoring system is still lacking**. Therefore, the data presented in this table are often limited to some local measurement initiatives and do not reflect the situation in the entire country.

| Operational category | Living situation | Most recent number (*) | Period covered | Source | |
|----------------------|---|--|---|---|--|
| 1 | 1 People living rough | Public space/ external space | 511 in the Brussels Capital Region | 6 March 2017 | Street count conducted by La Strada (https://lastrada.brussels/portail/images/PDF/20171012_Strada_Denomb_Syntthese_NL_V3.pdf) |
| 2 | 2 People in emergency accommodation | Overnight shelters | 1,452 in the Brussels Capital Region | 6 March 2017 | Street count conducted by La Strada (https://lastrada.brussels/portail/images/PDF/20171012_Strada_Denomb_Syntthese_NL_V3.pdf) |
| | | | 711 adults and 53 children in Flanders | Between 15 January and 15 February 2014 | Baseline measurement by Steunpunt Welzijns, Volksgezondheid en Gezin (https://steunpuntwvg.be/images/rapporten-en-werknotas/nulmeting-dak-en-thuisloosheid) |
| 3 | 3 People living in accommodation for the homeless | 3 Homeless hostels | 3,019 adults and 1,675 children in Flanders | Between 15 January and 15 February 2014 | Baseline measurement by Steunpunt Welzijns, Volksgezondheid en Gezin (https://steunpuntwvg.be/images/rapporten-en-werknotas/nulmeting-dak-en-thuisloosheid) |
| | | 4 Temporary accommodation | | | |
| | | 5 Transitional supported accommodation | | | |
| | | 6 Women's shelter or refuge accommodation | | | |
| 4 | 4 People living in institutions | 7 Healthcare institutions | Not available | | |
| | | 8 Penal institutions | | | |
| 5 | 5 People living in non-conventional dwellings due to lack of housing | 9 Mobile homes | Not available | | |
| | | 10 Non-conventional buildings | | | |
| | | 11 Temporary structures | | | |
| 6 | 6 Homeless people living temporarily in conventional housing with family and friends (due to lack of housing) | 12 Conventional housing, but not the person's usual place of residence | Not available | | |

(*) There are no similar data available for the Walloon Region.

