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Defining and measuring of homelessness. Poland

Abstract

The problem of determining the number of homeless people concerns many countries. Estimates of the homeless population show wide variation. This text aims to review and attempt to systematize the ways of defining and measuring homelessness in Poland.

Poland serves as a good example of the analysis of this phenomenon, because both the activities carried out in the field of diagnosis of homelessness and research aimed at developing a reliable methodology have been undertaken since the 1990s. The article summarizes such approaches as collecting data using the Central Statistical Application,

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The National Census and indicators based on international recommendations for “point in time” and the index of “homelessness”.

Thanks to the analysis, we conclude that a reliable and comprehensive diagnosis of homeless people throughout the country depends on several factors. Administrative and statistical data at the local level collected by state institutions and non-governmental institutions should be supported by compatible electronic data recording systems. Efforts should be made to improve and standardize the methodology of researching the population of homeless people to avoid errors that make it impossible to compare the results. At present, the data closest to the real number of homeless people are obtained using the ‘point-in-time counting’ method.

Key words: homelessness, diagnosis of homelessness, monitoring

Introduction and background

It would seem that the concept of homelessness and a homeless person is clear and commonly understood. Homelessness, however, is a complex social, psychological, healthcare-related, economic and political problem. An increase in the number of homeless people has been recorded in various countries in recent years. The causes of that situation are sought, among others, in the economic crisis, which has been recognized as a key factor contributing to increasing homelessness in the last 5 years in the European Union member states: Greece, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom. The increasing number of immigrants, women, families and young people who join the ranks of the homeless is alarming (Szluz, 2014).

In Poland there has long been no reliable and full estimation of the homeless population that would satisfy every homelessness analyst, although efforts are constantly made to assess the scale of the phenomenon realistically. The aim of the article is to analyze the activities undertaken in Poland over the past 20 years as regards the diagnosis of the homelessness phenomenon and to present the profile of a homeless person resulting from the current analysis. Based on the analysis of these activities and the reports of MFL&SP -03 (Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Policy) for the years 2010–2019, the methods used to measure homelessness in Poland were compiled and characterized. The European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion ETHOS recommends describing the homeless population using several indicators, mainly the “point in time” index and the “homelessness” index (FEANTSA), which were taken into account in the efforts to diagnose homelessness in Poland. The purpose of the compilation is to present estimated data on the homeless population in Poland in 2010–2019, including the survey method. The profile of the homeless person resulting from the current analysis was also presented.

In the social, economic and political context, we can encounter different social attitudes towards the homeless as well as different governmental policies for the problem of homelessness. In countries with a traditional approach, based on the idea of charity,

which undoubtedly includes Poland, large-scale aid programmes for the homeless are implemented. On the other hand, in countries where the revanchist trend prevails in politics (Latin America, Asia, Africa, USA) all help for the homeless is denied, assuming that it is a factor that strengthens people in their decision to stay homeless (Podgórska-Jachnik, 2014). Unfortunately, in spite of various, sometimes so extreme, approaches to this phenomenon, no effective model of the homelessness problem solution has been developed so far).

The largest number of homeless people is recorded in countries where the social assistance system is well-developed (Kalinowski, 2010). Well-developed social welfare systems, drawn-up and implemented strategies to fight homelessness, as well as systematic diagnosis of the homeless population, have a bearing on the real prevention of homelessness through the implementation of assistance programs for people at risk of homelessness (Pleace, 2017). Ambitious strategies to fight homelessness are in place in many countries of Western Europe, including Scandinavian countries, Great Britain, Austria, France, Ireland or the Netherlands (Gnaś & Majer, 2019). In the post-socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, where the problem of homelessness has become apparent as a result of the transformation of political, economic and social systems, homelessness prevention strategies are not fully implemented. The reason for that is usually the state policy or the country's difficult economic situation (Snieškienė & Dulinskienė, 2014). Examples include countries such like Bulgaria, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia or Romania, where there is no official definition of homelessness, as well as no current and up-to-date data on the number of homeless people, and thus no national strategy to fight homelessness. In these countries, like in Poland, care and services for the homeless are provided mainly by non-governmental organisations (Frączak, 2009; Hrast, 2019). The situation is similar in the Czech Republic, whose legislation defines neither a homeless person nor homelessness, but adopts the term "persons without shelter". Not only has the national strategy adopted in 2013 not been yet implemented, but also the regional strategies aimed at determining the number of the homeless (Gnaś & Majer, 2019). There are few local research projects aimed at diagnosing homelessness implemented locally and they concern larger cities (Daňková et al., 2019).

