UNITED NATIONS HUMAN SETTLEMENTS PROGRAMME

P.O. Box 30030, Nairobi 00100, Kenya

unhabitat-info@un.org | www.unhabitat.org

FOR A BETTER URBAN FUTURE

Expert Group and Intersessional Thematic Meeting on:

Definition of Homelessness

ANNEX 1. BACKGROUND

Existing definitions

Several international frameworks have sought to define homelessness in ways that reflect its complexity across different contexts. While no globally harmonized definition currently exists, these frameworks contribute valuable perspectives. Selected examples are outlined below:

1. **European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS-2005)[1].** Developed by the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA), ETHOS provides a comprehensive framework based on existing definitions and lived experiences. It identifies four conceptual categories of homelessness and housing exclusion, further broken down into 13 operational categories. Ethos Light, a simplified version with six categories was developed for statistical harmonization across EU member states. The OECD uses the ETHOS Light framework for their work on homelessness.

The **ETHOS framework[2]** identifies **13 distinct categories, in 4 groups** of homelessness and housing exclusion. Identifying the **universe of distinct categories** is a critical first step toward developing a globally agreed definition.

ROOFLESS

1. **People Living Rough (**Public space or external space)
2. **People in Emergency Accommodation (**Night shelter)

HOUSELESS

3. **People in Accommodation for the Homeless**
   - o   Homeless hostel
   - o   Temporary accommodation
   - o   Transitional supported accommodation
4. **People in Women's Shelter**
   - o   Women's shelter accommodation
5. **People in Accommodation for Immigrants**
   - o   Temporary accommodation / reception centers
   - o   Migrant workers accommodation
6. **People Due to Be Released from Institutions**
   - o   Penal institutions
   - o   Medical institutions (*)

---

[1] ETHOS Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion.

[2] FEANTSA, 2005, European typology of homelessness ethos and housing exclusion

> - Children's institutions / homes
> 7. **People Receiving Longer-Term Support (Due to Homelessness)**
>   - Residential care for older homeless people
>   - Supported accommodation for formerly homeless people
>
> **INSECURE**
>
> 8. **People Living in Insecure Accommodation**
>   - Temporarily with family/friends
>   - No legal (sub)tenancy
>   - Illegal occupation of land
> 9. **People Living Under Threat of Eviction**
>   - Legal orders enforced (rented)
>   - Re-possession orders (owned)
> 10. **People Living Under Threat of Violence**
>   - Police recorded incidents
>
> **INADEQUATE**
>
> 11. **People Living in Temporary/Non-Conventional Structures**
>   - Mobile homes
>   - Non-conventional building
>   - Temporary structure
> 12. **People Living in Unfit Housing**
>   - Occupied dwellings unfit for habitation
> 13. **People Living in Extreme Overcrowding**
>   - Highest national norm of overcrowding

2. **United Nations Economic Commission for Europe** (UNECE, 2006) for the 2010/11 Census round, UNECE proposed a two-tier classification of homelessness:
   a. *primary homelessness (rooflessness):* individuals not living in private or institutional households.
   b. *secondary homelessness:* individuals without a usual place of residence.

3. The **Expert Group Meeting on Affordable Housing and Social Protection Systems for All to Address Homelessness**,[3] convened by UN-Habitat and UNDESA (2019) recommended a definition that is:
   a. **Inclusive**: looking at the social, physical, and security domain to ensure that no one is left behind.
   b. **Culturally sensitive**: the definition should differentiate among degrees and types of homelessness, given that no form of homelessness is acceptable. The definition should account for the differences in the socioeconomic context of countries to tackle, holistically, any potential manifestation of homelessness.

---

[3] UN Habitat (2019) Expert Group Meeting on Affordable Housing and Social Protection Systems for All to Address Homelessness. 22-24 May 2019. Nairobi

c. **Shaped around homelessness as a systemic failure**: homelessness should be viewed as a societal rather than an individual flaw. As a human rights issue, homelessness sits at the intersection of public health, housing, domestic violence, mental illness, substance misuse, climate change and natural disasters, urbanization, racial and gender discrimination and unemployment. More so, it reflects the structural inequality and discrimination toward those who are denied their rights to adequate housing.

