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Counting the Homeless in Greece

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PART B

Aspects of Social Policy and Housing in Greece

Counting the Homeless in Greece

Vassilis Arapoglou[1], Constantine Dimoulas[2] and Clive Richardson[3]

Abstract

We present the main findings from pilot research on the homeless population in six municipal areas in Greece in 2018. The project employed the "point-in–time" technique, combining counting by observation with interviewing where possible. The procedure succeeded in engaging local communities and NGOs in enumerating the homeless population. A large part of the housing needs of the homeless remains unmet, especially in the major metropolitan centres, despite increased provision of emergency shelters and services since 2012. Younger ages face alarming difficulty in accessing housing support. Financial hardship and unemployment contribute separately and interactively with other stressors to increased homelessness.

Keywords: Point-in-time, homelessness in Greece, unmet needs, hardship

1. Introduction

During the long-lasting sovereign debt crisis and the strict austerity measures imposed by creditors on the Greek people, public interest regarding the extent and the severity of homelessness increased and led to hot political debate. Politicians, NGO's, public officials and the mass media presented different narratives and pictures as a description and explanation of this social problem. These arguments were generally contradictory insofar as they referred to the causes of homelessness and the size of the homeless population, as they stemmed from personal experiences and field work[4].

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4.The first known enumeration of homeless persons in Greece was conducted by the National Centre for Social Solidarity in 2009. It was based on estimation by local social services. Another effort to count the homeless, based on fieldwork by street workers, was implemented by the NGO "Klimaka" in Athens in 2012. Also, the Municipality of Athens conducted two enumerations in central Athens using observations from street workers in 2013 and 2016, and in 2017 counted those who were roofless in the city centre by using the "point-in-time" technique under the supervision of Bloomberg Associates. The only reliable estimation of homelessness conducted before the survey presented here is that of Arapoglou and Gounis (2014), which combined data from the 2011 Census with those gathered from social services.

Traditional and well embedded views support the view that homeless people are, for the most part, addicted, mentally ill, ex-prisoners and marginal minorities. However, during the crisis, the argument that homeless people are ex-householders and new-poor became prevalent.

Additionally, in the refugee crisis of 2015-16, the number of people sleeping in the parks and plazas of Athens and other Greek cities skyrocketed at a time when EU initiatives for Roma people were highlighting Greece's housing deficiencies. This situation of acute hardship created conflicting opinions about the extent and severity of homelessness in Greece, most of them unsound because of the lack of any official definition of homeless people and of commonly accepted established procedures for their enumeration.

In order to monitor measures against social exclusion and increase their efficiency, the Greek authorities established in 2016 (Law 4445) the National Committee for Social Protection. Under the auspices of this Committee, the Ministry for Social Solidarity undertook the initiative of creating an official mechanism for monitoring the impact of policies and actions for supporting vulnerable and socially excluded groups. In this context a specific task force was established in the Ministry which suggested the creation of an institutional mechanism for gathering information and monitoring the problem of homelessness in Greece. The Committee proposed to adopt for this purpose the FEANSA approach to homelessness as elaborated by Bill Edgar (2009), and it assigned to Panteion University the scientific responsibility for a pilot project for counting homeless people in the municipalities of Athens, Piraeus, Thessaloniki, Heraklion, Nea Ionia and Ioannina[5].

The aim of this pilot was twofold. First of all, to test the selected tools and procedures for counting homeless people in Greece and second, to engage local communities and NGOs in the creation and operation of a permanent mechanism employing mutually agreed institutional procedures for the regular enumeration of the homeless population.

After an initial investigation, the task force adopted the "point-in-time" technique as the most appropriate method for counting the homeless and prepared an initial draft questionnaire to be used as the official survey registration form. The Panteion scientific team undertook the task of clarifying, testing and refining the survey instruments so as to become robust and appropriate as official tools for the periodic counting of homeless people in Greece.

