

UNITED NATIONS
ECONOMIC COMMISSION FOR EUROPE
CONFERENCE OF EUROPEAN STATISTICIANS

Expert meeting on measuring poverty and inequality
29-30 November 2018, Vienna, Austria

Topic F: Coverage of hard-to-reach and potentially disadvantaged population groups in data collection

Coverage of persons with past episodes of homelessness and housing difficulties

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Abstract

Housing exclusion and homelessness are important subjects within the EU's efforts to fight poverty and support social inclusion. Currently, there is a lack of comparable data on homelessness and those experiencing housing difficulties across the EU Member states. EU-SILC revision allows for the inclusion of several variables which would enable the collection of comparable data relevant for this policy area.

However, as a household survey, EU SILC is not the appropriate instrument for sampling people who are currently homeless. Instead, it can provide valuable insights into specific dimensions of past homelessness and housing difficulties. Specifically, a module in EU SILC will allow the exploration of:

- Past episodes of homelessness and housing difficulties,
- Reasons for such past episodes,
- Exiting homelessness and housing difficulties

For the first time, in approximately half of the MS, this data will be collected in 2018. In the revised EU-SILC, this data is planned to be collected in all MS every 6 years.

Introduction

EU-SILC is a statistical data collection focused on income but covering also other domains of living conditions and their determinants, which enables the analysis of the multidimensional phenomena of poverty and social exclusion, and for the joint analysis of its different dimensions. It has been gradually implemented since 2003 and currently provides annual data for EU 28 member states, Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and some other countries¹.

EU-SILC defines the harmonised lists of target variables, common guidelines and procedures, common concepts and classifications aimed at maximising comparability of the information produced. It consists of primary and secondary target variables which are collected at two different levels, the household and the individual level (for persons aged 16 or over).

The primary target variables are collected every year and cover the following domains:

- At household level: basic/core data, income, housing, material deprivation.
- At personal level: basic/demographic data, income, education, labour and health.

Secondary variables are collected every five years, or less frequently in the so-called ad-hoc modules. Ad-hoc modules have been included each year since 2005 in order to complement the variables permanently collected in EU-SILC with supplementary variables highlighting unexplored aspects of social exclusion. The modules implemented between 2005 and 2016, and for which data have already been disseminated, covered the following topics: inter-generational transmission of poverty and of disadvantages, over-indebtedness and financial exclusion, housing conditions, material deprivation, intra-household sharing of resources, social and cultural participation and well-being as well as access to services².

EU-SILC, as an EU reference source for comparative statistics on income distribution and social inclusion, is used for monitoring various EU policies and in particular to monitor the poverty reduction headline target of the Europe 2020 strategy³.

EU-SILC currently undergoes a complete review of its content and methodology as part of a broader project on modernisation of EU social statistics.

As a part of the review of its contents, it is discussed which topics are important for the policy users and should be included in EU-SILC modules. In the revised EU-SILC, it has been agreed that modules will be collected on a regular basis every 3 years or 6 years with the aim to monitor changes over time and also to complement the information collected in the SILC annually. One of the topics which is planned to be collected as part of every 6 years in revised EU-SILC is housing difficulties. This module aims to collect information on past experiences of homelessness.

Policy justification

Adequate, affordable housing is crucial to the enjoyment of fundamental rights, health, well-being and social inclusion. Housing exclusion and homelessness are important themes for the EU's efforts to fight poverty and promote social inclusion.

¹ Montenegro, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey.

² <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/income-and-living-conditions/data/ad-hoc-modules>

³ <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/europe-2020-indicators/europe-2020-strategy/targets>

Non-harmonized national statistics suggest that homelessness is increasing in a majority of MS⁴.

Designing and implementing measures to reduce homelessness is a (sub) national competence. Nonetheless, the European Commission provides Member States with support through policy guidance and through EU funding. Key steps in the emergence of homelessness as a priority on the EU's social agenda include:

- 2008 French Presidency of the EU
- 2009 Joint Report on Social Protection and Social Inclusion of the Commission and Council
- European Consensus Conference on Homelessness organised by the Belgian Presidency of the Council in 2010
- Calls for a European Homelessness Strategy by various EU institutions and bodies, notably the Committee of the Regions, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Council (EPSCO), the European Parliament
- Publication of the Social Investment Package in 2013, including specific policy guidance on homelessness
- Inter-ministerial Round Table on Homelessness organised by the Irish Presidency in 2013
- Housing exclusion identified as a social trend to watch in the 2015 European Semester

Collecting data on homelessness at EU level has so far been very difficult. However, there has been criticism that the EU's social statistics do not cover more extreme forms of poverty well. The need to address this issue has been highlighted and it was agreed that action should be taken.

