European Commission

Homelessness in EU cities and towns before and during the Covid-19 pandemic

Main challenges and ways forward

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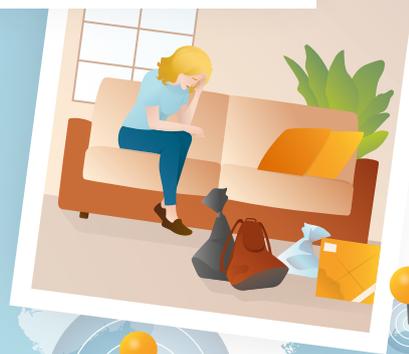Number of homeless people and urb...

Profiles

Transitional

Chronic

Episodic

Policy

Joint
Research
Centre

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Abstract

This study summarises the main findings from a survey conducted among a sample of European cities and towns, composed of 133 local administrations across 16 EU Member States. A specific feature of the research is that findings are also analysed according to city size (ranging from small towns to large metropolitan areas), allowing for the detection of possible differences in terms of number of homeless people, profiles, trends, and policies between cities, both before and during the Covid-19 pandemic. Overall, there are indications that city size matters when it comes to homelessness. For example, only local administrations from smaller urban areas (though obviously not all of them) report 'zero homelessness'; on the other hand, in those smaller urban areas that do experience homelessness, more variation in profile type is observed. Furthermore, during the pandemic, it was largely the smaller urban areas that maintained stable numbers of homeless people. More research is needed to fully understand the exact cause of these differences. The observation that smaller urban areas more often experience 'zero homelessness' may be rooted in more effective (prevention) policies, migration to larger cities, or due to different definitions or methodologies to measure homelessness. Improving policies that aim to tackle homelessness and precarious living conditions fits with the 'Leaving No One Behind' principle, which is crucial in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals framework and in several EU initiatives, among those the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Acknowledgements

Executive summary

The number of people experiencing homelessness in the EU has increased over the past decade. In particular, the financial crisis of 2008 triggered a new generation of people experiencing precarious living conditions. And while the exact consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic still remain to be seen, there is again cause for concern. In many countries, a growing number of people are at risk of losing their accommodation, while support measures and eviction bans are likely to come to an end, or being phased out.

Improving policies that aim to tackle homelessness and precarious living conditions, fits with global and EU initiatives. For example, principle 19 of the European Pillar of Social Rights specifically targets housing and assistance for the homeless, stating that a) access to social housing or housing assistance of good quality shall be provided for those in need, b) vulnerable people have the right to appropriate assistance and protection against forced eviction, and c) adequate shelter and services shall be provided to the homeless in order to promote their social inclusion. A concrete deliverable is the establishment of the European Platform on combatting homelessness, bringing together a variety of different stakeholders, among which representatives of EU institutions, national administrations, civil society organisations, social partners, and cities. All members are committed to work together towards the ending of homelessness by 2030, by promoting policies based on a person-centred, housing-led, and integrated approach. Moreover, to better monitor the situation across the EU, it is further aimed to improve data collection on homelessness by implementing a new EU-wide counting initiative, collecting data on past experiences of homelessness through Eurostat, and setting up a common monitoring framework on homelessness. The objective to tackle homelessness and precarious living condition is also coherent with the 'Leaving No One Behind' principle, which is crucial in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals framework.

With the aim to contribute to better knowledge and data in support of better policies, this report summarises the main findings from a survey conducted among a sample of European cities and towns, composed of 133 local administrations across 16 EU Member States.

A specific feature of this study is that findings are also analysed according to city size (urban classification). This allows for the detection of any possible differences in terms of numbers, profiles, trends, and policies between cities of various sizes.

The number and geographical scope of responses cannot be considered representative of the situation of homelessness in Europe, and, in that respect, some caution is required with generalising the results. In particular, it should be noted that the large majority of responses from smaller towns, and small urban areas are from Italy and Portugal, and to a lesser extent Slovenia. At the same time, this study is – to the best of the authors' knowledge – one of the most extended data collections on homelessness across European cities, which allows for the identification of some preliminary key trends and issues that in turn can help to delineate possible trajectories and policy recommendations.

As illustrated by the findings, homelessness is not exclusively reserved for big and/or capital cities. At the same time, it is found that overall, the number of city inhabitants is moderately positively correlated to the number of homeless, meaning the more people in a city, the higher the incidence of homeless. Furthermore, only among smaller cities and towns there were local administrations indicating that they currently experience 'zero homelessness'.

Looking at the main causes for homelessness, there is no significant difference detected between cities of various sizes. However, it is noted that metropolitan areas less often indicate family circumstances as a cause. In terms of main homeless profile (chronic, transitional, episodic) bigger cities observe more chronic homelessness, while in smaller urban areas there appears more variation in profiles. In the latter case, this might point to a stronger need for more tailor-made policies, or to the fact that local administration have a better picture of the homeless population since numbers are smaller.

Looking at some demographic characteristics, the large majority of homeless people are men, and non-immigrant. At the same time, an overall increase in homeless women is observed, as well as homeless youth. These characteristics do not appear to differ substantially by urban classification. However, substantial numbers of foreign nationals are most often registered in the large metropolitan areas, while in cities of smaller sizes this phenomenon has much less incidence.

In terms of number of people experiencing homelessness over the past decade, but before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, overall, most cities report an increase, although smaller cities and towns show more diversity between them (e.g., positive, negative, and stable trends). With regards to the number of homeless people during the Covid-19 pandemic, most cities indicate that numbers remained stable and this is especially true for smaller cities.

Although a substantial number of places report that the pandemic did not affect their policies, many cities did adapt their ways of working, most notably by establishing additional emergency shelters. Testing and isolation proved to be key challenges for several cities.

As one of the main lessons learned from the pandemic, various cities point to the need for government to strengthen collaboration with public health care services, as well as the third sector, including (voluntary) service organisations and/or non-governmental organisations. With regards to general policies, the need for an integrated approach is often stressed, emphasising that effective policy requires an integrated intervention and monitoring model, building a coalition between different stakeholders, both horizontally (across sectors), as well as vertically (across administrative levels).

Around half of all participating cities indicate that they currently have a strategy or policy in place to combat homelessness, whereby a large majority is embedded in a larger regional of national framework. It is not clear to what extent these policies are integrated. Small towns are the least likely to have a specific strategy in place, for example in terms of shelters. Nonetheless, many of them still implement policies and programmes to support the most vulnerable.

About a quarter of the cities that have a policy in place, implemented housing first or housing led approaches. Uptake is notably higher among larger urban areas, however, various smaller cities actually provide similar services, although sometimes less formally.

Overall, there are indications that city size matters when it comes to homelessness.

At the same time, more research is needed to fully understand why many smaller cities experience zero homelessness, or even relatively low shares of homeless people, and why profiles and trends tend to differ between cities of various sizes. In this respect, differences can be rooted in distinctive policies, distinctive needs and behaviour of homeless people, and/or distinctive definitions or data collection methods used by local administrations.

For example, the 'zero homelessness' in smaller urban areas might be a result of more flexible, targeted approaches, whereby it is also easier to scale up successful initiatives. At the same time, it should not be ruled out that homeless people migrate to larger urban areas, to have access to more services, and/or to avoid stigmatisation. Furthermore, it is likely that this, at least partially, follows from using a restricted definition of homelessness, referring exclusively to people sleeping rough. Moreover, next to more research into the various dynamics within cities of different sizes, also the relationships between trends and profiles, and (prevention) policies should be further explored.

Thus, this study stresses once more the strong need for better data to lay the foundation for better policies. Further efforts are needed to stimulate and facilitate the use of a common definition across the EU, paired with robust data collection, across cities and towns of various sizes.

Introduction

It is currently estimated that in the EU every night around 700 000 people sleep rough or in shelters, and overall, the number of people experiencing homelessness has increased over the past decade. In particular, the financial crisis of 2008, and subsequent economic crises, triggered a new generation of people experiencing precarious living conditions, with welfare systems put under pressure, and people losing their jobs and home.

While the exact ramifications of the Covid-19 pandemic still remain to be seen, there is cause for concern. In many countries, a growing number of people are at risk of losing their accommodation, while support measures and eviction bans are likely to come to an end, or being phased out. In particular young people have found themselves in increasingly vulnerable positions (FEANTSA and Abbé Pierre foundation, 2021).

A unique feature of the Covid-19 pandemic is that for a long period of time it required people to stay at home or to isolate. These circumstances caused many administrations to facilitate emergency housing. For this reason, data on homelessness may have improved, with many territories now having a clearer image of the size and profiles of their homeless population, in particular that of rough sleepers. At the same time, innovative measures have been taken to provide emergency shelters during the pandemic, and these developments might translate into more structural policies in the future.

While many policies have been implemented to manage and decrease homelessness, or to improve the living conditions of those experiencing precarious housing circumstances, there is still a strong need for better knowledge and better data to improve such interventions, especially at EU level.

Improving policies that aim to tackle homelessness and precarious living conditions fits with several EU initiatives. In the framework of the Europe 2020 Strategy, the target was set to free at least 20 million people from the risk of poverty and social inclusion, entrusting Member States with the task of implementing this goal at the national level. In addition, improving the condition of the homeless population is the target of two actions mentioned in the European Pillar of Social Rights' Action Plan, that seeks to build a fairer and more inclusive European Union[1]:

a) the European Platform on combatting homelessness and,
b) the Affordable Housing Initiative, both launched in the second quarter of 2021. Furthermore, early 2022, the governance structure and the workplan of the European Platform on combatting homelessness were presented, reiterating that the members of the Platform are committed to work together towards the ending of homelessness by 2030, by promoting policies based on a person-centred, housing-led, and integrated approach.

