Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba

Hidden homelessness international evidence review: exploring ways of identifying and counting hidden homeless populations

People, Communities and Places

social research

Executive summary

The term 'hidden homelessness' is often used to mean both that someone is homeless but physically hidden from public view and also to describe people who may be experiencing homelessness or are at risk of homelessness, who meet the legal definition of homelessness and have a right to access support, but do not appear in official homelessness statistics. This report presents an overview of the methods used internationally to identify or count people experiencing hidden forms of homelessness and the populations that may be likely to experience it. Currently there is not an estimation of who might be experiencing hidden homelessness in Scotland nor a standardised way to measure it. This research aims to help bridge that gap by summarising evidence about how hidden homelessness enumeration is approached in other countries and territories. Later, it reflects on how some of these insights could be applied in Scotland.

It is worth noting that the definition of hidden homelessness used in this report has been kept as comprehensive as possible to be able to capture a broad evidence base across countries which may have differing approaches to this matter.

Sections 4, 5 and 6 of this report are directly linked to the three objectives that guided this research:

1. Explore which methodologies have proven to be more effective at identifying people experiencing housing insecurity and/or hidden homelessness, their strengths and limitations.

2. Explore which population groups experiencing housing insecurity and/or homelessness are described within the literature as being undercounted or missed by homeless counts.

3. Briefly reflect on advantages and limitations of these approaches in relation to the Scottish context.

Section 4 presents evidence on which internationally used methods have proven to be more effective at identifying people experiencing hidden homelessness. These methods have been grouped into primary research methods, secondary research methods, new and innovative methods and triangulation of multiple methods. For each method there is a section reflecting on their main challenges and exemplifying case studies are provided when possible.

Overall, there is a very wide variety of methods and strategies used internationally to identify and count people experiencing homelessness. This is closely related to each country's laws and policies on homelessness.

Methods that rely on the physical visibility of those experiencing homelessness, like night counts and capture/re-capture counts, were found to be less likely to identify those experiencing hidden homelessness. Methods that rely on service providers to count people experiencing homelessness, like community services or local authorities, benefit from longer periods of data collection to identify those that might only occasionally reach out to support services. Evidence also suggests that the wider the variety of services participating of the count the more likely it is to identify people experiencing hidden homelessness.

Finally, the use of administrative data or public records as secondary sources needs careful consideration to avoid inadvertently excluding those that might not engage with the services from which the records are pulled. That being said, one study that used health records in Scotland showed promising results on the identification of people experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness (See section 4.2.1).

The evidence reviewed suggests that, because hidden homelessness is a complex and fluid phenomenon, the triangulation of methods (primary and secondary) can assist to better capture its complexity and identify those experiencing it that might otherwise be missed.

Section 5 presents, in no particular order, each of the six population groups for whom there was evidence of them experiencing hidden homelessness: women (particularly female heads of household and women who are parents); rural populations; young people; minority ethnic people; migrants, people who are seeking asylum or are refugees; and LGBTI people. Additionally, it is worth noting that the reality of hidden homelessness- as with most social topics- is intersectional and the groups used here refer to the main characteristics that might be preventing someone from being counted, but these are not mutually exclusive. This is not intended to be considered an exhaustive list of the population groups that experience hidden homelessness, nor do we know if these are the groups that experience hidden homelessness in the greatest proportions in Scotland.

The main barriers faced to enumerate each of these groups are discussed, the methods used- with their limitations and strengths- and case study examples where relevant. There were some barriers that appeared across several of the groups. One was fear of institutionalisation and discrimination which may deter some people- especially those in more vulnerable circumstances- from presenting to local authorities for help or accessing support services. This was mentioned as a barrier to enumeration for women in situations of domestic abuse, minority ethnic people, underage young people, LGBTI people and refugees/asylum seekers. Another barrier to enumeration of people experiencing homelessness was the use of definitions of homelessness that focus on the roofless aspect of homelessness in detriment of less visible circumstances like sofa-surfing, living in overcrowded or unsuitable accommodation. Finally, depending on the social perception of what being homeless is, as well as its legal definition, many people might not recognise themselves as homeless or may not think they are entitled to housing support. This was mentioned in the evidence in relation to young people, LGBTI people and some minority ethnic groups.

In Section 6 the strengths and limitations of the methods presented in section 4 as well as the circumstances of the population groups presented in section 5 are reflected on in relation to the Scottish context. Overall, three strengths were identified about the way

Scotland produces its homelessness statistics based on the review of international evidence:

- the definition and overall approach to homelessness used in Scotland means that most people that find themselves homeless, or are at risk of it, can in theory approach their local authority for support

- the geographical coverage that local authorities have across the whole Scottish territory allows for both urban and rural areas to be included in enumeration

- a longitudinal approach to data collection allows for identification of trends and comparisons

The lessons that could be taken from the evidence in relation to the Scottish context are:

- more research is needed to understand the reasons why some people exit the application process prematurely and/or refuse the offered temporary accommodation, and what their pathways are

- the evidence reviewed indicated that certain population groups, often in very vulnerable circumstances, might be reluctant to approach local authorities. Further research is needed to understand who might not be approaching their local authority in Scotland

- one of the main insights from the evidence reviewed is that one single method, no matter how robust, can seldom capture the broad spectrum of homelessness experiences

Lastly, there was very limited or no evidence on the prevalence of hidden homelessness on LGBTI people, rural populations, people seeking asylum or that are refugees in Scotland. There was some evidence on the prevalence of hidden homelessness for women and women who are parents, minority ethnic people and young people, yet still insufficient. Further research is needed to understand who is at a higher risk of experiencing hidden homelessness in Scotland.

1. Introduction

This report presents the outcomes of an evidence review aimed at producing a better understanding of the best practices to identify and count people experiencing concealed forms of homelessness, also referred to as 'hidden homelessness' or housing insecurity. An initial scoping of the literature identified a gap regarding evidence on hidden homelessness in Scotland. This evidence review will attempt to fill a part of that gap by exploring evidence on the approaches used internationally to better identify people that - due to varied circumstances - are not recorded and counted as homeless despite meeting the legal definition of homelessness. Furthermore, this evidence review also explores which population groups evidence suggests may be at risk of experiencing hidden homelessness. To conclude, it reflects on what lessons can be learned to strengthen our understanding of hidden homelessness in Scotland.

This research was conducted as part of a wider programme of work within the Better Homes Division of The Scottish Government. This programme has the overarching aim to generate better understanding of the circumstances faced by people who are homeless, at risk of homelessness or who are facing housing insecurity but do not appear in Scotland's homelessness statistics. The outcomes will support our policy responses and interventions so that they are guided by the best quality data possible. It will also contribute to the fulfilment of Scotland's commitment to ending homelessness and rough sleeping.

2. The evidence base

2.1 Methodology

This work is intended as a scoping review and is not intended to be exhaustive. While every attempt was made to explore the literature in a robust way, this work does not constitute a systematic review and, therefore, it is possible that some relevant sources may not be included.

Studies are reported as they were described in the literature at the time of their production, and data are gathered from multiple places and multiple time periods. As such, this paper is not intended to provide a comprehensive analysis of policy actions or positions in Scotland or elsewhere.

The primary aim of this evidence review is to identify key studies, assess their quality, and synthesise the findings to provide a clearer understanding of the international evidence base on methodologies to count/identify those experiencing concealed forms of homelessness. It has been guided by three main objectives:

1. Explore which methodologies have proven to be more effective at identifying people experiencing housing insecurity and/or hidden homelessness, their strengths and limitations

2. Explore which population groups experiencing housing insecurity and/or homelessness are described within the literature as being undercounted or missed by homeless counts

3. Briefly reflect on advantages and limitations of these approaches in relation to the Scottish context

The definition of hidden homelessness used in this report has been kept as comprehensive as possible to be able to capture a broad evidence base across countries which may have differing approaches to this matter.

2.1.1 Literature search

The literature search was conducted by The Scottish Government library which included databases such as: Idox, KandE, Knowledge Network, Policy Commons, ProQuest, Social Care Online and Google Custom Search. It was supplemented by the use of supplementary additional searches carried out by Scottish Government social researchers using online tools such as Google Scholar and broad search engine searches. The search terms were drawn from an initial scoping of known hidden homelessness literature and included: ‘hidden homelessness’, ‘statistics’, ‘enumeration’, ‘count’, ‘sofa surfing’, ‘doubling-up’, ‘overcrowding’, ‘unsheltered’, ‘rough sleeping’, ‘housing insecurity’, ‘squatting’, ‘survival sex’ among others. These terms were drawn from an initial scoping of key terms from relevant articles.

Included in this this review are:

- studies published between 2000 and 2023
- studies published in the English language
- publications that present/discuss research on methods to count/identify homeless and hidden homeless populations
- publications that present research conducted with a specific subgroup of the populations often missed in homelessness counts (ethnic minorities, refugees, LGBTI+, young people, women, etc.)

Excluded from this review are:

- studies where the methodology used was unclear, inconsistent with the results produced and/or lacked a thorough explanation
- opinion pieces

Once the literature for inclusion from the library search was identified and classified, the references mentioned in the identified publications were used to find other relevant publications that met the inclusion criteria and were not found in the initial database searches. This is also known as ‘snowballing’ and helped broaden the search.

The selected publications consist of peer-reviewed and grey literature that discuss ways of identifying and counting hidden forms of homelessness and the population groups they focus on. This includes mostly quantitative and mixed-methods research except for some qualitative pieces focussed on informing better ways to access and count forms of hidden homelessness. Literature was purposefully included if it had clear methods sections and reflected on limitations when possible.

The delineation between homelessness in the broader sense, and hidden homelessness more specifically is blurry and may differ from country to country. This needs to be considered when comparing data from multiple countries, bearing in mind that those who experience hidden forms of homelessness, and the meaning attached to these forms, is dependent on the specific context in which they exist.

2.1.3 Limitations

Although a robust approach has been taken to mitigate any shortcomings within the conduct of this review, it is not intended to be an exhaustive or traditionally 'systematic review' of evidence and, as such, there are a number of limitations. Due to the nature of this type of review, it is possible some literature may have been missed.

For pragmatic reasons, only materials published in English were included, however, we are aware that when dealing with an international evidence base, this narrows the reach of our search.

Some reviewed evidence came from studies/publications with a wider focus on homelessness and not specifically hidden homelessness. This has been clearly reflected upon when discussing those materials to ensure caution is taken when applying their findings to the hidden homeless population.

2.2 Glossary

In this section we have included a glossary of terms often used both in the literature reviewed and when discussing homelessness. These definitions are meant to provide clarity and consistency on the terms used across multiple countries and pieces of literature and are not exclusive to Scotland.