Various attempts have been made to improve the data available on homelessness at EU level. In 2007, the European Commission funded a study on measuring homelessness⁵. There was an attempt in the 2011 census to gather comparable data on homelessness. This exercise delivered useful information for some of the Member States, however due to a lack of harmonization in the definition and methodology, the data available is not comparable across countries.

EU-SILC as a survey on private households cannot collect information on persons experiencing homelessness currently. However, the ongoing revision of the EU-SILC legal basis provides an opportunity to monitor past homelessness on a regular basis. For this purpose a Task Force (TF) was set up for preparing variables on homelessness and related guidelines to be implemented as a test in the EU-SILC ad hoc module 2018. In addition to Member States volunteering to participate, FEANTSA (the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless) provided support to Eurostat and the work of the TF.

⁴ FAP- FEANTSA (2015) *Overview of Housing Exclusion in Europe*

⁵ European Commission (2007) *Measurement of Homelessness at European Union Level*

Main difficulties

Definition

The issue of how to define homelessness has been one of the main concerns when developing new variables measuring homelessness in EU SILC. Homelessness is a complex phenomenon and there is no universally accepted definition.

FEANTSA developed ETHOS – the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (see annex 1) as a definition based on four conceptual categories: rooflessness; houselessness; insecure and inadequate housing. ETHOS has become a widely accepted frame of reference. In 2007, a study on measuring homelessness funded by the European Commission used ETHOS as a starting point to propose a harmonized definition of homelessness for data collection purposes (see annex 2). This was a “light” version of the ETHOS, which was simplified for data collection purposes. ETHOS was used also as a starting point when defining homelessness in EU-SILC.

The major challenge was to agree which categories of ETHOS to use in questions for EU SILC. On the one hand, there were suggestions of using the broad categories in order to capture “hidden” forms of homelessness. On the other hand, there were concerns that when too many situations will be considered as homelessness, the usefulness of the data for policy purposes could be reduced. For example, several members of the TF expressed concern about the inclusion of ETHOS 8.1 (staying temporarily with family/friends) because it could apply to large parts of the population e.g. young people who are studying or saving to buy a first home.

Taking into account the above considerations it was agreed that a person should be considered as having past housing difficulties if had no place of their own (either owned or rented) where they could live and therefore were forced to stay with friends/family, stay in emergency or other temporary accommodation, a place not intended as a permanent home or had to sleep in a public space. Moreover, Eurostat clarified in the guidelines that if respondent was forced to leave their home temporarily due to unforeseen event such as: risk of earthquake; fire in the neighbourhood; evacuation of the neighbourhood because of bomb defuse etc. but in general had place of their own (either owned or rented) to live in then the respondent should not be considered to have had housing difficulties.

Furthermore, the category ‘staying with friends or relatives’ – should include only situations when somebody was forced to move (back) to family or friends as they did not have any other place to stay. Visits, staying for limited time (e.g. during refurbishing of own flat) or living with family in order to save money rather than due to an absolute need should not be taken into consideration.

Those clarifications in the guidelines enabled a broad definition of homelessness, allowing counties to capture also "hidden" forms of homelessness, while at the same time not include situations which could be considered as normal at certain stages of life.

Sample Issues

One of the most important issues when working on the topic of homelessness in EU-SILC was the concern of the occurrence of how many cases of past housing difficulties would be recorded taking into account the relatively small sample size and the perception that homelessness is a relatively 'rare' social issue.

Eurostat together with the countries and FEANSTA analysed experiences of other institutions and countries in collecting information on experiences of homelessness (Annex 3). In particular, the following retrospective modules on Homelessness were analysed:

- French Health Survey designed by INSEE, 2013

- The Survey of English Housing 1994/95
- The Scottish Household Survey, 2012
- Toro et al. survey, 2007
- Australian General Social Survey, 2010

Based on the experiences from other countries, it could be seen that homelessness in some form was experienced by between 4.5% and 13.5% of the population. The results differed greatly depending on the reference period taken into account as well as the definition of homelessness used.

