

TOWARD A EUROPEAN HOMELESSNESS POLICY

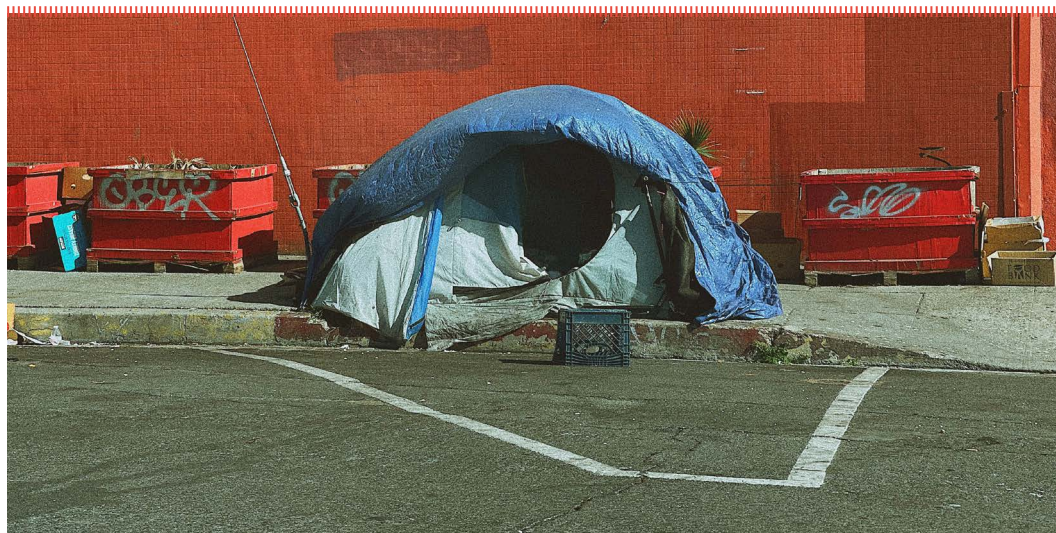


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Summary ■

In the EU-27 which usually has open internal borders, the scale on which homelessness is addressed is always more European, while, historically, it was conventionally local, then national. In recent years, the issue has been the focus of assessment, attention, communication and innovation. On the occasion of the Action Plan for the effective implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights, announced in early 2021 and which sets a target of reducing the number of persons at risk of poverty and social exclusion by 2030, it is possible to support strong recommendations in favour of a European homelessness policy:

- Set out a European strategy to combat homelessness
- Draw up an overview of policies conducted in the EU
- Improve data through counts in major European cities
- Establish European minimum standards for services to the homeless
- Finance assistance to European citizens who are not in their country of origin through European funds
- Give the new European Labour Authority a mandate on homelessness
- Approve financial support on a European scale for the creation of specialised housing and social residences

1 ■ INTRODUCTION

The issue of homelessness, with a wide range of definitions, situations and public responses according to the country, is gradually gaining a footing in the European political agenda. While there is no fully accepted European definition, the homeless are rightly considered to suffer from some of the most severe forms of poverty and social exclusion. In this respect, each year their situation is considered with greater attention, even though investment amounts differ per country, and very often they are on the periphery of general social protection and social inclusion concerns. On a European level, the homeless and homelessness have nevertheless become a focus, both of concerns and of initiatives that are yet to be completed. While the statistics are not entirely established, to give an order of magnitude, hundreds of thousands of people, every evening, sleep rough or in emergency accommodation centres¹.

The issue of homelessness was incidentally addressed in the first European debates in relation to the housing issue². Today, it is explicitly present in considerations, recommendations and even European actions. It falls within the scope of relative progress made regarding the social dimension of European construction and is part of European initiatives and programmes to combat exclusion. From the first reports on homelessness produced by European bodies in the 1980s and 1990s³, to the ambitions announced in early 2021 to give the European Pillar of Social Rights⁴ real content, notable advances have been made. However, there is still a long way to go.

The drive to develop actions to combat homelessness on a European level embodies a necessary voluntarism regarding social Europe. The European social model is the subject of a significant body of literature⁵. In short, social Europe is still finding its way. The question is whether the European Union is simply a project to achieve the internal market, with social policies being subordinate to this main objective, or whether it is possible to confer greater consistency to social investments, without involving the single track of labour and market organisation. In the state of current debates, particularly against the backdrop of the COVID crisis, the European Union and its members are actually facing social realities which countries must address: worrying inequality, increased risk of poverty, social exclusion, growing diversity in populations, changes in family structure, ageing populations, dependence and increased mobility.

1. The Abbé Pierre Foundation and the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) estimated 700,000 people in the EU-27 at the end of the 2010s.

2. The housing issue was the first entry point of expertise on the issue of homelessness in Europe, see Bill Edgar, Joe Doherty, Henk Meert, *Access to Housing. Homelessness and Vulnerability in Europe*, Policy Press, 2002. On the contemporary issue of the right to housing in Europe, its development and its current situation, see the Housing Rights Watch network www.housingrightswatch.org. See also the platform devoted to housing innovations in Europe: www.housing-solutions-platform.org.