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1   *https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights_en*

These initiatives and objectives also relate to a broader sentiment. A EUrobarometer (2021) related to the launch of the European Pillar of Social Rights, finds that nine in ten Europeans consider a social Europe to be important to them personally, and seven in ten consider a lack of social rights a serious problem.[2] Furthermore, a recent European Parliament EUbarometer indicated that people feel that the number one issue the EU should focus on is reducing poverty and social inequality for EU citizens.[3] In addition, also many cities and other stakeholders have publicly voiced their desire for a stronger social dimension of EU policies.[4]

The European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA, 2018) has developed a toolkit to provide cities with practical actions to combat homelessness. While acknowledging the key role of Member States in providing guidelines, they underline the unequivocal role that cities play in implementing national directives at the local level as the only way to end homelessness. Selected key actions include the need to improve data collection as a crucial means to develop proper strategies and reveal the true nature of the homeless population, the importance to provide an increasing access to affordable housing and to deliver integrated services, and investing in prevention. Furthermore, based on a comparative analysis of the different ways to manage homelessness across Europe, FEANTSA (2019) suggests to go beyond emergency shelters, and to move towards a homeless policy based on cross-disciplinary approaches and integrated prevention policies, guided by the principles of 'housing first'. Similar recommendations are expressed in an Opinion of the Committee of Regions (CoR) entitled *Eradicating homelessness in the European Union: The local and regional perspective* (CoR, 2021).

Moreover, FEANSTA has proposed a common definition, the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS), to capture all dimensions of homelessness and to enable the collection of comparative data. A study by the European Social Policy Network (ESPN) that includes 35 countries, and provides insights into the most common trends and challenges in national strategic approaches to homelessness and housing exclusion, stresses a similar need (Baptista and Marlier, 2019). Moreover, providing an overview of EU homelessness mainly based on the European Observatory on Homelessness, Bursch-Geertsema et al. (2010) also emphasise the importance of having comparable definitions and robust measurement techniques, identifying ad-hoc indicators and data collection processes that embrace all phases of homelessness. However, currently, robust comparative data at national, regional, and/or urban level across the EU is still largely lacking.

With the aim to contribute to better knowledge and improved data to support better policy development and implementation, this report summarises the main findings from a survey distributed among local administrations within the EU, and in specific to the units or departments responsible for homelessness. The study wishes to get a better understanding of homelessness trends and numbers, policies, the developments during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the potential implications for future policies. The study includes a wide range of

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2   This Special Eurobarometer was carried out in the 27 Member States from 20 November to 21 December 2020, with the participation of 27 213 EU citizens.

3   *https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2020/parlemeter-2020/en-key-findings.pdf*

4   *https://www.housingeurope.eu/resource-1555/open-letter-concerning-european-commitment-to-end-homelessness-at-the-porto-social-summit*

respondents, from smaller towns and villages, to large metropolitan areas, allowing to identify possible differences in terms of profiles, trends and policies between cities of various sizes. It also reflects upon data collections methods, keeping in mind that the homeless population is challenging to measure. As such, it constitutes a unique empirical basis and reference work for the further development of policies designed to manage and end homelessness in EU urban territories. Moreover, this study further contributes to the research activities of the Urban Observatory being set up by the Joint Research Centre (JRC).

The report is structured as follows: the following section addresses the challenge of establishing and using a commonly agreed-upon definition across the EU, while also shortly describing a selection of past primary data collection efforts at EU (city) level. The section concludes with a discussion and reflection upon some main measurement techniques. The subsequent section discusses the empirical strategy behind this study and the way data has been collected. Thereafter, the main results are presented, followed by a concluding section in which the findings are further interpreted and discussed, also offering some potential avenues for future research.

Definition and primary data collection

Over the years, homelessness has been defined more broadly, not only including people without accommodation and people staying in emergency shelters, but also people living in severely inadequate and/or insecure accommodations. Most notably, all these different dimensions of homelessness are included in the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) definition, developed in 2005 by FEANTSA. This definition serves to improve the comparative understanding of homelessness in Europe, providing a common language for transnational exchanges.[5]

Furthermore, the ETHOS light classification, established in 2007, offers a more pragmatic definition of homelessness, fit for statistical purposes rather than to be used as a conceptual instrument. It identifies homeless by: People living rough; people in emergency accommodation; people living in accommodation for the homeless; people living in institutions; people living in non-conventional dwellings due to lack of housing; and, homeless people living temporarily in conventional housing with family and friends (due to lack of housing).[6]

In 2010, the European Commission agreed on using the ETHOS proposed by FEANTSA as a common framework upon which start creating a shared knowledge, but re-categorising the different groups into 4 main ones:

- Roofless (people living rough);
- Houseless (people in accommodation for the homeless, in women's shelters, in accommodation for immigrants, people due to be released from institutions and people receiving long term support due to homelessness);
- People in insecure accommodation (e.g., people living in insecure tenancies, under threat of eviction or violence); and
- People in inadequate housing (living in unfit housing, nonconventional dwellings e.g., in caravans without adequate access to public utilities such as water, electricity or gas or in situations of extreme overcrowding) (European Commission, 2013).

In the 2011 European Census, Member States were for the first time formally asked to cover homeless people (FEANTSA, 2012). While some countries did address homelessness in their national surveys, FEANTSA still observed considerable differences between the definitions used, not relying on the common definition, or the 4 subgroups. Furthermore, in the end, it appeared only six over the fifteen countries surveyed by FEANTSA in 2014 had published any 2011 census data on homeless (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2014).

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5   https://www.feantsa.org/download/ethos2484215748748239888.pdf
6   https://www.feantsa.org/download/fea-002-18-update-ethos-light-0032417441788687419154.pdf

In accordance with Eurostat (2019) in the National Censuses of 2021, the topic of housing arrangements as defined in Regulation (EC) 2017/543[7] should include information on:

- Primary homeless persons (persons living in the streets without shelter);
- Secondary homeless persons (persons moving frequently between temporary accommodation); and
- Persons living in a non-conventional shelter (for example huts, cabins, shacks, shanties, caravans, houseboats or caves).

However, as opposed to the census from 2011, these attributes are now aggregated under a single category, besides being broken down by sex, age, and LAU2 level (pointing to local administrative units within the EU27, being mainly municipalities or equivalents). The new aggregate or combined categories are intended to simplify reporting, while ensuring that the total count and basic characteristics of this group are included in the census population. Eurostat will closely monitor the availability of such data in the quality evaluation of the 2021 censuses, in particular, regarding the metadata on homelessness.

Finally, introduced in autumn 2017, the European Pillar of Social Rights seeks to define a common framework for the social rights of European citizens. In order to ensure that the related principle 19 on housing and assistance for the homeless is implemented[8], the European Commission launched a European Platform on Combatting Homelessness in 2021. Under the framework of this Platform, a new initiative is supported to collect data on homelessness in the EU, led by Member of

European Parliament Kim Van Sparretak (GREENS/EFA).

2.1 Measurement techniques

Measuring homelessness is a challenging task: settlements are largely informal and often changing rapidly, both in form and place. While the census of 'people-in-homes-with-addresses' (where the meaning of home is economic independence) is based on well-established methodologies, the reference to measure homelessness concerns a framework dedicated to the measurement of rare and elusive, or hard-to-reach populations (inter alia Brent, 2007; Brousse, 2005; Burt, 1996; Shahaghi et al., 2011; Sudman, 1988; Wright and Devine, 1992).

The most common techniques to get insights are:

Facility based inquiries
This technique relies on data from facilities for homeless people, like night shelters, soup kitchens, and clothes distribution centres. Facility based data are relatively low-cost to obtain, but not all organisations are willing to disclose data, and between the different facilities data can be inconsistent. Furthermore, not all the target population makes use of (all) facilities and services. Conversely, not everyone that uses these services is homeless; this, together with possible double counts, is likely to introduce some errors in the estimates.

Point in time census
This technique describes the homeless population of a given territory (usually a city) based on a single night observation

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7   Contains definitions and technical specifications for the census topics (variables) and their breakdowns that are required to achieve Europe-wide comparability.

8   https://eurocities.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/EUROCITIES-report-EPSR-principle-19-on-housing-and-homelessness.pdf

(sometimes multiple nights) at multiple locations conducted by a considerable number of enumerators (people tasked to take the census of a population). The advantages of a point in time are that it gives quite a complete picture of homelessness in a city, since it gathers information both on homeless people using facilities, and on those not using them. Furthermore, since the time period of the count is very short, and usually it is during the night, the risk of homeless people moving back and forth between different places is limited, avoiding double counts. However, there is still the risk of undercounting, since some homeless people may sleep in well-hidden places. Also, the single snapshot in time is below optimal, taking into account a population that varies across seasons, both in its number and distribution (e.g. more homeless make use of nights shelter during winter than summer). Finally, this method is quite time and resources consuming, since it is necessary to find partners (e.g. night shelters) to involve, and it demands a lot of coordination and preparation, also with regards to the enumerators (experts and/or volunteers).

Capture-recapture

This technique concerns two or more independent observations on the same population in selected areas. To make an estimate on the population size (N), the researchers need to know the number of people observed the first time (N1), the ones observed the second time (N2) and the number of people that were at the observation area both during the first and the second time (C). To know this last piece of information, researchers must identify each individual in a way that they can be recognized across observation periods. In this respect, sometimes components of personal identifiers (date of birth, last digits of the identity card's number) are taken, although this is intrusive and can create problems in the process. There are

four assumptions that must hold to apply capture–recapture sampling: a sufficient high capture probability of homeless in the places chosen, the population of homeless is relatively stable during the observation period, that there are no lost tags (people are identified in a way that they will be recognized, if encountered during the second round of the sampling) and that there is independence between the two sets of people going in the two different times in the selected places (this assumption is the most problematic).

Telephone and household surveys

With this technique, households are randomly selected and then interviewed regarding eventual, personal, past experiences of homelessness. The main advantage of this method is that it is possible to build upon existing large–scale national surveys already conducted by official bodies (e.g., Eurobarometer and European Social Survey). The main disadvantage is that since this method uses questions to recall past experiences, answers might be imprecise (for example, regarding the length of a person's homelessness experience). Furthermore, it is not possible to address permanent homeless and in contrast to the other techniques, it does not provide spatial information. However, it does help to understand the magnitude of homelessness in past periods.