There were two strategies Eurostat used to increase the chances of capturing past experience of homelessness within EU SILC. The first one was to maximize the number of living situations/ETHOS categories included in the definition. However, a balance needed to be found between larger coverage for sample size reasons and policy relevance as well as its perception by the interviewees (see the discussion on the definition above). The second strategy was to maximize the reference period. During discussions, FEASTA recommended having a reference period of 5 or 6 years. This however, was viewed as too short and after consultations with Member States it was agreed to extend the reference period to 'lifetime'. The downside of using 'lifetime' as a reference period was that there will be no information on when the housing difficulties took place and when the respondent overcame the problem. However, 'lifetime' was also used by other surveys and using this reference period allows collecting information from a greater number of respondents.

Overall, Eurostat together with Member States agreed that the only way to establish the feasibility of addressing homelessness in the EU SILC sample was to test it as part of an ad hoc module which was implemented in 2018.

Implementation in EU-SILC

As indicated above, in EU-SILC it is impossible to collect information about current homelessness. Therefore, it was proposed and agreed with the WG members to try to collect information on past housing difficulties.

As, also explained, Eurostat co-operated with FEANSTA when developing the ad hoc module 2018. In particular concerning variables, FEANSTA advised Eurostat on what information is the most crucial.

Moreover, the variables have been pre-tested with the use of focus groups and cognitive interviews in English, French and Polish. Taking into consideration the results of the pre-testing, the proposed variables have been further modified. Moreover, Eurostat consulted Member States at multiple stages and also feedback received from the countries was crucial when finalising the list of variables to be collected.

As such, it has been suggested to have a filter question which would provide information on the number of people who experience any type of homelessness/housing difficulties during their lifetime. As stated earlier, guidelines for this variable were written in such a way as to preclude people who were not really forced to live outside their house (either owned or rented).

Having such a filter variable also limits the burden for majority of the respondents.

Following this, it was proposed to have a variable which would measure the duration of the experienced housing difficulties. It was recognised that it is possible that respondents experienced

housing difficulties more than once during their lifetime. There was discussion with the Member States regarding which information is more important - how long the longest occurrence of housing difficulties lasted or how long the most recent occurrence of housing difficulties lasted. At the end it has been agreed to ask about the duration of the most recent experience of housing difficulties. In cases when someone during a continuous experience of housing difficulties changed their place of stay (e.g. from emergency accommodation moved to a place not intended as a permanent home and following this was 'sleeping rough'), it was agreed that the total duration should be reported.

Housing difficulties are a complex, multidimensional issue and often a consequence of multiple events. From a policy perspective, it is crucial to have information regarding which are the main factors which lead to housing difficulties. After discussions with Member States, as well as taking into considerations outcomes of the pre-testing, it was decided to have two variables collecting information on reasons for past housing difficulties.

The last variable aimed at obtaining information regarding what enabled the respondent to get out of housing difficulties. In general, there may be more than one thing; nevertheless, the respondent is asked to select the most important thing in their opinion. For some people, it could be the first event which was a stepping stone and lead to escaping housing difficulties while for others it could be the most recent event. This variable also collects information on respondents who are still experiencing housing difficulties and stay with family or friends (in a household covered by the survey) due to a lack of other housing.

In 2018, the following 5 variables on past housing difficulties were collected for the first time and on a voluntary basis⁶:

<p>PHD01T Past experience of housing difficulties Yes, staying with friends or relatives temporarily Yes, staying in emergency or other temporary accommodation Yes, staying in a place not intended as a permanent home Yes, 'sleeping rough' or sleeping in a public space No</p>
<p>PHD02T Duration of the most recent experience of housing difficulties Duration</p>
<p>PHD03T Main reason for past housing difficulties Relationship or family problems Health problems Unemployment End of rental contract Uninhabitable accommodation Leaving an institution after a long stay and no home to go to Financial problems/ Insufficient income Other</p>
<p>PHD04T Other reason for past housing difficulties Relationship or family problems Health problems</p>

