WORKING PAPER

MORE THAN A ROOF
A STATISTICAL PROFILE OF HOMELESS PEOPLE IN BELGIUM

Tuba Bircan, Ingrid Schockaert & Ides Nicaise

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FOREWORD

This paper is part of the MEHOBEL project (Measuring Homelessness in Belgium), a research project funded by the Belgian Federal Service for Scientific Policy BELSPO and co-ordinated by Prof. Koen Hermans (LUCAS-KU Leuven). The research team consists of LUCAS and HIVA, (both interdisciplinary research institutes from the University of Leuven), Centre d'Etudes de l'Opinion (University of Liège) and La Strada (a resource centre for homelessness service providers in the Brussels Region) The Mehobel project has a policy-oriented and a scientific goal. On the one hand, we want to develop methodologies to measure and monitor homelessness in Belgium. On the other hand, we aim to contribute to the evidence base concerning homelessness, and more specifically, to develop innovative approaches to measure the dark number of homeless people, to produce stock and flow data and to integrate the lived experience of homeless people into the monitoring strategy.

One of the objectives of MEHOBEL is to explore the use of specific surveys to draw a profile of homeless people, such as (part of) the SILC-CUT survey that was conducted in 2010. The present paper focuses on this particular objective; it exploits for the first time the full dataset on homelessness and thus illustrates what kind of information can be derived from such surveys. It also demonstrates the feasibility of comparisons between the profile of homeless people and other groups at risk of poverty. Indeed, the SILC-CUT survey was intended as a pilot for 'satellite surveys' based on simplified and more targeted versions of the EU-SILC questionnaire. The downside of this approach is that it cannot be used to estimate the size of the target group.

The authors are grateful to BELSPO for the funding of the project; to all members of the steering committee (including representatives of people with a personal experience of homelessness); to Koen Hermans and other colleagues for useful comments and suggestions.

Contents

1 | INTRODUCTION

Despite the existence of indicators in the Eurostat database such as severe housing deprivation, overcrowding and housing affordability, none of the official EU statistics directly cover homelessness (Gosme, 2013; Eurostat, 2015), and consequently neither the number nor the profile of homeless people in EU member states are known (FEANTSA, 2012; Bowpitt, et al., 2014; Denvall, 2016). Methodologically speaking, estimations based on the census are not reliable as people without a fixed residence are not included in the census. In addition, homelessness is not a permanent status, with people moving into and out of homelessness rather frequently. High-profile European social and political debates have incrementally focused on the statistics on income, poverty and social exclusion, therefore collecting valid and reliable both qualitative and quantitative data with regard to homelessness is crucial.

Research methods for identifying the number and the characteristics of the homeless are controversial and remain in a developmental phase (for an extensive review see Tipple & Speak, 2009). Key tools for acquiring knowledge about poverty and social exclusion and monitoring the progress from a national or a European perspective are the European Community Household Panel (ECHP) and its successor EU Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC). One of the major shortcomings is the under- or even non-representation of certain (vulnerable) populations in these surveys, due to non-response or because they are not part of the sample framework (Adriaensens et al., 2003). These excluded groups are relevant because of their quantitative magnitude and more importantly their specific living conditions or their extreme poverty. In addition to groups that 'by definition' fall outside the sampling frame, some groups, such as rough sleepers and homeless people, rarely or never stay at their legally registered address and, consequently, cannot be reached.

Better understanding of the characteristics and the living conditions of these hidden groups of poor people in Belgium are highly relevant, as we suspect that they do not only suffer from a lack of financial resources, but also from inadequate housing, limited access to essential services, mental and physical health problems, and other forms of exclusion. It is therefore essential to collect information on the demographics and the living conditions of homeless by monitoring it across time.

The current living conditions of homeless people in Belgium are alarming, as they do not only suffer from the lack of integration into the Belgian society, but they are often faced with inadequate living conditions, limited access to necessary services, mental and physical health problems, and a precarious socio-economic situation.

This chapter is concentrated of several aspects of the living conditions of the homeless people such as their demographic profile, including nationality and education, housing situation, income, participation in the labour market, and health profile. After briefly reviewing homelessness studies and providing some background information about the homeless people in Belgium, the data source and the methodology will be discussed. Not only the demographic characteristics and education levels of these vulnerable groups will be examined, but also their housing situation, income and economic status, labour market participation and health status. The goal of this chapter is to fully exploit the statistical profile and the living conditions of homeless people in Belgium. However, let it be clear that this is merely a sketch of the living conditions and go for comparisons where

available. In addition, we must keep in mind that we have attempted to reach as wide a proportion of target population as possible, but we did not reach a large sample. We, therefore, abstain from statements about the volume of homelessness. Our profile data should be considered as merely tentative too.

2 | STATISTICAL STUDIES OF HOMELESSNESS

The European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) has developed a typology of homelessness and housing exclusion (ETHOS-European Typology of Homelessness) as a means of improving the understanding and measurement of homelessness across Europe (Edgar & Meert, 2006; Edgar, Harrison, Watson & Busch-Geertsema, 2007; Busch-Geertsema et al., 2016). This typology distinguishes between 'rough sleepers' (who sleep in the open air or in public spaces), homeless people living in shelters, households in insecure housing and households in inadequate housing.

Since the early 1990s, a substantial body of literature about homeless people has emanated in most western and Scandinavian European countries, with a minimal pursuit from other European countries (Avramov, 1995; Busch-Geertsema et al., 2010). Many countries such as Italy (2000), Spain (2004), Portugal (2005), France (2012), and Slovakia (2016) have undertaken national counts of people sleeping in public places or rough sleepers.