Using a combination of the abovementioned techniques can help overcome the weaknesses belonging to each of the techniques individually, increasing the overall robustness of measurement. Next to quantitative data on the number of homeless people, it is also crucial to understand the (basic) profiles of this population, whereas different profiles might have different needs. Therefore, it is necessary to obtain disaggregated data on several dimensions, not only demographic (e.g. age, sex, country of origin) but also status, such as transitional, chronic and/or episodic. In

general, chronic homeless refers to people who have been in shelter systems or living on the streets for at least one year but often much longer. These individuals are often persistently unemployed. Transitional homelessness refers to individuals who enter shelters for a short period of time, often due to a single unfortunate event that pushed them out of already vulnerable housing conditions. Episodic homelessness refers to individuals who frequently fall in and out of homelessness; unlike transitional homelessness, these individuals are often chronically unemployed and are more likely to experience medical, mental health, and/or addiction problems.

These kinds of information are easier to obtain when using administrative data on homeless population, for example, coming from facilities, but it is more difficult to gather through street counts or capture-recapture methods. In those circumstances, most often complementary interviews are needed.[9]

In particular, data collected with in-depth interviews, can shed more light on homeless migrants, for example obtaining information on the type of migration (looking for a job, reunite with their families, to escape legal problems, moved for health reasons, political reasons i.e. discrimination).

2.2 Reflections on measuring and fighting homelessness

In order to 'leave no one behind' it is crucial to address homelessness effectively (see also De Goede, et al, 2016; Hannah, 2001; Kish, 1991; Marquardt, 2015). Thus, when institutions and governments try to prioritise actions for those further behind, they are immediately faced with challenges inherent to marginalised and vulnerable people, such as the measurement of population groups that are often excluded from official statistics (Kharas, Mcarthur, & Ohno, 2015; Klasen & Fleurbaey, 2018).

In this respect, the first step to effective policy is effective measurement. For example, a periodic monitoring, covering all the dimensions of the ETHOS light definition is likely to indicate a strong commitment of a local administration in favour of reducing the number of people living in a condition that falls severely short of one or more thresholds of adequacy.

Apart from measurement techniques, there are other aspects to keep into consideration when measuring homelessness. The first is that different stakeholders bring different perspectives and have different roles. Public authorities provide resources to improve the condition of the homeless population. On the one side, they need robust, periodic, and timely statistics to assess their progress and develop policies, on the other hand, the more people in vulnerable conditions they identify, the higher the resources needed and the more responsibility to cope with this challenge. In general, non-profit organisations receive the resources to act in favour of

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9   Different techniques and methods used to conduct such interviews exist, including a debate concerning reflexivity issues, however discussing these topics is beyond the scope of this report. More information can be found inter alia in Heckathorn, 1997; Salganik, and Heckathorn, 2004.

the homeless (Brousse, 2005), therefore the higher the number of people they are supposed to support, the more resources they will receive. As a consequence, having a joint measurement (public actors and non-profit organisations) as well as the contribution of third parties, like universities or research institutes, might lead to more precise estimates.

The second aspect is that the number of homeless people can decrease for several reasons. First and foremost, by preventing that people become homeless. Homeless numbers might also decrease as a consequence of increased provision of social housing, and/or priority access roots to housing for those experiencing homelessness. But the number of homeless individuals in a city might also decrease as an effect of the installation of 'hostile architecture' deferring homeless people from sheltering in places such as parks, stations or squares, or by introducing rules against eating-sitting in certain places, and fining people sleeping in the street (Mitchell, 2003; Petty, 2016). Therefore, it is important not only to monitor numbers, but also to understand how/why these numbers change over time. This is especially true considering that support to people in fragile conditions should be provided by right, and not by concession (May and Cloke, 2014).

Empirical strategy and data collection

Data for this study have been collected through an online survey, distributed in English to municipalities within the EU. The survey design has received support from FEANTSA and includes 29 structured, semi-structured, or open-ended questions that are divided in five main sections: **1)** general information about the municipality; **2)** data to quantify and qualify homeless; **3)** existing strategies and policies for homelessness; **4)** specific trends or initiatives related to homelessness that have been observed or put in places during the Covid crisis; and **5)** the availability of public/social housing in the municipality and the criteria for inclusion/exclusions from it (see **Annex 1** for the full survey).

The survey was distributed between March and May 2021 to city representatives, often belonging to the Departments of Social Affairs, Welfare or Housing. The survey was spread by reaching out to existing contacts, national contact points for associations of cities and municipalities, additional contact points obtained though desktop research, and with support of EUROCITIES (*https://eurocities.eu*). The survey aimed to reach cities of various sizes and with a balanced geographical spread throughout the EU27. The large majority of respondents replied in English, but a few times replies were sent in another language. In these cases, replies were automatically translated using a European Commission translation tool.

In the end, 133 responses have been collected from 16 Member State (see **figure 1** for the survey coverage per Member State).

The number and geographical scope of responses cannot be considered representative of the situation of homelessness in Europe, and, in that respect, some caution is required with generalising the results. In particular, it should be noted that the large majority of responses from smaller towns, and small urban areas are from Italy and Portugal, and to a lesser extent Slovenia. At the same time, this study is – to the best of the authors' knowledge – one of the most extended data collections on homelessness across European cities, which allows for the identification of some preliminary key trends and issues that in turn can help to delineate possible trajectories and policy recommendations.

Figure 1: **Survey coverage across the EU.**

■ Participating Member States

The data analysis aims to address the following questions:

- How is homelessness defined, and how is data collected?
- What are the main features of the homeless population (e.g., size and profiles)?
- How has the number of people experiencing homeless evolved over the past decade?
- Which initiatives and policies have been implemented as a reaction on the Covid-19 pandemic and what are the middle/long term expectations regarding their implementation?
- Which policies have been implemented to manage homelessness and/or precarious living conditions, for example in terms of access to public/social housing?

Finally, a unique feature of this study is that findings are also analysed per urban classification, meaning in terms of city size. This allows for detection of any possible difference in terms of numbers, profiles, trends and policies between cities of various sizes.

The total number of inhabitants (as indicated by the municipalities themselves) served as the key criterion to make this urban classification. The different categories are largely derived from an existing classification used by the OECD (*https://data.oecd.org*), although an additional category was added (small towns) for the purpose of this study:

- Large metropolitan areas: with a population of 1.5 million or more;
- Metropolitan areas: with a population between 500 000 and 1.5 million;
- Medium-size urban areas: with a population between 200 000 and 500 000;
- Small urban areas: with a population between 50 000 and 200 000; and
- Small towns: with a population of 50 000 inhabitants or less.

Figure 2 shows the number of respondents per country and urban classification. Notably, small urban areas and small towns are mostly from Italy and Portugal, and to a lesser extent also from Slovenia. This results from the fact that the relevant associations of local governments from these countries, were more active in distributing the survey among their members.

Figure 2: Number of respondents per urban classification according to the country (n=133).
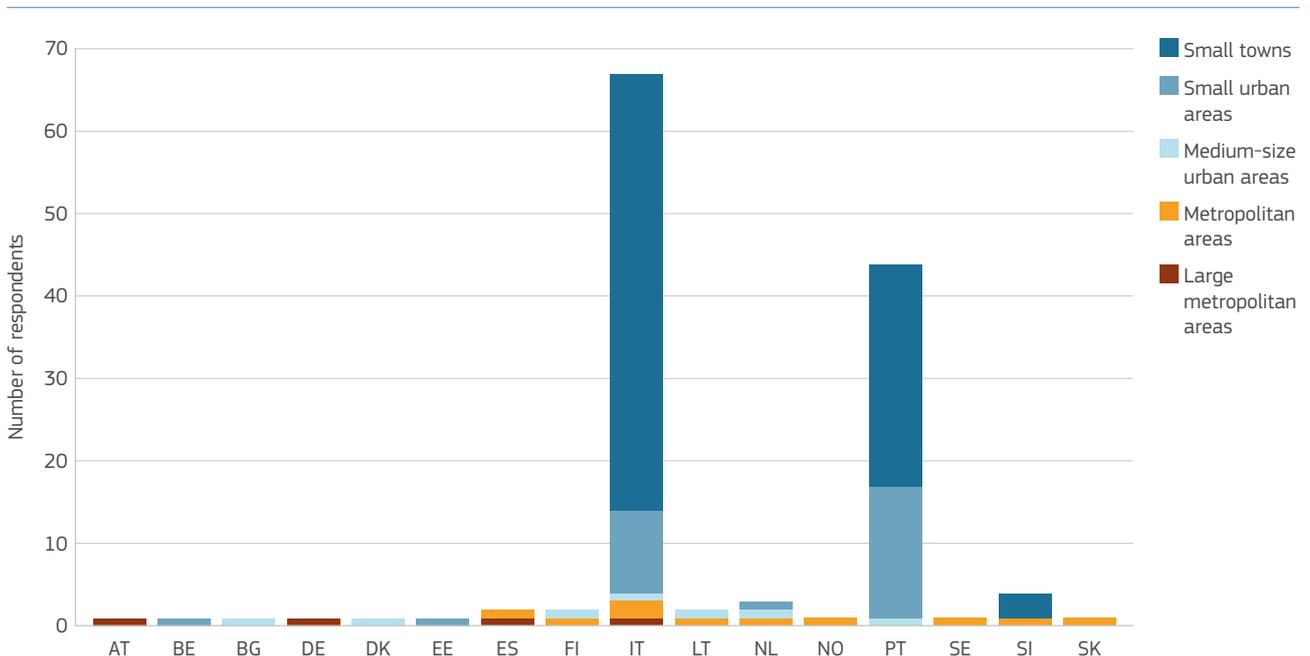
Results

From the 133 respondents that replied to the survey, the majority is employed in the unit or department of social services, followed by other offices such as the housing department, the civil registry office, or the city hall in general. In some cases, specific units dealing with homeless people are involved, such as the Center for Homeless Planning and Intervention of the city of Faro (PT). As far as the administrative grounds of the considered cities, most of them are delineated by their municipal boundaries, or by their metropolitan areas.

