Counting the homeless in Luxembourg

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The Luxembourgish experience of data collection on homelessness

Despite the fact that the development of instruments to count the homeless poses a lot of methodological problems, in 2006, the Ministry of Family and Integration has decided to face the challenge through the support of a first project of national scope that consists in the counting and the characterisation of persons who are concerned by housing exclusion.

This project has been entrusted to the CEPS/INSTEAD, which, in collaboration with a representative of the Ministry of Family and Integration and with representatives of those organisations that take care of persons who are exposed to housing exclusion, had outlined the project methodology. In contrary to ordinary household surveys, the collaboration and the support of the field actors to the project are essential to guarantee a good unwinding of such a project.

What did we know about homelessness before the launch of the 2006 survey?

Until 2006, the annual progress reports of the qualified Ministries in the field of exclusion related to housing and the annual progress reports of NGOs working with this population presented figures on the people suffering from exclusion related to housing. But these figures did not make it possible to measure the extent of the phenomenon because they suffered from the absence of a harmonized definition of the people exposed to exclusion related to housing. Indeed, the same person could be counted several times (phenomenon of double counting particularly for people suffering from exclusion related to housing who go to various structures during one year).

In 1994, 1995 and 1996, under the impulse of the FEANTSA (European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless), a survey of people exposed to exclusion related to housing was carried out by the CEPS/INSTEAD. NGOs working in the field of exclusion related to housing were to indicate the number of users attending their structure during one given day (the participation of NGOs in the survey was not compulsory). Although figures could be produced (343 people in 1996), they cannot be compared with those produced for 2006 because the methods, the voluntary character of the participation in the survey and the scope of the survey were different.

Survey 2006: how many people suffer from exclusion related to housing? Who are they?

To answer these two questions requires, in a preliminary stage, to define exclusion related to housing. The retained definition used in this survey is inspired by the ETHOS typology (European Typology of Homelessness and Housing exclusion). It results from the work of researchers carried out within the framework of the European Observatory on Homelessness of FEANTSA. The definition of housing exclusion does not only concern rough sleepers, but it also allows to tackle housing exclusion from a broader point of view by including also the situations of people living in precarious and inadequate accommodations.

Finally, the persons suffering from housing exclusion are:
- *People sleeping rough;*
- *People living in night shelters;*
- *People living in mixed homeless hostels;*
- *People in women's shelter and supported accommodation for women;*
- *People leaving institutions;*
- *People in supported accommodation.*

After having defined the scope of the population and having listed all the structures which belong to this scope, the second challenge consisted in choosing the data collection method. We have chosen face-to-face interviews of all the users of the facilities. In order to limit the problems of double counting, because the people exposed to exclusion related to housing are very mobile, the period of data collection was fixed between February 6th and February 12th 2006. Thus, the survey gives us a picture of the situation of the people concerned by exclusion related to housing during one week in 2006. On the whole, 41 structures out of 43 which correspond to the criteria took part in this survey.

What does this survey teach us?

Given that we have defined the exclusion related to housing as the users – older than 17 years old - of the mixed shelters (centres de jour), of the night shelters (centres de nuit), of the shelters and accommodations for people receiving longer-term support between February 6th and February 12th 2006, we have counted 715 people.

This population is characterized by a great diversity of situations. Certain persons sleep in the street, others in night shelters, which they must leave in the morning, others are in shelters, individual accommodations offered for free or for a small participation by an organisation which ensures a follow-up in parallel, finally others are temporarily lodged by their family or by friends. This population is also characterized by a strong mobility between the various situations.

More precisely, out of the 715 people, 30 slept in the street or in a public space the day before the survey, 136 in a night shelter, 141 in a mixed shelter, 240 in an accommodation for people receiving longer-term support, 40 in institutions (either lodged in a hospital, or left a prison), 38 were staying in their family or by friends and, 88 had slept in their personal accommodation.

The participation rate of the survey was quite high since 568 persons out of 715 agreed to take part (79%). The people whose situation is most extreme (those which sleep in the street or in a night shelter) had the lowest participation rate.

Characteristics of the population:

- Slightly more men (54%) than women (46%).

- A rather young population (Half of the population is aged between 18 and 34 years).

- An over-representation of the persons coming from a non EU-25 country.

- A rather relatively low educated population.

- Especially people living on their own and single-parent families.

- An exclusion which is accompanied by a reduction of the social relations.

- 35% have an occupation, half of them thanks to active employment policies. When they do not have a job, the setback with the labour market is, for much, a situation of long term. But, taking into account the very great heterogeneity of the population, the causes are varied (dismissal, resignation, end of contract, personal or family problems).

