



**UNITED
NATIONS**

HSP/OEWG-H.2026/INF/2



UN-HABITAT

**United Nations
Human Settlements
Programme**

Distr.: General
15 October 2026

Original: English

**Open-ended Intergovernmental Expert Working Group
on Adequate Housing for All
Third session**

Nairobi, 26 and 27 November 2026

Item 4 of the provisional agenda*

**Consideration of the outcomes of expert group and
intersessional meetings, including draft recommendations,
and of global events**

Background paper on the definition of homelessness**

Note by the secretariat

1. Work on a global definition of homelessness under the Open-ended Intergovernmental Expert Working Group on Adequate Housing for All began in July 2025. An Expert Group Meeting was convened on 21 August 2025, with the participation of 28 UN-Habitat and external experts. An intersessional meeting was subsequently held on 17 September 2025 and brought together 174 participants, who reviewed the background documentation and provided substantive inputs. Between October 2025 and March 2026, the paper was revised on the basis of those inputs, and it underwent a further round of technical review in April 2026. The present background paper reflects the inputs received throughout that process.

I. Introduction

2. The right to adequate housing is established in international human rights law and elaborated in General Comment No. 4 of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which identifies seven key criteria to be met: security of tenure, availability of services, affordability, habitability, accessibility, location, and cultural adequacy. Severe housing deprivation and exclusion refers to situations in which people are excluded from access to adequate housing. It reflects structural conditions, including inequalities in access to land, tenure insecurity, poverty, discrimination, and gaps in social protection, and manifests differently across regions and contexts.

3. Homelessness and informal settlements represent two aspects of the failure to respect, protect and fulfil the right to adequate housing. Homelessness is generally considered as the absence or instability of housing solutions and the lived experience of housing loss, insecurity, and social exclusion. Informal settlements are a spatial and settlement-based manifestation of housing inadequacy, characterised by settlement-level deprivations related to tenure security, infrastructure, planning, and access to basic services. Recognising and defining both within the broader adequate housing framework allows to consider them as separate but complementary manifestations of severe

* HSP/OEWG-H.2026/1.

** The present document has not been formally edited.

housing deprivation and systemic failures of housing systems, while keeping them distinct at the analytical and operational level.

4. Building on its mandate to advance coherent global guidance on adequate housing, the Open-Ended Intergovernmental Expert Working Group on Adequate Housing for All identified the development of global reference definitions for homelessness and informal settlements as a priority. Two parallel processes to develop the two definitions were supported. Definitions are presented in separate documents, each with its own conceptual framework, and application guidance.

5. While distinct in scope, both proposed definitions are guided by a shared set of principles:

- (a) A people-at-the-centre, human rights-based approach, recognising dignity, safety, and social connection as central to housing adequacy;
- (b) Recognition of agency and lived experience, including the importance of self-identification;
- (c) An understanding of housing deprivation and exclusion as systemic dynamic;
- (d) An emphasis on measurability across diverse data systems, ensuring the visibility of intersectional data;
- (e) Flexibility and progressive application in line with national contexts, needs, and capacities.

II. Relevance of addressing homelessness

6. Homelessness is a global challenge requiring increased attention and coordinated action. While its scale cannot yet be reliably estimated globally, available evidence points to persistent and, in many contexts, growing pressures associated with inadequate and unaffordable housing, poverty and inequality, forced displacement and evictions, conflict, climate-related hazards and disasters, discrimination, violence, and gaps in social protection. These pressures interact differently across countries and regions and can expose increasing numbers of people to housing instability and homelessness.

7. Addressing homelessness is important for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Homelessness can undermine progress across multiple Sustainable Development Goals, including those related to poverty, health, education, gender equality, reduced inequalities and sustainable cities and communities. Its impacts extend beyond the loss of housing itself, affecting access to services, livelihoods, education and health, as well as people's safety, dignity and participation in social and economic life.

8. Preventing and addressing homelessness is also integral to the progressive realization of the right to adequate housing. It requires action not only to respond to homelessness once it occurs, but also to address the conditions and pathways that can lead to housing loss, supporting earlier and preventive responses.