3. For an overview, see the opinion of the Committee of the Regions of the European Union on "Housing and the homeless", 3 June 1999 (1999/C 293/07).

4. The European Commission presented, on 4 March 2021, an Action Plan for the implementation of the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights. This Pillar was proclaimed in 2017 at the Gothenburg Social Summit. It is a set of twenty principles and fundamental rights broken down into three chapters: equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions and social protection and inclusion.

5. For two landmark publications, see Etienne Grass, *L'Europe sociale*, Paris, La Documentation française, 2013; Philippe Pochet, *À la recherche de l'Europe sociale*, Paris, PUF, 2019 (in French).

The homeless and our care of them condense in their own way several issues at the cross-roads between many European concerns. Clearly, this is an issue of poverty and social exclusion. It is also a question of cooperation between Member States via the immigration and asylum register. It also concerns freedom of movement, for the poorest people. Lastly, but one could argue first and foremost, it is a prominent issue of dignity and human rights. This age-old phenomenon, which has aspects that are time and again renewed, has taken on a new dimension, in particular because the extreme forms of poverty are considered unacceptable in affluent societies.

While it manifests itself in forms that vary in the different EU Member States, while it gives rise to a range of reactions (hostile or hospitable) and while the problem does not, at first sight, appear to fall under European competence, the fact of the matter is that the presence of homeless persons is one of the most severe signs of social exclusion trends, concerning local and regional authorities in the first instance, and also States. This issue which combines insecurity, indigence and mobility increasingly concerns the Union itself, as do, more broadly, all poverty and social exclusion issues⁶.

In this paper, we will provide a far-reaching historical overview to stress the extent to which **the issue of homelessness, assessed on the basis of vagrancy management, has become a predominantly European issue due to facilitated mobility**. In an open space, homeless persons from the EU and beyond can move from one country to another, from one European city to another. Subsequently, we will present the current situation regarding the gradual addressing of this issue on an EU scale. Following this analysis, we will put forward seven recommendations to further the ambitions of European policies to combat homelessness.

⁶. On this subject, see Julien Damon, “Combating poverty in Europe. Mixed results, new proposals”, Policy Paper of the Jacques Delors Institute, n° 254, 5 June 2020. (publication in French, abstract in English).

BOX 1 ■ Homelessness among the social priorities

Surveyed at the end of 2020 on the most important subjects for Europe’s future, in terms of social issues, the citizens polled in twenty-six Member States place emphasis on healthcare, social protection and wages. Assistance for the homeless ranked in the bottom third of the list of priority subjects, though located above childcare, inclusion of persons with disabilities and social dialogue. While the subject may not be essential, it is far from marginal. With an average score of 11%, it reached 23% in Ireland and 20% in France.

FIGURE 1 ■ Which of the following would you consider to be the most important for the future of Europe? (% -EU)



Source: Special Eurobarometer, n° 509, "social issues", March 2021

2 ■ A LOOK BACK OVER AN ISSUE THAT IS NOW DE FACTO EUROPEAN

A look back through history is a means of highlighting the issue's European dimension. The history of the construction of Nation States and of Europe includes the addressing the issue of homelessness, previously mainly through criminal punishment and now mainly through social policy. With names and definitions that have changed significantly, the long history of the issue comes up to present day.

Vagrancy and begging have been subject to public intervention in Europe for a very long time⁷. From the mid-14th century, controlling the vagrant population became a major matter of law and order in monarchies. With the control of those who eluded local communities and solidarity initiatives, the State experimented with offences, punishments and attempts to rehabilitate, in this way asserting itself over local powers. Since then, communication options and travel speeds have increased significantly. The issue is now raised on a European scale. To substantiate such an argument, we can draw inspiration from the way in which Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan, following on from the seminal work of Norbert Elias, analyses the changing ways of dealing with vagrants and beggars, alongside a rise in central States⁸.

In theory, the issue comes under game theory and the low ability to cooperate, without incentives. In this way, the problem of homeless people is not solved, but they are sent elsewhere.

In medieval Europe, a parish or a small community had to decide if it would welcome or reject the needy who were not of that parish. The issue raised by welcoming the poor from elsewhere proved to be not a problem of resources or purpose but rather of cooperation, with a classic dilemma of collective action. If the parish is welcoming, what will the others do? Everyone could seize this opportunity to "get rid" of their poor. Communities only had two options: to welcome the needy who arrived at their doors or to turn them away. If a local community, for religious or political reasons, decided to open their doors to the poor, it had no way of knowing if other communities would do the same or if, on the contrary, they would use this offer of assistance to discharge themselves of their own poor and send away all vagrants. The balance and coordination of the system that assisted the needy and/or constrained vagrants, organised on a local level, were sought after on a regional level. Yet nothing could compel a local authority to take action one way or the other.