Also the very definition of a homeless person, homelessness, as well as its typology, although seemingly obvious, poses many problems in clear definition of these terms to those dealing with the issue of homelessness scientifically and practically (Dobrzeńcki, 2010). The difficulty lies in the undisputed multidimensionality of this phenomenon emphasized by many authors. Therefore, the most desirable are the definitions taking into account all these areas (Pindral, 2010). In the opinion of others, it is the "multiformity and gradual nature" of the homelessness status that is considered by some authors as the reason for the indefinability of this phenomenon (Śledzianowski, 2006). According to the traditional approach, this is because acceptance of this or another typology that categorizes different forms of homelessness has a real impact not only on the operations of social welfare bodies, implementation of social work programs, therapeutic programs, cash and non-cash assistance, but also on monitoring the homelessness prevalence.

The difficulties in defining homelessness as well as different approaches to collecting and measuring the data on homeless people mean that all countries in which this problem is faced contend with proper assessment of the homelessness prevalence (Edgar et al., 2003). The number of homeless people in the United States is estimated at a quarter to over three million (Burt et al., 2001; National Alliance to End Homelessness). The main reason for such a broad divergence is the lack of a clear and precise definition of homelessness. The variety of definitions and typologies does certainly not facilitate the formulation of methodological assumptions, hence the data is sometimes subject to a significant margin of error (Pindral, 2010). The comparison of research results is therefore problematic and sometimes impossible (Fitzgerald et al., 2001).

Also in Poland there has long been no reliable and full estimation of the homeless population that would satisfy every homelessness analyst, although efforts are constantly made to assess the scale of the phenomenon realistically. The aim of the article is to analyse the activities undertaken in Poland over the past 20 years as regards the diagnosis of the homelessness phenomenon and to present the profile of a homeless person resulting from the current analysis.

The main homelessness prevalence indicators

The European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) developed by the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) is one of the attempts to respond to the need to standardize concepts, organize research methodologies and standardize assistance provided to homeless people (Amore et al., 2011). FEANTSA has adopted a very broad definition of the homelessness, while emphasizing the importance of country-specific differences in order to understand the phenomenon more precisely. The ETHOS typology considers the following four main conceptual categories: rooflessness (people living in public places, e.g. on the street, or lodged as an intervention, e.g. in a night shelter); houselessness (people staying in shelters for the homeless, immigration centres, as well as people to leave, e.g., prisons or psychiatric hospitals); living in insecure housing (people who “are put up” temporarily by their family, dwelling illegally, threatened with eviction or violence) and living in inadequate housing (people living in overcrowded or sub-standard housing). A total of thirteen operational categories describing in detail the housing situation of a given category have been assigned to the main categories. FEANTSA recommends the use of the ETHOS Typology as a starting point for creation of country-specific typologies. The advantage of the ETHOS typology is that it does not describe the causes of homelessness, which are very complex and specific for each person. Instead, the typology is based on current living and housing conditions.

The homelessness diagnosis should be broad taking into account the ETHOS Typology and international recommendations, including European Parliament resolutions (European Parliament Resolution, 2014) and European Commission guidelines. Determination of the number of homeless people and their socio-demographic profile forms the basis

for further actions aimed at reducing the negative effects of homelessness. In order to undertake these actions it is necessary to know the size of the group to be covered, as well as the financial resource to be allocated to this activity. Therefore, the diagnosis should describe the population of homeless people using several basic indicators, the key ones of which are the following quantitative indicators: “point in time” (PIT), applicable to the “headcount at a point in time” method and the “homelessness prevalence” indicator. Both indicators represent the size of the homeless population in a given period of time (Edgar & Meert, 2006).