2. On the Methodological Issue

The enumeration of different social groups and the knowledge of their demographics and other crucial characteristics is a basic precondition for every effective public policy. Because of financial constraints, public services are forced to target their resources by placing priorities on their interventions which are founded on an evidence base of reliable and widely accepted data. Unfortunately, this is not an easy task, as many vulnerable and socially excluded groups are concealed from the public space and discourse.

According to Roger Tourangeau (2014:3), such populations are *hard to sample, to identify, to find or contact, to persuade to take part in the research and hard to interview.* Homeless people

5. The Municipality of Trikala also participated in the project on its own initiative.

are characterized by most of these obstacles and their robust investigation is, in most cases, an unsuccessful effort.

Homeless people are not included in the normal censuses of population, which are based on housing registration. They lack any fixed address, very often they cycle through various living arrangements and are constantly on the move. When homeless people are staying temporarily in a residence, they are unlikely to be reported on a Census questionnaire. Additionally, some of them are hiding (from courts, police or other custodial and surveillance services), do not want to be identified and are vague about their sleeping arrangements because they want to keep their sleeping location private (Glaser et al., 2014: 183-84).

Because of their elusiveness, any research project trying to enumerate the homeless in a specific area faces three principal difficulties. First of all, for any enumeration based on observation, it is impossible to know whether all homeless persons have been accounted for; second, because of the spatial mobility of the homeless population during the enumeration it is uncertain whether a portion of them have previously been counted or not; and, third, the homeless population may fluctuate in size from time to time and so ad hoc research is not generalisable over time (Williams and Cheal, 2002:316; Berry, 2007: 170). As a consequence, there are no adequate sample frames for surveying the homeless and the research community is forced to try to enumerate them and investigate their characteristics using alternative approaches.

One of the most common techniques for enumerating the homeless is to use Service Based Enumeration, that is, to gather data from shelters, soup kitchens and other group sites. Although Service Based Enumeration can reduce duplicates (double counting) by using predetermined criteria (e.g. matching demographic data), it does not ensure their elimination as an individual could have been counted in a soup kitchen, at an outdoor encampment and at a homeless shelter (Glasser et al., 2014: 181-84).

Another widely used technique for surveying hard to reach groups is screening, that is selecting a sample from a larger population to identify members of the target population. This technique presupposes that the target population can be identified relatively easily and the selection probabilities are known (Kalton, 2014:401-423). Additionally, screening has to overcome two types of misclassification, that is, "false positives" (persons incorrectly identified as members of the target population) and "false negatives" (persons incorrectly classified as not belonging to the target population) (Kalton, 2014: 404). In order to minimize the false negatives an appropriate technique is location sampling which, according to Kalton (2014), presupposes that the population under investigation is more or less stable, which is not the case for homeless persons.

A third widely employed method for enumerating homeless persons is networking and snowballing techniques which are commonly used by NGO's and local services for the homeless. This particular technique may provide the research community with valuable qualitative dimensions which must be taken into consideration as items that must be included in the questionnaire. In this method the sampling error cannot be defined whilst the sampling informants "may not accurately report the target population status of other members of the linkage, either deliberately or through lack of knowledge" (Kalton, 2014: 406; Berry, 2007: 171).

An innovative and highly promising method for measuring homeless person is the Capture-Recapture method. Capture-Recapture utilizes information from duplicate cases to permit the

calculation of the number of people who remained unobserved (the "hidden population"). The technique rests on the principle of two or preferably more observations of the same population. These can be simultaneous observations of sources that represent approximately the same population, or observations of the same source at different time points (Williams & Cheal, 2002: 317).

This method rests upon three key assumptions. Firstly, homogeneity: within each sample, each member of the population must have the same probability of capture. Secondly, observing an individual in one sample should not have any effect on the observation of that individual at the second or subsequent counts. Thirdly, closure: the overall numbers in the population should not be different at the time of each sample (Williams & Cheal, 2002: 317). Apart from its high cost and the issue of the proper choice of the time span for recounting, a potential deficiency of this particular method is the possible inaccuracy of identifiers used to match an individual between two sources (such as date of birth, gender, place of previous stay, etc.; Berry, 2007; Williams & Cheal, 2002). Personal interviews on the street which could minimize this are often not possible, and may prompt the homeless individual to avoid later contact with researchers (Berry, 2007: 168).