There have been significant increases in housing exclusion and homelessness in the Member States during the crisis. Recent data from a variety of Member States indicate 'an on-going trend of increasing homelessness in many contexts' (see SPC, 2014; Busch-Geertsema et al., 2014). Likewise, FEANTSA (2012) states that during the last decade, a substantial increase in homelessness in many EU countries is recorded in the national monitoring reports. The OECD (2017) confirms that homelessness has increased in recent years in Denmark, England, France, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands and New Zealand, but fallen in Finland and the United States, based on the data from the 2016 OECD Questionnaire on Affordable and Social Housing (QuASH 2016) for 29 out of 35 reporting countries. Estimates of the number of homeless people (2015 or latest year available) are missing for Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Iceland, Israel, Italy, Korea, Malta, Romania, the Slovak Republic, Switzerland and Turkey.

Belgium homeless should be enumerated as part of the census (FEANTSA, 2008). The results of the 2011 censuses in Belgium indicate '0' homeless. It is obvious that '0' stands for the nonexistence of numbers rather than nonexistence of homeless people in Belgium. Since 2008, there has been a two-yearly count of homeless and inadequately housed people in the Brussels-Capital Region by *La Strada* which is a support centre for homeless in Brussels. Based on the count of the night of the 7 November 2016, a total of 3,386 people were counted, of whom 35% were roofless (in public spaces or in emergency or crisis shelters), 25% were homeless (in temporary accommodation) and 39% were living in inadequate housing (including squats). The total number of rough sleepers and homeless people living in shelters in Belgium were estimated to be 18,700 by the FEANTSA in 2016. They particularly pointed out a 33% increase in the number of homeless in the Brussels region in the last four years a 96% increase in the last 8 years.

3 | SILC-CUT: DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Homeless people are one of the main excluded groups from the EU-SILC (Survey of Income and Living Conditions). Therefore, as the data source, we refer to a unique survey targeting those hard-to-reach groups: the SILC-CUT survey of homeless people (2010; funded by the Belgian Science Policy, BELSPO). The Belgian data of EU-SILC for 2009 will also be referred to enable comparisons among homeless and the Belgian poor.

The SILC-CUT survey was carried out in 2010 as a pilot of a 'satellite survey' to EU-SILC among specific high-risk groups in Belgium, including homeless people, using simplified versions of the EU-SILC questionnaires so that comparisons could be made with the 'mainstream' EU-SILC data (SILC-CUT project - see Schockaert et al., 2012; Nicaise & Schockaert, 2014 for methodological details). The concept of 'satellite surveys' means that targeted surveys are carried out among specific subpopulations with an increased poverty risk, using questionnaires and methods that are adapted to the realities of these populations and yet as comparable as possible with the instruments of the main EU-SILC survey.

The SILC-CUT research was funded by the Agora Research Programme of the Belgian Science Policy (http://www.belspo.be) upon request from the 'Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service' (http://www.combatpoverty.be), which was established by the Federal Government, the Regions and Communities as an instrument in the fight against poverty, insecurity and social exclusion. Simplified versions of the EU-SILC questionnaire were used in order to maximise response rates, while keeping the data from our surveys as comparable as possible with the mainstream EU-SILC data; on the other hand, we also included a few additional questions about essential topics relating to the living conditions of homeless people such as access to water and sanitary equipment.

SILC-CUT data collection was organised with the assistance of an interdisciplinary team and finalised between 1 February 2010 and 31 July 2010. A total of 445 interviews were conducted; of those 277 were with homeless people.

Our sample of homeless focuses on rough sleepers and people living in shelters. The samples for homeless was drawn through non-random, stratified indirect sampling in collaboration with organisations and services working with the target group. The two-stage sampling process, beginning with a selection of intermediaries, obviously involved a risk of missing the most marginalised people in our target groups - particularly rough sleepers. Therefore, 15% of the interviews were also conducted in the street, in stations or abandoned buildings, and another 5% of the respondents were contacted through a snowball method. On the other hand, we opted for collaboration with third sector organisations because in this way we expected to have easier access to a sufficient number of respondents. Our expectations were met on this point because the overall 'non-response' is attributable to the unreachability of targeted persons rather than refusals or failed interviews. Of all individuals contacted for an interview, 70% completed the interview.[1]

[1] Rates of (un)reachability could not be measured as interviews mainly occurred on the spot, in the buildings of collaborating organisations.

Quota were set per region on the basis of different sources that provided approximate information: for homeless people, we benefited from registers of the associations of shelters. Table 3.1 gives an overview of the anticipated and achieved quota per cell for the target group.

Table 3.1 Anticipated/achieved number of interviews, homeless people

Flanders 91/141			**Brussels 71/68**			**Wallonia 88/68**		
Men 61/89		Women 30/52	Men 57/41		Women 14/27	Men 64/38		Women 24/30
Rough sl. 13/19		Shelter 78/120	Rough sl. 11/19		Shelter 60/49	Rough sl. 13/26		Shelter 75/42
<30 47/50	30-50 31/66	>50 13/21	<30 30/15	30-50 29/37	>50 12/16	<30 37/17	30-50 36/39	>50 15/10

In spite of the limitations to the research methodology which ought to be recognised, this dataset provides a unique opportunity to illustrate the characteristics and the living conditions of this hidden group of poor people and this knowledge is certainly useful for policy makers and organisations working with target groups such as rough sleepers and other homeless people.

4 | SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

4.1 Age and gender

The SILC-CUT sample consisted of 61% men and 39% women. Although the homeless population is clearly dominated by males, the shares of women in our samples were greater than we had expected based on material from other sources. This suggests that women may be somewhat overrepresented in our studies due to higher response rates.