The “headcount at a point in time” method is widely used all over the world. It allows to obtain data on the population of homeless people at one selected moment and place of its functioning. Social workers, police officers, municipal police officers, street workers and volunteers locate and count the homeless within a strictly defined time frame, completing the data using a traditional paper questionnaire method. For several years now, in many countries of Western Europe and the United States, a tool supporting the services when counting the homeless has been a telephone application of the geographic information system (GIS), which uses a non-standard form and allows to send notes and photos updating the information recorded in the form (ESRI, 2015). Research using the PIT method allows to avoid counting the same homeless people many times. Conducting the research in winter makes it easier to determine the number of homeless people, since it is likely that most of them use night shelter at that time. The number of homeless people inside and outside homeless institutions is counted. However, the method has some limitations. The status indicator always slightly underestimates the population, which is mainly due to organisational reasons. The counting services are unable to reach all homeless people within one day, and they only go to areas known to them for homeless people. Also, not all categories recognised as homelessness according to the ETHOS Typology are taken into account, for example: people who are “put up” by their family or friends, those temporarily rent apartments collectively, homeless people addicted to psychoactive agents staying in specialised institutions, shelters for refugees and undocumented migrants, and people getting out of homelessness living in so-called protected, training or temporary apartments (Herbst & Wygnańska, 2016). Omitting certain situations undoubtedly causes underestimation of the number of people meeting the definition of homelessness. Apart from that, the results of the survey using the PIT method are largely dependent on the organisation of the survey by the local systems of assistance, cooperation and involvement of the services that count the homeless, as well as the knowledge of the public places where homeless people live.

In order to more accurately estimate the homeless population and to determine the need for long-term assistance the occurrence rate is used. It is intended to determine the real size of the population experiencing the problem. While the status indicator reflects the phenomenon at one point in time, the prevalence rate covers the size of the population over a longer period of several months and even years (Wygnańska, 2011). It is obtained by analysis of records on aid provided by institutions, hospitals and NGOs. The homelessness category (chronic, temporary and periodical) is important in this indicator,

because it involves extremely different assistance, sometimes provided for many years, characteristic for a given type of homelessness. A factor that complicates research using this indicator is the issue of determining the time interval during which a person becomes homeless and the time interval when he or she gets out of homelessness (Fitzgerald et al., 2001). This method requires implementation of the register computerization procedure enabling to eliminate double counting of the same people who use the assistance in several centres. Absence of the above data in the records means that, like in the case of the “point in time” method, as well as in research using the occurrence rate, we can only obtain the estimated number of homeless people, which clearly highlights the difficulty of monitoring the phenomenon.

The specificity of the homelessness phenomenon makes it possible to use untypical methods to diagnose it. An example is the Respondent Driven Sampling (RDS) method, i.e. selection of a sample controlled by the respondents. It is applied in research on so-called hidden populations and populations hard to access during a survey. Such a population can undoubtedly include the population of homeless people. The RDS method is a variation of the snowball method, which is modified by introducing a system of double rewards in the form of rewarding respondents for both the participation in the survey and for recruiting more participants. In this method, it is the respondent who decides who is invited to participate in the survey, while hoping to receive an award, usually financial, for recruitment if the person persuaded by the respondent takes part in the survey (Heckathorn, 2002). The RDS survey method was used, among others, to diagnose the population of homeless people in Prague and Plzen (Daňková et al., 2019), where the importance of the participation of homeless people regardless of where they sleep was emphasized, as well as the inclusion in the study of people who do not use the services of assistance organisations. The disadvantage of the method is that it is time-consuming and costly.