This sparked the need for regional authorities in charge of addressing vagrancy, particularly through law enforcement, obliging local communities to cooperate. As communication and travel means developed, these regional authorities experienced the same dilemma, but on a larger scale. It took the assertion of Nation States to attempt to reduce the unstable cooperation between regions. With the development of cities and their interconnections, States across Europe intervened to add a regional balance of assistance to local charity systems which had become insufficient. The first attempt to achieve a broader territorial balance was in England, with the "Poor Laws" system and in France, with the "grand renfermement" (the great confinement). The "Poor Laws" were a set of laws, the most important of which date

7. See the classic work by Bronislaw Geremek, *Poverty: A History*, Wiley-Blackwell, 1991.

8. Abram de Swaan, *In Care of the State*, Oxford University Press, 1988.

back to the 17th century, aimed at controlling and settling vagrants and other poor persons in English parishes. In certain areas, some categories of poor people could be allocated relief. Most of the time, the poor were made to work in workhouses with very strict discipline. In France, the initiative of Louis XIV, referred to in a questionable way by Michel Foucault under the name “grand renfermement”⁹ (great confinement), created the Hôpital Général, first in Paris and then in the provinces. Buildings, known as the Hôpitaux Généraux, were constructed or renovated to confine the poor and thereby put an end to vagrancy.

At the same time, the idea of “ateliers de charité” emerged. The poor were no longer simply interned to be detained or punished. They were offered a task that was intended to convert, punish, cure or re-educate them. The principle was to employ able-bodied poor persons in a self-sustaining relief system. This idea of creating a level of self-sufficiency in assistance gave the impression of a solution to the dilemma between accepting and rejecting poor people which overburdened the system of independent authorities. Yet these ateliers, like the workhouses in the United Kingdom, struggled to be self-sufficient. Moreover, they were criticised by local companies which considered them to be unfair competition. The central power then played a key role in supporting towns by providing funding and/or orders to ateliers and hôpitaux. Subsequently, vagrants and other poor persons without fixed abode shifted from criminal justice to social legislation¹⁰. The “Poor Laws” were abolished and the Hôpitaux Généraux changed destination. Yet State intervention continued to assert itself across Europe, targeting not only the fight against crime but also the fight against poverty. The State’s participation in the fight against vagrancy and in poor relief was growing constantly. Municipal independence gave way to the emergence of an increasingly powerful central State to govern the communities in its territory.

The history of how vagrancy was addressed sheds light on the current trends. The conclusion that can be drawn from this quick overview is that independent communities prove to be incapable of collective action to manage vagrancy without a central regulating authority. State intervention, in this respect, involves organising the monitoring of movements and cooperation between towns and cities. However, these interventions are outdated in the more open international context.

In a shift from local parishes to a national State level, the addressing of the issue of vagrants, renamed the “homeless”, has changed with the gradual opening and enlargement of European borders. Now the homeless, which are no longer called “vagrants” anywhere, can travel between countries more or less easily, according to their personal preferences, the collective services of a territory, the emphasis placed on repression or welcome by municipalities.

In the last few decades, as offences for vagrancy and begging were removed from the various European criminal codes, the issue of addressing homelessness has been extended over a broader scale. From the local, then regional, then national scale, the issue is now to be fully addressed on a global scale. **Everywhere, the homeless are no longer only nationals.** Often, nationals are in the minority in accommodation centres or shelters. The collapse of the Soviet bloc and the Yugoslav crisis sparked migrations within Europe, as have, more recently, the crises in Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Iraq and Eritrea. The issue of homelessness

⁹. See Michel Foucault’s classic publication, *History of madness in the classical age*, Routledge, 2006.

¹⁰. For a French perspective, see Diane Roman, *Le Droit public face à la pauvreté*, Paris, LGDJ, 2002 (in French).

is increasingly connected to that of international migration and asylum. In some respects, we could say that there is a “migrantisation” of homelessness¹¹.

This extension of the scope of the classic vagrancy issue also illustrates how globalisation works. Here, we are not talking about the mobility of managers and executives, but rather on lower levels. Nations have committed to an unstable state of cooperation, between Member States of the European Union and those on the other side of the Mediterranean or to the East of their borders, between France and some Member States as regards some of the inhabitants of the shanty towns who are European citizens, between port cities which send each other ships with potential asylum-seekers aboard.

From the local scale, we have shifted fully into a global perspective - or at least, indisputably, to a European one. The EU’s proposals and hesitations attest to this, sometimes in open conflict with some Member States on the issue of “burden sharing”.

Today, in a Union with internal borders that are generally usually open, the new scale of addressing the issue of the homeless and other destitute persons is European. **In some respects, cities and the EU are in a better position to take action than regions and States.**

The alternative is simple, in an open Schengen area, on paper. Borders must be closed if homelessness is to be addressed on a national level. Or, in view of the depletion and overwhelming of the Nation State, the issue should be completely addressed on a European scale, both in terms of security and social policy. Naturally, the current situation and prospects require a more nuanced picture.