Asylum seeker: The UNHCR defines an asylum-seeker as an individual who has left their country of origin in order to seek asylum in another country, someone whose request for sanctuary has yet to be processed. (Source: Asylum-seekers | UNHCR and Asylum in the - UNHCR United Kingdom)

Domestic abuse: this includes violence, harassment, threatening conduct, and any other conduct giving rise, or likely to give rise, to physical or mental injury, fear, alarm or distress. Conduct includes speech and/or presence in a specified place or area. This includes therefore, persons experiencing non-violent domestic abuse, where abuse is interpreted as extending beyond physical violence to included threatening behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional). This can also include coercive control. (Source: Domestic abuse, housing and homelessness in Scotland: An evidence review)

Doubled-up: when more than one household lives in the same dwelling because they lack the means to have their own. This can be also sometimes referred to as the presence of a 'concealed household' within other.

Enumeration: is the action of establishing the number of something. In this report this term is mostly used in reference to the number of people experiencing hidden homelessness.

Minority ethnic: This report uses the term 'minority ethnic' to refer to those individuals belonging to ethnic groups that are in a minority in the other populations. This term includes non-visible White minority groups such as Polish or Irish Traveller. It is preferable for the word 'minority' in 'minority ethnic' to come first to acknowledge that everyone has an ethnicity and that minority ethnic groups in the UK are not necessarily a minority in populations elsewhere around the globe.

Relatively popular terms such as 'BAME' (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) and 'BME' (Black and minority ethnic) are also avoided due to their implicit homogenisation of different ethnicities into a singular, unified identity. Where these terms appear in this text it is to reflect the wording of the original research.

Housing insecurity: the state of not having stable or adequate living arrangements, especially due to risk of eviction or because one lives in unsafe or uncomfortable conditions.

LGBTI: this term stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex. Other acronyms were used in some of the research cited and will be used only when referring to it.

Local connection: in the Scottish context, this refers to a homelessness applicant's connection formed on the basis of residence regarding employment, family associations or any special circumstance (Source: Section 1: Background - Local connection and intentionality provisions in homelessness legislation: consultation - gov.scot (www.gov.scot)).

Overcrowding: is used to refer to the living circumstances where the number of people living in the same dwelling is above the desired limits for wellbeing and privacy. The Housing (Scotland) Act 1987 defines overcrowding as the situation when the number of persons sleeping in a house contravenes the room or place standard (these are based on the number of bedrooms and baths shared).

England and Wales have two main definitions of overcrowding. One, known as 'the room standard' that focuses on the number of inhabitants in a dwelling of a certain size. The other, known as the 'space standard' that focuses on the number of bedrooms available in a dwelling and their square footage (Addison, Batt, & Stock, 2022; The Scottish Government, 2021).

Refugee: The definition of a refugee according to the 1951 Refugee Convention is someone who: 'Owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.' Refugee Status Determination is the process in which either the host government or UNHCR determine whether an asylum-seeker meets the definition of a refugee. (source: Asylum in the - UNHCR United Kingdom)

Rough sleeping: refers to people who are bedded down outside, in the open air (such as on the streets, or in doorways, parks or bus shelters) or sleeping in a building or other place not designed for habitation (such as barns, sheds, car parks, cars, derelict boats, stations etc.).

Sofa surfing: refers to people who are living with others involuntarily and/or do not have the right or option to remain indefinitely. Also referred to in some evidence as 'couch-surfing' or 'staying with friends and family'.

Squatting: legally in the UK, this is when someone deliberately enters property without permission and lives there or intends to live there. Squatting is sometimes a response to homelessness. People experiencing homelessness who squat occupy empty, usually disused or abandoned property, not other people's homes. (Sources: Squatting and the law: Overview - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk) and squatting_a_homelessness_issue_2011.pdf (crisis.org.uk))

Survival sex: is the exchange of sex for material support, in this case, a place to spend the night when homeless.

Temporary accommodation: is the housing provided by local authorities to people experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity (depending on the country). This can include different types of dwellings in social sector accommodation, hostels, bed and breakfasts, community housing or refuges among others.

3. Background

3.1 Homelessness and 'hidden' homelessness

Homelessness can be defined in multiple ways depending on policies and laws of each government. The European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) defines homelessness as having three domains:

- physical (having access to an adequate and secure physical living space)
- legal (having legal right to occupy this space)
- and, social (having access to privacy in this space) (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018).

Through the combinations of these domains it recognises four main types of homelessness: rooflessness (sleeping rough), houselessness (living in temporary accommodation, supported accommodation or institutionalised), insecure housing (sofa surfing, at risk of eviction or at risk of harm) and inadequate housing (living in inadequate mobile homes, condemned buildings or over-crowded circumstances) (Johnson, Ribar, & Zhu, 2017).

The homelessness definition used by each government may vary in the weight given to each of these dimensions. This has budgetary, legal, and political implications, and affects what support people are entitled to. Depending on the definitions of homelessness used and methods used to collect data, certain populations may be missing from counts. This is also known as 'hidden homelessness'.

The term 'hidden homelessness' is often used to mean both that someone is homeless but physically hidden from public view and also to describe people who may be experiencing homelessness or are at risk of homelessness, who meet the legal definition of homelessness and have a right to access support, but do not appear in official homelessness statistics. Hidden from view and hidden from the official counts are two separate but related situations, as people experiencing homelessness but hidden from public view can also be missed by certain types of homelessness counts. This evidence review takes both into account.

The method/s used to collect data on the prevalence of homelessness in an area or specific population is guided by the definition of homelessness employed. By prioritising some dimensions over others, counts will inevitably capture some experiences more than others. Because it is not feasible nor cost-effective to collect data on every single aspect of any phenomenon, this can unintentionally lead to gaps in data collection.

Internationally, people experiencing hidden homelessness were present in a variety of circumstances including:

- rough sleeping in less visible sites
- staying in unsafe, overcrowded or insecure accommodation
- sofa surfing (staying with a series of different friends or relatives where this is not reasonable)
- sharing accommodation with another household on a long-term basis because they cannot secure their own home
- staying in or moving between temporary and/or shared accommodation (e.g., hostels)
- staying in refuges
- sleeping in cars, tents or other unsuitable non-residential accommodation
- living in unsafe circumstances- like those in situations of domestic abuse
- or where people do not have a legal right to live in their dwelling, like squatting

Some situations listed above, such as temporarily staying with a friend or relative, are not necessarily problematic, and may be the person's or household's preference. Other situations are more clearly neither suitable nor preferred.

The literature on hidden homelessness points out that people missing from homelessness counts could be people who do not approach their local authority/support services for help; people who approach their local authority/support services but exit the process prematurely; those who find alternative temporary 'solutions' (sofa surfing, rough sleeping in less visible places, etc.) and those who do not see themselves as homeless.

3.2 Homelessness in Scotland

Section 24 of the Housing (Scotland) Act 1987, as amended, defines homelessness for the purposes of the Act as follows. A person is homeless if they have no accommodation in the UK or elsewhere. A person is also homeless if they have accommodation but cannot reasonably occupy it, for example because of a threat of violence. A person is potentially homeless (threatened with homelessness) if it is likely that they will become homeless within two months. A person is intentionally homeless if they deliberately did or failed to do anything which led to the loss of accommodation which it was reasonable for them to continue to occupy (The Scottish Government, 2022c).

Since 2001 there have been multiple laws passed in Scotland that have a direct impact on homelessness policy. The Housing (Scotland) Act 2001 amends the 1987 Act and requires councils to provide a minimum of temporary accommodation, advice and assistance to all applicants assessed as homeless, regardless of whether they have been assessed as being in priority need.

The Homelessness etc. (Scotland) Act 2003 outlined the provision that, by 2012, anyone finding themselves homeless through no fault of their own must be entitled to settled accommodation in a local authority or housing association tenancy or a private rental. As a result, through the Homeless (Abolition of Priority Need Test) (Scotland) Order 2012 from 31 December 2012, all unintentionally homeless households are entitled to settled accommodation.

In recent years, a focus on prevention has been developed to provide support to people to avoid them going through homelessness. In November 2022, the Homeless Persons (Suspension of Referrals between Local Authorities) (Scotland) Order 2022 came into force. It removed the need for a local connection and since, local authorities have had to provide assistance where the person presents and they cannot be referred to other local authorities. This allows people to access support where they choose.

Nevertheless, it is possible that some people might not approach their local authorities when experiencing homelessness. This could be for multiple reasons. Yet, in order to provide the best support and fulfil Scottish Government's commitment to end homelessness, it is necessary to be able to include them in the homelessness statistics to understand who they are and how support can be best provided.

See Annex one for more information on the stages of the application process.

3.2.1 Scotland's homelessness statistics

The Scottish Government's homelessness statistics are based on administrative data generated by local authorities in the course of processing homelessness applications. This data is reported twice a year through the Homelessness in Scotland statistics bulletin and later with a Homelessness in Scotland update six months into the financial year. These publications present data on homelessness trends; circumstances previous to a homelessness episode; households currently in temporary accommodation and the scale of rough sleeping; among other data points. Scotland's homelessness statistics also include measures on sofa surfing and overcrowding, generated by asking applicants the property type from which they became homeless.

Data for the statistical publications is collected using the homelessness application (HL1) and temporary accommodation (HL2 and HL3) data returns by local authorities. These allow local authorities to track households as they go through the homeless system. Each person is given a unique identifying number, so that previous homeless applications can be linked and avoid duplication.

Local authorities also collect case level data through the PREVENT1 form to monitor homelessness prevention through the housing options (provision) guidance, although this is not mandatory. This relates to the support local authorities provide to individuals who are at risk of homelessness to try to prevent the homeless episode from happening when possible.

A limitation of this approach is that data is not collected for any households who are homeless but do not engage with their local authority. The HL1 data return captures presentations but not the overall incidence of homelessness. This means, that despite having a robust method and a comprehensive framework of rights for people experiencing homelessness, official statistics could be unintentionally missing an unknown portion of the homeless population in Scotland.

Another critique of homelessness data collection has been the insufficient inclusion of equalities data, specifically for disability, sexual orientation or trans status. This makes it difficult to capture data on groups like LGBTI people and disabled people approaching their local authorities. Additionally, the HL1 captures high level information around eligibility for assistance based on nationality and immigration status but does not capture information on asylum seeker status specifically. The Scottish Government is currently undertaking a review of their homelessness data collection. This review aims to improve the data collection process conducted by local authorities as part of their delivery of their statutory duties around homelessness and homelessness prevention.

The Homelessness in Scotland: 2021/22 statistical bulletin notes that there were a total of 28,882 households assessed as homeless or threatened with homelessness in Scotland. 67% of these were single person households and 28% contained children; and 85% were of White ethnicity (including White Polish). These households contained a total of 32,592 adults and 14,372 children. 2021/22 figures are higher compared to the 2020/21 but are lower than pre-pandemic levels.