9. For these reasons the General Assembly, through several resolutions, and the Secretary-General in his reports have called for urgent, coordinated and rights-based action to prevent and address homelessness as part of broader efforts to advance sustainable development and the right to adequate housing.¹

III. Limitations of current approaches and objectives

10. Homelessness is a global phenomenon, yet it is understood, defined, measured, and addressed in highly diverse ways across countries and cities. These differences reflect variations in legal frameworks, housing systems, social protection arrangements, policy priorities and data capacities. At the same time, the absence of an internationally agreed reference definition contributes to three limitations that impact visibility, measurement and comparability of homelessness at the global level.

11. First, homelessness remains insufficiently visible in global policy and monitoring frameworks. Significant gaps in available evidence remain across countries and regions, limiting understanding of its scale, characteristics and dynamics. This can make it more difficult to systematically reflect homelessness within wider housing, poverty reduction, social protection and sustainable development policies. It also limits attention and resource allocation at the global, regional and country level.

¹ General Assembly resolutions 76/133 (2021), 78/172 (2023) and 80/175, and reports of the Secretary-General A/78/236 and A/80/316.

12. Second, existing approaches often capture most effectively the more visible forms of homelessness, particularly people sleeping rough or using emergency shelters and homelessness services. While these situations remain central to any understanding of homelessness, less visible and dynamic situations may consequently remain underrepresented, and therefore only partially addressed or prioritised. This in turn makes it more difficult to understand pathways into and out of homelessness and identify opportunities for prevention.
13. Third, differences between definitions, typologies, coverage and measurement approaches limit the comparability and interpretation of available evidence. Without a common reference framework, differences in reported levels or trends may reflect not only differences in homelessness itself but also differences in what is defined and measured. This makes comparison across countries and regions, as well as the identification of broader trends and effective responses, more difficult.
14. An internationally agreed definition can address these limitations without replacing national or local definitions. Rather, it would provide a shared reference point against which existing definitions and data can be benchmarked and transparently mapped. This would strengthen comparability while preserving flexibility, enabling countries to clarify what is included and excluded, and to progressively expand coverage as systems and capacities evolve and in accordance with national and local contexts.
15. Such a framework can also support a better understanding of homelessness as a dynamic experience, rather than a static situation. Typologies are important for identifying and comparing situations in which people experience homelessness, but the situation observed at a particular point in time does not necessarily provide a complete picture of that experience. People within the same homelessness category may experience that situation for very different periods of time and may follow very different pathways into, between and out of homelessness. Understanding homelessness therefore requires information beyond the current living situation and focus on people's lived experiences. This in turn can support more evidence-based strategies, prevention-oriented policies, and contribute to more inclusive, rights-based housing and social protection systems.
16. To this end, the proposed global definition is intended to provide:
 - (a) Clarity in how homelessness is globally understood and identified;
 - (b) A basis for interpreting available data and comparing, assessing and developing national and local homelessness definitions;
 - (c) A framework to identify pathways into homelessness and to strengthen social protection systems.

IV. A global definition of homelessness

A. Proposed definition of homelessness

17. Homelessness refers to situations in which individuals and households lack access to adequate housing resulting in the inability to live with dignity, establish a home, maintain social relations, and enjoy connected rights such as education and health.
18. Homelessness encompasses a continuum of living situations, including: (1) being without accommodation; (2) staying in temporary or crisis accommodation; (3) staying in insecure or severely inadequate housing in the absence of reasonable alternatives; and (4) being at imminent risk of homelessness. The first two are core typologies that all countries should include in their definitions and data collection; the latter two are extended typologies that can be progressively included in national and local definitions depending on context and priorities.
19. These situations may be short-term, episodic, recurrent or long-term, and people may move between different situations over time.
20. Homelessness often results from extreme poverty, as well as unequal exposure to risk factors, including discrimination, violence, displacement, and other forms of social exclusion. Homelessness is a violation of the right to adequate housing. As it reflects the failure of housing and interconnected systems, including land administration, social protection, labour markets, and care systems.
21. People experiencing homelessness must be recognised as right-holders and active agents who draw on personal capacities, social networks, and collective strategies to secure and retain access to housing, livelihoods, and safety, often under conditions of constraint and uncertainty.

B. Typologies of homelessness

22. Based on the proposed homelessness definition, a few homelessness typologies are provided to guide the adaptation, refinement and operationalisation of national and local homeless definitions. These are divided in two sets: minimum core typologies and extended context-specific typologies.