Table 4.1 Age distribution of the homeless in the sample

	Min.	1st quartile	Median	Mean	3rd quartile	Max.
Male	18	29	41	39.84	48	80
Female	18	27	38	37.53	46	66
Total	18	28	39	38.95	47	80

The age-gender distribution is shown in Table 4.1. The women in the sample are considerably younger. The median age is 39 years. The oldest respondent is just 80 years of age.

Table 4.2 Nationalities at birth of homeless in the sample, in %

Belgian	EU country	Non-EU country
72.9%	12.5	14.5

Regarding nationalities, 73% of homeless are Belgian nationals. European Union country nationals account for 12.5% of the homeless.

4.2 Socio-economic background

Parents' employment status is a significant indicator of the socio-economic status of the household where the respondent was grown up. Table 4.3 below provides the information about mother's and father's employment status when the respondent was (approximately) 14 years old. Only 57.7% of the homeless people in the sample had a working father while more than half (54.3%) of the mothers were either housewives or unemployed. On the other hand, 65% of the institutionalised people in the sample reported they grew up in a household with a working father and 50.9% with a mother staying at home.

Table 4.3 Parents' employment status when the respondent was 14 years old, in %

	Institutionalised		Roofless	
	Father's employment status	**Mother's employment status**	**Father's employment status**	**Mother's employment status**
Employee	51.9	28.5	49.2	19.6
Self-employed	13.1	7.5	8.5	8.9
Work with family	0.5	1.4		
Unemployed	6.1	4.7	6.8	8.9
Retired	1.4			
Houseman/housewife	0.5	45.8	1.7	55.4
Other	9.8	3.7	3.4	
Don't know	5.6	4.7	11.9	3.6
N/A	11.2	3.7	18.6	3.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

4.3 Household composition

As the question about *household* composition in the EU-SILC questionnaire refers to 'persons living together', the figures do not take into account family members that were left behind either through separation or through migration. This may result in very complex, multiple households and discrepancies between household size and family size.

Table 4.4 sketches the household composition also by gender. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of the homeless respondents were single. This is the case for men and women, but the share is significantly greater for men than women (86.3% for men compared with 58.8% of women). Men seldom live in two-person households (5.3%) whereas a quarter of the women live with one another person. The remainder (8% of the total sample) live in a household with more people. This is the case for 16% of the women and 8.4% of the men.

In total, 14.9% of the homeless respondents have children that live in the same household. This remains limited to approximately 4% among the men; however, this percentage climbs to 31.7% for the women. In other words, most of the women (who are not living alone) live with their children. Needless to say, this is a particularly vulnerable group.

Table 4.4 Household composition of homeless in the sample, in %

	Single	**2 persons**	**3 persons**	**More than 3 persons**
Male	86.3	5.3	0.6	7.8
Female	58.8	25.2	9.3	6.7
Total	78.9	13.1	2.5	5.5

Table 4.5 Marital status of homeless in the sample, in %

	Roofless
Single	62.7
Married	15.3
Living together	3.4
Divorced	16.9
Widow	1.7
Total	100.0

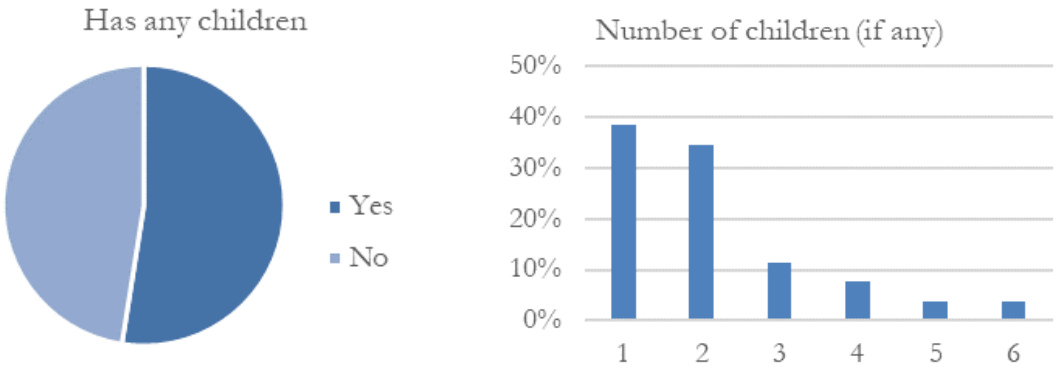


Figure 4.1 Number of children (if any) of homeless

5 | EDUCATION LEVEL

The level of education of most respondents is (very) low. There are great similarities between both sexes. Around 25% of the men and 31% of the women do not have any qualification or only possess a certificate from primary school. Another 45% of the men have a lower secondary education certificate. This is the case for 39% of the women. In other words, 71% of the homeless people (men *and* women) left school with no certificate of upper secondary education. On the other hand, we note that 9% of the men and 6% of the women have a degree in higher education.

Table 5.1 Education level of homeless in the sample, in %

No Diploma	Elementary education	Lower secondary education	Higher secondary education	Higher education
10.7	18.0	42.6	20.2	8.5

Table 5.2 Difficulties with reading, writing and calculation in the native language among homeless in the sample, in %

	Institutionalised			Roofless		
	Reading	Writing	Calculation	Reading	Writing	Calculation
None	80,6	72,6	74,8	68,4	63,8	62,1
Sometimes	11,6	18,1	15,4	21,1	20,7	24,1
Often	7,9	9,3	9,8	10,5	15,5	13,8
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Acquiring a lower education degree by the respondents does not necessarily demonstrate their proficiency in their native language. More than 30% of the homeless people reported having difficulties with reading in their native language. This ratio is lower for the institutionalised (19.5%). Problems with writing and calculation in native language are more dramatic for roofless people, 36.2% reported that they experienced difficulties with writing and 37.9% had difficulties with calculation in their native language.