Of the 28,882 households assessed as homeless or threatened with homelessness 99% (28,513) were assessed as unintentionally homeless. The most common reason given for making a homeless application was ‘household disputes’ (35%) followed by being ‘asked to leave’ (26%) and ‘dispute within household: violent or abusive’ (14%). Most households became homeless from a ‘family home’ (28%), ‘from friends and partners’ (20%) and from a ‘private rented tenancy’ (15%) (The Scottish Government, 2022b).

3.2.2 Estimations of hidden homelessness in Scotland

There are several estimations of hidden homelessness levels conducted in the last two decades, some specific to Scotland and some for the wider UK. Due to the differences in housing policies and ways of collecting data on homelessness between Scotland and the other three nations in the UK, care needs to be taken when extrapolating or comparing data. Nevertheless, these estimates can still provide some indications of the potential scale of hidden homelessness for Scotland and who is more likely to experience it.

The Office of National Statistics (ONS) recently published an evidence review of the hidden homelessness data landscape across the four UK nations. This report identifies that women, people from a minority ethnic group and young people are at a higher risk of experiencing hidden homelessness in the UK (Office of National Statistics, 2023). This report also highlights Denmark's biennial homelessness counts (for more on it see section 4.4) and Australia's use of the census to capture information on hidden homelessness as valuable approaches to capturing hidden homelessness in national statistics (for more on it see section 4.2.2).

A topic report by Shelter Scotland indicated that ethnic minorities, migrants, women and people living in rural areas might be at a heightened risk of experiencing hidden forms of homelessness, but note that due to the very nature of the issue it is extremely difficult to measure the scale of it (Husbands, 2018).

An estimation published by CRISIS in 2021 as part of their 'Homeless monitor' series focused on five main circumstances that are grouped under the concept of 'core homelessness' which refers to people considered to be experiencing the most extreme and immediate forms of homelessness and who are effectively homeless at a point in time. It includes people rough sleeping, living in unconventional accommodation (sleeping in cars or tents), hostels, unsuitable temporary accommodation and sofa surfing (Watts, Bramley, Fitzpatrick, Pawson, & Young, 2021). The concept of core homelessness used by CRISIS overlaps with the understanding of both statutory homelessness used in the UK and with the hidden homelessness present on the literature included here, such as sofa surfing and living in unconventional accommodation – understood as unsuitable.

This study pulled data from multiple databases from Scotland, including the HL1 and PREVENT1 returns, to estimate the levels of 'core homelessness' there. In Scotland over the period 2012-2019 core homelessness was estimated at 14,250 homeless households. Based on data from the circumstances prior to a homeless application: 7,970 households were sofa surfing; 3,320 living in hostels; 1,180 in unsuitable temporary accommodation; 900 rough sleeping and 880 in unconventional accommodation (Watts et al., 2021, p. 78). This gives a rough indication of kinds and proportions of the different forms hidden homeless can encompass. However, it is understood by the use of PREVENT1 and HL1 data returns as part of the data sources that some or most of these households later approached their council to apply for housing support. This leaves the question of what were the particular living circumstances of the households that did not approach their local authority- as they would be the ones experiencing hidden homelessness- and if these living circumstances present in the same proportions as for this cohort experiencing core homelessness.

Palmer (2004) produced an estimate of the hidden homeless population in London in the early 2000s. It included multiple circumstances of homelessness or housing insecurity. Although the profile of London's population differs from that of Scotland, this exercise provided a valuable example of the use of multiple secondary data sources to estimate hidden homelessness. Sources used included both administrative and official data sources. This exercise concluded that in London in 2003 there were an estimated 140,000 severely overcrowded households; 15,000 people living in hostels, night shelters and refuges on a non-permanent basis; and 8,000 people squatting involuntarily (Palmer, 2004).

The London Assembly published an estimation in 2017 that there were 13 times more people in concealed homelessness than those visibly sleeping rough in London (London Assembly, 2017). LGBTI youth and those that are not eligible for support were signalled as the most at risk.

All these estimations provide insights and lessons to build from when trying to determine who could be missing from official counts. Each study approached this challenge in different ways, some by using administrative data sources or routinely collected data and others by introducing bespoke data collection tools. The following chapter focuses on evidence regarding methods to enumerate homelessness and hidden homelessness.

4. Methods for identifying hidden homeless populations

In the following chapter methods for identifying and counting homeless and hidden homeless populations that emerged from the literature will be presented in four sections. The first section (4.1) groups primary data collection methods. Section 4.2 details secondary data collection methods and their specific sources. Section 4.3 introduces innovative data collection strategies which present two novel approaches to homeless data collection. Finally, section 4.4 discusses the use of a combination of multiple methods and data sources to triangulate homelessness estimations.

Some of the methods discussed in this chapter refer to the improvement of the enumeration of a specific population group, while others are presented more generally as ways of improving the counts of less visible populations. Their contextual specificities are accounted for in this section. Where possible, case studies with examples of the application of each method to hidden homelessness are included while also reflecting on their strengths and limitations.

4.1 Primary research methods

This section focuses on methods designed to collect data directly from people with first-hand experience of homelessness and hidden homelessness. This includes methods such us surveys, interviews, focus groups and observations, among others.

4.1.1 Overnight Point in Time (PiT) Counts

Overnight point in time (PiT) counts are the data collection method that most frequently appeared in the literature on homeless counts. PiT counts are a cross-sectional observational survey method used to measure unsheltered types of homelessness (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018). They are one of the most often used methods in England, North America and parts of Europe (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018; Rabinovitch, 2015; Schneider, Brisson, & Burnes, 2016). It is worth noting that Wales stopped conducting rough sleeping overnight counts in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and later decided to replace this method with monthly council estimations.

PiT counts consist mostly of overnight counts in urban areas, covering previously mapped areas considered ‘hotspots’ (areas where there is an expectation to find people sleeping rough). This means a count of people sleeping rough conducted during a specific day/night by a group of trained volunteers. A brief survey is sometimes also conducted with individuals if they consent. This method can also include the enumeration of people sleeping in homeless shelters on one given night.

PiT counts can be repeated periodically to establish trends or count over an extended period of time (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018). For example, in England, rough sleeping overnight street counts are conducted annually over a single night during the autumn (Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities, 2023). In Canada, the frequency of conducting PiT counts varies in different cities. Vancouver conducts annual PiT counts, Edmonton and Calgary conduct them every two years and metropolitan Vancouver and Toronto conduct them every three years (Rabinovitch, 2015). This has resource implications and may require a balanced consideration of available resource versus the frequency required to obtain robust data. PiT counts are also conducted in Italy, France and Spain, however, they are used in specific urban areas rather than nationwide and on a less frequent basis than is observed in the Canadian context, with counts taking place several years apart (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018).

Challenges and limitations of overnight Point in Time (PiT) counts

As previously established, not all homelessness involves rough sleeping. It is known that, due to the reliance of PiT counts on visibility of people experiencing homelessness, they are likely to underestimate the overall homeless population and overrepresent specific sub-groups like those who are visibly homeless and people with complex needs (Agans et al., 2014; Baptista, Benjaminsen, Pleace, & Busch-Geertsema, 2012; Rabinovitch, 2015; A. Smith, 2015).

The enumeration of only those who are ‘bedded-down’ (sleeping on the street) or about to bed-down, might miss anyone who is walking around using, for example, all-night cafes, shops, bars or restaurants for shelter. People sleeping rough may also be in hospitals, train stations, riding on public transport, and sometimes in police custody when counts are being conducted and may be missed for those reasons (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018). One of the main criticisms of PiT counts present in the literature is that they often undercount women and other vulnerable populations who stay purposely out of sight due to physical safety concerns, as well as those who adopt other strategies such as sofa surfing (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018; Pleace, 2016). Further, PiT counts frequently do not include rural areas, where people experiencing homelessness may be more dispersed (Busch-Geertsema, Culhane, & Fitzpatrick, 2016).

Additionally, counting every person sleeping rough, or in a space not fit for human habitation, over a 24-hour period is likely not achievable, especially in large urban areas and/or sparsely populated rural areas (Rabinovitch, 2015). PiT counts are not designed to cover the entire geography of a particular area and tend to focus on places which are known to host people experiencing homelessness or places familiar to the volunteers/organisations to allow counts to be efficient and cost-effective. This often means focusing on urban spaces where there is an expectation of finding clusters of people experiencing homelessness. This can lead to an undercount or a misrepresentation of the characteristics of the total homeless population (Weare, 2019).

The characteristics of people sleeping rough may differ from other groups experiencing other types of homelessness circumstances. This undermines the potential for this method to provide an accurate representation of the overall homeless population (Rabinovitch, 2015).

PiT counts are also very sensitive to the environmental and social context of the specific date on which it is conducted (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2016; Hall, 2017). This could mean, for example, the weather on the day/night or major events happening in the surroundings where the count is taking place. For example, there could be more police presence if there is a large concert or social gathering occurring nearby- such as a protest- and this can deter people from staying overnight in the area due to fears of criminalisation.

Finally, volunteers' training on identification of people sleeping rough for the purpose of including them in the count also plays a central role. The assessment that volunteers make of who is and who is not sleeping rough, and even their demographic characteristics (such as their gender, ethnicity or age), can skew the count or hinder its quality (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2016). Sometimes a further survey is conducted with people who are awake during the count, which can provide more accuracy, but as most counts happen overnight that is not always possible.

Case study: PiT count of unsheltered youth based on a local collaborative partnership

Trawver and Aguiniga (2016) present the strategies employed to adapt a PiT count of unaccompanied youth in the US to better suit the characteristics of that population after the previous 'Youth Count! Initiative' in 2013 was proven to have significantly undercounted this population. In order to improve this outcome a collaborative partnership was created in 2014 between academics of the University of Anchorage (Alaska), community youth services (a homeless youth shelter and services, a drop-in centre and medical clinic for youth and a teen club and resource centre) and local students. Their aim was to conduct a successful youth PiT count, with better outreach, that more accurately reflected the number of homeless youths in their area.

A key aspect of the collaboration was that each partner took on their specific role based on their skills and resources. Community organisations led on the logistics and organisation of the count, faculty members produced the survey used to collect the data and a local student led on the volunteer recruitment.

The survey included questions that collected the necessary data to meet the official requirements of the Department for Housing and Urban Development (HUD), but also included bespoke questions to inform the service provision for local organisations. The city-wide street count with outreach took place over a 24-hour period. It collected the information on 70+ unsheltered unaccompanied young people in the area, which is almost double the number of the previous Youth Count! in 2013 (Trawver & Aguiniga, 2016, p. 262). The overarching lesson from this study is that making the most of local resources is central to the success of this count. Combining local resources and knowledge allowed to tailor the design and data collection strategy improving the outcome of the count and quality of the data.