To account for the above-mentioned features, the Expert Group proposed the following definition: ***Homelessness is a condition where a person or household lacks habitable space with security of tenure, rights and ability to enjoy social relations, including safety. Homelessness is a manifestation of extreme poverty and a failure of multiple systems and human rights"***.[4]

This definition informed the adoption of the *United Nations General Assembly Resolution 78/172 in 2023*. The definition proposes four broad categories of homelessness *(See Figure 1):*

d. *People living on the streets or other open spaces*
e. *People living in temporary or crisis accommodations*
f. *People living in severely inadequate and insecure accommodation (for example, extremely overcrowded conditions, unconventional buildings and temporary structures)*
g. *People lacking access to affordable housing (for example, people sharing with friends and relatives on a temporary basis, people living in cheap hotels, bed and breakfasts).*

4. **Institute of Global Homelessness** (IGH) defines homelessness as "lacking access to minimally adequate housing."[5] This definition incorporates three dimensions of housing adequacy:

a. *Security:* legal tenure, protection from eviction, and financial stability to remain in housing,
b. *Physical adequacy:* structural quality, overcrowding and habitability,
c. *Social adequacy:* safety from others living internally, privacy and the ability to maintain social relations.

The IGHT's Global Homelessness Framework (2015)[6] categorizes homelessness into three tiers:

a. people without accommodation,
b. people living in temporary or crisis accommodation, and
c. people living in severely inadequate and insecure accommodation.[7]

[4] Definition proposed by the expert group at its meeting in Nairobi from 22 to 24 May 2019. (https://docs.un.org/en/E/CN.5/2020/3)

[5] Busch-Geertsema, V., Culhane, D. and Fitzpatrick, S. (2016) 'Developing a global framework for conceptualising and measuring homelessness'. Habitat International, 55, pp. 124-132. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2016.03.00

[6] Argeriou, M., McCarty, D., & Mulvey, K. (1995). Dimensions of homelessness. Public Health Reports, 110(6), 734–741. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1381895/

[7] Busch-Geertsema, V., Culhane, D. and Fitzpatrick, S. (2016) 'Developing a global framework for conceptualising and measuring homelessness'. Habitat International, 55, pp. 124-132. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2016.03.004. (p.228)

People without accommodation	People living in temporary or crisis accommodation	People living in severely inadequate and insecure accommodation
1A **People sleeping in the streets or in other open spaces** (such as parks, railway embankments, under bridges, on pavement, on river banks, in forests, etc.)	**2A** **People staying in night shelters** (where occupants have to renegotiate their accommodation nightly)	**3A** People sharing with friends and relatives on a temporary basis
1B **People sleeping in public roofed spaces or buildings not intended for human habitation** (such as bus and railway stations, taxi ranks, derelict buildings, public buildings, etc.)	**2B** **People living in homeless hostels and other types of temporary accommodation for homeless people** (where occupants have a designated bed or room)	**3B** People living under threat of violence
		3C People living in cheap hotels, bed and breakfasts and similar
	2C **Women and children living in refuges for those fleeing domestic violence**	**3D** People squatting in conventional housing
1C **People sleeping in their cars, rickshaws, open fishing boats and other forms of transport**		**3E** People living in conventional housing that is unfit for human habitation
	2D People living in camps provided for 'internally displaced people' i.e. those who have fled their homes as a result of armed conflict, natural or human-made disasters, human rights violations, development projects, etc. but have not crossed international borders	**3F** People living in trailers, caravans and tents
1D **'Pavement dwellers'** - individuals or households who live on the street in a regular spot, usually with some form of makeshift cover		**3G** People living in extremely overcrowded conditions
	2E People living in camps or reception centres/temporary accommodation for asylum seekers, refugees and other immigrants	**3H** People living in non-conventional buildings and temporary structures, including those living in slums/informal settlements