6 | HOUSING SITUATION

Most homeless respondents were contacted in a shelter (almost 80%), while we found some people who spent the night in a private home as non-paying residents, and 14% lived on the streets.[2] Contacts with women occurred more often in shelters than those with men. Note that this distribution is largely the result of the procedure adopted to contact the respondents, which took place via social services and associations, and therefore cannot be viewed as representative of the entire target group. Nevertheless, it is commonly admitted that most homeless people usually spend the nights in shelters. Rough sleeping (on the street) appears to be very uncommon among women (partly for security reasons, partly because they may live with children and have better access to shelters).

Table 6.1 Housing situation of the homeless in the sample (in %)

	Shelter	House	On the street
Male	73.6	9.8	20.1
Female	88.9	4	3.0
Total	79.1	7.7	13.9

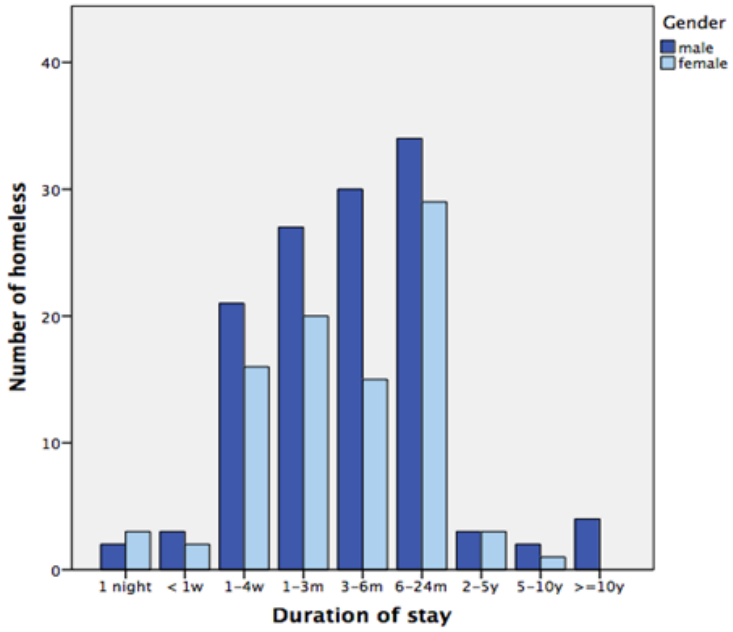
6.1 Shelters and institutions

Figure 6.1 shows that more than half of the homeless respondents in an institution (shelter or home) have already been residing there for over three months - with some outliers over ten years. The same distribution pattern holds for men and women. Most (86.6% of men, 89.7% of women) stay there overnight on a daily basis. However, note that the share of the homeless people who permanently reside in an institution is unavoidably overestimated, given that these people have a higher probability of being sampled than those who only stay in an institution occasionally.[3] Culhane and Metraux (2008) suggest that the vast majority (up to 4/5) of homeless people entering a shelter, escape this situation within a few days and do not fall back into it. The majority of the homeless people (87%) pay for the night's stay; the price is less than 27 euros for 82.6%. 30% of the respondents declare that they work or do odd jobs in exchange for a night's stay, whether or not this happens voluntarily.

[2] The SILC-CUT survey offered the possibility of reporting an 'alternative' housing situation besides those defined ('in an institution', 'in a home' or 'on the streets'). When this option was selected it always concerned temporary accommodation in a property or other sheltered place or with friends. They were incorporated in the category 'home' or 'on the streets'.

[3] This concerns the so-called 'stock sampling' approach. Suppose that all surveys take place in an institution on one random day in a year, and that all guests present are interviewed: a person that resides in the institution the entire year has 365 chances out of 365 of being included in the sample, whereas a person that spends just one day there has only one chance out of 365.

Figure 6.1 Duration of the stay in a shelter (homeless people)



6.2 Sleeping rough

The housing situation of homeless people outside institutions (we call them 'rough sleepers' or roofless) varies a lot: 24.6% reside in an abandoned property, 26.2% on the streets, under a bridge or in the park, and 23% occasionally with family or friends. The others find shelter in cellars, car parks, entrance halls, the underground, stations or shopping centres. These sleeping areas are relatively stable. Approximately 20% have already stayed in the same place for at least a year and almost 60% for at least a month.

Part of them 'rarely or never use a shelter'. When we asked them why 26% cited a lack of places as a reason, 18% found shelters too expensive and 16% had bad experiences. Some respondents said that they were not eligible according to the regulations, that animals were not allowed or that they preferred to live on the streets rather than in an institution. 'Other reasons', including conflicts or fear of being expelled from the country, were also cited (33%).[4]

Table 6.2 indicates that rough sleepers often lack the most basic amenities. Only half of the rough sleepers have access to potable water, and even fewer to a hot drink, in the spaces where they are spending the night. Half have access to a toilet, whereas less than a third have access to washing facilities.

Table 6.2 Access to basic services among the homeless in the sample

Services	With Access
Drinkable water	53
Warm drinks	35
WC	50
Communal bathroom or shower	31

4 The respondents could provide various reasons.

7 | INCOME AND MATERIAL DEPRIVATION

EU-SILC is extremely hard to fill out for low-literate respondents. Therefore, in the SILC-CUT questionnaire, we decided to confine the questions to monthly net income data in the month preceding the interview.