4.1.2 Prevalence surveys - longitudinal and cross-sectional

Prevalence surveys measure the presence of a condition, in this case homelessness, across the general population of an area. This method can provide a reference point against which other methods for counting people sleeping rough and homelessness can be compared. This method consists of drawing a representative sample of households in a population and conducting a survey to ask residents if they have anyone staying in their home who cannot stay indefinitely (Agans et al., 2014). This question helps differentiate between young people or dependents cohabitating with someone presumed to be able to stay indefinitely, and someone staying without an invitation to stay indefinitely. Only a small percentage of respondents are required to answer beyond the first screening question- whether they have someone couch surfing in the property or not (Lohmann, 2021). Based on the results an estimate is developed for that area.

This method is particularly valued for being able to enumerate types of hidden homelessness such as sofa surfing (Rabinovitch, 2015). One of the most widely known examples of the use of this method for homelessness enumeration was in the US in Greater Los Angeles, California as part of a wider homelessness enumeration exercise. It was later replicated in Canada, France and the UK (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018).

Challenges and limitations of Prevalence surveys

One limitation of prevalence surveys is that, since people experiencing hidden homelessness are a relatively small population compared to a wider national population, finding cases of hidden homelessness in this way is a ‘rare event’ statistically. Because of this, very large samples will be required in order to produce a robust estimation. Such large samples are more likely present in national surveys or in a national census. Smaller samples can lead to very large confidence intervals, with estimations for a whole nation based on only a handful of respondents (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018). In addition, some harder to reach hidden homeless populations, like recent migrants, might require oversampling to appear in sufficient numbers (Lohmann, 2021).

To conduct a survey by phone, phone numbers which are geographically bound would be required to draw a sample in a particular area. For some countries there is only a landline registry with enough data to create a sample and for others this could also mean mobile telephone lines. Nevertheless, it is likely that these communication methods will cover certain parts of the hidden homeless population, specifically those staying with family and friends, and that needs to be accounted for when drawing conclusions.

A final limitation of this method is that surveys with household-based data collection exclude people without settled housing at the time the survey takes place. This might mean those experiencing long-term homelessness, those rough sleeping and those repeatedly homeless will be less likely to be identified (Lohmann, 2021). However, there are other methods such as PiT counts and service-based surveys that would be better suited for those circumstances. The novelty of this method is that it offers the possibility of estimating the prevalence of some concealed types of homelessness within a wider population.

Two case studies: Telephone prevalence surveys

A study was conducted in 2009 to estimate the total homeless population of Greater Los Angeles, California. The cross-sectional prevalence survey was based on a randomised sample of 4,288 households with landlines. It aimed to find those who were homeless but were currently living with someone housed, either sofa surfing or doubled-up. Participants were asked if someone who was homeless was staying with them. Only 16 people experiencing hidden homelessness were identified in this count, which produced an estimate of 10,800 people experiencing hidden homelessness in the total population with a large standard error of 3,421; producing wide intervals at the 95 percent confidence level (HC11 ^ 6705) (Agans et al., 2014, p. 225).

Due to the low proportion of cases identified and the imprecise estimation produced, in the following count in 2011 the researchers took a 'Multiplicity-based approach'. This approach would consider hidden homelessness as a statistically rare event. This approach was previously used by health care providers to estimate the prevalence of rare conditions in a population. It requires researchers to increase the sample's coverage and therefore make the rare event 'less rare' to allow for more robust estimations. The researchers did this by adding a follow-up question to the survey which asked respondents not only to report if someone experiencing homelessness was staying with them but also if they knew of someone experiencing homelessness staying in their neighbour's property. Respondents were finally asked how confident they were of this, only those cases who responded to be 'very confident' and 'quite confident' were included in the count.

This new approach produced a more reliable estimation of 18,622 people experiencing hidden homelessness in Greater Los Angeles, California at the time. This meant a reduction of the relative standard error from 32% to 15% (Agans et al., 2014, p. 225). However, it was not significant based on a normal distribution test (p=0.06) (Agans et al., 2014, p. 224).

A similar study was conducted in Germany which explored the feasibility of collecting data on hidden homelessness in population surveys. In a population-wide multi-topic telephone survey, respondents were asked if they had hosted friends, family or other persons over the last 12 months who had no accommodation of their own (Lohmann, 2021). This study was conducted in three different areas using a sample of landlines of approximately 1,000 for each area. The author concluded that a sample of that size was not large enough to calculate robust estimations. They recommended using a larger sample in future studies to improve the quality of the estimation (Lohmann, 2021).

Case study: The rough sleeping census for women in London

The aim of this study was to pilot a methodology tailored to women experiencing homelessness, specifically rough sleeping (Young & Hodges, 2022). It also looked to establish the circumstances and characteristics of this group and their prior journey into homelessness. The method used was a Period Prevalence Count (PPC) in the form of a short survey conducted by outreach practitioners from local organisations during the daytime. This survey was purposely short (10 questions) to avoid burdening the participants and maximising the chances of full completion. A voucher was provided as an incentive to the participants.

The study was conducted across 21 of London's boroughs over a 5-day period in October 2022. Initially it was conceived to collect data from multiple data points which included local authorities' data and service user's data. However, this proved to be challenging due to low levels of response from organisations and, ultimately, the data collected came from the PPC survey.

Although the study looked to engage a wide variety of support services working with women, not all kinds of services had the same response levels. The researchers thought this could have been because not all services conduct the same levels of outreach as it might not be in line with the kind of support they provide. For example, this was the case of services for women experiencing domestic or sexual abuse which rely on women contacting them more than being contacted through outreach.

Another challenge noted was identifying women that might be rough sleeping during the daytime, as they would not be bedded down. Outreach workers reported finding it hard to identify and engage women to conduct the survey. They noted sometimes being mistaken for being fundraisers rather than outreach workers when approaching them. Additionally, some of the women that normally interacted with the practitioners did not participate. Although some women that had never interacted with outreach workers did participate, the census is still likely to have underrepresented the total number of women rough sleeping in the area.

There was a total of 154 valid responses to the survey after removing invalid and duplicated ones (Young & Hodges, 2022). One of the main conclusions was that women were found to rough sleep in places that are more varied than the current definition of rough sleeping used in England considers, so incorporating this information could help better include women's rough sleeping in the official statistics. Second, although most of participants reported accessing housing support services, not all of them did. This reinforced the understanding multiple methods and strategies are needed to capture the complexity of the circumstances faced by women sleeping rough.

Case study: 'Journeys Home' longitudinal survey

'Journeys Home' was a national longitudinal survey of people living in Australia who were either homeless or at high risk of becoming homeless. It was launched in September 2011 and collected information on homelessness through a longitudinal survey tracking the same 1,700 people over two and half years. It was funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Social Services and The Melbourne Institute was responsible for the design and content of the survey (Bevitt et al., 2015).

Australia's current definition of homelessness includes people who are living in culturally inappropriate or severely over-crowded accommodation (Johnson et al., 2017). Thus, when designing the data collection instrument researchers were sensitive to collecting data that was not constrained by a definition of homelessness that focused exclusively on rooflessness. Data was collected on the type of accommodation in which people lived, the stability of their housing arrangements, the security of their tenure and the quality of the accommodation.

The sample was drawn from social security records (Centrelink) over the previous 10 years. This database allowed service providers to flag clients who were homeless or at risk of homelessness and provided unique identifiers. Using these records, a sample was drawn and respondents contacted. For those who opted in, data was then collected face-to-face or by telephone according to what was preferable by the respondent (Wooden et al., 2012).

The fieldwork took part over six waves, between 2011 and 2014. In each wave respondents were asked detailed questions about their housing, personal and family circumstances in the previous year. A cash incentive was provided with each agreed interview. The main challenges to this approach are the cost of maintaining a large sample of a very mobile population over the extent of the research project and managing drop out levels. Nevertheless, researchers reported sustained high rates of engagement with 84% of the initial sample participating in all the waves of the study (Bevitt et al., 2015).

Case study: US youth survey

A study conducted by Curry, et al. (2017) looked to understand the prevalence of sofa surfing among homeless youth in US and the implications it has for this population regarding vulnerability and needs for support. The study used mixed methods. Data was collected through a national survey for homeless youth conducted via mobile and landline phones. In-depth interviews were then conducted to contextualise the findings.

This study reached some similar conclusions to those of Petry, et al. (2022). First, that the prevalence of sofa surfing in the US increases with age for young people between the ages of 13 to 25 (Curry et al., 2017). Second, that there are differences between youth who report multiple types of homelessness and youth who report only having sofa surfed. Young people with experience of multiple types of homelessness were more likely to be LGBTI, Black, multiracial or Latino than those who just had sofa surfing experiences. Third, that most young people experiencing homelessness had experience of sofa surfing at some point.

One of the main limitations of this study is that the survey was self-reported for young people from 18 to 25 years, while for those aged between 13 to 17 years old the survey was answered by an adult member of the household. The authors suspect that this could have led younger participants to answer differently to avoid disclosing information to adults responding for them.

4.1.3 Service-Based Surveys (SBS)

Service-based surveys (SBS) are a subtype of prevalence surveys that were prevalent in the literature as part of large-scale counts in Canada, in the form of PPC, and as part of the methods used in Nordic countries to enumerate homelessness.

The data collection tool used to undertake these counts can take the form of a short survey which is administered when people access the community services. This screening tool standardises the collection of basic information about participants like age, gender, ethnicity and most recent accommodation, among other information. It also can collect case identifier information to avoid double counting (David Robinson, 2002).

SBSs often take place over a longer period than a PiT count, such as seven or more consecutive days to establish the prevalence of homelessness in a community. The type of support service administering the survey is not restricted to homelessness services but can include other services that homeless populations might attend in their community, such as a food bank or a church meal program. Authors emphasise that aspects such as planning and communication with the participating organisations are essential to its success. It is also important to ensure that services have the capacity and resources to participate (Hall, 2017).

Collecting data from a wide range of organisations providing front-line services has the potential to identify those in more hidden forms of homelessness who might come in contact with services that are not directly related to homelessness (Hall, 2017; Kauppi et al., 2020). The wider the range of organisations participating in an area, the better the chance of reaching hidden homeless populations that might not engage with the traditional homeless support services.

For that reason, SBSs provide the opportunity to count people that do not approach local authorities or homelessness support services (Kauppi et al., 2020; David Robinson, 2002). They can also be used in conjunction to street counts conducted in an area to be able to identify people experiencing homelessness that might have been missed by the overnight count. This can be done by surveying the services the day following the night a PiT count was conducted to ask people where they spent the previous night. Then, compare both the daytime and overnight counts to calculate people who might have been missed in the overnight count (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2016).

Challenges and limitations of service-based surveys

The main challenge for SBSs is ensuring the participation from services, especially those that are smaller and have less resources to participate in data collection (Busch-Geertsema, Benjaminsen, Filipovic Hrast, & Pleace, 2014). A wide coverage of services, beyond those providing homelessness support, is central to capturing those in hidden homelessness. Something to bear in mind is that the collection of data is restricted to the extent of service provision in an area. This can be particularly challenging in rural and more sparsely populated areas where there might be fewer services present in the community.