Monitoring the homelessness scale in Poland

Attempts to determine the scale of the homelessness phenomenon in Poland have been made since the beginning of the 1990s. The data published by the researchers of the subject was initially highly divergent. It was based on the estimated number of homeless people, which were at the disposal of the social assistance organizations and institutions operating in individual voivodships (Kaźmierczak-Kałużna, 2015). Przymeński pointed out a high divergence of data, especially that obtained just after 1989, falling within the range of 200 000 to 500 000 homeless people, as well as the phenomenon of exaggerating the scale of homelessness and providing data that is very incorrect (Przymeński, 2008). According to the author, the aim of publishing inflated, undocumented information was to draw the attention of state institutions to the phenomenon of homelessness after the political, economic and social transformation of the country (Przymeński, 2001).

An undoubted difficulty in conducting a methodologically correct research on that subject is that, apart from homeless people staying in places of institutional support, whose number is much easier to estimate, a significant part of the homeless stays in other places:

railway and bus stations, staircases, basements. In addition, homeless people constantly move from one place to another, which may result in their being recorded several times in statistics. Sometimes homeless people avoid registering, not wanting to be identified as homeless.

At present, data on the scale of homelessness in Poland, which is burdened with various margins of error, can be obtained from several sources. One of them provides data collected using the MRPiPS-03 form developed by the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy (MFL&SP — formerly, until 2015, the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (ML&SP)). The information contained in the form on the local and supra-municipal social assistance and integration units is the main source of knowledge about homelessness in Poland. On the basis of these data, the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, in cooperation with the Social Policy Departments of individual Voivodship Offices, reports and analyses the scale of homelessness in Poland. Data on the scale of homelessness can also be obtained from the reports of full-time social welfare institutions submitted to the Polish National Statistical Office (GUS PS-03), as well as national population and housing censuses carried out by the Statistics Poland. In this paper, particular attention was paid to the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy's use of the following quantitative indicators discussed above: the "point in time", the "headcount at a point in time" applicable to the PIT method and the "homelessness prevalence" indicator.

It is worth noting that the first local study using the PIT method in Poland was conducted by the Pomeranian Forum for Getting out of Homelessness (PFWB) in 2001. It was the first survey in Poland that covered non-institutionalized homeless people (Sochocki, 2010).

The first nationwide assessment of the homelessness prevalence was carried out on the night of 15th to 16th of December 2009 by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and repeated on the night of 26th to 27th of January 2010. At the request of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, voivodship offices then provided the number of people staying in shelters for the homeless on the specified dates. The aim of the survey was to conduct it overnight throughout the country, in all voivodships, to avoid duplication of data on homeless people using shelters. The data obtained during the second survey was higher (20 960) than that from one month earlier (18 227). The reason for the difference was a sharp frost, which caused that there were many more homeless people in the shelters. Assuming that approximately 1/3 of homeless people did not use the overnight accommodation in facilities at that time, the number of homeless people in Poland was estimated at around 30 000 (ML&SP 2010).

In 2011, the counting methods used by Pomorskie Forum na rzecz Wychodzenia z Bezdomności (Pomeranian Forum for Getting out of Homelessness) were applied in the National Population and Housing Census (The National Census). 25 773 homeless people were recorded. Two categories of homeless people were distinguished in the National Census of 2011: the "roofless" people in the number of 9 789, including people living on the street, in public places, without shelter, and the second group, the "houseless" in the number of 15 984. The "roofless" people stayed at train and bus stations and around them,

channels and district heating substations, streets, beaches, bunkers, forests and parks, cemeteries, shopping malls, parking lots, abandoned cars, caravans, staircases, rubbish chutes, basements, attics, dustbins, dugouts, railcars and railway sidings, warm-up shelters. The census of homeless persons was carried out by census takers at a strictly defined time. Places where homeless people were found had previously been identified in cooperation with social assistance centres, the Municipal Police and other organizations providing assistance to homeless people. The group of “houseless” persons usually included people without a domicile, who receive assistance in accordance with the Social Welfare Act, i.e. a shelter, food and clothing. These are primarily people accommodated in homeless shelters and social welfare homes (CSO, 2013).