¹¹. See, in this respect, the report [Asylum Seekers, Refugees and Homelessness. The Humanitarian Crisis and the Homelessness Sector in Europe](#), FEANTSA, 2017. See the report by the European Commission, [Study on Mobility, Migration and Destitution in the European Union](#), 2014. On the older links between “homelessness” and immigration, see Joe Doherty, Bill. Edgar, Henk Meert, *Immigration And Homelessness In Europe*, Policy Press, 2005.

BOX 2 ■ European public opinion on homelessness

There are no sources of recent data on Europeans' opinions on homelessness. A Eurobarometer survey from 2007 (Special Eurobarometer, n° 279, "Poverty and Exclusion") demonstrated that in terms of opinions on homelessness (situation of people, perceived causes, the risk of experiencing the issue personally), there were major differences between countries. In the results, France stands out as one of the most tolerant and innovative countries regarding these issues.

More recently, a HOME_EU consortium of experts and practitioners rolled out a survey in 2017 in a few European countries. The result paints a less heterogeneous picture, with a majority of citizens polled stating an understanding attitude towards the homeless. Across the board in these countries, more than two thirds of respondents believed that the government must do more.

In short, European public opinion, at least in the countries in which the surveys were conducted, appears to still be mixed, but more convergent.

TABLE 1 ■ A few opinions and attitudes to homelessness, in 2017 (as a %)

| | SPAIN | FRANCE | IRELAND | ITALY | THE NETHERLANDS | POLAND | PORTUGAL | SWEDEN |
|--|-------|--------|---------|-------|-----------------|--------|----------|--------|
| Claim to have done volunteer work for homeless people | 11 | 7 | 16 | 13 | 5 | 9 | 23 | 19 |
| Believe that the government spends too little to help homeless people | 88 | 70 | 79 | 80 | 71 | 69 | 85 | 64 |
| Would be willing to pay more taxes to reduce homelessness | 32 | 33 | 45 | 21 | 18 | 22 | 36 | 41 |

Source: "European public perceptions of homelessness: A knowledge, attitudes and practices survey" <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0221896>

3 ■ AN ISSUE THAT IS PRESENT AND BETTER-KNOWN ON THE EUROPEAN AGENDA

The issue of homelessness appears regularly or occasionally on local and national agendas, depending on the country. It has gradually earned a place on the European agenda. A recurring theme that is actually increasingly present, it has been the subject of declarations, recommendations and communications. In European texts regarding social Europe, and more specifically inclusion, it is now conventional to include homelessness, though this is not systematic.

In the 1970s, the European institutions were concerned by poverty and exclusion. While “new poverty” was identified almost everywhere as a consequence of the economic crisis, the Commission launched an ambitious programme from 1975, supporting pilot projects to improve knowledge and develop new methods to combat poverty and insecurity. Initially, the EU took action in terms of knowledge, sharing practices and supporting innovations. Originally, as regards housing, the labour market and social protection, the Union had no competence and no drive to achieve harmonisation. However, in certain areas such as State assistance, public contracts and the fight against forms of discrimination, the EU’s actions had an increasingly clear impact on the policies and structures to combat housing-related exclusion. Furthermore, across the entire area of social inclusion¹² which went on to be extended in the 1990s and 2000s, the shared expertise system became increasingly important. It addressed how homelessness was tackled on a national level, often indirectly, and sometimes head-on. Homelessness is a prime example of the social cohesion problems that the successive European strategies have sought to mitigate.

The 2000s were a decade of initiatives and announcements. The European Council of Lisbon in March 2000 invited Member States and the European Commission to adopt provisions that would have a major impact on eliminating poverty by 2010. Member States coordinated their policies aimed at combating poverty and social exclusion on the basis of a process of exchanges and mutual learning, known as the “open method of coordination” (OMC). It is within this European framework, and in particular in its extension to support social inclusion policies that the issue of homelessness was addressed. The European social inclusion strategy considered the homeless in terms of preventing exclusion and of the need to protect the most vulnerable within our societies. The EU’s efforts contributed to improving knowledge, a key prerequisite for any assessment of systems and for all support of best practices.

In order to qualify and quantify homelessness and housing deprivation in a European context, expert bodies were consulted. Eurostat highlighted the obstacles to European comparisons, by examining the wide range of definitions of homeless people and by analysing data collection systems¹³. This overview created by Eurostat shed light on the different definitions of homeless people. The Employment, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities DG of the European Commission commissioned and disseminated an in-depth study of the possible means of standardising definitions and survey methodology¹⁴.

¹². On social inclusion, see Eric Marlier, Anthony B. Atkinson, Bea Cantillon, Brian Nolan, *The EU and Social Inclusion. Facing the Challenges*, Bristol, Policy Press, 2006.

¹³. Eurostat, *The production of data on homelessness and housing deprivation in the European Union: survey and proposals*, 20 January 2005.

¹⁴. See the report *Measurement of Homelessness at European Union Level* (January 2007), on-line on the Commission’s website.