Secondly, the estimates produced through SBSs are restricted to people who visit agencies participating in the count during the collection period and some people who do not use services frequently may be missed. Additionally, some services only operate on specific days of the month, and again, people may be missed in the enumeration if the count is scheduled during a period where some services do not operate. To tackle this limitation, the longer the period the count is in place the more accurate it can be (Hall, 2017). Although chances of duplication increase with longer counts, this could be avoided with robust deduplication processes.

Thirdly, because the data collection is done by people whose main priority might be service provision rather than undertaking the count, there might be difficulties guaranteeing the rigour of data collection procedures from participating services. Capacity of the support services should also be considered when recruiting them to participate in the count as smaller organisations might struggle to find sufficient staff to administer the surveys (David Robinson, 2002). That being said, careful consideration should be given to avoid excluding smaller organisations that could have contact within populations experiencing hidden homelessness.

Fourthly, and connected to the previous point, these types of counts that occur over a specific time period are liable to underestimate sub-groups within the homeless population that have shorter periods of homelessness. Inversely, those who are homeless for longer periods of time are more likely to be identified by these methods (David Robinson, 2002).

Lastly, it is possible that some individuals experiencing homelessness will not be identified using this method, as they may choose not to use any services or may not see themselves as homeless. For example, some women experiencing homelessness were reported to avoid accessing mixed-gender services for concerns over their safety based on previous experiences of gendered violence. This was also true for LGBTI people. Additionally, the literature mentioned that some women who had experienced domestic abuse feared the perpetrators could track their presence back to services or someone could inadvertently reveal their presence there (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018).

Case study: The enumeration of the homeless population in the Cochrane District in Ontario, Canada

Kauppi et al. (2020) conducted a study comparing PiT counts and PPC as way of counting the local homeless populations in the Cochrane District in Ontario, Canada. This enumeration project is particularly relevant to this research as it specifically compared these methods of enumeration in terms of their usefulness for identifying hidden homeless populations. It is worth noting that the term 'Aboriginal peoples' is used in these studies to refer to the three legally defined culture groups in Canada: Métis, Inuit, and First Nations.

The study compared data collected simultaneously by a PPC and PiT count in the city of Timmins, in the Cochrane District of Ontario. The participants were asked about the different circumstances they found themselves in while homeless. The study found that staying with family and friends was the most prevalent experience among the surveyed population of the Cochrane District of Ontario, with three quarters of respondents having been in that situation at some point (Kauppi et al., 2020, p. 39). This was followed in half the cases by having slept outdoors, and in over 40% of cases by having stayed in a motel or rented a room, a third reported having slept in vehicles or having squatted and a quarter reporting having stayed at an institution or offering services in exchange of accommodation including sex (Kauppi et al., 2020, p. 39). These results are useful to put into perspective the range of circumstances that are often consistent with homelessness and the proportions in which they may present.

The study concluded that the PiT count had produced a low count in Timmins, identifying only 111 people experiencing homelessness, while the PPC identified another 431 people experiencing homelessness (Kauppi et al., 2020, p. 13). Additionally, the PiT count did not fully capture the demographic makeup of the homeless population. The PPC found an overrepresentation of Aboriginal people among the people experiencing hidden forms of homelessness in the count (Kauppi et al., 2020). The results also pointed to the fact that those that were currently experiencing unsheltered types of homelessness had, during their housing trajectory, also been in circumstances of hidden homelessness.

The authors concluded that PPCs were particularly valuable to produce homelessness counts in rural and remote areas in Canada. While it was more costly than a PiT count, it could also be conducted less frequently and targeted to rural and harder to reach populations (Kauppi et al., 2020).

Case study: Nordic countries' approach to homelessness counts

Sweden, Norway and Denmark all conduct periodical two-step counts, first carrying out a mapping of support services and then asking these services to conduct a survey of their users over a specific week (Benjaminsen, Dhalmann, Dyb, Knutagård, & Lindén, 2020). A very important aspect of this enumeration strategy is that the services reached are not just those targeting people experiencing homelessness but a much wider range of agencies and social services. This includes job-centres, drop-in cafes, parts of the health system, addiction treatment centres, NGOs, among others (A. Smith, 2015). This is called 'extended service-based count' and was found to be an effective way of obtaining information about people who are often missed in other forms of homeless counts in these countries. More on Denmark's approach to homelessness counts is discussed in Section 4.4.

Austria also carries out a count via data supplied through support services. However, in the paper outlining the Austrian approach, it was pointed out by the authors that services surveyed are limited and access to these services is also restricted to those born in Austria (Hermans, Dyb, Knutagard, Novak-Zezula, & Trummer, 2020), therefore, limiting the count of immigrant and other harder-to-reach populations.

4.1.4 Multiplier estimations: Capture-Recapture, Plant Capture and Multiple list methods

This section will explore the multiplier methods discussed across the literature: Capture-Recapture, Plant Capture and Multiple lists. All these methods use the comparison of two or more lists/observations of the same population to check their overlap and estimate the total size of a population. They do this by using a formula to multiply the results to calculate the incidence of a phenomenon in a wider population. This formula is known as a 'multiplier'.

Capture-Recapture, Plant Capture and the Multiple lists methods are underpinned by three main assumptions. First, that the size of the total population remains stable during the count. Second, that the probability of all members of the population to be included in one of the counts is the same. Third, that the probability of being included in each count/observation is different (Weare, 2019).

Capture-Recapture

The Capture-Recapture method, also referred to as 'mark and re-capture', has been used in the past to estimate the size of homeless populations as well as other harder to reach populations such as injecting drug users. This method involves fieldwork which consists of conducting an observation and 'tagging' an individual when counted, to record their singular presence. This technique is based on the conducting of two or more independent observations of the same population. These observations can be simultaneous, from two sources that represent approximately the same population, or they can be from the same source at two points in time (Williams, 2010). The rationale behind this method is that the more times a single individual of the population is tagged the smaller the population must be. The longer it takes to recapture an individual the larger the population is estimated to be (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018).

Capture-Recapture is discussed in the literature as having the potential to produce a more accurate estimate than PiT overnight counts provided the assumptions about the total population are met (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018; Weare, 2019). These counts can also be rerun periodically to produce trend data.

Plant capture

Plant Capture is an alternative use of the Capture-Recapture method which was only mentioned briefly in one identified study and does not appear to be widely used in homelessness counts. It consists of ‘planting’ a group of people passing as homeless or rough sleepers across the area where the count will take place. Then, the rate at which the ‘plants’ are counted or not is used to estimate the accuracy of the count (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018).

This method raises several issues; first, is the ethical consideration of disguising people to pass as homeless in an area where people are experiencing homelessness which can be seen as highly insensitive. In addition to that, there is the issue of the lack of clarity about what would it mean to make someone ‘look’ homeless, this in itself is a point of contention (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018). Finally, in the literature reviewed this method was not shown to add value to that of the original Capture-Recapture method but it did come with additional ethical complexity and fieldwork costs.

Multiple lists

The Multiple lists method, instead of collecting data through observations, uses two or more lists (often administrative records) obtained separately of the same population. These lists are compared to establish their overlap, which is then used to calculate the estimated size of the total population. Although it is a secondary method it is included here as it shares the assumptions and use of multipliers of Capture-Recapture and Plant capture methods (Weare, 2019).

This approach has the benefit of having a relative low cost as it does not involve fieldwork. However, the way the ‘lists’ are produced often violates the necessary assumptions. First, the lengthier the period over which data were collected the more changes the size of the population could have, violating the first assumption. Second, two lists they might have different collection periods which are not comparable. Lastly, not all population members have the same chance to be included as they might not interact with all the organisations providing the records used as lists (David Robinson, 2002).

Challenges and limitations of multiplier methods

Many of the same limitations as with PiT counts and SBS arise with multiplier methods, as they frequently rely on observation. Particularly those in relation to the extent and nature of the coverage and the time period during. which data is collected. The reason why someone is only counted once might be down to geographical coverage and the selection of the area where the survey looks for people experiencing homelessness.

In addition, there are inherent problems associated with counting people who move around physically, who conceal themselves for safety, who move in and out of homelessness or who simply do not have a fixed abode that are not entirely addressed by these methods. For example, women rough sleeping may be more likely to be missed by methods using observation for the same reasons they may be missed by street counts, because they remove themselves from sight or conceal their gender due to safety concerns (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018). (See section 5.1.1).

Relying on external observations as the main approach to counting the homeless population introduces multiple sources of bias. This can be somewhat mitigated by the level of training and knowledge of the observers, yet not fully removed. Turning observations into standardised short surveys/interviews can also mitigate this risk but this introduces new costs including the need for further logistical and analytical resources (Berry, 2007).

Another challenge of the use of multiplier methods is that they produce estimates with large confidence intervals. However, confidence intervals can be narrowed with repeated resampling, for example, by redoing the procedure monthly over a six-month period (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2016).

Lastly, the assumptions that the homeless population size remains stable during the data collection period and that each person has equal chances of being identified are somewhat undermined by the mobile and fluid nature of the homeless population and this needs to be taken into account and mitigated by the design of the study (David Robinson, 2002).

Case study: Capture-Recapture in Plymouth and Torbay

An enumeration study was conducted in Plymouth and Torbay, England using a hybrid model that combined a simple Capture-Recapture approach with longitudinal count. This involved capturing two samples of a population taken three times over a one-year period, leading to a total of six counts in each location. This longitudinal model was adopted on pragmatic grounds to improve the reliability of the counts as opposed to conducting them over a short period of time.

The homeless population was counted through the records held by local services like hostels, hospitals and soup kitchens, among others. When the records were not sufficiently robust or detailed a monitoring form was then used for the count. Individuals would be tagged using four identifiers: sex, date of birth, where they were staying at present and length of time spent in either study location. Complete data was available for 90% of the cases and for the remaining it was possible to draw conclusions from the incomplete data (Williams, 2010, p. 55). Additionally, there were random data collection quality checks in some locations.

The author of the study concluded that this method was suitable to the geography of both localities. Both being urban areas bounded by countryside and sea with a low population density which made movement in and out of the areas easier to control for. The data collected allowed the calculation of three measures of homelessness: the estimated total population derived from each set of counts; longitudinal data on change and a mean of all three sets of counts. The longitudinal nature of this study provided important data on trends as well as a comparison of each count to the overall mean which could be interpreted as an indication of a level of reliability (Williams, 2010).

4.2 Secondary research methods

This section focuses on secondary research methods used to identify and count hidden homeless populations. This means research methods which use secondary data sources, which are sources where data was collected with purposes other than the research on hidden homelessness or homelessness.