The first nationwide research on the number of homeless people using the “headcount at a point in time” method was conducted in 2013, and has been continued every two years since then. The last one was conducted in 2019. On the basis of the data obtained in the PIT survey, one can conclude that the number of homeless people in Poland is relatively constant and amounts to approximately 30 000 (Table 1).

What is noteworthy, however, is the large decrease in the number of non-institutionalized homeless people in 2017 and 2019 compared to previous years of research (by 10%). This does not mean a real decrease in the number of the non-institutionalized homeless people in a given period, but results from a change in the research methodology. In accordance with the recommendation of the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, the homeless population in the 2017 and 2019 survey did not include people living in allotment garden houses if their standard was similar to an apartment and there was a suspicion that they had been living there for a long time. According to the ETHOS Typology, such people would be included in the last, fourth category of the homelessness defined as “people living in inadequate housing” (substandard conditions). This category of the homeless is characterized by living in premises that do not meet housing standards and are not suitable for residence according to the national statutory standard or building regulations (FEANTSA). The case is undoubtedly debatable, because although the law unequivocally prohibits permanent residence in family allotment gardens (FAG) (Journal of Laws of 2014, item 40, article 12), such conduct is common and increasingly popular. Although Article 3 of the Act on the FAG contains a provision on assistance to families and people in a difficult life situation and equalizing their chances, the fact of living on in allotment garden due to poverty is to be reported by the FAG board to the district authorities or social assistance. On the other hand, regarding those for whom living in an allotment garden house all year round in the territory of FAG is a way of life as homeless is really counterproductive and overstates the statistics of homelessness.

The problem of interpreting the status of people who are living and are registered in the FAG areas proves that it is difficult to define the homeless and, consequently, to estimate their number in real terms. It also makes it difficult to compare survey results and to plan social policy in this regard.

The homelessness rate was first published in 2011 by ML&SP on the basis of data obtained from reports of voivodship offices as of the year 2010. The rate was developed on

the basis of statistical data collected directly from non-governmental organizations running night shelters for the homeless — by means of questionnaires, and from district, county and voivodship authorities — by means of the one-time DPS-IV-52-IR report prepared using Centralna Aplikacja Statystyczna (the Central Statistical Application, CSA). Based on above data, over 43 083 homeless people were identified receiving assistance from districts and counties (ML&SP, 2012). Subsequent analyses using the incidence rate were carried out for the years 2012 and 2014, in which 37 645 (ML&SP, 2013) and 39 936 homeless people (ML&SP, 2015) were identified, respectively (Table 1).

It should be stressed, however, that the data on the number of homeless people in 2010, 2012 and 2014 were challenged by NGOs dealing with homelessness. It was noted that it was impossible to compare data from this period due to incorrect survey methodology, including duplication the personal data in the survey of 2010, caused by different dates of the survey implementation depending on the decisions of voivodship authorities, or calculation errors (Szarfenberg, 2019). Therefore, due to low computerization degree of service user registers, preventing the elimination of double-counting of people who use the assistance in several centres, the analysis of the incidence rate at the national level was discontinued in the following years and was continued at the local level only (Wygnańska, 2016).

Table 1. Estimated data on the size of the homeless population in Poland in the years 2010–2019 considering the survey method

Year of survey	2010	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2017	2019
Survey method	Voivodship Offices report	CSA	National Census	CSA	PIT	CSA	PIT	PIT	PIT
Institutionalised homeless people	20 960	33 650	15 984	No data available	22 158	No data available	25 600	26 900	24 323
Non-institutionalised homeless people	No data available	9 440	9 789	No data available	8 554	No data available	10 500	6 508	6 007
Total	No data available	43 080	25 773	37 645	30 712	39 936	36 160	33 408	30 330

Source: Based on MFL&SP data for 2010–2019.