Going beyond expertise-related progress, the political dimension gained momentum. In April 2008, the European Parliament adopted a written declaration on “ending street homelessness” by 2015¹⁵. This text called on the Council of the EU “to agree on an EU-wide commitment to end street homelessness by 2015”. The Parliament’s ambition was renewed in another declaration dated 16 December 2010¹⁶, while, the same year (European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion), the issue of homelessness was the subject of a Consensus Conference¹⁷.

Ten years later, on 24 November 2020, a resolution of the Parliament, adopted by a very large majority, concerned “tackling homelessness rates in the European Union”¹⁸. The Parliament expressed “its deepest concern about the situation of more than 4 million homeless European citizens as the ongoing health and economic crisis puts more people out of a job and makes more people dependent on social protection”. It called on the Union and its Member States to “end homelessness in the Union by 2030 and to set this as a goal at EU level”.

Many European cities are also adopting initiatives and are calling for increased voluntarism as regards homelessness. In April 2021, some 70 mayors of European capitals and cities (including Lisbon, Budapest, Athens, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Tallin, Bratislava and Dublin)¹⁹ signed, with around one hundred MEPs, an open letter to put an end to homelessness in the EU by 2030.

For around two decades, the issue of homelessness has been rooted in debates on European objectives and instruments. The idea of a dedicated European strategy is gaining ground. It is based on the efforts made to gain a better understanding of the situation. Progress in this area, made with a view to harmonising data, was possible thanks to the collaboration between the Commission’s departments, national statistics bodies and non-government institutions for the homeless.

In recent years, associations for the homeless and experts who take part in FEANTSA²⁰ have developed, with the Commission’s support, a significant body of work in terms of information and comparisons²¹.

15. P6_TA(2008)0163

16. P7_DCL(2010)0061

17. On this, [Consensus Conference, its expectations and productions](#) (in French)

18. P9_TA(2020)0314

19. The presence of Bordeaux, Lyon and Strasbourg is noted, as is the absence of Paris. [The open letter](#) is available.

20. See www.feantsa.org

21. It should be noted that throughout the 1990s, counts, disseminated by national associations and FEANTSA, circulated with regard to the scale of the homeless population. For around ten years, it was repeated that every day around 1.1 million EU citizens (EU-15) relied on homeless assistance services. This figure rose to 1.8 million over a one-year period. Again, according to estimates from the time by FEANTSA, around 18 million citizens of the European Union lived in very inadequate or “unconventional” housing, i.e. buildings not intended for housing.

BOX 3 • FEANTSA

Founded in 1989 and supported by the Commission, the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) - one of only a few European organisations with a French acronym - has 150 members based in 30 European countries, including the Member States of the EU (except Cyprus and Bulgaria). Since 1991, it has been running an "Observatory on Homelessness" and regularly produces documents which present the results of trans-national exchanges. It leads a network of researchers and publishes the European Journal of Homelessness. France has around fifteen members, including local authorities (the metropolitan authorities of Lyon and Grenoble, the Paris City Hall social action centre), and, above all, associations and federations of organisations (Abbé Pierre Foundation, Secours Catholique, Fapil, Fédération des acteurs de la solidarité, SOLIHA, UNAF0, UNCLLAJ). The expertise collected and produced by FEANTSA makes it a benchmark stakeholder in terms of knowledge on homelessness and of policies to combat homelessness. What is known and stated in European documentation on this issue comes from FEANTSA. With its official signature, "Working together to end homelessness in Europe", FEANTSA has been advocating a specific European strategy for years.

FEANTSA's care to produce shared analytical frameworks is noteworthy, particularly in terms of definitions and statistics. This exercise is difficult on a national level. It is even more difficult on an EU level²². A European typology of housing-related exclusion was, however, recently debated and disseminated. Named ETHOS (for European Typology on Homelessness and housing exclusion), it is to be used for data collection, research and to draw up policies to combat housing-related exclusion. It is now the benchmark.

This typology is intended as an open exercise, putting national definitions in Member States to one side. It classifies the homeless according to their living situation:

- *Being roofless* (living rough or in emergency accommodation),
- *Being houseless* (living in temporary accommodation in institutions or shelters),
- *Living in insecure housing* (living under threat of exclusion due to precarious tenancies),
- *Living in inadequate housing* (in caravans on illegal campsites, in unfit housing, in extreme overcrowding).

In addition to the analysis of the populations concerned, FEANTSA also proposes tools to understand the diversity of policies to combat homelessness²³.

This expertise now contributes to national public debate and, above all, European debate. The typology and ability to mobilise a network of data suppliers mean that it is possible to offer a European overview. While this admittedly has its shortcomings –FEANTSA and its associate experts are the first to acknowledge this–, in the current circumstances, it is the most complete.

FEANTSA, in partnership with the Abbé Pierre Foundation (FAP), has also produced an annual overview of housing exclusion in Europe²⁴ since 2016. This highly documented work on housing and the populations excluded from housing collates available data and proposes theme-based analysis.