The most frequently used secondary data sources include censuses, national health records and administrative databases used by homelessness support services, also known as Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS). Johnson (2017) argues that the integration of multiple sorts of administrative data produced by public services can offer a valuable data source for homelessness research. Most governments are already collecting increasing quantities of administrative data to be able to provide services for their constituents including data on housing, welfare, justice and health among others, so there is an opportunity to make the most of this resource.

The methods discussed below are indirect statistical estimations, predictive analysis and spatial techniques. They all have in common the use of different databases of administrative or routinely collected data to estimate or identify the presence/risk of homelessness. While care needs to be taken when drawing conclusions based on data not collected for the purpose of identifying homelessness, it can also be a cost-effective way to produce valuable insights with already available resources.

4.2.1 Indirect estimations using administrative data

Indirect estimation is a statistical method used to estimate the size of the homeless population in an area or larger population by using client records from organisations such as homelessness support service providers, social security agencies, public health services, etc. Data is collected by these services as a result of service provision that may or may not be related to homelessness. Some forms of administrative and official data used in the past to estimate the size of homeless and hidden homeless populations are homelessness support services' client databases, social security/benefits data, council tax records and household surveys (Rabinovitch, 2015).

The logic behind the use of public records or administrative service data is that people experiencing homelessness may be in contact with multiple services or organisation even if they do not approach their local authorities or specialised homelessness support services. By capturing other forms of data from multiple sources a wider picture can be painted of the prevalence of homelessness and hidden forms of homelessness, as well as the pathways into and out of homelessness (Benjaminsen et al., 2020).

One form of service records used in estimations comes from Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS). HMIS are administrative databases used by homelessness support services to collect information from individuals on the multiple occasions they come into contact with them. These are frequently shared by homelessness services in an area, building a large pool of data about the demographic makeup and circumstances of the homeless population in it. In order for HMIS to be useful data sources, most services in the community must use it. HMIS are often suitable sources of data for longitudinal analysis of homelessness because their records are continuously updated and dated (Rabinovitch, 2015).

Challenges and limitations of re-processing administrative data

There are some limitations related to re-processing administrative data. Firstly, data sharing agreements are often needed- though not always- for these kinds of studies to take place. Secondly, while longitudinal studies are much needed to balance out the (often employed) cross-sectional data collection methods in homelessness research, monitoring of individuals through health and housing systems can be ethically complex and ethical considerations should be explored within each legal context. Thirdly, caution is required to clarify those groups who might not be included in the data pool. There are limits to their generalisability to their overall population.

Fourthly, the definition of homelessness used affects who is entitled to receive support for certain services, which in turn affects the profile characteristics of the service users. This should be considered when selecting service records as secondary data sources. The literature also suggests that it is essential to compare the makeup of the population of service users against the wider population for which the estimation is intended, to avoid producing unreliable or biased results (Deleu, Schrooten, & Hermans, 2021).

Additionally, studies that use HMIS as their main source rely on support services to detect people experiencing homelessness, but not all people experiencing homelessness approach support services. Therefore, using solely this type of data introduces the risk of excluding people who are experiencing homelessness who do not engage with homeless services and may be more likely to be experiencing a hidden form of homelessness (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018).

The strength of this approach, however, is that the existence of a large-scale national database with potentially better coverage than homeless counts can still further our knowledge on people experiencing homelessness (Roncarati, Byrne, & McInnes, 2021). By pooling data on different areas of a person’s life it may be possible to spot patterns between behaviours, experiences and outcomes that can help make pathways in and out of homelessness more visible (Richard et al., 2019).

Case study: US Homeless Management Information System

A recent study by Petry, et al. (2022) used administrative data obtained from the Homeless Management Information System databases of 16 communities across the US to create a convenience sample of young people (under the age of 25). The researchers used multinomial logistic regression to assess whether demographic characteristics, homeless history, risk and victimisation, among other indicators, were associated with the place where young people spent their homeless nights (sofa surfing, sleeping on the streets or in a shelter).

Some of the main findings of this study were, firstly, that minority ethnic and LGBTI youth were at higher risk of any kind of homelessness. LGBTI youth were also more likely to sleep on the streets compared to young people staying in an overnight shelter. As youth approached legal age (18+ years) they were more likely to sofa surf. These three findings are consistent with the overall literature reviewed. Lastly, this research found a positive correlation between sofa surfing or sleeping rough and having an income and having unmet basic needs, compared to youth sleeping in shelters (Petry, Hill, Milburn, & Rice, 2022, p. 746). The researcher interpreted this finding as likely due to the role that shelters play in satisfying basic needs.

The authors point out that the need to voluntarily opt in by the communities that were included in the sampling introduced a source of bias. In addition, the data was collected with the purpose of allocating housing resources which the authors believe could have biased the responses relating to aspects like mental health, illegal substance use and risky behaviours as people might want to minimise them to increase their chances of allocation. The authors also highlight that the fear of involvement of child protection services might have affected the responses from younger participants (Petry et al., 2022).

Case study: The CHAIN database

CHAIN (Combined Homelessness and Information Network) is an HMIS multi-agency database which has detailed and comprehensive data on rough sleeping in London. It records service use by individual people experiencing homelessness over time, including services used by people sleeping rough and people in the 'wider street population'- meaning people who inhabit the streets at all times of day. The data is collected for administrative and monitoring purposes by professionals working these populations. However, CHAIN collects data based on service contacts, which means it is not a census or representative survey of all people experiencing homelessness in London (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018).

A 2018 study produced a multivariate analysis on women's homelessness using the CHAIN database. This was done by pulling the demographic characteristics and circumstances surrounding homelessness episodes for women between 2012 and 2017 in London (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018). This study focused on the trends for women experiencing homelessness and in their interactions with services. It helped widen the understanding of the complexity of the needs of women sleeping rough, including mental health needs and domestic abuse support.

It concluded that Black British women represented 20% of homeless women that were UK citizens, although that demographic only made up 3.4% of the wider British population (based on the 2011 census) (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018, p. 7). In addition, women sleeping rough were found to be more likely than men to be in a younger age bracket of 25 years or less (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018, p. 9). This is consistent with a trend reported in 2008 that the demographic composition of the homeless population of UK with it becoming younger and increasingly female (Quilgars, Johnsen, & Pleace, 2008).

Case study: The use of health and other records in predictive analytics in Canada and Scotland

One study used large-scale health databases to retrospectively predict homelessness outcomes in Ontario, Canada (Richard et al., 2019). The authors make the case for using this approach because it provides a lower cost alternative to primary data collection at national level, as well as allowing a longitudinal perspective of the trajectories of people experiencing homelessness and hidden homelessness (Richard et al., 2019).

The authors discussed the potential use of predictive analysis of routinely collected data to anticipate housing outcomes, particularly homelessness. This would be done with the intention of being able to predict and prevent negative housing outcomes before they happen based on other publicly available data. This kind of data processing technique has the capacity to spot patterns in high volumes of data, exponentially growing its processing capacity and complexity.

This approach is further supported by a study about health and homelessness in Scotland which matched and compared health data from a 15-year cohort of households that had experienced homelessness to individuals that had not in the most and least deprived areas (The Scottish Government, 2018). Comparisons of interactions with health services between these cohorts were made by looking at the number of times people appeared in these various datasets.

This study used six health datasets from the National Health Service (NHS) together with information about deaths from National Records of Scotland. There was a particular focus on mental health, drug-related health conditions and alcohol-related health conditions as those are considered to have links with homelessness. This study found that prior to a homelessness episode there were increased interactions with health services and that a peak in interactions was seen around the time of the first homelessness assessment and right after (The Scottish Government, 2018). This is a promising finding as it could lead to ways to identify people experiencing homelessness who have not approached their local authorities or support services.

Case study: Re-processing of administrative secondary data sources

Another example of research produced using existing administrative data is the research conducted by (Bramley, Fitzpatrick, McIntyre, & Johnsen, 2022) on homelessness among Black and minority ethnic communities in the UK. In this case the researchers reprocessed 10 databases consisting of multiple secondary data sources such as administrative data, previous cohort studies conducted with administrative data and surveys to produce a report on the experience of homelessness of these communities in the UK. This report concluded that when keeping other socio-economic and demographic factors constant, being Black, of a minority ethnic group and/or having a migration background still increased the chances of experiencing homelessness in the UK (Bramley et al., 2022).

This study also found that Black British communities were three and a half times more likely to experience statutory homelessness than White British people in England. People of Asian descent were found to have lower rates of statutory homelessness than Black people, yet they were at a higher risk of hidden forms of homelessness like overcrowding and living in double-up households (Bramley et al., 2022). This study also points to discrimination from landlords, both social and private, as one of the contributing factors to the higher levels of homelessness among Black and minority ethnic people (Belanger, 2013; Bramley et al., 2022; Shankley & Finney, 2020).

Case study: An estimation of hidden homelessness prevalence in London, UK

The New Policy Institute published a report that used multiple official housing records and statistics to produce an estimate of the prevalence of hidden homeless and housing need in London during the last quarter of 2003 (Palmer, 2004). This exercise focused specifically on people who lived in London and who fitted England's legal definition of homelessness but who had not been provided with accommodation by their local authority (Palmer, 2004). This was one of the first attempts to produce an estimation of hidden homelessness in England.

However, the authors emphasise the many limitations that gaps in the data from public records when trying to calculate the number of people living in overcrowded households; people at risk of eviction; people squatting and people leaving institutional care with no accommodation to go to after (Palmer, 2004).

4.2.2 Indirect estimations using census data

The use of census data to produce indirect estimations of the prevalence of homelessness in a population appeared consistently across the evidence reviewed. This could be because census databases are uniquely comprehensive of the national population and provide consistent collection of variables that allows comparison, with only a few exceptions. They are also generally available, cost-effective and have high quality standards.

Two main uses of census data were found in the evidence. The first is Australia's approach to producing a census that actively looks to include people experiencing homelessness. Although it is not a homeless population census and there is still the danger of undercounting, it has proven a successful way to include homeless and hidden homeless populations in the census data which will later make it a valuable source to estimate homelessness prevalence across the country.

The second approach is the one present in two studies from Canada, where already collected census data was re-processed to estimate housing needs and overcrowding as a form of homelessness in specific populations. These two approaches are described in more detail below.

Challenges and limitations of using census data

There are some limitations to using the national census as a secondary source of data to produce an estimate of the hidden homeless population. The first, and most obvious, is that people experiencing homelessness at the time of the census might not live in officially recognised or accessible places, so they could be missed by census counts. The second, that homelessness is in general a dynamic circumstance which the census is not designed to fully capture (Baptista et al., 2012). Additionally – even when a household could be identified as homeless, variables that would enable the identification of practices like sofa surfing and the scale of sofa surfing are not currently included in the questionnaire.