Taking into account the presented data concerning the diagnosis of homelessness in Poland, it is important to eliminate the critical errors in the methodology of survey conducted. No doubt, every method applied in the assessment of the homelessness scale in Poland should be supported by measures at the governmental level. It seems that combining data collected by different service providers and use of electronic systems of homeless population registration would provide access to current information about the

real size of the population of people dealing with homelessness and their sociodemographic characteristics (Herbst & Wygnańska, 2016).

According to Debski, the homeless population is “an empirical reality which falls outside any strictly empirical approach”, which is reflected in the presented difficulties in estimating the number of homeless people (Debski, 2014).

The profile of a homeless person

As sociodemographic analyses show, about 80% of the homeless population are men (MFL&SP, 2015; MFL&SP, 2017; MFL&SP, 2018) in the age group between 40 and 60 (Dębski, 2014; Sochocki, 2010), who are often single (Szluz, 2010). Homeless women are younger (Dębski, 2014). The homeless population includes relatively small percentage of people over the age of 65, which can be accounted for by ill health and, consequently, premature death (Sochocki, 2010). In the study by Suzańska, homeless people over the age of 65 accounted for only 14% of the total population (Suzańska et al., 2010). According to Stepulak, the population between 51 and 60 years of age constituted 33.3%, and over 60 years 22.1% of the homeless people (Stepulak & Kowalski, 2015).

According to the research performed in the Pomeranian Voivodship, the homeless community is also getting older (Olech & Ługowski, 2006). The average age of a homeless person in 2003 was 46 years, while in 2013 it was 52.4 years (Dębski, 2014). The European Commission points out the change in the profile of homeless people. The general population of homeless includes more and more young people, women and children, migrants and national minorities (Szluz, 2010). In an all-Poland study on homeless people carried-out in 2015, children constituted 5.2% of the homeless population (ML&SP, 2015). In 2017, they constituted 4% (MFL&SP, 2017), and in 2019 3.3% (MFL&SP, 2019). They stayed mainly in homes for mothers with minor children, in homeless shelters and crisis intervention centers, but as much as 27% of them also outside shelter facilities: in cottages on allotments, summer houses and other unspecified places (ML&SP, 2015; MFL&SP, 2017). A similar number of homeless children, i.e. 4.6%, was estimated in the study by Stepulak (Stepulak & Kowalski, 2015). Families with children account for 15%, women 16%, adolescents 9%, and adult men 60% of the homeless population in the United States (Burt et al., 2001).

Homeless people are most often single (80%), including divorced, widows and widowers as well as separated people. They are usually unemployed. They live mainly on social assistance, scrap collecting, odd jobs and pensions or allowances (Sochocki, 2010; MFL&SP, 2017; Stenius-Ayoadeet al., 2017). Almost one fifth of them have no source of income (MFL&SP, 2017; Stepulak & Kowalski, 2015).

Homeless people tend to concentrate in large urban areas, which gives them a better chance of getting assistance and supporting themselves. A city is also a place where it is easier to beg for money and food (Stepulak & Kowalski, 2015). The largest concentrations of homeless people have been recorded for years in the following voivodships: Mazovian, Silesian and Pomeranian (MFL&SP, 2017; MFL&SP, 2019). According to Stepulak, there

are four times as many homeless people in the cities as in the countryside (Stepulak & Kowalski, 2015). During seasonal works in farms, the homeless people sometimes migrate to smaller towns and to the countryside (Sochocki, 2010).

The average education level of homeless people in Poland is low. These are most often people with vocational and primary education, and only one fifth of them has secondary education. People with higher education are a very small group of the homeless (Suzańska et al., 2010). In the analysis by Stepulak they accounted for 2% of the studied population of 1128 homeless persons. For comparison, the percentage of people with vocational education constituted 41%, and the primary one, 31.2% (Stepulak & Kowalski, 2015). The education level of young homeless people is higher compared to the education level of older homeless people (Dębski, 2014).