4.1 Homelessness definition and methods of data collection

A large majority of the respondents (almost 88%) defines homelessness by some sort of variation to the concept of 'a person who has no fixed address', leaving out any further nuance brought by the Ethos classification. Then, almost 9% of the cities actually do use the ETHOS light definition (e.g. Barcelona (ES), Braga (PT), Bratislava (SK), Gothenburg (SE), Leuven (BE), Odense (DK), Prato (IT), Turin (IT), Vienna (AT), and Zaragosa (ES), or at least an adjusted version of it, and only 3.5% of the respondents indicate that they have not adopted a definition at all (n =114).[10]

Looking at the main data collection methods (n=94), 43.6% of the respondents indicate they rely on a mixture of two or more data collection methods, while the majority relies on a single way of collecting data. An example of the first category is the city of Berlin (DE), which collects data on homelessness:

> *through reporting by the different districts, but also street censuses, evaluation of the accounting systems for the payment of social benefits and the granting of benefits within the framework of homeless assistance, and reporting and accounting with the providers and agencies of homeless assistance.*

From the cities that rely on multiple data sources, most use a combination of their own public institution data (sometimes specifying they use police data, unemployment data, etc.) and data from service organisations. Regardless of whether multiple data sources are used or not, service organisation are most often named as a data source (50.3%), followed by public institutions (34.8%), and street count (8.5%). Finally, a very small number of respondents (2.1%) does not rely on any data collection at all.

Notably, street counts are most often used in small urban areas and small towns. This is probably explained by the fact that they are characterised by a limited absolute number of people experiencing homelessness who are also more easily detected on the street due to the relatively small size of the territory, and thus street counts can relatively easy follow observation. From the large metropolitan areas, actually only the city of Berlin (DE) relies on street counts. Finally, police data are used neither by large metropolitan areas, nor by metropolitan areas.

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10 The letter 'n' refers to the number of respondents included in the analysis (exclusion is based on no data/no reply).

The responses provided limited information on the frequency and periodicity of data collection. Only the cities of Kaunas (LT) and Latina (IT) indicate that data are collected and monitored on a monthly basis, whereas the cities of Amsterdam (NL), Cinisello Balsamo (IT), Gothenburg (SE), Palmela (PT), Valongo (PT), and Zaragoza (ES), specify that data are collected annually. Finally, the city of Oslo (NO) relies mainly on a national survey distributed every 4 years.

4.2 Number of homeless people and urban classifications

Overall, the survey covers around 37 million people. However, not all the surveyed cities gave an estimate of their homeless population, whereas only 122 cities did. At the same time, 34 out of these 122 actually declared they do not have any homeless people.

Taking into account only those cities that did provide an estimation of their homeless population (zero or more), the total number of inhabitants covered by the surveyed cities is almost 33 million, among which 41 280 homeless people are observed. Assuming that all homeless people are included in the population counts, this implies that around 0.13 % of the combined total number of inhabitants is currently homeless. However, the share of homeless within the population differs quite a bit between cities, ranging from zero homelessness, to almost 0.95 %.

Figure 3 shows the average percentage of homeless population per urban classification, illustrating that the share of homeless is highest in metropolitan areas, followed by medium sized urban areas, small urban areas, and small towns. Nevertheless, overall (not using the urban classifications) a moderate positive linear relationship between population and homeless-

Figure 3: **Average percentage of homeless population on total population by urban classification (n=122).**
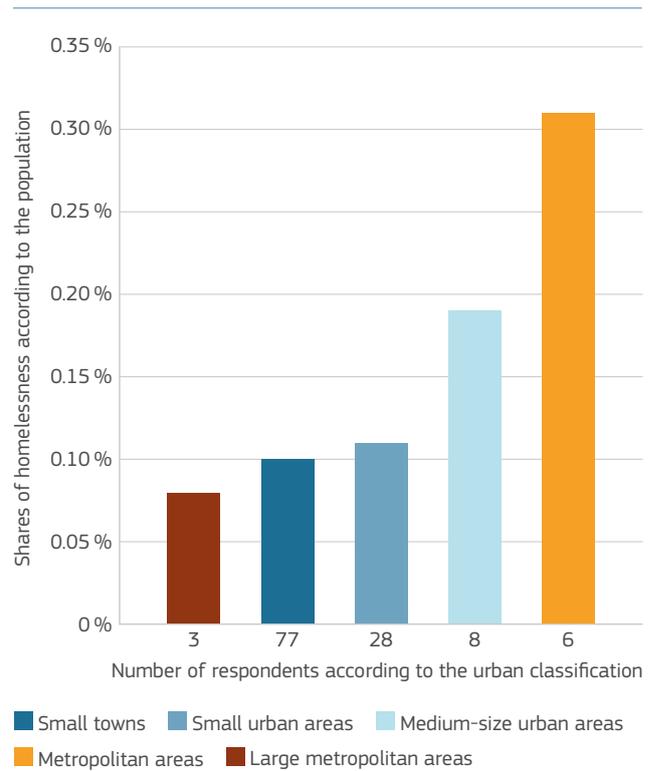
ness is shown, meaning the more people in a city, the higher the number of homeless. However, large metropolitan areas do not seem to support this relationship. Possibly, this can be explained by the fact that in large metropolitan areas, suburbs and surrounding areas increase the total number of inhabitants, while homelessness remains a phenomenon centred in the core city.

If the phenomenon of zero homelessness is broken down by urban classifications, it clearly shows that the larger urban areas disappear completely, with the small towns scoring highest on this feature, leading up to almost 50 % of them stating they currently do not experience homelessness, this decreases to only around 5 % for small urban areas.

When small towns are further disaggregated into towns with a population of less than 5 000 inhabitants and towns with a population between 5 001 and 50 000 inhabitants, it shows again that those places

with less inhabitants, are also more likely to have zero homelessness, whereas 64.2 % of the towns with less than 5 000 inhabitants, currently experience no homelessness at all.

4.3 Profiles, causes, and challenges

Analysing the profile of homeless people in terms of chronic, transitional, and episodic (n=49), it shows that most cities (57.1 %) classify its homeless population as mostly chronic, followed by a 22.4 % of the respondents who state that homeless people are all chronic, and 2 % stating that all are episodically homeless. None of the respondents classifies its homeless population as 'all transitional'. Furthermore, 8.2 % indicate that most concern transitional homeless people, and another 8.2 % indicate that most concern episodic homeless people.

Associating main profiles to urban classification, it is observed that in large metropolitan areas the homeless population is exclusively considered mostly chronic, whereas in small cities more diversity

in profiles and prevalence of profiles is shown, see figure 4.

Exploring the demographic features, 46.6 % of the surveyed cities provide information on sex, indicating that a large majority of the homeless population is male (on average 82.4 %) (n=62). As regards to nationality, 41 % of the respondents provide detailed information, indicating that on average 74.5 % of the homeless population concerns nationals (n=56).

From most answers however, it is not possible to detect how many homeless are migrants (intra/extra EU), and/or if (all) migrants or asylum seekers are counted among the 'general' homeless populations. For example, the city of Odense (DK) declares that…

> *homeless count does not include asylum seekers or migrants*

and the city of Tartu (EE) states that…

> *all people who received the shelter services were Estonian citizens or with a legal residence permit. No immigrants received the shelter services in 2019.*

Figure 4: **Main homeless profile (chronic, transitional, episodic) by urban classification (n=49).**
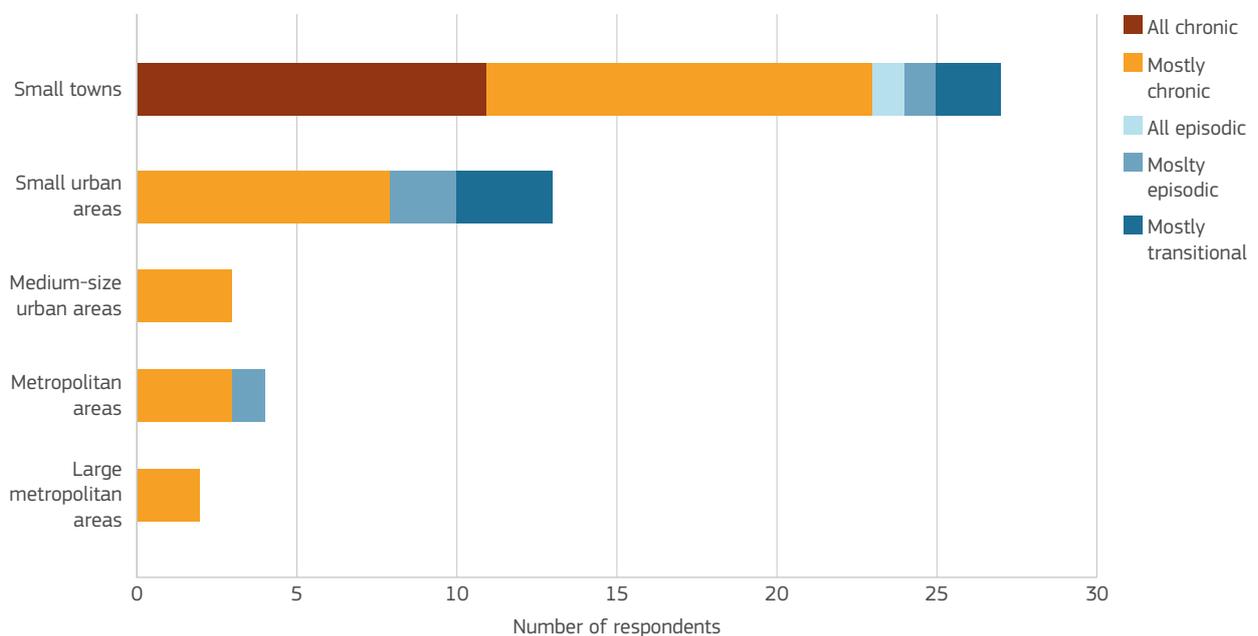
Considering those respondents that were able to provide information on nationality, it shows that migrants are most often registered in the large metropolitan areas (68%), while in all other categories the percentage of migrants is around 23-24%.