23. The distinction between minimum and extended categories is intended to support progressive application of the framework and does not imply a hierarchy of importance, severity or prevalence. It recognises that some situations, particularly those at the intersection of homelessness and severe housing deprivation, may be understood and classified differently across contexts.

1. Minimum core typologies

24. These form the minimum core of homelessness typologies for international reference, against which all countries should map their existing definitions and data.

Typology 1: Being without accommodation

- 1(a) People sleeping in tents, open or unroofed spaces (e.g. sidewalks, parks, railway embankments, under bridges, riverbanks, forests, etc.)
- 1(b) People sleeping in roofed spaces not intended for habitation (e.g. bus or railway stations, public buildings, taxi ranks, cemeteries, staircases, etc.)
- 1(c) People sleeping in cars, rickshaws, boats, or other forms of transport, where this situation is considered by the people concerned as homelessness

Typology 2: Staying in temporary or crisis accommodation

- 2(a) People staying in night shelters or emergency accommodation, where accommodation is provided on nightly basis.
- 2(b) People living in homeless hostels or other temporary accommodation, where a bed or place is designated, but housing is not intended as permanent or stable
- 2(c) Women, children, LGBTIQ+ individuals and others living in temporary refuges due to domestic or family violence, abuse, or neglect, where accommodation is provided for protection but not intended as stable or permanent

2. Extended context-specific typologies

25. Countries are encouraged, based on their context and policy priorities, to include additional typologies in national and local definitions.

Typology 3: People living in severely inadequate or insecure accommodation in the absence of reasonable alternatives

- 3(a) People temporarily staying with others (e.g. friends or relatives) due to lack of access to long-term accommodation and without immediate prospect for accessing permanent housing
- 3(b) People living under threat of violence, coercion, or exploitation within their accommodation
- 3(c) People living in hotels, bed and breakfasts, or similar commercial accommodation as a substitute for housing because they lack an adequate and secure alternative
- 3(d) People squatting in unoccupied or abandoned housing due to lack of alternatives
- 3(e) People living in housing that is structurally unsafe or unfit for human habitation and where the severity of the conditions and the absence of a viable housing alternative effectively leave them without adequate and secure accommodation
- 3(f) People living in trailers, caravans, or other non-standard housing as an involuntary arrangement because of lack of alternatives

26. It is important to recognise that the boundary between homelessness and other forms of severe housing deprivation, and non-standard housing varies across contexts and cannot be determined by the physical condition of accommodation alone. This is particularly relevant in contexts where large numbers of people live in informal settlements or other forms of self-provided housing.

27. People living in informal settlements may experience very severe housing deprivation, including poor physical conditions and insecure tenure, while nevertheless having established a home and social and community relations, and not considering themselves to be experiencing homelessness.

In some cases, occupation may also provide a degree or prospect of stability and opportunities for incremental improvement over time. Conversely, some people living in informal settlements or squatting may have little or no security, live in temporary or highly precarious conditions, face repeated displacement, and have no reasonable housing alternative.

28. Homelessness and informal settlement conditions can therefore overlap, but should not be treated as equivalent. Factors such as the stability and security of the housing situation, the availability of reasonable alternatives, opportunities to establish and progressively improve a home, social and community connections, and people's agency, ability to remain or leave, as well as housing trajectories can support determining whether a particular situation constitutes homelessness.

Typology 4: People at imminent risk of homelessness

- 4(a) People facing imminent loss of housing due to eviction, displacement, or withdrawal of accommodation (including people in supported housing with support about to be discontinued)
- 4(b) People exiting institutions (e.g., care, including children's institutions; detention; health facilities) without secure housing options

C. Progressive application

29. The typologies' guidance is intended to support transparency, learning, and evidence-building, and does not prescribe a single operational or statistical approach. It is designed to be applied progressively. Countries and cities may begin by mapping existing data and definitions against the minimum global reference categories (Categories 1 and 2), based on current legal frameworks, policy priorities, and data availability.