IGH FOCUS AREA IN **BOLD**

While these definitions share common goals of capturing housing exclusion and guiding policy responses, they differ in terms of scope, target populations, and applicability across regions. Comparative analysis of these definitions highlights the inherent trade-offs between conceptual breadth and operational feasibility. Each of these frameworks balances inclusiveness and measurability differently. Broader definitions support more comprehensive responses but introduce complexity in data collection. Conversely, narrow definitions can facilitate monitoring but may omit hidden forms of homelessness. Figure 1 illustrates key differences among selected international frameworks on homelessness.
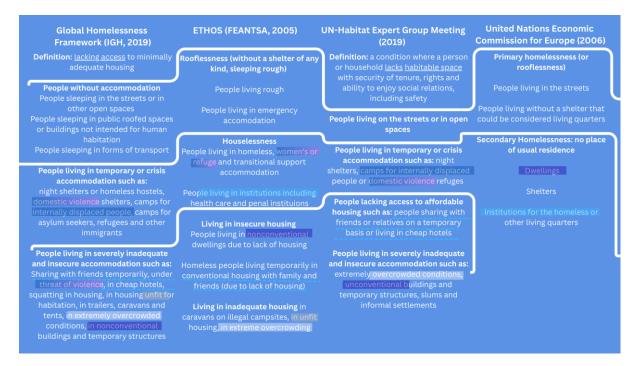
Figure 1 (Source: adapted from IGH, 2019; FEANTSA, 2005; UN-Habitat EGM, 2019, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, 2009)**:**

A. Analysis of existing definitions

Focus on Visible Homelessness Skews Priorities

Policy and public focus often prioritize visible homelessness—individuals sleeping rough or residing in shelters—while neglecting those experiencing "hidden homelessness" in overcrowded, informal, or unstable living arrangements. This narrow focus excludes many, including women, children, LGBTIQ+ persons, Indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities, and migrants, who are less likely to appear in official statistics due to safety concerns, discrimination, or reliance on informal networks. As a result, structural drivers of housing exclusion go unaddressed, and the full scale of homelessness remains underestimated.

Challenges of Broad Definitions: Complexity, Overlap and Measurement Implications

Broader definitions of homelessness—those that encompass hidden or precarious living arrangements, including individuals staying temporarily with friends or relatives, in overcrowded dwellings, or informal or inadequate shelters—recognize the full spectrum of housing insecurity, but present data collection challenges. Individuals experiencing these less visible forms of homelessness are often not in contact with formal services, making them difficult to identify or survey systematically. Incorporating them into monitoring frameworks increases the complexity, cost, and operational uncertainty of data collection, particularly in resource-constrained settings.

Further, broader definitions include diverse population categories that face very different housing challenges and may lack tenure security—such as internally displaced persons, migrants, refugees, or residents of informal settlements. This overlap risks double counting, inconsistent reporting, and fragmented policy responses, undermining accountability and coordination.

Time as a Critical Dimension of Homelessness

The duration of homelessness experience plays a critical role in shaping people's trajectories[8], influencing both the nature of vulnerability and the required policy response. Recognizing this temporal dimension is essential for the formulation of effective, inclusive housing policies and social protection systems.

Homelessness is not a uniform condition—it manifests in varying forms over time:

- **Transient homelessness** often arises from acute disruptions such as job loss, eviction, or family breakdown. Individuals may still retain social ties or resources enabling relatively quick reintegration if supported early.

- **Episodic homelessness** is characterized by repeated, short-term spells of housing instability, frequently reflecting underlying structural barriers or unmet social or health needs.

- **Chronic homelessness** involves sustained or recurrent housing exclusion over months or years and is often associated with intersecting vulnerabilities including mental health conditions, substance dependency, and systemic marginalization.

The longer someone remains without stable housing, the more likely they are to face a range of escalating difficulties. Longer durations of homelessness are associated with greater exposure to trauma, deterioration of physical and mental health, and deeper disengagement from formal systems. Furthermore, individuals experiencing chronic homelessness frequently cycle through emergency shelters, health care facilities, and the justice system, incurring significant social and economic costs while remaining excluded from long-term solutions.

Time is not merely a descriptive variable—it is a **structuring factor** in the experience and resolution of homelessness. Embedding it within the conceptual and operational aspect of a homelessness definition enhances clarity, inclusivity, and accountability. It shifts the discourse from viewing homelessness as a uniform status to understanding it as a condition that evolves over time and requires differentiated, sustained, and context-sensitive policy responses.

Type of living arrangement

Incorporating the type of living arrangement into the definition and conceptual framework of homelessness significantly enhances the precision and usefulness of housing policy. homelessness is not a uniform condition but a continuum of experiences shaped by duration, dwelling type, and and personal experience of loss of security, stability, and social connection — the feeling of belonging nowhere.

People may be found in a variety of settings, ranging from relatively stable to severely inadequate, including:

- **Conventional housing**: Own home, rooming houses, family or friends' homes.

- **Institutional settings**: Shelters, hospitals, detox centres, jails.

---

[8]

- **Extreme homelessness**: Streets, parks, cars, abandoned buildings, public transit stations, tents.