Finally, some respondents are also able to provide more demographic details such as age. For example, the small urban area of Coimbra (PT) classifies the number of homeless people as follows: until 18 years old: 1; between 18-35 years old: 15; between 31-44 years old: 39; between 45-64 years old: 88; from 64 years old: 10. Unfortunately, not enough information is available to derive more general findings.

Looking at the primary causes of homelessness, the surveyed cities most often reply this is due to mental illnesses and/or addiction, followed by loss of/in income and family circumstances, such as divorce. With regards to urban classification, metropolitan areas less often indicate family circumstances, compared to the shares in the other categories. Needless to say, despite these reasons appearing as the top 3, they are quite interlinked. Other less relevant, but not negligible reasons are: eviction (e.g., Gondomar (PT), Valongo (PT)), institutional release (e.g., Merano (IT), Maastricht (NL)), and low-income jobs (e.g., Bassano del Grappa (IT), Nova Gorica (SI)).

Among the most cited lessons learned on combatting homelessness (before the Covid-19 pandemic), the adoption of an integrated approach prevails, implying that effective policy requires an integrated intervention and monitoring model, building a coalition between all stakeholders, both horizontally (across sectors) as well as vertically (across administrative levels). Furthermore, as stated by the cities, primary lessons learned also include:

- Assistance to homeless people has to account for the diversity of the group in terms of sex, age, ethnicity, and background and combatting homelessness requires a person-oriented approach (e.g., a case manager model), as well as the adoption of tailor-made solutions.
- Housing First solutions represent highly effective programmes to rehouse homeless people.
- Affordable housing is the essential prerequisite for ending homelessness.
- Protocols with other stakeholders (local police, volunteers, etc.) should be established as well as cooperation between public sector and third sector.
- Homeless persons need to be actively involved in their change process.
- There is a need to ensure continuity in the provision of assistance to the homeless.
- The main difficulty in obtaining data is updating it.

4.4 Trends

In general, results show that a slight majority of cities (29.9%), experienced a positive trend (an increase) in overall number of homeless people in the decade before the Covid-19 pandemic. 21.6% of the respondents state that a stable situation was in place, and 16.5% declares a negative trend, meaning a decline in homelessness. See figure 5 (n=97).

Figure 5: **Trends in homelessness in the decade before the start of the pandemic (n=97).**
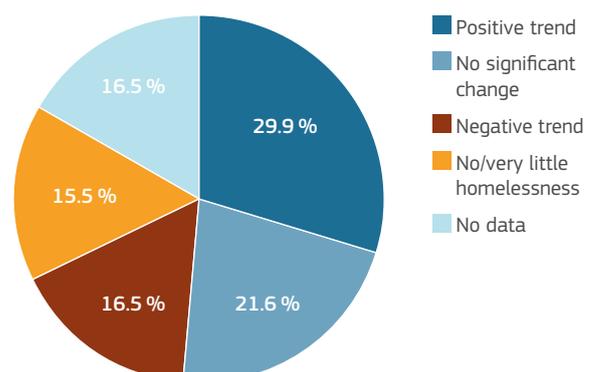
Figure 6: Trends in number of homeless people per urban classification (n=97).
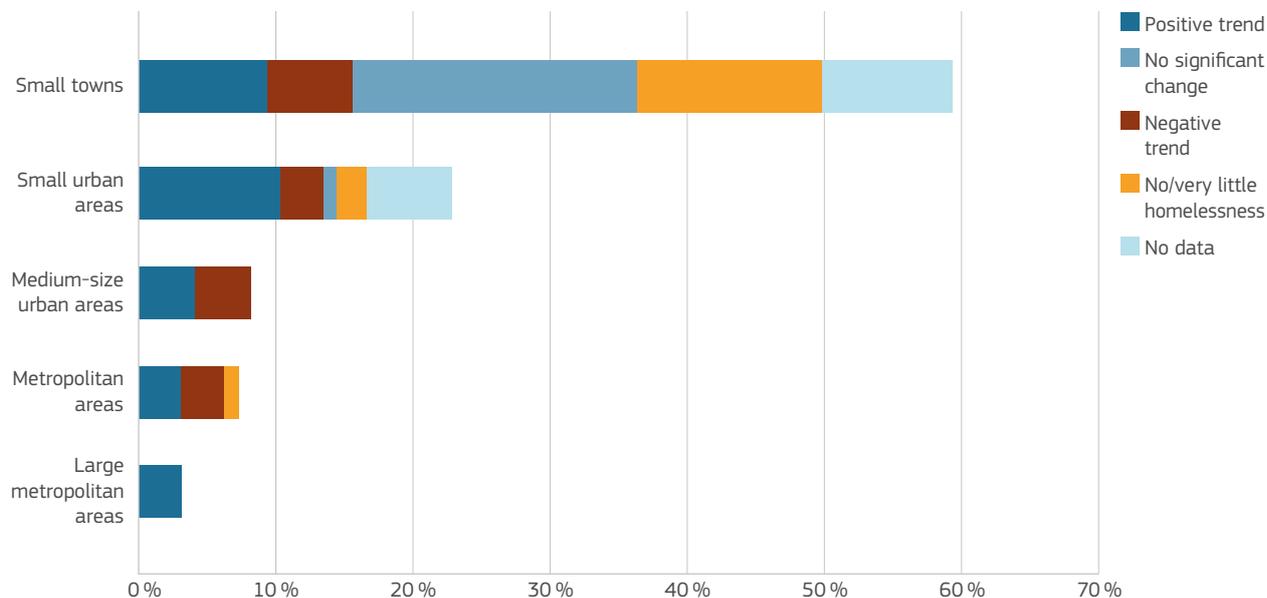
Figure 6 shows the main trends per urban classification (n=97), illustrating that all large metropolitan areas indicate a positive trend. Furthermore, as the size of the cities decreases, more diversity is shown. In relative terms, negative trends, meaning homelessness went down over time, is mostly seen in medium sized areas, and metropolitan areas. Whereas in relative terms positive trends are mostly seen in large metropolitan areas and small urban areas. Small towns most often experienced stable numbers.

Furthermore, 16.5 % of the responding cities also declared a substantial change in profiles of the homeless population over time, pointing to an increase in youth, women, extra EU population, and refugees.

The most mentioned reasons for an increase in homelessness (positive trend) are:

- Higher poverty incidence;
- Less affordable housing;
- Change in administration (meaning a government change, e.g., a new party/coalition in charge);
- Change in data collection.

The most mentioned reasons for a decrease in homelessness (negative trend) are:

- Change in policy (for example: the city of Odense started adopting the Housing First approach in 2020).
- More affordable housing.
- Lower poverty incidence;
- Change in funding.

4.5 Policy

Approximately half of the responding cities (n=123) indicate that they have a specific strategy or policy in place to combat homelessness. Further disaggregating the analysis by urban classification, its shows that all large metropolitan areas and medium-size urban areas, are equipped with specific homelessness policies/strategies, while for metropolitan areas and small urban areas this is on average 78 %. This percentage decreases to 26.5 % for small towns. However, it should be noted that although these are very small urban centres, often characterised by zero homelessness, a small share of them does not ignore the policy side, inserting specific initiatives for vulnerable people, or referring to national policies.

Moreover, to give some specific examples of the declared policies/strategies, the city of Vienna (AT) put in place the…

'Viennese Assistance Programme for Homeless People', with the aim of providing 80% of new clients with their own homes assisted by Housing First Support. The remaining 20% of new clients who do not want to live independently in their own flats are offered a self-contained, permanent apartment in a supervised housing facility. Other peculiarities of this strategy are represented by:

- *The re-organisation and expansion of outreach services to make sure that no one is left behind;*

- *The closure of overnight shelters and transitional accommodations that are less empowering and less effective in (re-)integrating (formerly) homeless people.*

Another example is the city of Turin (IT) that has developed a…

network of public and private services and interventions dedicated to prevention, hospitality, and inclusion policies for homeless people. The city's Social Inclusion Plan has a specific area to develop a co-designed Plan with volunteers and the third sector (social cooperatives).

Most of these policies (58%) are embedded in a larger regional or national framework, and almost 25.8% of the cities and towns have implemented housing first or housing led initiatives in this respect, together housing about 1 678 homeless people in total in the last year (roughly 2020).

Breaking it down per urban classification, it shows that housing first policies have a much higher uptake in larger urban areas (see figure 7). At the same time, several smaller urban areas indicate that they often house homeless people following a housing led approach, although in a less formal way.

Despite the fact that the housing first approaches are generally praised, Naples (IT) remarks that:

[…] the transition from an emergency or step-by-step approach to a housing first approach, which identifies the house as a stable, safe and comfortable place of residence, as a starting point for starting and completing every social inclusion pathway, requires proper planning and graduation, especially as regards action methodologies and working tools.

Furthermore, Helsinki (FI) states that:

One problem having to do with the housing first approach is that people who are no more in the need of supported housing do not want to move out of the housing units because of the good services and safety the units can provide. […] This means that the queues to the supported housing keep getting longer and longer meaning also that we need more emergency and temporary housing for people waiting to get their own home from the supported housing units.