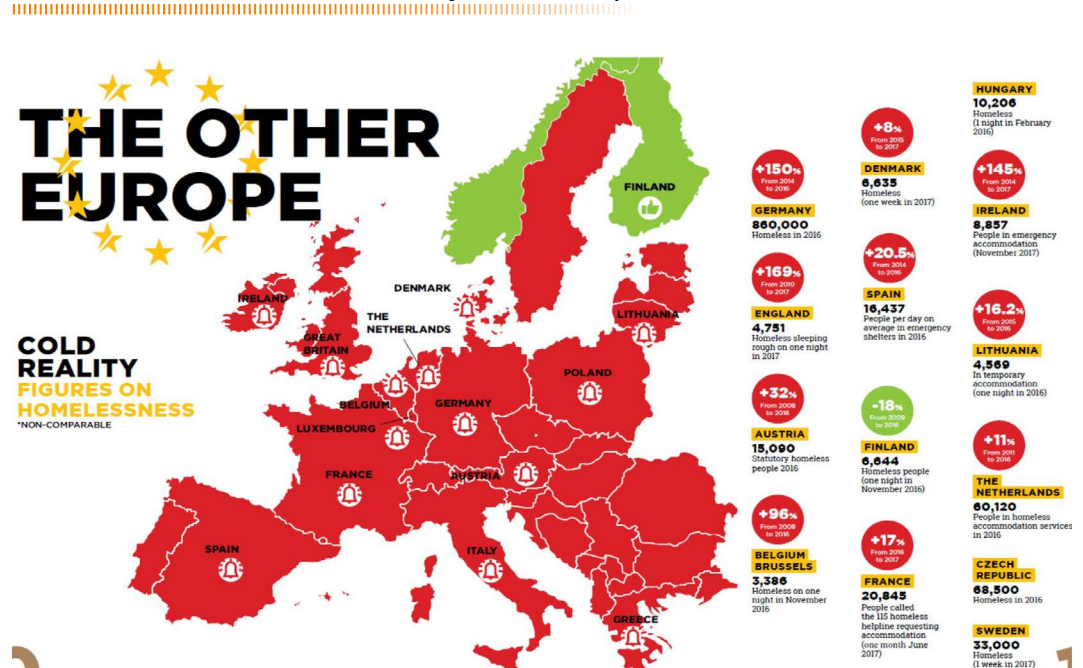
²². Regarding these difficulties, see the article by Cécile Brousse, "Définir et compter les sans-abri en Europe : enjeux et controverses", *Genèses*, n° 58, 2005, pp. 48-71 (in French).

²³. See the [typology proposed according to archetypes: 1/ focus on housing, 2/ intensity of support](#).

²⁴. These reports can be found on the FEANTSA (www.feantsa.org) and Abbé Pierre Foundation (www.fondation-abbé-pierre.fr) websites

In the communications released upon recent publications of this work, FEANTSA has stated that **some 700,000 people face homelessness every night within the European Union, i.e. 0,14% of the European population** (EU-27). A European map, updated when there is new data, shows very clearly the situations and trends. As stated in the second publication of this warning report, with this tool, we have a “location - non-comparable - non-exhaustive - of alarming trends in homelessness in Europe”. These detailed figures should once again be considered with caution. Yet it is this data which informs national policies and, in addition, the European institutions. Moreover, these reports, which do contain the most meticulous and synthetic data in terms of sources and figures, insist less on the number of homeless people (a figure strictly “unknown” as stated in the reports) and more on trends²⁵ identified on a national level. In addition to the overview, there is a dashboard.

MAP 1 ■ Homelessness (2018 Overview of Housing Exclusion in Europe)



Source: FEANTSA, Abbé Pierre Foundation

The aggregated estimates on a European level establish an order of magnitude, based on national data collected from surveys conducted at different times with different methodologies. They should not be interpreted as perfect data. The source does, however, allow us to identify and follow trends as well as the resources rolled out to address them. The different maps produced have put forward Finland as a European country in a good position, with a number of homeless people on the decrease. These results from Finland are credited to a very effective “housing first” policy. The model is not a perfect example, however, as is sometimes the case, as this very proactive policy is only aimed at Finns, and other homeless people, even Spanish citizens, are not eligible for the proposed solutions²⁶.

²⁵. As Freek Spinnewijn, FEANTSA’s dynamic director, wryly noted, the Commission knows approximately how many fish are in the seas and oceans, but it does not really know how many homeless people there are in Europe.

²⁶. On the experiences of countries which are often highlighted, in particular for their “housing first” strategy, see Mike Allen, Lars Benjaminsen, Eoin O’Sullivan and Nicholas Pleace, *Ending Homelessness? The Contrasting Experiences of Denmark, Finland and Ireland*, Policy Press, 2020. Regarding the situation in Finland, see the achievements and expertise of the Y-Foundation, www.ysaatio.fi. See also, published by this organisation, the collection of essays, *Homelessness in 2030. Essays on possible futures*, 2019.