Figure 7.1 illustrates the distribution of net monthly equivalised income amongst homeless people. To begin with, the SILC-CUT results obviously reveal very high financial poverty risks: 71.8% of the homeless people have incomes below the financial poverty threshold (60% of the median equivalised income in the country) – against 14.7% on average for the Belgian population.

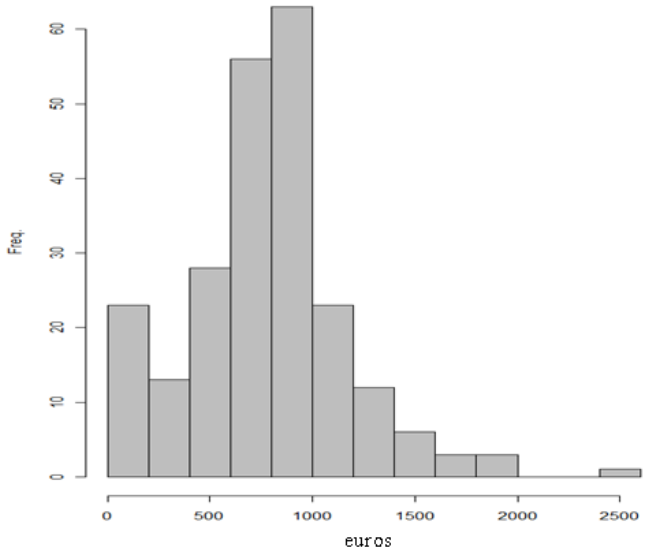


Figure 7.1 Distribution of equivalised net household income of homeless people (euros per month, 2010)

Despite the fact that most homeless people draw some kind of social benefit, and despite the existence of special regulations to facilitate their access to the guaranteed minimum income[5], the majority of the homeless appear to live below that minimum level. This suggests either that administrative obstacles remain important, or that homeless people fear the interference of official services (such as debt management, conditions relating to activation, or compulsory medical treatment).

Table 7.1 Equivalised net income distribution of homeless in the sample compared with average Belgian households (in euros per month, 2010 prices)

		Min.	1st quartile	Median	Mean	3rd quartile
Homeless	Total	4	590	790	801.7	999
Belgium	Total	0	1,056	1,735	1,300	2,834

For comparison with the overall subgroup of *financially poor* households in Belgium, we selected the relevant variables for households whose total gross household income was lower than the financial poverty threshold (60% of median total equivalised disposable household income).

[5] Taking an official reference address at a municipal social service gives access to social assistance (including the minimum income) in that municipality.

As seen in Table 7.2, the percentages of the population with an income lower than 40%, 50% 60% and 70% of the median equivalent income, provide an idea of the severity of poverty. We see that one in thirteen individuals (7.5% of the population) has to survive on less than half the median equivalent income and 4% on less than 40%. Of the homeless population, we find 58.4% below the 50% median equivalent income level and 31.1% has less than 40%.

Table 7.2 Poverty in the Belgian population and homeless people, in %

	Belgium (EU-SILC 2010)	Homeless
Population with income below 60% of median equivalent income	14.6	71.8
Population with income below 40% of median equivalent income	3.7	31.1
Population with income below 50% of median equivalent income	7.5	58.4
Population with income below 70% of median equivalent income	23.8	85.2
Relative median poverty gap (income deficit relative to poverty line)	17.2	29.3
Difficulties or great difficulties to make ends meet	21.6	23.1

Another commonly used indicator is the relative median poverty gap. The total population at risk of poverty has an income, on average, 17.2% lower than the poverty line. Among homeless people, this is on average 29% lower.[6]

The figures relating to subjective poverty stand out. When Belgian people were asked whether they find it extremely easy, easy, rather difficult, difficult or extremely difficult to make ends meet on a monthly basis, 23.1% position themselves in the last three categories. Remarkably, this is barely higher among homeless people. One possible explanation can be respondents' attempts to conceal their poverty, or adaptation to their difficult living situations.

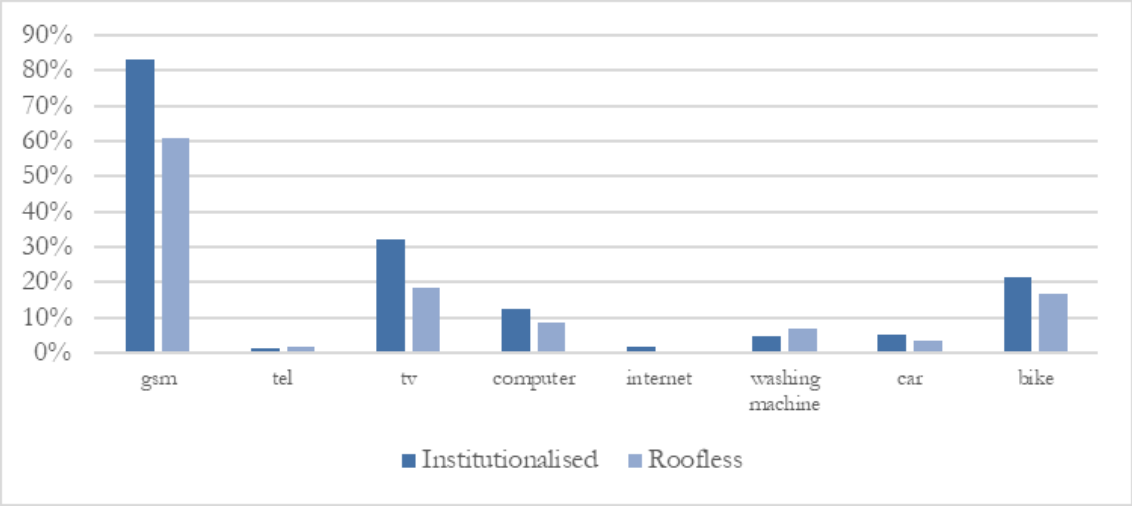


Figure 7.2 Ownership of durables by homeless people in the sample

Figure 7.2 reflects the ownership status of durables for homeless people in our sample. Highest percentages (83.20% for institutionalised, 61% for roofless) are not surprisingly mobile phones. It is