As regards the "point-in-time" method which was the technique initially chosen for counting the homeless in Greece, it is characterized by a high proportion of missing data on the homeless who are in places hidden from public view which, according to some estimates, may be more than 40% (Berry, 2007: 167). Additionally, "such a snapshot of the homeless population may only be of limited value, because the homeless population often changes in size and composition over time" (Berry, 2007: 170). On the other hand, it is an easily applied technique, efficient in terms of time and cost, while the researchers need not be highly trained.

3. Finalisation and implementation

After five months of intensive consultation between the task force and the Panteion scientific group, it was agreed to combine the "point in time" technique with Service Based Enumeration, and furthermore combining counting by observation with counting by interviewing where possible. The target group for enumeration and registration was defined as homeless people staying at night in shelters, in parks and plazas and on the street. This particular investigation excluded those living in camps, inadequate housing and occupied buildings (squats).

Additionally, the initial registration form was separated into three different questionnaires. The first was an observation form, composed of seven questions which were filled in by the investigators when they came across rough sleepers who could not be, or refused to be, interviewed. The second form was a questionnaire containing 19 questions which were filled in by the investigators for rough sleepers who consented to answer it. The third registration form was a more detailed questionnaire, consisting of 32 questions for the homeless who were staying in night shelters or were using the services of day centres for homeless people. All completed questionnaires were entered directly into an online platform via a specially developed app which also automatically recorded the GPS location where the registration took place.

In order to minimize the unobservable homeless population, it was decided to carry out recording from 10 p. m. to 2.30 a.m. on one night in mid-May 2018. At this time of year in Greece, people are usually preparing at this time for rest and sleeping whilst many of them are awake and so the probabilities of being noticed by the researchers and also agreeing to answer the questionnaires are high. Furthermore, those who were staying in homeless shelters and dormitories on that particular night were recorded by an assigned social worker at each building. The following morning, from 6 a.m. – 8 a.m., five research groups visited the parks and registered any homeless that were there, also asking them if they had been interviewed during the previous night. Additionally, at noon on that day, 15 research teams visited the soup kitchens that were in active operation between 13.00-16.00 and asked everyone in the queue if they were homeless and, if so, would they agree to answer the questionnaire. If they refused to answer the questionnaire, the researchers filled in the observation form.

The counting procedures were implemented by 369 researchers who worked in 120 groups of three persons each and 21 coordinators. Most researchers (239 persons) were volunteers from municipal social services, four national social policy agencies and 19 NGO's whilst 130 were postgraduate students. Each research group included one student and at least one person experienced in contacts with homeless people, most of whom were social workers and street workers.

For the definition of the areas that would be investigated in each municipality participating in the project, social workers and street workers working in social services and NGO's were asked to point out on a map all the places where they observed homeless people. Based on these observations, the Panteion research team defined the area surrounding those places as probable spaces for encountering rough sleepers. These areas were then divided into registration sectors of about 36 hectares, each of which included approximately 8,000-9,000 metres of streets and pavements. Every research group had to walk and "scan" all streets, pavements, and outbuildings in the area, and to record and interview rough sleepers.

One week before the night arranged for the count, all researchers participated in a training course of 3 hours' duration. During the course they were educated on the content of the questionnaires and the procedures that had to be followed during the count. They were advised to visit the place which they had to scan a couple of days beforehand, in order to become familiar with it. Each researcher was also provided with written guidance.

On the night of the count, all teams met together two hours before the start of the investigation in a special meeting hall, where they were provided with detailed maps of their own registration sector and small snacks to offer to each rough sleeper they encountered.