Responding cities were also given the possibility name other special initiatives. One of the most cited initiatives is the organisation of different kinds of shelters, or temporary accommodations (e.g., Olovdiv (BG), Pavia (IT)), followed by the establishment of specific assistance programmes and projects, or specific consultancy activities (e.g. Odense (DK), Nova Gorica (SI)), as well as the presence of voluntary groups, like road units, NGOs, etc. (e.g. Naples (IT), Maribor (SI)), Other less mentioned initiatives are cooperation agreements with public housing organisations (e.g. Odense (DK)), and the establishment of healthcare services (e.g. Barcelona (ES), Modena (IT)).

Figure 7: Implementation of housing first/housing led approaches by urban classification per country (n=31).
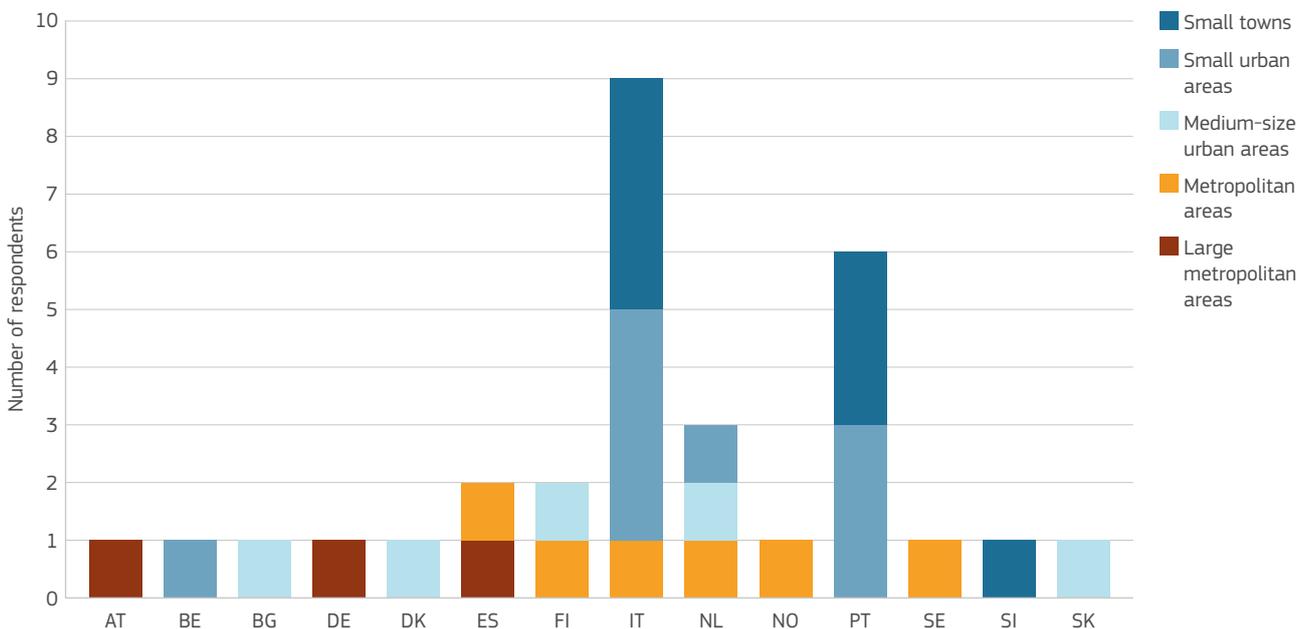
4.6   Covid-19 Pandemic

While the all-embracing effects of the pandemic are still to be seen, this study offers some initial findings about its potential impacts and consequences.

Overall, most cities (approx. 55%) did not observe a substantial increase or decrease in homelessness due to the pandemic, meaning numbers remained more or less stable. At the same time, 40% of the respondents did observe an increase, and 5% noted a decrease. The share of respondents that observed stable numbers is highest among towns or small towns (approx. 75%). Furthermore, the share of respondents that note an increase in general homelessness rises to around 67% in metropolitan areas, and to 60% in smaller urban areas.

In general, the most observed changes in terms of profile are an increase in families, and/or women. Arguably, the latter relates to the possible increase in domestic violence. In addition, some cities noted more particular profile changes; for example, Barcelona (ES) states:

Along with the usual profile of homeless people, new profiles were observed: people that lost their rental rooms because they could not afford the rent, or because of the lockdown conditions (conflicts between flatmates, fear of contagion); people working in the informal economy (hospitality industry, riders, caring sector). For most of them, it was their first contact with social services.

Furthermore, the city of Utrecht (NL) saw a rise in EU mobile citizens who lost their jobs, and also their accommodation, since their employers provided this for. During the (first) period of lockdown, the municipality provided shelter, although this group is not part of the legally permitted target groups of the shelters.

Venice (IT) also observed two main new profiles: single adults that lost their jobs and lacked (social) safety nets, and foreign households with sole or non-regular work, being non-residents and therefore not eligible to the special measures set-up to absorb the economic shocks of the pandemic. Moreover, in Vilnius (LT), a slight increase in elderly and disabled people was observed among those experiencing homelessness.

Some cities, such as Turate (IT), state that they have not experienced an increase in the number of homeless people, but rather an increase in households seeking support to struggling to pay the rent, similar observations were made in Covilhã (PT). Also, Naples (IT) indicated a rise in households living in illegal or inadequate housing seeking support for food and/or income, and in Turin (IT) the number of meals distributed to seriously marginalised people doubled.

A minority of places (approx. 5 %) indicates a decrease in homelessness during the pandemic, which is most likely explained by family and friends offering (temporary) shelter. Notwithstanding, many cities indicate that they are expecting an increase with a bit more time delay, when dedicated support programmes have stopped, and evictions will begin to add up. Furthermore, it must be noted that under the ETHOS light definition, people sleeping temporarily at friends or family are also considered homeless.

Although a substantial number of places indicated that the pandemic did not affect their regular policies, many cities did adapt their ways of working, most notably by establishing emergency shelters, distributing extra food and essential goods, screening for Sars-Cov2 illness at reception centres, establishing isolation and quarantine spaces, extending working hours, lowering the entry barriers to care and shelter, and providing extra financial support. About 25 % of the respondents indicate that they received extra funds from higher-level administrations to manage homelessness during the pandemic, in particular metropolitan areas, and small urban areas. In addition, many tapped into municipal funding.

For example, in Tartu (EE), the department of social welfare and health agreed with the University of Tartu to use dorm rooms for isolation and quarantine for those not able to do so safely at home, while the city's shelter also vacated rooms for homeless people to isolate or quarantine without exposing other residents. Furthermore, several cities such as Amsterdam (NL), Leuven (BE), Malo (IT), Oslo (NO), Rome (IT), Venice (IT), Zaragosa (ES), converted old sports halls, or made use of empty ho(s)tels. Bratislava (SK) actually built a temporary quarantine facility for homeless people, and in Maastricht (NL) an old prison was converted to temporary accommodation, offering each person its own cell. In the smaller urban agglomeration of Casale Monferarrato (IT) a bed and breakfast was made available for shelter, while the municipality of Nova Gorica (SI) installed two 'living containers', one intended for isolation. Various cities, such as Odense (DK) and Oslo (NO) indicated that the emergency accommodation was not used as much as they anticipated.

To manage the health threat, Zaragoza (ES) employed health workers to detect and prevent infection. Also Vienna (AT) implemented screening and testing measures, opening a hotline for homeless service providers to report suspected cases. Similar measures haven been taken in Leuven (BE), increasing the medical outreach and including homeless people in the vaccination campaign as a priority group. Next to the implementation of testing and isolation/quarantine strategies, Berlin (DE) distributes FFP-2 masks in people on low incomes, people experiencing homeless, and refugees. Also, people housed or work in shelters for the homeless have a high priority vaccine entitlement. Mobile vaccination teams are on duty to vaccinate homeless people, and vaccinations are also taking place at more than 20 selected locations of services for the homeless.

Despite the fact that many cities took measures, various also indicate the biggest challenges during the pandemic in shelters; most cities name the inability to test homeless people, seeing some of them do not have the social security

numbers needed for official testing services, as well as isolating people that are suspected or confirmed positive for Sars-Cov-2 illness. It was also noted how the blocking of many informal networks, such as the help of shopkeepers, challenged the situation even further.

Asked about the sustainability (long-term implementation) of any of the measures implemented due to the pandemic, cities did not provide a clear reply, some indicated that most measures will last as long as they are needed while also looking into possibility of implementing some features more permanently, others stressed they are temporary. For example, Amsterdam (NL) indicates that the use of hostels as emergency shelters will stop once tourism picks up again. However, a few cities did state some or more measures will become structural, such as indicated by Turin (IT), including:

- The 24 hours opening of reception facilities;
- Security and privacy distancing;
- Having a single access and orientation centre in the city;
- Strengthening integrated work with the health services.

Also, Leuven (BE) indicates that they foresee an extension of their street support and deployment of medical outreach until (at least) 2025. Berlin (DE) and Faro (PT) specifically mention the possibility of using EU funding to make measures and programmes more permanent. Furthermore, around 39 % of the cities state their pandemic recovery plans include the issues of housing precarious and homelessness. From these, around 72 % concern smaller urban areas, towns or small towns.

As one of the main lessons learned from the pandemic so far, various cities point to the need to have an integrated approach to homelessness, whereby government and third sector work together, including

different departments and domains, such as housing and health. For example, Leuven (BE) states that by joining forces (policy, civil society, and citizens) a lot of effort was made for the target group in a short period of time. Naples (IT) specifically names two main lessons learned. First, the need to recognise primary rights (registration, access to national health service), and second, the need to act on housing exclusion by recognising housing as a right and not as a result of a process of empowerment (thus that you need to earn).