4 ■ PROPOSALS FOR ENHANCED EUROPEAN POLICIES

Today, homelessness is without question a social reality in the EU, which calls for a renewal of analysis frameworks and modes of action. National analysis frameworks are no longer appropriate in terms of the mobility of poverty which is not what it was in past centuries. Modes of action should not be restricted solely to local interventions or to the insufficient capacities of regional and national coordination. **The issue of homelessness is currently a real issue on both a local and a European level, which calls for a meticulous and ambitious analysis and revision of policies and initiatives**, in terms of generic (such as social assistance systems) or specific instruments (such as emergency shelters), of legislation on anti-social behaviour in public spaces or of the gradual affirmation of the right to housing.

Acknowledging this European dimension to the issue of homelessness entails, for each Member State, opening up other perspectives on the way in which the issues of occupying public space (by groups of individuals, tents, etc.)²⁷, begging and anti-social behaviour, the prospect of strengthening and enforceability of the right to housing are being addressed elsewhere in the EU.

In practical terms, several proposals have been put forward. Some are not necessarily new. Yet by repeating them, the decision to adopt them should be made more quickly. Other proposals round off the aims and instruments of this area of study. The fight to reduce homelessness can be subject to a new fate. It appears that the successive European Commissioners responsible for this issue were rather reluctant, unconvinced by the added value that Europe can bring about. The Commissioner Nicolas Schmit, responsible for employment, social affairs and inclusion, claims to have a more proactive stance²⁸ as does the President of the European Parliament, David Sassoli.

As homelessness is on the agenda and as the financial resources are more easily allocated following the COVID crisis, a proactive European investment to end homelessness is completely logical.

A window of opportunity is therefore open for ambitious proposals.

1. **Set out a European strategy to combat homelessness.** Following on from what is currently being developed, it would be timely for the issue of homelessness to become, in its own right, one of the subjects specifically identified in the social inclusion strategy of the Action Plan, announced in March 2021, to achieve the European Pillar of Social Rights. Let us stress that in the twenty principles of this Pillar, the 19th, entitled “Housing and assistance for the homeless” explicitly provides that “access to social housing or housing assistance of good quality shall be provided for those in need. Vulnerable people have the right to appropriate assistance and protection against forced eviction.

²⁷. Regarding these tents and camps in Europe, see Julien Damon, *Campement de migrants sans-abri : comparaisons européennes et recommandations*, Fondapol, 2019. (in French)

²⁸. As evidenced by his various interventions and statements regarding homelessness, including an opinion piece “*Les sans-abri en Europe: si nous cessions de regarder ailleurs ?*” (*Le Soir*, 22 June 2020), signed with Ana Mendes Godinho (Portuguese Minister of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security and President of the EPSCO Council during the first semester of 2021), Yves Leterme (Goodwill Ambassador for the Fight against Homelessness in Europe).

Adequate shelter and services shall be provided to the homeless in order to promote their social inclusion.²⁹ As part of the Action Plan drafted to achieve this Pillar, **the aim of reducing the number of persons at risk of poverty and social exclusion by 2030 is set at 15 million**. In terms of this target, we could also envisage an objective to reduce the number of homeless people in Europe, and even, with more impetus, an objective to end homelessness. Such an ambition would be perfectly in line with the UN target of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) which strive to end extreme poverty in the world by 2030. Ambitious quantifiable objectives do not necessarily have a good image among European institutions. Yet it is not because ambitious ideas have amounted to little that they should be disregarded.

2. **Establish an assessed overview of policies.** With a view to strengthening current interventions and cooperations, the completion of an overview of the issues and policies conducted in the EU, highlighting and submitting for debate the advantages and disadvantages of EU interventions, would be welcome, with recommendations for a common framework that would bring about adjusted and coordinated national policies. **The approach would be in line with the objective of a substantial reduction of, and ultimately, an end to homelessness.** The assessment of the different national policies, and in particular of all that is currently conducted under the name “housing first”³⁰ (which involves providing housing rather than accommodation first), would result in a common framework of actions. Acknowledging and achieving this proposal for an assessed overview could involve the “European Platform on Combating Homelessness”. This platform is set to be established, upon the initiative of the Portuguese presidency of the Council of the EU, at the end of the first semester of 2021³¹. It is intended to paint a clearer picture of the homeless population in Europe and to enable a better sharing of the instruments used in all Member States.
3. **Improve data through counts in major cities.** To improve the harmonised measures to combat homelessness, one original approach would be to support large-scale counts in cities on a European scale. Using various methods, London, Brussels and Madrid have been doing this, sometimes for a decade now. Paris has launched the “nuits de la solidarité” (‘nights of solidarity’), followed by other French municipalities³². With a harmonised methodology and material support from European funds, it must be possible to make progress and obtain results relatively quickly. In terms of communication, such an operation would give the social Europe project a new and clear dimension. Going beyond these local counts, data collection must also be harmonised. The issue of homelessness could be incorporated in all European social surveys and databases.