Many people have been homeless for a long time. In the study by Sochocki, developed on the basis of the results of five research projects, more than 50% of respondents have been homeless persons for several years, and the group of the people who have been homeless for more than 10 years was dominated by men (Sochocki, 2010). In the research carried out by the Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Policy (MFL&SP) in 2017, 25% of people have been homeless for more than two years (MFL&SP, 2017). In 2019, the most numerous group were people who have been homeless for 5–10 years (27.8%) (MFL&SP, 2019).

The most common cause of homelessness is forced eviction and family conflicts. Stepulak emphasises that there are often several reasons for homelessness. According to the results of the author's study, homelessness was caused by addiction (16.9%), job loss and unemployment (12.7%), as well as ill health and disability (6.7%). Among other reasons, Stepulak mentions leaving the prison, indebtedness, leaving the young offenders' institution and domestic violence. The author also emphasizes different causes of homelessness depending on gender. While the two most common causes of homelessness, i.e. evictions and family conflicts, are characteristic of both sexes, the subsequent reasons for women are: unemployment, domestic violence and addiction, and for men the order of direct causes for homelessness was different and included: addiction, unemployment and ill health (Stepulak & Kowalski, 2015).

Conclusions

It is necessary to take measures to ensure a comprehensive diagnosis of the homelessness and housing exclusion phenomena. On the basis of a nationwide survey on the number of homeless people carried out in 2019, one can conclude that a statistical Polish homeless person is a single man aged 41 to 60, with low education, living on social welfare benefits and being homeless for 5 to 10 years (MFL&SP, 2019).

The analysis of activities undertaken in Poland over the past 20 years as regards the diagnosis of the homelessness phenomenon has shown that carrying out comprehensive activities in this area and developing a reliable methodology is very difficult. They result not only from the complexity and multiformity of the homelessness phenomenon, diversity

of definitions and typology of homelessness, but also from the typically organizational aspects, resulting from the reach of the survey which covers the homeless in the whole country (Pindral, 2010).

Therefore, the basis for a reliable and comprehensive diagnosis diagnosis of homeless people throughout the country should be local administrative and statistical data collected by governmental and non-governmental institutions aided by compatible electronic data recording systems. One should also strive to improve and standardize the homeless population surveying methodology in order to avoid mistakes that make it impossible to compare the results, because monitoring of that social problem is of practical importance (Szarfenberg, 2019; Wygnańska, 2016).

It seems that the most representative data on the number of homeless people can currently be obtained using the “headcount at a point in time” method. Despite the limitations of this method, the results of which are largely dependent on the organisation of the survey by the local assistance systems, the cooperation and involvement of the services that count the homeless, as well as the knowledge of the public places where homeless people live, the diagnosis of the homelessness using the PIT method may constitute the basis for development of the social policy of the government in the context of homelessness prevention, emergency relief, as well as the successful return of homeless people to normal functioning in society. In order to improve the methodology of research on the scale of homelessness and streamline the survey process itself, it would be worthwhile to take advantage of the experience of other countries using telephone applications supporting the survey process (ESRI, 2015). Geographical information systems provided with an interface for collecting spatial data during fieldwork seem to be a good tool supporting services participating in the homelessness counting actions.

The conducted study has some limitations. As far as the study methodology is concerned, the analysis was based on a review of selected estimates of other researchers (Kaźmierczak-Kałużna, 2015; Przyemeński, 2008) and MFL&SP data. Moreover, two main quantitative indicators used in monitoring the scale of homelessness in Poland were presented and analyzed herein. Despite those limitations, the study constitutes substantive material for this rarely discussed subject. It enables better understanding of the phenomena and processes related to homelessness, as well as difficulties related to reliable determination of the number of homeless people. The research problem outlined in the paper may, at the same time, be a starting point for further research on monitoring homelessness as not only a multidimensional and diverse phenomenon, but also dependent on country-specific differences.

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