30. Over time, and as data systems, service coverage, and prevention strategies evolve, countries are strongly encouraged to progressively expand their typologies to include categories 3 and 4, to strengthen understanding of homelessness, improve comparability, and support early intervention and prevention. Further, the framework recognises that countries and regions may distinguish differently between homelessness, housing exclusion, severe housing deprivation and imminent risk of homelessness, as well as using different names. It therefore provides common reference categories, rather than prescribing uniform thresholds or terminologies.

31. For comparability, countries and cities are encouraged to report data by typology, rather than relying only on a single aggregate figure. Where aggregate figures are used, they should clearly indicate which typologies are included and, where possible, the definitions, geographical and population coverage, reference period and data sources used.

D. Considerations on monitoring, disaggregation and evidence

32. The reference framework does not prescribe a single methodology or frequency for measuring. Yet, it is suggested that data collection and analysis approaches seek to strengthen the regularity, inclusiveness, and interpretability of evidence on homelessness to support decision-making, planning, and resource allocation, rather than becoming an end in itself.

33. This includes:

- (a) Regularity and continuity of monitoring: data should be collected with sufficient regularity to support understanding of both the scale and characteristics of homelessness at a given point in time and changes over time. The appropriate frequency should reflect the purpose of monitoring, the scale and circumstances of the jurisdiction, available resources and existing statistical and administrative systems. Monitoring may draw on point-in-time counts, local enumerations, administrative or service data, real-time data, inclusion in census, longitudinal evidence and other context-appropriate methods.
- (b) Capturing hidden homelessness and homelessness among groups that may be less visible in standard data systems: street enumeration and homelessness service data can provide important evidence, but might fail to represent people who are not visible in public spaces or who have little or no contact with homelessness services. It is therefore suggested that countries and cities explore complementary approaches. This may include widening the range of services and locations covered in data collection; adapting survey, census, and intake questions to better capture temporary stays with others, precarious living situations, and past experiences of homelessness; linking administrative data across housing, social protection, health, and care systems, with appropriate safeguards; and using qualitative or community-generated evidence to identify barriers, hidden locations, service-use patterns, and pathways into homelessness.

- (c) Disaggregation and intersectionality: it is further recommended that data collection approaches provide for the use of disaggregated data, by characteristics such as gender, including LGBTIQ+ status, age, disability, households composition, migration status, as well as other key factors that could lead to exclusion as relevant to the local context, in line with national data systems, legal frameworks, and data protection standards. Such disaggregation contributes to a better understanding of unequal exposure to the risk of homelessness and the diverse pathways through which people experience housing loss and is necessary to inform holistic and sustainable policy responses. Efforts to strengthen disaggregation may also consider practical barriers to data collection, including trust, stigma, administrative capacity, and the availability of appropriate tools for frontline services.
 - (d) Capturing duration, recurrence and trajectories: monitoring should go beyond identifying a person's living situation at a single point in time and capture how homelessness develops over time. This may include the duration of the current episode or situation; previous experiences of homelessness and their recurrence; the housing or living situation preceding homelessness; movement between different homelessness typologies; and transitions into more stable or adequate housing. Where relevant and feasible, information on the circumstances leading to the current situation, available housing alternatives, and household, social and livelihood circumstances can provide further understanding of why apparently similar homelessness situations may represent different trajectories and require different responses. Such information may be collected through longitudinal and linked administrative data, repeat surveys, service records, retrospective questions and qualitative or community-generated evidence.
 - (e) Strengthening coordination between national and local authorities, statistical offices and other relevant actor to support the systematic use of data for planning, service delivery, and evaluation of housing and social protection responses.
34. Across these considerations, the objective is not to create additional data collection requirements as an end in themselves, but to progressively improve the availability, coverage, comparability and policy relevance of evidence on homelessness.

Annex

Examples of indicators and evidence areas

To support implementation of the definition, countries and cities are encouraged to develop a set of monitoring indicators that can be progressively expanded over time. These indicators should help make transparent which homelessness typologies are included, how data is collected, and whether monitoring captures both the scale of homelessness at a given point in time and the flows into and out of homelessness over time. The table below provides examples indicators and evidence areas that can be adapted to national and local data systems.