4.7 Social and public housing

Those experiencing homelessness cannot always access public and social housing in the same way as people who do not experience homelessness. For example, Tartu (EE) indicates that the city has about 2 340 apartments used by households with housing needs. People experiencing homelessness and using the shelters are not immediately given access to public housing. First, the accommodation is provided for one year, known as the short-term housing program. If no problems arise, the accommodation is provided long term. Moreover, from the 82 cities that specified their general entry condition(s) to public and social housing, 60 name income. This is also the most mentioned condition overall, followed by residency/citizenship/nationality, household composition, and administrative regularity/employment. Often multiple conditions exist together. 19 of the cities indicated that being in a vulnerable position could also be a reason to enter (pointing also to elderly, refugees, or people with disabilities). 11 cities specifically mention inadequate housing and living conditions as a criterion. Thus, sometimes experiencing homelessness can be a sufficient condition to enter social/public housing and even priority routes exist, other times, it can actually

hinder the chances of obtaining social/public housing due to a lack in income, unemployment, and/or residential status.

Almost 50% of the cities state that people who experience homelessness can access social/public housing (n= 101), this rises to 75% in the large metropolitan areas, to 83% in metropolitan areas, and to 88% in medium-sized urban areas, indicating that larger urban areas are more often housing homeless people in public/social housing than smaller settlements.

For example, around 14000 flats are allocated by the City of Vienna every year. In 2020, 1037 municipal flats were allocated through the Social Allocation Programme of Wiener Wohnen to vulnerable households which corresponds to 7.4% of the annual sum, among them were 247 homeless, corresponding to 1.7%.

Furthermore, Chieri (IT) allocates about 0.1% of its social/public housing to people experiencing homelessness, in Rovereto (IT) this is around 1.75%, in Barcelona (ES) about 2.5% from a total of 9646 public/social housing stock units, and in Vila de Rei (PT) 2.9% (1 out of 36 apartments). Leuven (BE) indicates this percentage is around 5%, and Utrecht states that 30% of the city's social housing accommodations are reserved for homeless people, asylum seekers and people who come out of institutions and shelters (who reintegrate into society).

The average time spent on a waiting list for social/public housing, is mostly 3 to 4 years, followed by less than 12 months. In six cities it takes more than 10 years, concerning two metropolitan areas, one medium sized urban area, one smaller urban area, and two smaller towns.

Asked about the number of homeless people that are on the waiting lists for social/public housing, only medium-sized and smaller urban agglomerations provided a reply. In this respect, 67% of the medium-sized urban areas, have less than 10 people experiencing homelessness on the waiting list, in smaller urban areas and small towns this is 55%. The remaining 33% of the medium-sized cities indicate they have more than 50 people experiencing homelessness on the list, opposed to 9% of the small towns. The remaining 45% of the smaller urban areas indicate they have between 10 and 50 people experiencing homelessness on the list.

To the question what share of the households is considered vulnerable to displacement or eviction, a small minority of cities replied. However, Vienna for instance indicates 20% of the households in the municipal housing pay more than 35% of their net household income for rent plus operating costs and tax. Around 30000 households in public housing (56000 people) are living on minimum incomes.

Furthermore, while no statements can be made about the risk of eviction for the entire housing stock in Berlin (DE), figures from the municipal housing associations can be used. In 2020, with a total housing stock of over 330000 flats, there were a total of 260 evictions due to rent arrears or other reasons. Compared to the previous year, the number of evictions decreased by 169. A distinction is made between occupied (physical) and unoccupied (formal) evictions. In the case of occupied evictions, persons or furniture are found in the flat at the time of the eviction, which suggests that the flat might still be occupied. In the case of unoccupied evictions, on the other hand, the tenants have obviously already moved out and, for example, have merely not handed in keys or have left behind residual furniture and rubbish that had to be cleared by the housing company. Since 2017, the number of occupied evictions has decreased significantly. While there were still more than 300 occupied evictions in 2017 and 2018, the number decreased to 199 in 2019 and

has further decreased to 105 in 2020. This corresponds to a share of the total housing stock of the housing associations of about 0.03 per cent. In 2019, there were a total of 4 299 eviction orders in Berlin. In 2018, there were 4,918. Vilnius (LT) indicates there are currently 20 claims for eviction from social / municipal housing pending in court. Elvas (PT) states that there are currently about 4 households in such precarious situations, risking eviction.

Finally, 69 cities specified their polices to prevent evictions (and thus potentially homelessness), while 8 cities specifically indicate such policies are not in place. From the prevention policies, most concern economic support, followed by eviction suspension, housing support/counselling, and social assistance.

For example, Cinisello Balsamo (IT) states that since 2015, thanks to state, regional and municipal contributions, the social/ educational support service has been set up with the aim of making individual plans with vulnerable households. In this report, a dialogue is started with the owners who initiated the eviction process in order to find effective solutions for both sides.

Discussion and conclusion

This report summarises the main findings of a survey conducted among 133 cities and towns across 16 EU Member States. The study took place within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, and partially followed from the assumption that the requirement to shelter in place, led to better administrative data on homeless population across cities, in particular rough sleepers. From the findings, it is not easy to assess whether data have indeed improved, nonetheless, to the best of the authors' knowledge, this study entails one of the most extended current data collections on homelessness across European cities and towns, allowing for the identification of some preliminary key trends and issues. As such, it constitutes a unique empirical basis and reference work for the development of future research, as well as policies designed to manage and end homelessness in EU urban territories.

A specific feature of this study is that many findings are also analysed per urban classification, meaning in terms of city size. This allows for the detection of any possible difference in terms of numbers, profiles, trends, and policies between cities of various sizes. As illustrated by the findings, homelessness is not exclusively reserved for big and/or capital cities. At the same time, it is found that overall, the number of city inhabitants is moderately positively correlated to the number of homeless, meaning the more people in a city, the higher the incidence of homelessness. Only smaller cities and towns (though obviously not all of them) report that they currently experience 'zero homelessness'. Possibly this is a result of more flexible, targeted approaches, whereby it is also easier to scale up successful initia-

tives. At the same time, it should not be ruled out that homeless people migrate to larger urban areas, to have access to more services, and/or to avoid stigmatisation. Furthermore, it is likely that this, at least partially, follows from using a restricted definition of homelessness, referring exclusively to people sleeping rough.

Notably, it is actually the large metropolitan areas that have relatively low percentages of homeless populations in relation to their overall population. One possible (but not fully satisfactory) explanation is that homeless people tend to remain in the city centres (near services and public spaces), while the (sub)urban fringes of the city drive up overall population numbers.

Looking at the main causes, respondents indicated for homelessness (mental illnesses and/or addiction, followed by loss of/in income and family circumstances, such as divorce), there was no significant difference detected between cities of various sizes, only noting that metropolitan areas less often indicate family circumstances as a cause, compared to the cities of other sizes. Notably, a lack of affordable housing is not named among the key causes. Nonetheless, it is expected that between cities of different sizes the price of (rental) housing is a key distinction. Furthermore, the fact that having a mental illness and/or addiction problems is most often named as the key cause for homelessness, might imply that a rather narrow definition for homelessness is used, focusing only on rough sleepers and people in night shelters.

In terms of main homeless profile (chronic, transitional, episodic) it is noted that big-

ger cities more often indicate they observe mostly chronic homelessness, while between smaller cities and towns, more variation in profile type is observed. Notably, these findings need more scrutiny, whereas previous studies (e.g., Feantsa, 2021) show that in many cities chronic homelessness only affects a minority of the sheltered population. The observation that the profile types of people experiencing homelessness are quite heterogeneous in smaller towns, points to the need for more tailor-made policies to address the different needs. At the same time, the heterogeneity in profile types might follow the fact that there is a deeper understanding of who is homeless in smaller cities, as the overall numbers are smaller.

Furthermore, with regards to the nationality of homeless people, it shows that substantial numbers of foreign nationals are most often registered in the large metropolitan areas, while in cities of smaller sizes this phenomenon has much less incidence. Although homeless people with a migrant background already form a particular category due to the fact that they sometimes follow specific legal trajectories, it does indicate applied policies are more suited in some places than in others.

Regarding to the trend in homeless numbers over the past decade (positive, negative, stable) before the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, smaller cities and towns show more diversity between them. Clearly, this can be a result from the fact that overall, a higher number of smaller EU cities and towns participated to the study (increasing the chance for diversity). However, it does seem that in particular bigger cities have seen its homeless population increase (like the majority of respondents overall), while smaller cities mostly reported stable numbers. In similar vein, while most cities indicate that the number of homeless people remained stable during the Covid-19 pandemic, this is mostly true for smaller cities, suggesting that smaller

places might be more able to shield themselves from external influences, and have more control over the situation to keep numbers stable. With regards to negative trends in the number of homeless people during the pandemic, it should not be ruled out migrants with an irregular status, being aware of stronger controls and counts, actually avoided referring to social services out of fear for the possible consequences of a detection of their irregular situation. Furthermore, some services for homeless people might have been (partially/temporarily) closed during the pandemic, which could have made the count of homeless people more difficult.

Although a substantial number of places indicate that the pandemic did not affect their regular policies, many cities did adapt their ways of working, most notably by establishing additional emergency shelters. Furthermore, various cities point to the need to have an integrated approach to homelessness as one of the main lessons learned from the pandemic so far, whereby different government departments and domains work together (notably including health services), involving also the third sector (e.g., voluntary service organisations, non-governmental organisations, non-profit organisations). For example, Naples (IT) specifically names two main lessons learned. First, the need to recognise primary rights (registration, access to national health services), and second, the need to act on housing exclusion by recognising housing as a right and not as a result of a process of empowerment (thus that you need to earn).

This also relates to the broader findings on policies, whereby the need for an integrated approach is most often stressed, implying that effective policy requires an integrated intervention and monitoring model, building a coalition between all stakeholders, both horizontally (across sectors) as well as vertically (across administrative levels).

Around half of all participating cities indicate there is currently a strategy or policy in place to combat homelessness, from which a large majority is embedded in a larger regional of national framework. However, it is not clear to what extent these policies are integrated. Small towns are least likely to have a specific strategy in place. They are also the places that most often indicate they experience zero homelessness. Nonetheless, many of them still implement policies and programmes to support the most vulnerable.