6 The relative median poverty gap is calculated as the difference between the median equivalent income of the persons below the poverty line and the poverty line, expressed as a percentage of the poverty line.

followed by TV (32.20% for institutionalised, 18.60% for roofless) and bicycle (on average 20%). Considering the lack of basic amenities such as water, a low ratio of washing machine ownership (around 5%) is not unexpected.

Different perceptions for making ends meet and paying off debts can be seen in the two next figures. Figure 7.3 demonstrates the difficulty experienced by homeless people in the sample to make ends meet with the current household income. The tendency clearly emphasises the modesty of this vulnerable group. Almost half of the homeless people in the sample reported that either themselves or a member of their household had to pay off debts in the previous month. Figure 7.4 pictures the difficulty to pay off debts with the current household income (only among those who had debts in the previous month). The struggle with paying off debts is apparent and the contrast of the trends between two graphs is striking.

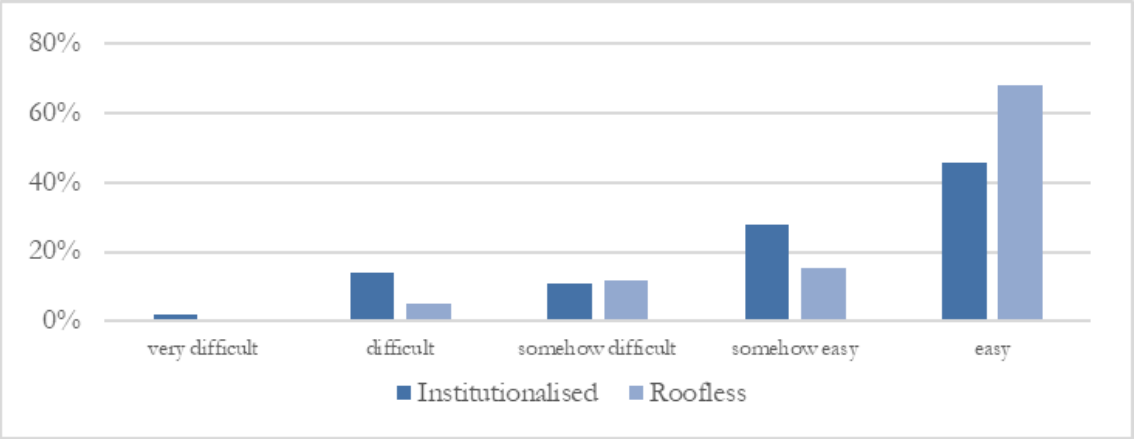


Figure 7.3 Difficulty level to make ends meet with the current household income of homeless people in the sample

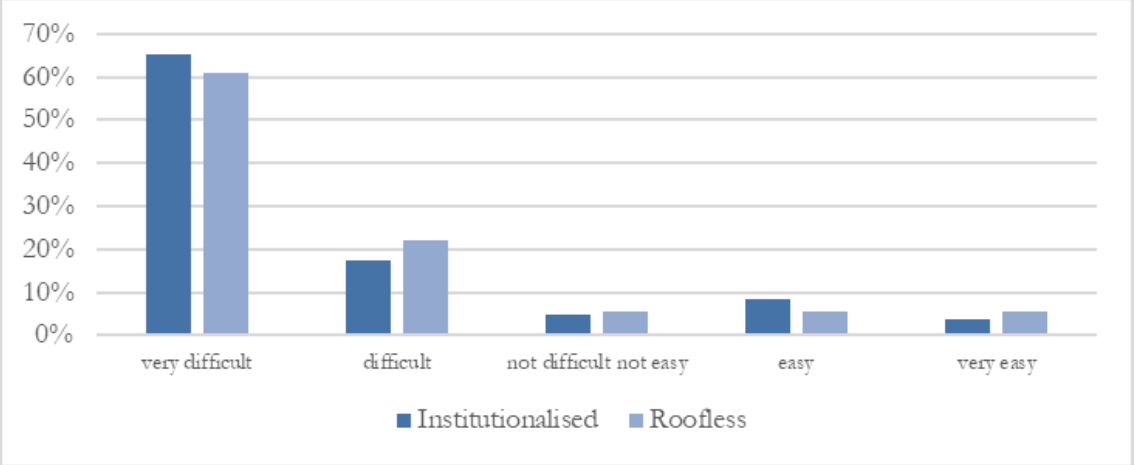


Figure 7.4 Difficulty level to pay off debts

8 | LABOUR MARKET POSITION

Among the homeless, one in five men and almost one in twenty women performed paid labour in the previous week. Approximately a third of those in employment have a standard fixed-term contract or a contract for an indefinite period; approximately a third participate in a training course retaining their benefits, work under Article 60[7] or another subsidised employment scheme. Another third has a job in the informal economy (undeclared work). These jobs concern part-time work for over half those in employment. The monthly median income is 400 euros, whereas a quarter of the respondents earn even less than 120 euros a month. Additionally, it appeared that 18% were sometimes not even paid any wages. Of the homeless respondents who do not work, over half have been unemployed for over two years. On the other hand, just 10% have been unemployed for less than six months.