Example indicator or evidence area	What it measures	Existing reference / possible source	Current availability and methodological maturity	Suggested disaggregation	Geographic scale	Notes
Number and share of people without accommodation	People without any form of accommodation, including street homelessness or rough sleeping	OECD; ETHOS; Institute of Global Homelessness; Street counts; census; administrative data; service data; community and civil society mapping	Existing with limited coverage	Gender, age, disability, household type, migration or displacement status, income/poverty status; employment status; access to identity/civil registration/required documentation; LGBTIQ+ status where safe to collect	National, local, neighbourhood	Definitions and coverage should be made explicit
Number and share of people living in temporary or crisis accommodation	People staying in shelters, crisis accommodation, temporary accommodation or temporary refuges due to domestic violence, abuse and neglect	OECD; ETHOS; Institute of Global Homelessness; Shelter data; service data; administrative data; domestic violence refuge data; census	Existing with limited coverage	Gender, age, disability, household type, migration or displacement status, income/poverty status; employment status; access to identity/civil registration/required documentation; LGBTIQ+ status where safe to collect	National, local	Definitions and coverage should be made explicit
Number and share of people living in severely inadequate or insecure accommodation in the absence of reasonable alternatives	People temporarily staying with others, living in commercial accommodation, squats, non-standard accommodation, unsafe housing or other insecure arrangements due to lack of alternatives	OECD; ETHOS; Institute of Global Homelessness; Household surveys; service data; qualitative evidence; local enumeration	No global indicator, monitored in some national contexts	Gender, age, disability, household type, migration or displacement status, income/poverty status; employment status; access to identity/civil registration/required documentation; LGBTIQ+ status where safe to collect, arrangement type	National, local	Requires clear typology and careful differentiation from other inadequacy measures, as well as explicitly reported definitions and coverage
Number and share of people at imminent risk of homelessness	People at immediate risk of losing accommodation, including people leaving institutions, people losing supported accommodation, etc.	Eviction notices; court data; arrears data; social services; hospital and prison release data; homelessness prevention data	No global indicator, monitored in some national contexts	Gender, age, disability, household type, migration or displacement status, income/poverty status; employment status; access to identity/civil registration/required documentation; LGBTIQ+ status where safe to collect, tenure, location	National, local	Important for prevention-oriented policy. Definitions and coverage should be made explicit.

Example indicator or evidence area	What it measures	Existing reference / possible source	Current availability and methodological maturity	Suggested disaggregation	Geographic scale	Notes
Duration of homelessness	Duration of the current situation of homelessness, and, where possible, cumulative duration across repeated episodes	Service data; administrative data; longitudinal studies	Limited monitoring at local or programme level	Gender, age, disability, household type, migration or displacement status	Local, national	Requires longitudinal or linked data
Recurrence of homelessness	Repeated entries into homelessness over time	IGH; Service data; administrative data; longitudinal studies	Limited monitoring at local or programme level	Gender, age, disability, household type, migration or displacement status	National, local	Important for understanding pathways and policy effectiveness
Transition between homelessness situations	Movement of people or households between different homelessness typologies	Longitudinal surveys and research; linked administrative and service data	Limited monitoring at local or programme level	Gender, age, disability, household type, migration or displacement status, previous homelessness typology/living situation, current typology/living situation, duration and recurrence	National, local	
Flow into and out of homelessness during the reporting period	Number and share of people entering homelessness and number and share exiting homelessness into stable or adequate housing during a defined reporting period	Homelessness service data; shelter data; social protection system; longitudinal studies; local and community enumerations	Limited monitoring at local or programme level	Gender, age, disability, household type, migration or displacement status, previous accommodation, exit destination	National, local	
Main reported pathways into homelessness	Immediate situation preceding homelessness and structural drivers of homelessness experiences	Service intake data; qualitative research; community-generated evidence	Proposed/requires methodological development	Gender, disability, household composition, migration of displacement status, previous tenure, location	National, local	
Circumstances shaping the experience of homelessness	Whether the person has an established household or home elsewhere; household and social connections; livelihood circumstances; perceived stability of the current situation; and the person's ability to remain, leave or change the arrangement.	Surveys; qualitative research; service intake data; longitudinal research; community-generated evidence.	Proposed/requires methodological development	Gender, disability, household composition, migration of displacement status, employment/livelihood status, homelessness typology	National, local	Requires contextual interpretation and methodological development; intended primarily to understand different experiences and policy needs within homelessness typologies rather than determine inclusion in the minimum core categories.