Acknowledging these different forms of living arrangements allows for a more nuanced operational definition of homelessness. It moves beyond a simple dichotomy of "housed" versus "unhoused" and enables identification of individuals living in insecure, inadequate, or unstable conditions—many of whom are excluded from narrower legal or statistical categories.

Furthermore, this approach reflects the fluid and transitional nature of homelessness. People often shift between different forms of accommodation, and their degree of vulnerability may vary depending on the stability, safety, and adequacy of their current living arrangement. By capturing these variations, definitions of homelessness become more comprehensive and aligned with the lived experiences of those affected.

Implementation Challenges Due to Data and Capacity Constraints

Even where comprehensive frameworks exist, operationalization is hindered by the complexity of data collection and limited statistical infrastructure. Frameworks like ETHOS and the IGH Global Framework encompass legal, physical, and social dimensions of exclusion, but few countries possess the institutional capacity to gather this data reliably. Consequently, many adopt simplified approaches, which reduces the effectiveness of these frameworks in informing targeted policy responses.

I.   How is Homelessness Currently Measured

Stronger data, in recent times, has enabled the development of national strategies and shifted public perceptions of homelessness. Quantitative metrics alone can reinforce exclusion and invisibility, especially numbers that are not contextualised. Disaggregated, qualitative, and longitudinal data, collected in partnership with affected communities, can support the development of equitable and effective policies. A human rights approach that respects dignity suggests existing data methods are complemented by self-reporting, particularly considering those living in severely inadequate housing that do not consider themselves homeless.

The Global Homelessness Data Initiative Advisory Committee (IGH) suggest that demographic information, frequency and geographical coverage are important components of measuring homelessness. The IGH recommends that enumeration at the national level should take place at least once a year, at the same time each year, and should be fed into policy development regularly.

The Expert Group recommendations[9] coordinated by UN-Habitat also suggest the collection of quantitative and qualitative data, which captures the needs and drivers or homelessness, as well as testimonies and pictures that seek to include those not statistically visible.

Specific demographic information is crucial to understanding the intersections of those experiencing homelessness and how to create better targeted policies. Recommended disaggregated demographic information includes sex, age, type and household size, length of time experiencing homelessness and health/disability status. Where possible income sources, race, ethnicity, migratory status, cause of

---

[9] Expert Group Meeting on Affordable Housing and Social Protection Systems for All to Address Homelessness (Nairobi, 22-24 May 2019). UN Habitat.

homelessness and or reason for loss of last settled home, as well as other nationally relevant characteristics should be collected.

Geographical coverage is important, ensuring that all major cities are included, as well as samples of rural areas, particular communities and towns of different sizes.

B. Existing Measurement Approaches

While some high-income countries and a growing number of middle-income countries have developed national-level data systems, current global data remains fragmented, inconsistent, and insufficient for a comprehensive understanding of the issue. Current data collection and aggregation is insufficient to provide a 'true' count of global homelessness. However, sufficient data is available at the national level in large parts of the Global North and some of the Global South, suggesting it would be feasible and useful to track trends over time.[10] Despite these limitations, existing national practices and innovations offer important lessons for strengthening data systems, improving comparability, and supporting evidence-based policymaking.

Some of the currently used data collection approaches and methodologies are described below.

- **Point-in-Time (PIT) Counts** - This method involves a physical enumeration of individuals sleeping rough or using emergency shelters on a specific night. This method is common in countries like the United States, Canada, and South Africa, where volunteers and service providers conduct street-level headcounts. While these counts offer valuable snapshots, they often underrepresent populations who are less visible or avoid formal services, such as women, youth, or those temporarily staying with others.

- **Service-Based Sampling -** Service-based sampling is another common approach, involving data collection from shelters, food banks, or day centres. In Germany, for example, data on shelter usage is a key input for federal homelessness monitoring. Similarly, Australia's Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS) system compiles rich administrative data from frontline agencies. However, service-based methods tend to overlook people who do not or cannot access formal support systems, such as undocumented migrants or those in remote areas.

- **Registry Weeks / By-Name Lists** - More recently, cities and countries have begun implementing registry weeks and by-name lists, which attempt to maintain real-time individual-level data on people experiencing homelessness. In Finland, such tools are embedded within the Housing First strategy, helping tailor interventions. In Brazil, municipalities like São Paulo have conducted registry weeks with civil society partners to identify needs and track housing status. These approaches are often resource-intensive but support more targeted and effective programming.