Table 8.1 Paid work status in the previous week, in %

	Yes
Male	20.2
Female	6.0
Total	15.0

In Belgium as well as other European countries, employment offers considerable protection against poverty. Nevertheless, slightly more than 12.5% of the Belgian population aged between 18 and 59, live in a household with no paid employment. This rises to 84% among the homeless. The poverty risk for people in employment in Belgium is very low (4.8%). However, homeless people in employment are subject to a poverty risk of almost 47%, which confirms once again the precariousness of their jobs.

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7 Article 60 of the law on municipal welfare centres enables the centres to employ their minimum income clients for as long as necessary to get access to unemployment benefits. The minimum income benefit is then converted into a wage subsidy.

9 | HEALTH SITUATION

9.1 General health situation

Table 9.1 gives an impression of the general health condition of homeless people. The respondents' subjective assessment of their own health needs to be interpreted carefully, as they often tend to underestimate their problems. Yet, almost one in four *homeless* persons consider their general health to be in a poor or extremely poor condition. Moreover, 37% have a disability or long-term illness. 39% felt limited in their daily activities during the past six months due to health reasons. The health profile of the women appears to be worse than that of the men.

Table 9.1 General health condition of homeless in the sample, in %

	Male	Female	Total
Bad to very bad general health	20.9	28.3	23.8
Disabled or long-term ill	31.7	46.2	37.2
Limited or very limited in daily activities	35.7	43.2	38.7

In addition to chronical diseases such as asthma, rheumatism, cardiovascular diseases or diabetes, mental health issues constitute a major problem among people living in poverty. Table 9.2 analyses some of the common mental health issues. Lack of sleep is typical of homeless people, given their hard-living conditions, which in the case of rough sleepers combines with stress from insecurity. A significant share of the homeless population (29.5% of the men and 26.6% of the women) sleep just five hours a night or even less; 39% of the men and over half the women also report frequent or extremely frequent sleep problems. Nervousness and loneliness are also issues, experienced (extremely) frequently by 40% and 45% of the men, respectively. Both issues are experienced (extremely) frequently by 55% of the women.

Table 9.2 Common health issues of homeless in the sample, in %

	Male	Female	Total
Sleeps less than 6 hours	29.5	26.6	28.2
Often or very often sleeping problems	39.2	51.4	44.8
Often or very often nervous or tense	40.4	55.1	46.1
Often or very often lonely	45.2	55.1	49.1

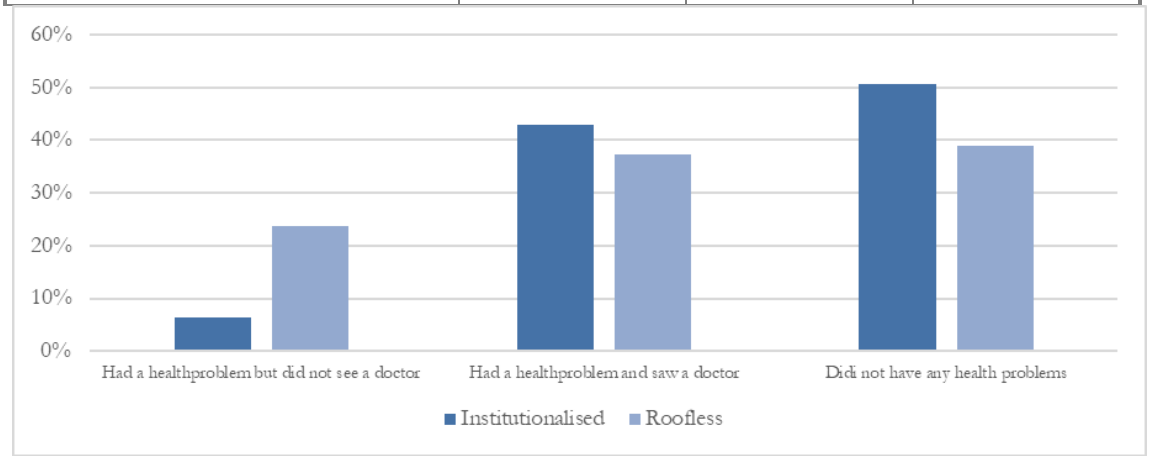

Figure 9.1 Need of a medical treatment in the last 12 months amongst homeless in the sample

Affordability of healthcare is measured by the percentage of respondents who had to postpone or forego necessary care within the last 12 months due to financial reasons. In 2010 this was the case for just 0.5% of the total Belgian population and 1.5% of households with an increased poverty risk. For homeless people, the corresponding percentage was 10.5% and the details are illustrated in Figure 9.1 above. With regard to the main reasons for not going to a doctor in case of a medical need, Figure 9.2 lists the most common reasons given by the homeless in the sample. Financial restrictions constitute the main rationale for not visiting a doctor despite the need of a medical treatment.