Case study: Estimating homelessness through the national census

The Australian national 2021 census of population and housing conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) is used to estimate the prevalence of homelessness in Australia at the time. Homelessness is not a characteristic that is directly measured in the census, so estimates of those experiencing homelessness were derived using analytical techniques and statistical assumptions. The relevance of this case is the use of a specific strategy to ensure the participation of all people experiencing homelessness in the census, this includes people that often would be classed as experiencing hidden homelessness.

Some key elements of this approach were, first, the use of 'place of usual residence' to count people experiencing homelessness and not just the place where they had spent the night of the census to be able to understand the location and living circumstances separately. Second, the homelessness enumeration strategy focussed on early engagement and building strong relationships with all levels of government and key stakeholders. In many cases census staff was recruited directly from people in the communities. This meant that the census questionnaire was delivered by trusted members of the communities giving higher chances of engagement with the census and better quality answers. Third, support with filling the census was provided (in-person, online and via telephone) and tailored communication materials was provided and adapted to local circumstances and specific populations like youth (Australian Boureau of Statistics, 2023b).

Lastly, there were different approaches taken to reach people experiencing homelessness depending on where they were staying. The strategy included additional collection and support mechanisms for people living in three broad situations on census night, plus one residual category:

- people living ‘not in a dwelling’ (i.e., ‘people living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out’ also known as ‘people sleeping rough’)

For people in these circumstances the collection period was extended to six days starting in the night of the census on 10th August 2021. Specific adjustments to this collection period were made in areas affected by covid restrictions as homelessness support services operated on a different schedule then.

This population group was interviewed by staff with previous experience working with homeless populations and in locations where services are provided for people experiencing homelessness to get the most accurate accounts.

In most circumstances, people ‘not in a dwelling’ were counted through interview using a paper shortened version of the main census questionnaire which was designed to identify people experiencing homelessness. The ABS undertook a quality assurance process at the end of count to remove any duplicate forms, given the mobility of some people experiencing homelessness and the extended enumeration period.

- people living ‘in a private dwelling’ (i.e., ‘people staying temporarily with other households’ or ‘people living in 'severely' crowded dwellings’)

Most people in private dwellings completed their census using either the paper or online general questionnaire. This included people staying temporarily with other households and those who were living in overcrowded private accommodation.

- people living ‘in a non-private dwelling’ (i.e., people in supported accommodation for the homeless, people living in boarding houses or people in other temporary accommodation in hostels or motels paid for by the local authorities)

The Census count for non-private dwellings took two main approaches. Where the presence of the institution or temporary accommodation residence was publicly known, residents were counted as within any other institutions like hospitals or residential care. For those establishments where the location is not publicly known, such as female youth refuges, their location was not disclosed to the wider census staff and specialist staff conducted the count.

- other marginally housed groups (people marginally housed but not classified as homeless: people living in other crowded dwellings; people in other improvised dwellings; people housed in caravan parks; humanitarian migrants; housing with major structural problems or where residents are in constant threat of violence)

Previous homelessness records were used to inform data imputation of key demographic information for people in each of these four main categories. The census concluded that there were 122,494 people estimated to be experiencing homelessness on the night of the 2021 census in Australia. 55,9% of people experiencing homelessness are still some population groups who are underestimated in the census and homelessness estimates. This includes: youth experiencing homelessness; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; and people displaced from domestic and/or family violence (Australian Boureau of Statistics, 2023a).

Case study: The relationship between minority ethnic people's homelessness and overcrowding in Canada

A study conducted in Canada with 2001 census data utilised data re-processing to uncover patterns of overcrowding across immigrant communities (Haan, 2011). The author identified differential patterns in overcrowding between immigrant and Canadian-born households but concluded that the relationship between residential (over)crowding and hidden homelessness is nuanced and that there could be many explanations for residential (over)crowding which are not directly related to hidden homelessness. This study noted that residential (over)crowding- defined as more than one person per room in a dwelling- is not a consistent indicator of hidden homelessness or, on its own, directly related to ethnic minorities in Canada (Haan, 2011).

Case study: Housing needs from immigrant populations in Canada

Fiedler, Schuurman and Hyndman's (2006) study also re-processed data from Canada's 2001 census, but in this case, specifically explored housing needs and economic risk of homelessness for immigrant populations. This study concluded that secondary census data on its own is not a suitable data source to assess risk of homelessness for recent migrants at the time of the census in Canada. This is partly because recently arrived migrants might not yet have an income/social security number and they would therefore be excluded from the sample.

4.3 Innovative methods and data collection tools

4.3.1 Geographic Information Systems (GIS)

Geographic Information Systems are used for capturing, visualising and manipulating geographical data. In the example discussed below, GIS were used to map and compare the location of risks and resources in communities across the state of Maine, US. There, the GIS was used to map the risk factors relating to housing insecurity in communities across this state, which happens to be a in rural area for which data on homelessness and housing insecurity was sparce (Gleason, Dube, Bernier, & Martin, 2022).

The aim of this study was to plug the information gap on housing insecurity and hidden homelessness in these areas. It accomplished this by re-processing official data sources to produce a geographical map illustrating community risks of housing insecurity in relation to existing resources within a defined area (Gleason et al., 2022).

This study identified a number of community indicators associated with risks of housing insecurity which were then mapped against resources- mostly services- to better understand where needs and the support availability could lead to a higher risk of housing insecurity (Gleason et al., 2022). The data sources included were a national survey, geographic governmental data on the area, data on evictions and shelter and street counts (Gleason et al., 2022). The sources were selected based on quality and availability for the specific state.

The distribution of eight risk factors was measured as potential indicators of housing insecurity. These risk factors were poverty, unemployment, female headed households, other cohabitating households in the property, eviction, renter burden, mortgage burden and owner burden. These were then combined into two composite indicators: ‘all owner burden’ and ‘all housing burden’. The authors highlight that these risk indicators were produced based on previous peer-reviewed studies, but there is a limitation due to the overall small quantity of research produced on homelessness in rural settings.

This study identified as potential risk factors for housing insecurity: high rates of poverty, unemployment, cost-burdened renters and cost-burdened mortgage holder; and concluded that these risk factors seem to be as prevalent in rural communities as in metropolitan areas (Gleason et al., 2022, p. 2004). However, rates of households being hosted by other households, single female parent households, cost-burdened non-mortgage holding homeowners and eviction were found to be comparably lower for urban areas. The researchers reached the conclusion that additional data sources would be needed to further explore this topic such as geocoded data to provide a better assessment of concealed households, substandard housing and moves within the community.

4.3.2 Information and Communications Technologies (ICT): WhatsApp

Information and communications technologies (ICT) are becoming more prevalent tools to gather data. In a study conducted in the city of Girona, Spain, the mobile app WhatsApp was used as a complementary data collection tool in a PiT count of people experiencing homelessness in the area (Calvo & Carbonell, 2017).

Squatting is a frequent form of homelessness in Spain and the researchers anticipated resistance from participants to identify as such because of fears of eviction or legal repercussions (Calvo & Carbonell, 2017). Thus, the researchers first developed a working relationship with the local homeless team and the network of volunteers with local knowledge. Based on their discussion with local homelessness support services, they reached the conclusion that WhatsApp was the appropriate ICT to use in the case. For this particular community, it was understood that at least one person in each household would have access to a mobile phone with internet connection or mobile data and as WhatsApp was known and used, the participants were actively reassured of the confidentiality of the data shared.

The study found that people were reluctant to reach out to the local support team in person but were instead more amenable to using WhatsApp to communicate with them. The results showed that 36.1% of the total data obtained from the count was collected through WhatsApp and this contributed an additional 55 people identified as homeless in the area which represented 19.4% of the total count (Calvo & Carbonell, 2017, p. 4). Because this is the first count conducted in this specific area it was not possible to compare the results to a baseline from previous waves.

4.4 Triangulation of multiple methods (and data sources)

As we have seen through the previous sections of this report, homelessness is not a monolith. It presents in multiple ways for different people and is in constant flux. That is why the more sensitive methods are to the complexities of homelessness, the better the chance to produce reliable estimates. Several authors have made the case for the use of combined methods and data sources as the most robust and reliable way of producing homeless counts and subsequent estimates (Agans et al., 2014; Bretherton & Pleace, 2018; Busch-Geertsema et al., 2016; Clarke, Burgess, Morris, & Udagawa, 2015; Hermans et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2017). The rationale is that when multiple enumeration methods are employed, using a variety of data sources and data collection techniques, a larger proportion of the total homeless population can be counted, including people experiencing more concealed forms of homelessness.

An argument in favour of using multiple methods is that triangulating multiple estimates can counteract the individual shortcomings of each method used to produce them (Berry, 2007; Busch-Geertsema et al., 2016). This is particularly relevant to large geographic areas where there is also a benefit to using multiple methods to capture the different experiences of homelessness (sleeping rough, sleeping in places unsuitable for habitation, squatting, sofa surfing, etc.) as seen in the previously discussed Greater Los Angeles, US count from 2009 and 2011 (see section 4.1.2) (Agans et al., 2014).

This approach often uses a variety of primary (mostly surveys and structured interviews) and secondary research methods (re-processing of routine data collection sources). Using a mix of primary and secondary methods has the advantage to make the most of already existing data sources and reducing costs, while also designing collection tools that cover the aspects of homelessness that might not be already present in routine/administrative data sources. This was noted as having the potential to be methodologically robust and cost-effective and have the best chances of capturing people experiencing hidden homelessness (Agans et al., 2014; Bretherton & Pleace, 2018; Busch-Geertsema et al., 2016; Clarke et al., 2015).

The studies reviewed for this report indicate that there are some methods that are more likely to identify and count certain populations when experiencing homelessness. For example, Bretherton and Pleace (2018) made the case for using multiple data points specifically to count women experiencing homelessness as their trajectories are often not picked up by traditional data collection methods like overnight snapshot counts. In Busch-Geertsema et al. (2016) the authors make the same point with regards to young people and Robinson (2002) states that the use of a combination of enumeration methods and multiplier techniques in rural areas can provide a reliable estimation of the hidden homeless population there.

Case study: Research on the experiences of Black and minority ethnic people accessing homelessness support services in Scotland

The Homelessness Task Force commissioned a report to better understand the experiences of homelessness by Black and Minority Ethnic people (BME) in Scotland (Netto et al., 2004). The aim of this study was to map services supporting people experiencing homelessness across Scotland, examine services use and the experiences of minority ethnic people with those services. In addition, it looked to identify good practices. The study involved a range of qualitative and quantitative methods.

Qualitative methods included:

- in-depth interviews and group interviews with BME people who were currently experiencing homelessness, who had been homeless in the past or who were at risk of becoming homeless

- in-depth interviews were also conducted with diverse mainstream and BME agencies which provided homelessness services.