⁶ Although optional those variables were included in regulation Commission Regulation (EU) 2017/310 of 22 February 2017 implementing Regulation (EC) No 1177/2003 of the European Parliament and of the Council concerning Community statistics on income and living conditions (EU-SILC) as regards the list of target secondary variables on material deprivation, well-being and housing difficulties for 2018 (https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv:OJ.L_.2017.045.01.0001.01.ENG&toc=OJ:L:2017:045:TOC)

Unemployment End of rental contract Uninhabitable accommodation Leaving an institution after a long stay and no home to go to Financial problems/ Insufficient income Other No other reason
PHD05T Exit from housing difficulties Existing, new or renewed relationship with family or partner Addressed health problems Gained employment Moved into social or subsidised private housing Other Still experiencing housing difficulties

During past consultations 13 Member States⁷ declared that they will implement the optional housing difficulties variables in the 2018 EU-SILC ad hoc module.

Plans for the revised EU-SILC

In the revised EU-SILC, a few variables on past housing difficulties are planned to be collected every 6 years. Based on the results of the test of the module in 2018, available in 2019, a decision will be made on the final list of variables to be included in the revised EU-SILC.

Conclusion

There is a strong need for comparable information on persons experiencing homelessness. As a household survey, EU SILC is not the appropriate instrument for sampling people who are currently homeless. However, it can provide valuable insights into specific dimensions of past homelessness and housing difficulties. In 2018, information on past housing difficulties was collected for the first time in EU-SILC. The information was collected on a voluntary basis at this testing stage.

In the revised EU-SILC, after improving the variables and guidelines based on the outcomes of the 2018 test, information on past housing difficulties is planned to be collected every 6 years. This will provide information for policy makers on type of housing difficulties, duration, main reasons for housing difficulties and what allowed respondents to exit housing difficulties.

⁷ Belgium, Bulgaria, Germany, Ireland, Greece, Spain, Hungary, Malta, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, the United Kingdom and Denmark (Denmark partially, only the first 3 variables)

Annex 1: ETHOS

		Operational Category		Living Situation		Generic Definition
Conceptual Category	ROOFL LESS	1	People Living Rough	1.1	Public space or external space	Living in the streets or public spaces, without a shelter that can be defined as living quarters
		2	People in emergency accommodation	2.1	Night shelter	People with no usual place of residence who make use of overnight shelter, low threshold shelter
	HOUSELESS	3	People in accommodation for the homeless	3.1 3.2 3.3	Homeless hostel Temporary Accommodation Transitional supported accommodation	Where the period of stay is intended to be short term
		4	People in Women's shelter	4.1	Women's shelter accommodation	Women accommodated due to experience of domestic violence and where the period of stay is intended to be short term
		5	People in accommodation for immigrants	5.1 5.2	Temporary accommodation /reception centres Migrant workers accommodation	Immigrants in reception or short term accommodation due to their immigrant status
		6	People due to be released from institutions	6.1 6.2 6.3	Penal institutions Medical institutions (*) Children's institutions/homes	No housing available prior to release Stay longer than needed due to lack of housing No housing identified (e.g. by 18 th birthday)
		7	People receiving longer-term support (due to homelessness)	7.1 7.2	Residential care for older homeless people Supported accommodation for formerly homeless people	Long stay accommodation with care for formerly homeless people (normally more than one year)
	INSECURE	8	People living in insecure accommodation	8.1 8.2 8.3	Temporarily with family/friends No legal (sub)tenancy Illegal occupation of land	Living in conventional housing but not the usual or place of residence due to lack of housing Occupation of dwelling with no legal tenancy -Illegal occupation of a dwelling Occupation of land with no legal rights
		9	People living under threat of eviction	9.1 9.2	Legal orders enforced (rented) Re-possession orders (owned)	Where orders for eviction are operative Where mortgagee has legal order to re-possess
		10	People living under threat of violence	10.1	Police-recorded incidents	Where police action is taken to ensure place of safety for victims of domestic violence
	INADEQUATE	11	People living in temporary/ non-conventional structures	11.1 11.2 11.3	Mobile homes Non-conventional building Temporary structure	Not intended as place of usual residence Makeshift shelter, shack or shanty Semi-permanent structure hut or cabin
		12	People living in unfit housing	12.1	Occupied dwellings unfit for habitation	Defined as unfit for habitation by national legislation or building regulations
		13	People living in extreme overcrowding	13.1	Highest national norm of overcrowding	Defined as exceeding national density standard for floor-space or useable rooms