- **Administrative Data** - Administrative data systems have proven valuable in countries with strong welfare infrastructure. Denmark and Norway integrate health, housing, and social service data to monitor transitions in and out of homelessness. In Chile, administrative data has been used to align national strategies with shelter and street-level information. Yet, in many countries,

---

[10] Busch-Geertsema, V., Culhane, D. and Fitzpatrick, S. (2016) 'Developing a global framework for conceptualising and measuring homelessness'. *Habitat International*, 55, pp. 124-132.
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.habitatint.2016.03.004.

administrative data systems are fragmented or lack the interoperability needed for longitudinal analysis.

- **Capture-Recapture Techniques** - A more technical approach, capture-recapture methodology, has been applied in places like Scotland, the Netherlands, and Mexico. This technique estimates the size of hidden homeless populations by comparing two separate data sources taken at different times. While statistically powerful, its application requires careful coordination and access to reliable identifiers, which may not be feasible in many low-resource contexts.

- **Censuses and Household/Telephone Surveys** - Some countries incorporate homelessness indicators into household and census surveys. For instance, Brazil's census includes data on housing precarity and informal arrangements, while South Korea and the Philippines use household surveys to identify individuals living without stable accommodation. Although these surveys can reach broader populations, they often fail to capture those currently without shelter or living in institutional care.

- **Community-led mapping and participatory enumeration -** Community-led mapping and participatory enumeration represent important bottom-up approach. Organizations like Slum Dwellers International (SDI) support participatory mapping in informal settlements across Kenya, India, and Nigeria, offering critical data on overcrowding, tenure insecurity, and displacement. In post-disaster contexts such as Nepal, these methods have been used to identify at-risk populations and inform emergency housing responses. Though often overlooked in official statistics, participatory methods provide inclusive, locally grounded knowledge—particularly in contexts where state-led data is limited or absent.

Each of these methods contributes different insights. In practice, hybrid approaches that combine quantitative and qualitative data—especially those integrating lived experience—offer the greatest promise for building inclusive and actionable data systems. Still, challenges persist in ensuring methodological consistency, minimizing duplication, and safeguarding privacy, particularly when integrating datasets.

Mixed Approaches to Measuring Homelessness

Several countries have adopted mixed-method strategies to better capture the complexity of homelessness. By combining administrative data, point-in-time counts, surveys, and community-led tools, these approaches improve accuracy and inclusiveness. Below are two examples:

France uses a combination of national surveys, administrative systems, and local enumeration. The INSEE's "Sans-Domicile" survey collects in-depth data on people using shelter services, while SIAO data systems track emergency housing requests and allocations. Cities like Paris conduct "Nuits de la solidarité", annual street counts involving volunteers. These approaches are complemented by NGO-led studies, providing both quantitative and qualitative insights.

Canada's "Reaching Home" strategy relies on a mix of point-in-time counts, the HIFIS data system (used in over 300 communities), and local "by-name lists" for case management. National surveys by Statistics Canada include homelessness modules, covering hidden homelessness and Indigenous populations. This layered approach supports both national reporting and targeted local interventions.

Mixed-method approaches combine quantitative data (e.g. administrative records, point-in-time counts) with qualitative or community-based insights (e.g. by-name lists, NGO surveys), offering more comprehensive understanding of homelessness. They allow for cross-validation between sources, improving accuracy and reducing undercounting—especially for hidden or hard-to-reach populations. Such approaches can enhance policy relevance by capturing both structural trends and lived experiences, enabling more tailored and effective interventions. Moreover, they are acknowledged to strengthen local-national coordination and support more inclusive, rights-based responses.

Different data collection methods offer varying degrees of insight into homelessness, with each requiring different levels of resources and effort. Selecting the appropriate method should be guided by well-defined research questions that align with the intended policy objectives. In the 2025 OECD Monitoring Framework for Measuring Homelessness[11], it was found most national level statistics capture those in temporary accommodation or those sleeping rough, but with fewer statistics covering individuals in institutional settings, non-conventional dwellings, or staying with friends or family. When choosing measuring methods, capturing hidden homelessness and hard-to-reach groups should be considered.

---

[11] OECD (2025). *OECD Monitoring Framework to Measure Homelessness.* Available at: https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2025/01/oecd-monitoring-framework-to-measure-homelessness_7b704e9d/3e98455b-en.pdf