- 80% of the surveyed people indicate to have private means. In fact, especially incomes from the social protection, first of all the Minimum Income Guaranteed (social assistance), compose these resources. But 25% perceive wages, especially the people most stabilized in terms of housing. Certain people (15%), more frequently those who sleep in the street or in the night shelters, had to go begging to have resources.

- They have a rather negative perception of their health.

- Two principal reasons contributed to the loss of their housing and thus to the recourse to a structure of lodging or for some to the street: economic and financial reasons (loss of work, of the income, over-indebtedness and impossibility of honouring the rent) and personal and family reasons (separation, disagreement, marital violence).

- Among the people questioned, a person out of three had already known this situation at least once in his life.

Beyond the lessons coming from this survey, the first of this scale at the national level, this exercise is an excellent starting point to guide a reflection on a regular evaluation of the situation of those persons who are exposed to housing exclusion.
In the future, what instrument should be constructed in order to realize a regular assessment of the situation of the situation of these people, in order to assess the progress done in this domain?

Questions and remarks raised by this project that can help to define a national strategy to improve the collection of standardized data on homelessness

The questions and remarks raised by this project can be divided in 5 points:

- The definition of the target population: It is important to clearly identify what one plans to measure. From a theoretical definition to an operational definition of homelessness, how should one proceed? The European Typology on Homelessness and housing exclusion (ETHOS) has to be the starting point to define the target population.

- The data collection method / source of data: to collect data on homelessness, three methods can be envisaged: a survey on homelessness people using face to face interviews, the census and thirdly a permanent data collection by the NGOs working with the homeless people. Each of these methods presents advantages and disadvantages.

Collecting data using a survey is a complex, costly and time-consuming process. The 2006 survey on homelessness was successful but it's difficult to repeat such a survey every year.

Until now, no information about homelessness is available in the census. But new recommendations for the 2011 census require that the "homeless people" must be listed. One big disadvantage of the census is the periodicity of the data collection (once every 10 years). Another disadvantage of the census is that the information collected is quite poor with regard to the homelessness.

The data collection by the NGOs working with the homeless people via a common tool and procedure is certainly the most efficient method. Before 2009, this mode of data collection didn't exist in Luxembourg. Some of the most important NGOs have implemented their proper tool to manage their homeless people (tool that can also produce statistics) but no common system exists that offers the possibility to describe the national situation. Implementing a common and unique system for all the NGOs, a system that permits at the same time to manage and to produce statistics on homeless people would be useful for the NGOs and for all the stakeholders implicated in the question of homelessness. Longitudinal data will be richer than only cross-sectional data. Because data collection on homelessness implies that the social workers will be involved in the fieldwork, which will be the additional workload for them? On the other side, the benefit that such a tool can offer to the social workers has to be analysed.

- The kind of data to be collected: the kind of data to be collected depends first on the objective looked for. Questions have to be simple and importance has to be given on the length of the questionnaire. Knowing that homelessness is not only a state but it falls under a process, questions concerning this process have to identify the main reason of the situation and not recount the whole life of the person.

- Data protection: like for other data collection on persons, the question of data protection has to be precisely analysed.

- Comparability of data: to measure the progress made for fighting against homelessness, it's important to have comparable data and indicators over-time. And, for international comparison, it is also important to take care to remain comparable at the European level.

- The stakeholders: for the success of such an operation, it is necessary that various administrations (Ministries, Commune) and the NGOs take part in it at the different stages of the project.

The option taken recently by the Ministry of Family and Integration to implement a permanent system for counting the homeless

Taking into account the previous experiences in counting the homeless, taking into account the exchanges between the different stakeholders (notably during the MPHASIS meeting), the Ministry of Family and Integration has recently asked a private company (Valain Company, that has developed some years ago, via the Ministry of the Equality of Chances, a system that permits to produce statistics on the users of women's shelter accommodation) to develop a system for counting and describing the homeless in the different NGOs subsidized by the Ministry of Family and Integration.

At this stage, the core variables that are collected by this system are the ones proposed by the MPHASIS project:

- Age and gender;

- Nationality and country of birth;

- Household structure;

- Living situation immediately preceding the need for supportive measures and at the time of the survey;

- The length of the most recent period of homelessness and the current housing situation;

- The cause of the most recent period of homelessness.

In the future, data on health, employment and housing will also be collected.

The system will help the social workers of the different structures to be more efficient. It is also planed that information of the clients could be exchanged between the different structures with the permission of the client.

After the validation of the system, it is planed that the system will be diffused to all the NGOs involved in the homeless sector (i.e. the NGOs subsidized by other Ministries than the Ministry of Family and Integration).