Annex 2: ETHOS Light

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

Annex 3: Modules on Homelessness in Household Surveys

1. In France, INSEE has included variables on experience of not having a home of one's own in its household survey. Data is available for 2006⁸ and is currently being processed for 2013. Preliminary results for 2013 indicate that 9% of adults living in ordinary housing have experienced sustained and involuntary periods where they had no home of their own. A broad range of living situations are covered. If people staying with family and friends are removed, the proportion of the population affected falls to 3-4%. If people staying in hotels on their own costs are removed, it falls to 2% of the adult population.
2. The Survey of English Housing 1994/95 (at that time, an annual nationally representative survey of households with a sample size of 20,000) asked heads of households: 'There is a lot of discussion these days about homelessness. Can I just check, in the last 10 years, would you say that you have ever been homeless?'. 4.3% of heads of household said that they had been homeless at some time during this period. Burrows (1997) provided a detailed analysis of 'the social distribution of the experience of homelessness in England' based on this single question⁹.
3. The Scottish Household Survey is a continuous, large-scale social survey of the composition and characteristics of Scottish households which has been reporting since February 1999. The sample size is approximately 10,000. The SHS included a module on experience of homelessness in the period 2001-08, in 2010 and 2012. The module consists of a series of 15 questions. A random adult in each household is asked whether they have ever been homeless ('homelessness' is self-defined in this question). Those that reply are "no" are then asked whether they have experienced any of a short list of 'objective' housing problems that could constitute homelessness over the past two years. The list includes:
 - sleeping rough,
 - staying with friends/relatives because of not having anywhere else to live,
 - staying in emergency accommodation or other insecure accommodation
 - applying for help from the council because of the threat or actuality of homelessness.

Researchers have combined the 'subjective' lifetime measure and 'objective' measure of experience over the past two years to give a 'lifetime experience of homelessness' indicator. 6.9% of adults in Scotland had 'lifetime experience of homelessness' in 2008¹⁰.

4. The only existing transnational study on overall prevalence rates of lifetime homelessness was Toro *et al's* (2007) work¹¹. In five developed countries were conducted telephone interviews. It was found that 'lifetime homelessness' in the US and UK was considerably higher than in Belgium, Germany and Italy. However, Toro *et al's* survey had a range of limitations: response rates were relatively low, the sample sizes in individual countries were quite small, and it was restricted to those ex-homeless people who had access to a telephone. Moreover, there were also differences in phrasing questions across the countries.

⁸ See 2009, Peretti G., Marpsat M., Une personne sur vingt s'est retrouvée sans logement personnel au cours de sa vie, Insee Première n° 1225 ;

http://www.insee.fr/fr/themes/document.asp?reg_id=0&ref_id=ip1225

⁹ Burrows, R. (1997) 'The social distribution of the experience of homelessness', in R. Burrows, N. Pleace and D. Quilgars (eds) *Homelessness and Social Policy*, London, Routledge.

¹⁰ Fitzpatrick, S, Pawson, H, Bramley, G, and Wilcox, S (2012) [*The Homelessness Monitor: Scotland 2012*](#). Institute for Housing, Urban and Real Estate Research, Heriot-Watt University and Centre for Housing Policy, University of York, London, Crisis

¹¹ Toro, P.A., Tompsett, C.J., Philippot, P., Nachtergaeel, H., Galand, B., Schlien, N., Stammel, N., Yabar, Y., Blume, M., MacKay, L. & Harbey, K. (2007) '*Homelessness in Europe and the United States: a comparison of prevalence and public opinion*', *Journal of Social Issues*, 63(3): 505-524.

5. The 2010 Australian General Social Survey¹² collected information about persons aged 18 years and over who lived in private dwellings. The total sample of the survey was 15,028 dwellings. The survey asked people about episodes in their lives where they had been without a permanent place to live, about the reasons for those circumstances and about their use of services in relation to periods of homelessness. Episodes of homelessness were identified during the analysis using a broad definition roughly comparable to ETHOS. 13% of respondents were classified as having experienced homelessness at some time in their lives

¹² Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010) [General Social Survey: Summary Results](#)