4. Demographic characteristics and reasons for becoming homeless

The total number of apparently homeless people who were approached on the street was 317. However, 33 of these said that they did in fact have housing for that night and two claimed to have been interviewed already. Of the 282 remaining, 236 (83.7%) agreed to be interviewed. Only basic information was recorded by observation for those who refused, along with other

people who appeared to be asleep and were not disturbed, or with whom communication was not possible because of language or other reasons. The following day, a further 495 people were interviewed in facilities for the homeless, after checking that they had not been interviewed previously, and 172 in supported housing. Therefore, a total of 903 interviews were conducted and information on a further 393 apparently homeless people was collected by observation only (Table 1).

Table 1. Numbers of homeless people interviewed on the street, in facilities for the homeless and in supported housing, or recorded by observation, by city

City	Street homeless	In facilities	Supported housing	Total interviews	Observation only	Total
Athens	92	213	73	378	250	628
Thessaloniki	53	126	49	228	87	315
Piraeus	61	117	0	178	33	211
Iraklio	20	21	29	70	13	83
Ioannina	4	9	0	13	9	22
Trikala	4	5	11	20	0	20
Nea Ionia	2	4	10	16	1	17
Total	236	495	172	903	393	1296

Some basic characteristics of interviewees are shown in Table 2. People interviewed on the street and in facilities were in the majority (>80%) male, compared to 51% in supported housing. The median age was 53 years in facilities and 49 in housing, compared to only 42 on the street where a substantial proportion (15.6%) was under 25 years old. The street population included fewer Greeks, around half compared to three-quarters of the rest. About half of both the street interviewees and those in facilities claimed that this was their first episode of homelessness. The median duration of the current episode of homelessness was 12 months; 9.4% reported a duration of up to one month, 58% up to 12 months, and 21% over 3 years.

Table 2. Distribution of basic characteristics of homeless people interviewed, by site

	Street homeless	In facilities	Supported housing
Gender: Male	86.9%	81.7%	50.6%
Age: <40	43.0%	18.6%	26.7%
40-49	28.9%	22.8%	26.0%
50-59	13.3%	27.1%	26.6%
60+	14.8%	31.9%	20.7%
Nationality: Greek	56.4%	74.7%	77.3%
First time homeless	45.8%	53.8%	61.2%*

* First time in supported housing

Over half of both sets of respondents gave financial problems among the reasons behind their current episode of homelessness (whether or not it was the first episode) and large percentages cited unemployment or family problems (Table 3). In more than a third of cases in both groups, one or both of financial problems and unemployment were the only reasons mentioned for being homeless.

5. Local variations and policy responses

Research since the 1990s in the USA, where the most reliable data at local level is available, has detected a number of structural and individual determinants for the geographical variation of homelessness: rent levels, unemployment and poverty rates are consistently identified, and often coupled with demographic (% minorities and single person households), and mental health variables (reviews in Byrne et al., 2013; Hanratty, 2017; Lee et al., 2021).

Table 3. Reason for living on the street or homelessness (referring to the current episode), by site. (Multiple responses permitted: percentages add up to more than 100.)

	Street homeless (n=227)		In facilities (n=454)	
	n	%	n	%
Financial problems	116	51.1	274	60.4
Unemployment	63	27.8	198	43.6
Family problems	48	21.1	160	35.2
Health problems	27	11.9	64	14.1
Substance use	19	8.4	–	–
Refugees from war	15	6.6	0	0
Bad conditions in previous housing	14	6.2	27	5.9
Evicted from rented housing	12	5.3	23	6.1
Released from prison	11	5.3	14	3.1
Loss of own home	3	1.3	9	2.0
End of stay in institution	2	0.9	7	1.5
Other reason(s)	31	12.3	58	12.8
Financial problems / unemployment only	86	37.9	167	36.8
Financial problems / unemployment and other reason(s)	52	22.9	153	33.7
Only other reason(s)	89	39.2	134	29.5

Similar results have been obtained in the UK since the 1990s, and geographical variations in homelessness have been explained by sociodemographic variables (single parents; New Commonwealth households), low income, the availability of social rented housing and the urban-rural character of areas (Bramley, 1993). Recent dynamic approaches highlight the centrality of poverty alongside local labour and housing market contexts, and certain demographic, and social

support characteristics to the generation of homelessness in the UK (Bramley & Fitzpatrick, 2018; Fitzpatrick et al., 2013). The homeless count in Greece provides some interesting insights into the varied incidence of homelessness across cities and variations in housing and service provisions.