About a quarter of the cities indicate they have implemented housing first or housing led approaches, and uptake is much higher among larger urban areas. However, various smaller cities indicate that they provide similar services, although sometimes in a less formal way. Notably, these findings are likely to a bit skewed since relatively many cities from Italy took part in the survey, and this is one of the countries that has been very successful in promoting housing first approaches.

Arguably, re-housing policies also depends on the type(s) of housing stock already available in a city. In some countries, social housing is more often found in smaller cities, or in suburban areas, while in other countries it is (also) located in the city centres of the bigger cities. For example, findings from this survey show that in particular in larger urban areas homeless people can access social/public housing. At the same time, in general (easy) accessibility is not often the case, nor is it sufficient. Places that do not have a large supply of social and public housing stock, or do not make it accessible, might refer to other means to reduce or combat homelessness, relying more on prevention policies, and/or informal support networks. Nonetheless, the relationship between the level of social/public housing (and related expenditures), and homelessness demands a careful assessment, since some countries have relatively high levels of social/public housing (and related expenditures), and also high levels of homelessness.

Overall, there are some real indications that city size matters when it comes to homelessness. At the same time, more research is needed to fully understand why many smaller cities experience zero homelessness, or even relatively low shares of homeless people, and why profiles and trends tend to differ between cities of various sizes. Only thereafter, the implications for policies can be fully determined.

Currently, anecdotal evidence implies that many smaller cities reproduce the policies of big cities (such as establishing night shelters), which are not necessarily adapted to the needs of the local homeless population. Possibly, some smaller cities might also incorporate a certain hesitancy towards a housing first approach from bigger cities, while a consistent housing first approach is probably more easily and more effectively scaled up in smaller urban areas. Therefore, instead of smaller cities reproducing big city policies, it might be more fruitful when big cities follow successful policies developed and implemented in smaller urban areas.

Moreover, next to more research into the various dynamics within cities of different sizes, also the relationships between trends and profiles, and (prevention) policies should be further explored.

In conclusion, this study once more stresses the strong need for better data to lay the foundation for better policies and more awareness of the real extent of the phenomenon among local communities (see also Alesina et al., 2020). Further efforts are needed to stimulate and facilitate the use of a common definition across the EU, paired with robust data collection, across cities and towns of various sizes.

This particular study could also be repeated after being improved: asking less,

and more targeted questions. It appeared that the surveyed administrations were not always able to reply to all questions (especially those on social/public housing, or vacant housing) since this was not part of their day-to-day work. In order to get a more complete picture, it is likely that specific units/departments need to be addressed for specific sets of questions. Furthermore, some replies needed further interpretation by the researchers in order to aggregate and categorise them. To decrease the chance of wrongful interpretations, the survey should be redesigned in such a way that replies will more easily fall within pre-defined categories.

Lastly, as stated by the local administrations, effective policies to combat homelessness require an integrated approach. This also holds true for the EU level, and resonates with set-up of the European Platform on combatting homelessness. Early 2022, the European Commission, the Member States, and representatives of local authorities, social partners and civil society, endorsed an ambitious work plan to eradicate homelessness in the EU by 2030. While the work plan includes a detailed list of actions for all parties involved, the European Commission will support the monitoring of homelessness through the European Semester process and the Social Protection Committee, and it will also strengthen analysis and data collection, by implementing a new EU-wide counting initiative, collecting data on past experiences of homelessness through Eurostat, and setting up a common monitoring framework on homelessness. Furthermore, a dedicated website will promote good practice in the prevention of, response to, and exit from, homelessness, while also a policy toolkit will be developed. Finally, more support will become available to the relevant services to find their way to existing EU funding opportunities. Alesina, A., Miano A., and S. Stantcheva (2020), The Polarization of Reality, *AEA Papers and Proceedings,* (110) 324-28.

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List of figures

Annex: Survey

Homelessness during the pandemic and beyond

City information
- **Question A.** Please enter the name of the city you represent.
- **Question B.** Please indicate which unit(s) or department(s) in the city work on homelessness.
- **Question C.** Please indicate the number of city inhabitants, including the reference year.
- **Question D.** If possible, please indicate how the city is defined/delineated.
  - e.g., referring to the administrative boundaries of the city, the greater metropolitan area, or the functional urban area.

Homelessness: Data
- **Question 1.** If applicable, what is the definition of a homeless person that is used in your city?
- **Question 2.** Can you give an estimate of the number of homeless people in your city in 2019?
  - Please, if you use the ETHOS light classification*, we kindly ask you to provide data accordingly.
  - Also, please indicate what the number represents: e.g. average number of rough sleepers per night, per week, or yearly total.

Based on the ETHOS light classification, homelessness refers to:
- *People living rough;*
- *People in emergency accommodation;*
- *People living in accommodation for the homeless;*
- *People living in institutions;*
- *People living in non-conventional dwellings due to lack of housing;*
- *Homeless people living temporarily in conventional housing with family and friends (due to lack of housing)*
- **Question 3.** Can you divide this estimation by profile type, specifying the share of transitional, chronic and episodical homeless persons*?

Chronic homeless people are those belonging to this category for more than 1 year; episodical homeless people are those falling back into homelessness several times during a year; Transitional homeless people are those entering the homeless system once and not coming back.
- **Question 4**. Can you divide this estimation based on demographics?
  - For example divided by age, gender, nationality and migration status (e.g. asylum seekers, EU migrants, undocumented migrants, etc.)
- **Question 5.** How does your city gather data on homelessness?
  - (e.g. shelter/service use, street count, data received from service organisations etc.)
- **Question 6**. How has the number of homeless people evolved in the past 10 years, but before the start of the Covid-19 crisis?
  - If possible, also indicate the evolvement in terms of homelessness profile type, and demographics.

- **Question 7.** How can you explain these trends?
  (Multiple answers possible) Between 1 and 11 choices.
  - Change in data collection
  - Change in homelessness definition
  - Change in administration/government policy
  - More/less evictions
  - Higher/lower poverty incidence
  - Less/more affordable housing
  - Change in funding
  - More/less migration
  - More/less austerity
  - Change in homelessness policies
  - Other
  - Question If other, please specify
- **Question 8.** Can you name the 3 most observed (primary) circumstances that lead to homelessness in your city? Between 1 and 3 choices.
  - Loss in/of income
  - End of rental contract
  - Family circumstance such as divorce
  - Mental problems and/or addiction
  - Accident
  - Eviction
  - Working poor
  - Institutional release (prison, youth care)
  - Other
  - Question If other, please specify
- **Question 9.** Are there entry conditions for homeless people to access shelters/shelter beds? Please describe them.

Homelessness: Actions

- **Question 10.** Does your city have a specific policy/strategy for homelessness? Yes or No
- **Question 10b**. If yes, can you describe its central objective(s) and process?
- **Question 10c**. Is this strategy embedded in a regional or national framework? Yes or No
- **Question 11.** Do you have 'housing first' initiatives* in your city? Yes or No

Housing first initiatives refer to policy that uses housing as a tool for integration, rather than as a reward for the integration process (the staircase model). A Housing First service provides housing as soon as possible, without the need to demonstrate specific requirements. Additional information is available on housingfirst.europe.eu.

- **Question 11b.** If yes, how many homeless people are housed annually through the Housing First approach?
- **Question 12.** Are there other special initiatives that target homelessness in your city that you would like to mention?
- **Question 13.** Please, if possible, cite the (max.) 3 main lessons learnt on homelessness in your city before Covid-19.

Homelessness: Covid-19

- **Question 14.** How did homelessness evolve during the Covid-19 crisis?
  - (e.g. increase in number of people, decrease in access to shelters
- **Question 15.** If applicable, how did the profile of homeless people change during the Covid-19-crisis, such as more families, more women, younger/older people. (You can also refer to anecdotal evidence)

- **Question 16.** If applicable, please list all the initiatives related to homelessness that have been put in place during the Covid-19 crisis (e.g. use of empty hotel rooms, offices or vacant apartments to homeless shelters, etc.).
- **Question 17.** If special initiatives have been taken, how long-lasting are these solutions, both in terms of funding and in terms of capacity?
- **Question 18.** Did your city receive extra funds from the regional or central government to manage homelessness during the pandemic, and/or have local funds been raised? (please specify)
- **Question 19.** What is considered the biggest challenge with regards to homelessness and Covid-19?
- **Question 20.** What is considered the main lesson learnt with regards to homelessness and Covid-19?
- **Question 21.** Does the Covid-19 recovery plan of your country/city include the issues of housing precariousness and homelessness? Yes or No
- **Question 21b.** If yes, what are the proposed actions?

Homelessness: Public/social housing

- **Question 22.** What are the criteria to enter public/social housing in your city (e.g. nationality, household composition, income ceiling, employment)
- **Question 23.** Does your city use public and/or social housing* to house homeless people? Please specify.

Social housing is generally understood as accommodation which is provided at affordable rates, on a secure basis to people on low incomes or with particular needs. Social housing is usually owned by the state or by non-profit organisations such as housing associations. Public housing is understood as housing provided by the government or state at low rents for people on low incomes.

- **Question 23b.** If yes, what share of public/social housing is allocated to homeless people?
- **Question 24.** Are the criteria to enter public and/or social housing the same for homeless people? Or do priority access routes exist?
- **Question 25.** How long is on average the waiting list to obtain public/social housing? (based on the last available data)
- **Question 26.** If applicable, how many homeless people are in the waiting list?
- **Question 27.** If available, what share of households is currently considered vulnerable* to potential displacement or eviction?
  - If possible, please indicate how households vulnerable to eviction are defined.

One way to operationalise households that are vulnerable to potential displacement, is by looking at households that spend more than 40 % of the disposable income on housing. Another way is by looking at households overcrowding

- **Question 28.** What are the policies to prevent evictions (and thus potential homelessness) in your city?
- **Question 29.** Can you give an approximation of the number or share of vacant residential housing/apartments in your city? (excluding holiday homes/second houses)

Additional remarks

Please add any comments you might have.

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