²⁹. See the text of this joint Proclamation by the Parliament, Council and Commission on the European Pillar of Social Rights (2017/C 428/09).

³⁰. On the French “housing first” model, which was subject to a policy launched in September 2017 by President Macron and for which the DIHAL (Inter-Ministerial Delegation for Accommodation and Access to Housing) is responsible, see the institutional website www.gouvernement.fr/logement-d-abord (in French). For an international perspective, see Deborah K. Padgett, Benjamin F. Henwood, and Sam J. Tsemberis, *Housing First. Ending Homelessness, Transforming Systems, and Changing Lives*, Oxford University Press, 2015.

³¹. The project and intention of this collaborative platform had already been announced, in July 2020, by the European Commissioner for employment and social rights, Nicolas Schmit, during an on-line event of FEANTSA and the Abbé Pierre Foundation for the launch of the *5th Overview of Housing Exclusion in Europe*. We should also note that the issue is also clearly part of the objectives of the [Strategic Plan 2020-2024 of the DG Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion](#).

³². On these methodologies, see Julien Damon, “Combien de SDF ? Exagérations, estimations et aiguilles dans le foin”, *Revue de droit sanitaire et social*, n° 1, 2021. (in French)

4. **Establish European minimum standards for services.** In addition to objectives and knowledge, very practical interventions can embody the European ambition. **Just as there are standards for asylum, although they are applied to varying degrees, it would be wise to establish and ensure compliance with minimum standards for services to the homeless**, mainly accommodation centres. The quality of these shelters varies greatly across the EU. Often, these facilities are of very poor quality in Eastern European countries, while some are absolutely indecent. In this respect, a return of Eastern European homeless people to their country of origin is impossible, at least regarding shelters. Minimum quality standards would create a framework for these services, which currently stand out for their high level of heterogeneity, both in terms of quality and quantity. Put plainly, these standards could concern opening hours, ratios of specialised staff, guidelines for community life, the number of spaces per centre, etc.
5. **Finance assistance to European citizens who are not in their country of origin through European funds.** As the different Member States are not all affected by the presence of homeless persons from other Member States in the same way, the costs of these services could be pooled. **European funds could be used to finance services to European citizens who are homeless in another country.** This option would not concern emergency assistance but rather rehabilitation centres and other long-term measures. The proposal would have to be specifically calibrated in terms of the right to residency and social assistance provisions, but, once again, it would be a firmly European action. Drawing inspiration from regulations to coordinate social security systems, the idea could give rise to coordination mechanisms for social assistance systems³³.
6. **Give the new European Labour Authority a mandate on homelessness.** It may be possible to introduce specific instruments, for example, a European agency which has a threefold function of monitoring homelessness across the EU, supporting service and regulation initiatives and conducting cooperation initiatives between Member States to manage cases and situations of homeless persons present in a State in which they are not national citizens. A certain number of the European Union's specialised agencies have already been established to provide their support to Member States and their citizens. These agencies meet the need to tackle new legal, technical and/or scientific tasks. Created in October 2019, the European Labour Authority (ELA) must achieve a better oversight of worker mobility within the Union, with a view to combating social dumping. **Its mandate could be extended to include the intra-European mobility of homeless persons.** This could lead to a change of name.
7. **Approve financial support on a European scale for the creation of specialised housing and social residences.** This intervention would initially be short-term, but the crisis of the hotel sector due to the adverse economic impact of COVID could hold a solution through **assistance to convert part of the offering, generally low-end establishments, into housing for the homeless.** The proposal should be studied in detail, as local projects, in particular in France or in the USA³⁴, show that it is worth considering. This reminds that combating homelessness always requires innovation. A subsidy and loan package could be earmarked within the European recovery plan.

³³. On the coordination of social security systems, see the foundations and activities of the Centre of European and International Liaisons for Social Security (Cleiss). www.cleiss.fr

³⁴. For an example in the USA, see the [Homekey project](#) in Los Angeles.

These seven points are suggestions for ways in which public initiatives aimed at the homeless can be improved. It should be stressed that this form of public action should not be considered in isolation from the rest of the public policy movement, on national and European scales, as **the issue of homelessness is not a unique subject that excessively specialised instruments can resolve alone, but rather it is a social issue - now a European issue** - that should be understood, and therefore tackled, as a condensed version of all the others.

Homelessness is naturally a renewed mobility issue within the EU's open internal borders but it is above all a concentrate of all other social problems (unemployment, changes to inequality and poverty, changes to family situation, housing market issues) and a precipitate of public action shortcomings (both as regards social policies and asylum and immigration policies).

As regards the possible outcomes, based on the pace of European construction and institutions and on the recommendations made in this paper, the upcoming creation of the European Platform on Combating Homelessness at the end of June 2021 is to be commended. It is to be hoped that this achievement of the Portuguese presidency of the Council of the European Union will act as a foundation for technical appraisal, and even for the implementation of our seven proposals, during the next French presidency of the Council in the first semester of 2022. ■



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