Taking into account the total resident population of the municipalities where the count was undertaken, estimates of the time-point prevalence appear to be higher in the three major urban centres of the mainland - Piraeus (1.29/1000, population: 163,668), Thessaloniki (0.99/1000, population: 315,210), Athens (0.94/1000, population: 664,046) - and smaller in the municipalities of Heraklion (0.59/1000, population: 140,730), Trikala (0.32/1000, population: 61,653) and Nea Ionia (0.25/1000, population: 67,134). An indicative reference can be made to the USA estimates of the point-in-time prevalence of homelessness yielding 1.0/1000 in the early 1980s and 1.7/1000 in the late 2010s (NAEH, 2020; AHAR, 2018). Although a robust comparison is not feasible, the Greek numbers appear to be high and justify public attention drawn to the rise of homelessness since the advent of the sovereign debt crisis. A detailed analysis of data suggests that for all municipalities the most often reported reasons for becoming homeless were financial hardship and unemployment. For smaller cities like Ioannina, Trikala and Nea Ionia family and health related reasons are more important than in major metropolitan centres. Athens seems to be unique in the combination of multiple reasons and in reporting incarceration and use of closed care facilities.

The above estimates should also be read with caution because time-in-point methods fail to capture episodic and hidden homelessness, which prevails in Southern European countries. A partial methodological remedy has been provided by estimating the one-year prevalence of homelessness through sampling the total population (e.g. in the USA the one-year prevalence of 1.5% in 2013 is much higher than the point-in-time estimate; Tsai, 2018). There is no Europe-wide estimate of the prevalence of homelessness but FEANTSA experts in 2009 estimated that, each year, about 4.1 million people in the European Union were unsheltered, or in emergency or temporary accommodation. In 2017, sampling of the general population in eight European countries revealed that the one-year prevalence of homelessness could be significantly higher than might be expected on the basis of previous estimates, with a range from 0.4% in Ireland to 2.0% in Spain (Taylor et al., 2019).

The ratio of the street to the total homeless (street and sheltered) population is often used as an indication of unmet need for housing support; in the USA, for example, it has fluctuated between 35% and 37% since 2018 (NAEH, 2020). In Greece, policy changes introduced in 2012 placed emphasis on emergency and temporary accommodation, and in 2014 a supported housing scheme was introduced (Arapoglou & Gounis, 2017; Kourachanis, 2017). As a result, the Greek policy model was incrementally shaped according to a 'staircase' approach.

Table 4. Share of street homeless in relation to total homeless and temporarily sheltered homeless

City	Ratio of street homeless to total homeless	Ratio of street homeless to temporarily sheltered
Athens	0.61	0.68
Thessaloniki	0.56	0.66
Pireaus	N/A*	0.73
Iraklion	0.42	0.65
All cities	0.59	0.68

* The count in Piraeus did not include the housing-reintegration scheme because that Municipality withdrew from the count.

Table 4 presents the share of the street homeless in relation to the total homeless and the temporarily sheltered homeless[6]. The ratio of the street homeless (interviewed and observed) to those accommodated in shelters is very high (i.e. more homeless were reported to be on the streets than in shelters), indicating that the largest part of urgent housing need was not met, especially in the municipalities of Athens and Piraeus. The ratio of the street homeless (interviewed and observed) to those accommodated in shelters and supported housing is also very high (almost 6 out of 10 homeless sleep in the streets while only four out of ten find some kind of temporary or supported shelter). Overall, a 10% difference is observed when comparing the share of the street homeless to the temporarily sheltered (67.6%) with the rate of the street homeless to the total population (58.6%). The difference is greater (about 20%) in smaller cities like Iraklion and highlights the contribution of the housing reintegration scheme to the meeting of housing needs. This finding also suggests how the expansion of supported and reintegration schemes could make a real change for local policies.