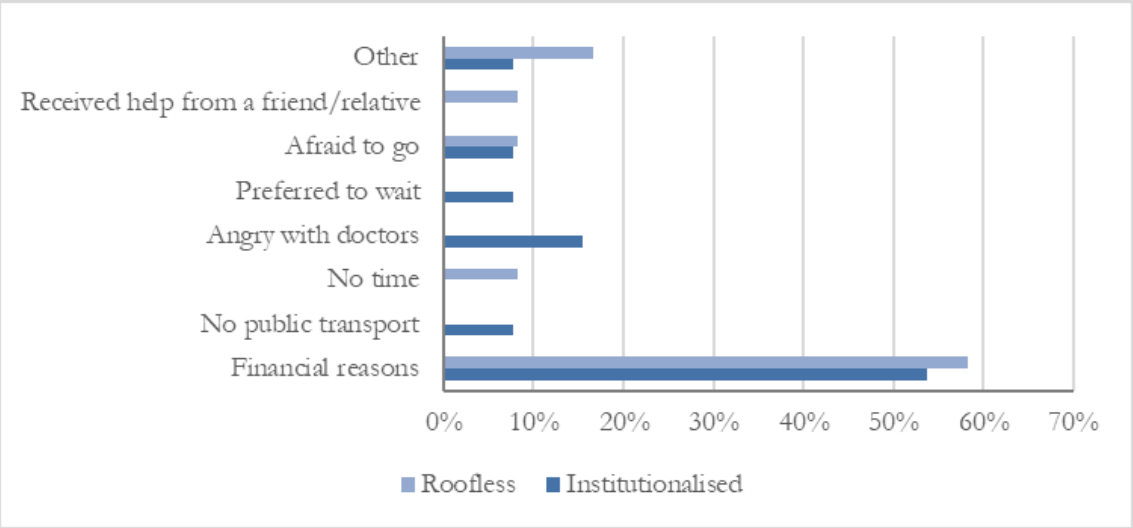

Figure 9.2 Reasons for not seeing a doctor in the last 12 months when a medical treatment was needed

9.2 Mental health

Table 9.3 analyses the use of sedatives, alcohol and narcotics. A fifth of the homeless men and women use sedatives often to very often. Excessive alcohol consumption (3 glasses a day or more) applies to 24.3% of the men and 3.8% of the women. Narcotics are rarely used by the women (2.8%), but more often by the men (13.6%). The use of sleeping pills, alcohol, drugs and psychiatric problems indicates the prevalence of major mental health issues among homeless people.

Table 9.3 Use of sleeping pills, alcohol and narcotics by homeless in the sample, by gender (in %)

	Male	Female	Total
Often to very often use sleeping pills	21.5	20.5	21.1
Three or more glasses of alcohol a day	24.3	3.8	16.4
Often to very often use narcotic drugs	13.6	2.8	9.4

Another indication is the fact that more than 25% of them reported having stayed in a psychiatric institute.

10 | CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND RESEARCH

Research shedding light to the potential causes of homelessness and main characteristics of homeless people (Busch-Geertsema, et al., 2010; Fitzpatrick, et al., 2009; Jones & Pleace, 2010) has recommended a more structural analysis acknowledging that, as with poverty, homelessness needs to be interpreted as a course and a multifaceted phenomenon. The main goal of this chapter was to sketch the socio-demographic profile and the living conditions of homeless people that are not represented in the official poverty statistics in Belgium. Nationwide socio-demographic data on homelessness in Belgium are very scarce. Specific 'satellite surveys' were carried out to collect data from groups excluded from the statistics, that should be comparable to the mainstream EU-SILC data. Although it was impossible to compare the full profile of homeless with the average population, and with the population at risk of (financial) poverty, our analysis confirms the exposure of homeless to more extreme damage from poverty in several dimensions of life: education, family life, income, work, housing and health.

With regard to the *housing situation* we can conclude that *roofless* people are deprived of more than just a roof: often they have no access to the most essential amenities such as drinking water, a toilet or washing facilities. They also report obstacles in the access to shelters, as well as persistent difficulties to obtain a reference address (which is crucially important to access other rights). The latter obstacle is also faced by homeless people living in shelters. Further measures to improve their access to shelters, as well as reference addresses, are therefore needed.

Poverty and material deprivation and housing circumstances are interweaved. With respect to *income*, our analysis confirms that all homeless people experience severe financial hardship. The figures suggest that more than 7 out of 10 homeless people live below the financial poverty threshold, and even approximately half of them below the guaranteed minimum income level in Belgium[8]. The existing legal arrangements concerning reference addresses, designed to ensure access of homeless people to the minimum income benefit, appear to be ineffective.

One in six to seven homeless adults (mainly men) is '*in work*'. It goes without saying that their jobs are highly irregular and precarious. Poor education and health appear to be the main causes of this marginal position of homeless people vis-à-vis the labour market. This also means that simple activation schemes will remain ineffective unless they go in pair with investments in literacy and numeracy training as well as health care. Enforcing decent minimum standards and fighting discrimination are equally needed.

Another key dimension of the living conditions of homeless is their *health status*. 24% of the interviewees estimate their general health to be poor to extremely poor (with a higher incidence among women than men). The fact that 37.2% of them are disabled or chronically ill suggests that their subjective assessment must be viewed as an underestimation. Moreover, our survey also suggests that homeless people tend to suffer more from stress and mental health issues. Given that the health insurance system in Belgium is far less generous in reimbursing expenses for mental health care, this is an important point of attention for future policy.

[8] Depending on the household type, the guaranteed minimum income level in Belgium lies 23-28% below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold

Despite the small sample sizes of this 'satellite survey' and some doubts concerning its representativeness, our findings do provide useful insight into on the relative severity as well as some key dimensions of poverty among this hidden high-risk group. They also demonstrate the feasibility of such satellite surveys, using simplified, multilingual and more flexible questionnaires. We would, therefore, recommend a systematic replication at regular time intervals. Whereas qualitative research can provide a more detailed and deep understanding of poverty issues, statistical surveys allow for comparisons between groups and countries, and a monitoring of the effectiveness of policies over time.

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