The homeless sleeping on the street were asked which services they used (Table 5). With considerable variation between cities, overall nearly half said that they used services that provide meals and a quarter that they went to day centres. However, 20% said that they did not use any services and, indicative of the problem posed by interviewing this group, as many as 10% did not provide usable information.

Table 5. Services used by the homeless who were sleeping on the street, by city

Services	Athens (n=92)	Thessaloniki (n=53)	Piraeus n= 61)	Iraklio (n=20)	Total (n=236)
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)
Meals	29 (31.5)	37 (69.8)	25 (41.0)	8 (40.0)	104 (44.1)
Day centre	20 (21.7)	25 (47.2)	13 (21.3)	1 (5.0)	61 (25.8)
Dormitory/hostel	5 (5.4)	3 (5.7)	1 (1.6)	1 (5.0)	10 (4.2)
Other	21 (22.8)	5 (9.4)	11 (18.0)	6 (30.0)	45 (19.1)
None	18 (19.6)	2 (3.8)	21 (34.4)	2 (10.0)	48 (20.3)
No answer	15 (16.3)	3 (5.7)	4 (6.6)	3 (15.0)	25 (10.6)

6. Street homeless includes those planning to sleep outdoors and those observed sleeping outdoors. Total homeless include participants in the supported housing- reintegration scheme and persons temporarily accommodated in shelters.

In relation to reasons for homelessness (Table 6), nearly all those with health problems used services and in particular they used day centres in a greater percentage than other homeless people. Research has emphasised how day centres become pivotal in the search for healthcare services amongst the street homeless, as they respond to their urgent needs and are linked to day clinics and public hospitals (Arapoglou et al., 2015). Recent research has also revealed how vital such centres are to homeless persons for recovering the feeling of security and for countervailing stigmatization, despite the austerity constraints which have severely undermined the capacities of staff and volunteers (Vogkli, 2021).

Respondents who were interviewed inside facilities for the homeless were asked how often they faced each one of seven possible problems in their daily lives: never, sometimes, often, or every day. The problems were finding or accessing: a place to rest during the day (faced "often" or "every day" by 27.8%); somewhere to keep belongings (33.0%); washing facilities (17.8%); food and water (21.4%); medicines (14.1%); first aid and medical care (10.8%); personal safety (20.9%).

Table 6. Services used by the homeless who were sleeping on the street, by reasons for homelessness

Services	Financial problems	Unemployment	Family problems	Health problems	Other reasons
	%	%	%	%	%
Meals	62.9*	58.7	52.1	51.9	29.0
Day centre	38.8	31.7	25.0	44.4	22.6
Dormitory/hostel	4.3	1.6	8.3	7.4	6.5
Other	13.8	7.9	16.7	22.2	19.4
None	15.5	19.0	10.4	3.7	32.3

* Percentage that used meals services among those who reported homelessness because of financial problems

As is commonly done in social sciences research, these items can be combined into a single indicator of everyday difficulties by scoring the four response categories from 0 (never) to 3 (every day) and taking the average score over the seven items. The value of Cronbach's alpha coefficient measuring the internal consistency of the scale constructed in this way is satisfactorily high, 0.82. The validity of the scale is demonstrated by the fact that it bears the expected relationship to various factors: more difficulties (higher scores) were reported by the first-time homeless, substance users, those with chronic health problems, and those without a job or pension. Potentially, this scale represents a useful summary measure contributing to the description of the lives of the homeless.

Difficulties were least in Athens compared to the other major cities in this study (Table 7) and this reflects the growth of services, day centres and outreach initiatives of NGOs in inner city areas which provide many of the necessities reported in Table 7 (Arapoglou et al., 2015). A similar picture emerges for Piraeus but the main concern of the homeless for personal safety seems not to have been addressed in this area (see also Table 8 and related comments). However, qualitative and ethnographic evidence from inner city Athens suggests that NGO services and grassroot initiatives can only partially remedy the exclusions and harms inflicted on the homeless by inadequate provisions of public local agencies (Bourlessas, 2018; Bourlessas, 2020; Vogkli, 2021). Moreover, the geographical concentration of services in the Athenian metropolises stands witness to uneven provision nationally.

Table 7. Mean and standard deviation (SD) of the Scale of Everyday Difficulties, by city. Scale scores are on a 0-3 range.

City	n	Mean	SD
Athens	212	0.60	0.64
Thessaloniki	124	1.03	0.61
Piraeus	117	0.86	0.46
Iraklio	20	1.29	1.28
Total	491*	0.80	0.66

* Including 18 respondents in three smaller cities.

Apart from facing difficulties in meeting basic needs of everyday life, the homeless person is exposed to various threats. In particular, they were asked whether they had been the victim of robbery, physical violence, bullying, and sexual abuse or harassment. Table 8 shows that just over half (54.4%) answered that one or more of these had occurred, in most cases robbery, followed by physical violence and, for female respondents, sexual abuse or harassment. As with other items surveyed, there were substantial differences between the cities; in this case, Piraeus had higher rates of victimisation than elsewhere.

Table 8. Prevalence of victimisation among interviewees in facilities for the homeless

City	Robbery	Physical violence	Bullying	Sexual abuse or harassment	None of these
Athens	37.1%	22.0%	5.9%	3.1%/10.0%**	51.2%
Thessaloniki	45.5%	26.0%	5.7%	4.4%/17.2%	48.5%
Piraeus	58.9%	41.1%	16.1%	3.4%/36.4%	33.9%
Iraklio	35.3%	0	0	0/-	64.7%
Total*	44.5%	27.6%	8.4%	3.6%/16.9%	45.6%

* Including 17 respondents in three smaller cities.
** Percentage among males / percentage among females. No females in Iraklion sample.

6. Conclusions and Policy Implications

The findings of the pilot homeless count suggest that a large part of the housing needs of the homeless remains unmet, especially in large urban centres, despite the growth of emergency shelters and services since 2012. Financial hardship and unemployment are factors which contribute both separately and in interaction with other stressors to increased homelessness. The results of the count also suggest that further analysis could explore the multiplicity of the risks of homelessness in Athens, which seem to be more complex than in other cities, and the difficulties of family support to the homeless, that seem to be a particular impediment in smaller cities.

The count has also revealed an alarming difficulty for younger ages to access housing support, especially considering that they are exposed to a combination of risks of homelessness (economic strain, unemployment, lack of housing affordability). Related to this is the fact that foreign citizenship and use of substances are features which differentiate the profile of the street homeless from those using day facilities and shelters. The provision of targeted services and shelters to these subgroups has increased since 2015 but is inadequate both in quantitative and qualitative terms. Six out of ten homeless sleep in the streets in the major metropolitan areas and a high proportion of them has no access at all to any facility for the homeless. Additionally a major part of those interviewed during the pilot are permanently homeless (for more than three years) facing various threats (e.g. robbery, physical violence, sexual abuse). Our findings also signal opportunities for supported housing schemes and rent assistance to enhance preventative interventions on such high risk groups.

The pilot count was an opportunity for the Ministry to introduce an institutional forum for collaboration, knowledge exchange and learning between central and local authorities and NGOs. Its discontinuation by the political administration after 2019 erodes any capacities that this experiment may have generated to curtail fragmentation and antagonisms between stakeholders. The role of Greek universities is worth mentioning not only for introducing surveying techniques but also for facilitating a culture of policy deliberation through pragmatic arguments and evidence, for recruiting and training volunteers among students and sensitising the local public in the cities of the count. The Census year 2021 offers a unique opportunity for repeating the count, capitalising on the existing knowledge, and enhancing collaborations to address the challenges of the pandemic.

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