- focus groups supplemented by interviews with some local authorities

Quantitative methods included:

- a postal questionnaire which was extensively circulated to all identified agencies providing homelessness services in Scotland

- analysis of local authority homelessness data monitoring

A mapping exercise of homelessness services was conducted by approaching the 32 local authorities to provide information on the services within their area. The definition of homelessness support services considered was broad and a wide range of services were included. Recruitment of minority ethnic people with experience of homelessness was done through these previously identified homeless support services using information leaflets. It was also done through community interpreters who were likely to know minority ethnic people previously or currently affected by homelessness or at risk of being homeless and had English as a second language.

The use of qualitative data supported the understanding of each community’s perspectives on what it means to be homeless, as these usually differ across communities. It also explored service use, best practices and the experiences of minority ethnic people of support services.

This study presented several recommendations for the understanding, better identification of homelessness among minority ethnic communities and provision of culturally appropriate services (Netto et al., 2004). The use of mixed methods and the breath of topics covered makes this study makes a valuable contribution to the understanding of the particularities of homelessness for minority ethnic people in Scotland and remains a key text in the topic. More on the hidden homelessness of Minority Ethnic people is discussed in section 5.1.4 of this report.

Case study: Denmark's biennial homelessness mapping

Another example of using multiple methods and data sources is published on the 2017 Denmark's biennial homelessness mapping report. Every two years, a mix of surveys and administrative data collection tools are used to count the homeless population across the country (Benjaminsen et al., 2020). Statistical data is pulled from the HMIS used in homeless shelters and it is processed alongside a week-long survey with all community services homeless people are likely to have contact with.

Administrative records offer longitudinal data on who use homelessness support services and survey results provide coverage of those people experiencing homelessness who might be missed from regular homelessness data collection because they do not use services related with homelessness (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018).

Case study: Belgium's approach to homelessness counts

Belgium was described as utilising a combination of data sources to calculate homelessness figures that includes: a national periodic count conducted by each city, use of administrative and social security system databases, specific data on evictions and waiting lists for social housing and the national statistics on housing quality and availability (Hermans et al., 2020). City counts are also conducted through services and collect data on nationality, country of birth and place of stay.

The paper outlining Belgium's approach by Hermans, et. al. (2020) raises two main points about the reliance in support services for the count of people who are migrants and are homeless. First, the mapping and selection of services phase has a significant influence on the results and, therefore, it vital to dedicate resources to get this aspect right. Second, is that legal status has an impact on eligibility for most services which also affects the population reached, leading to undercounts of migrants.

5. Population groups

5.1 Population groups often presented as hidden homeless in the literature

This section presents the population groups which were more commonly identified within the evidence as experiencing hidden homelessness. Six populations were consistently mentioned as experiencing hidden homelessness in the literature:

- women and women who are parents
- rural populations
- young people
- minority ethnic people
- migrants, people who arrive to a country seeking asylum or that are refugees
- LGBTI people

This does not mean that these are the only population groups that experience hidden homelessness, as there are gaps in the current research. However, the consistent international evidence found for each of these groups indicates that they have been found to be at risk of experiencing hidden homelessness.

This does not intend to be exhaustive description of homelessness for each group but to focus on the particular challenges to be included in homelessness counts and the methodological implications mentioned in the literature. Additionally, although the groups are presented as separate, reality is much more complex and they are not mutually exclusive. For example, a woman who is a mother can be from a minority ethnic group, or a LGBTI person can also be seeking asylum in the UK, hence the need to consider these groups intersectionally.

5.1.1 Households lead by women and women who are parents

This group is formed by people who identify as female and in some cases who also present in their parental role. The available evidence that is specific to women's homelessness is mostly qualitative and focuses on the homelessness pathways of individual women and their experiences or from small quantitative studies. There is a gap, which is also signalled in the literature, regarding large scale longitudinal enumeration studies focusing on women’s homelessness. This is both due to the fact that some forms of homelessness often experienced by women are less visible- often due to personal safety concerns- or are not classified as such by some legal definitions (sofa surfing, living in overcrowded dwellings and survival sex) (Johnson et al., 2017; Pleace, 2016).

Women often appear to be less prevalent among homeless populations, particularly among people sleeping rough (Johnson et al., 2017). This has often led to the conclusion that women are less likely to experience homelessness than men. Nevertheless, it is noted in the literature that a portion of that underrepresentation of women in the homeless populations could be due to utilising other strategies to avoid (visibly) sleeping rough or in mixed homeless shelters.

There is consistency across the literature on the need for a gendered lens on homelessness to fully grasp the complexity of this phenomenon and to improve enumeration methods to better identify women experiencing homelessness. Bretherton (2020) emphasises that homelessness is a gendered experience meaning that gender is a key variable to fully understand homelessness.

Finally, there are contradicting views on the relevance of ‘survival sex’ or exchanging sex for accommodation as a strategy to secure shelter for women experiencing homelessness. In two studies conducted with women in Scotland with experience of homelessness, survival sex emerged as a prevalent subsistence strategy. 20% of female respondents had engaged in sex work to pay for accommodation compared to 3% of men and 28% of female respondents had spent the night with someone to get accommodation compared to 14% of men (Reeve, 2018, p. 171). However, Bretherton and Pleace (2018) note that there is not enough evidence of this being a widespread phenomenon. This could also be due to some inconsistencies in the literature where two groups may be overlapping in the data: women who exchange sex to find overnight accommodation and women who are sex workers who are also homeless.

Reasons why this group might be missed from counts

In the literature there are six main reasons presented why women’s homelessness might not be adequately counted. Those are:

Definitions of homelessness which focus on rooflessness

Bretherton and Pleace (2018) conducted a review of the way women’s homelessness in identified and counted across Europe (including the UK) and reached the conclusion that when the definition of homelessness is broader, particularly when concealed forms of homelessness are included, women appear in higher numbers (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018). The evidence notes that when homelessness data collection centres on unsheltered forms of homelessness is more likely to miss women experiencing homelessness (Bretherton, 2017; Johnson et al., 2017; Pleace, 2016). This is attributed to the fact that women tend to exhaust their informal options of accommodation, like staying with friends and family, before presenting to homeless services (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018; Engender, 2020b; Pleace, 2016). This leads to an undercount in methods like street counts and counts that use homeless shelter's administrative data.

The link between homelessness and domestic abuse

Across the literature there was a clear link established between women's experiences of homelessness and gender-based violence. Domestic abuse was seen as both a cause and a consequence of the homelessness episodes for some women, as well as a circumstance that shapes the behaviours of women while experiencing homelessness.

Domestic abuse is presented in the literature as a direct cause of homelessness in the parts of the UK. 1 in 5 women (21%) who have experienced domestic abuse in England became homeless at one point in their lives compared to 1% of those who hadn't (Scott & McManus, 2016, p. 6). Even when domestic abuse is not direct cause of a particular homelessness episode, gendered violence is still present throughout women's homelessness trajectories (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018).

With regards to enumeration, one of the challenges noted in the literature is that, in some countries, women who seek assistance with domestic abuse may not be recorded as homeless as they are supported by a refuge or dedicated charity and not by their local authority (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018).

Concealing strategies used due to physical safety concerns

There is evidence to suggest that women sleeping rough often use concealing strategies to avoid being targets of physical and sexual violence (Bimpson, Reeve, & Parr, 2020; Bretherton & Pleace, 2018; Pleace, 2016). This is by both concealing themselves from view and concealing their gender (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018). This hidden aspect of their homelessness- as with other groups that will be discussed later in this review- is often represented as a survival strategy, a way to remain safer in a potentially threatening situation. In this case point in time overnight (PiT) counts in streets or shelters may produce undercounts of this population (Bretherton, 2017).

Reeve (2018) highlights that women occupy public space in a different way to men. One study in Scotland found that 62% of women with experiencing of homelessness had slept rough out of a 144 participant sample (Reeve, 2018, p. 167). Of those women who had slept rough only 12% had been in contact with the rough sleeping team in their area to get support, which is linked to the following point (Reeve, 2018, p. 168).

Homelessness presentation

It was found that women may use sofa surfing more often than men as a strategy to avoid sleeping rough (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018). Homelessness counts do not always include ways to identify multiple households living in a single dwelling. This could potentially be one of the contributing factors to the undercount of women who are staying with friends and family to avoid being roofless.

Parental status

The parental status of women was presented as another challenge to their inclusion in homelessness counts. A paper published by the Centre for Homeless Impact notes that, in England, women who are categorised as 'single homeless' could be actually mothers whose children are temporarily in care of others (Bimpson et al., 2020). There is a risk that the parental status of women could become invisible once they live apart from their children, even if this is not a permanent situation.

Reeve (2018, p. 169) reported in their 2006 study that 30% of single homeless women that participated had mentioned having children under the age of 16, yet they were still recorded as 'single homeless'. Studies from both the UK and Australia signalled that there is a gap in understanding of family dynamics and how they influence women's homelessness (Bimpson et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2017; Reeve, 2018).

5.1.2 Rural populations

What is considered a rural population varies according to each government/authority. However, there was consistency in the evidence around the challenges of identifying people experiencing homelessness in rural or more sparsely populated areas. The authors reviewed here argued in favour of the application of alternative methods to estimate the prevalence of homelessness in rural areas that are sensitive to rural contexts and are able to produce more robust and accurate representations of the issue.

Reasons why this group might be missed from counts

There are several factors presented across the literature about why rural homelessness is less frequently accounted for and less visible than urban homelessness. These include:

Measurement limitations

There was agreement across the literature that rural homelessness is often undercounted or misrepresented, and this may skew perceptions of its scale and have an impact on the interventions designed to tackle it (Gleason et al., 2022; Knopf-Amelung, 2013; David Robinson, 2004; Stroud & Pickett, 2017). Studies suggest that there is a circular issue in which homelessness is under researched in rural geographies because it is believed to have limited incidence and therefore, there is a lack of evidence of the contrary.

Cultural limitations

Robinson (2004), as well as (Cloke, Milbourne, & Widdowfield, 2001), introduce the concept of 'non-coupling' of the notions of homelessness and rurality. This means that often homelessness is not associated to rural spaces. Aspirational idealisations about rural spaces being privileged and free from the urban troubles create a barrier to raising awareness about social issues like homelessness (Cloke, Widdowfield, & Milbourne, 2000; David Robinson, 2004).

Additionally, homelessness tends to be minimised by local residents of rural spaces as it can be perceived as a threat to the reputation of their place (Cloke et al., 2000). This can mean that homeless people in rural spaces find their behaviours over-policed and may have to use strategies to make themselves invisible to avoid challenging the views of their own community (Cloke et al., 2000; Knopf-Amelung, 2013).

Resourcing limitations

Another argument present in the literature is that fewer temporary accommodation alternatives are available in rural areas (Gleason et al., 2022). Lack of sufficient support service provision may make moving away from rural areas the most viable option to exit homelessness (Cloke et al., 2000). However, people’s desire to remain in their area might delay presentation as homeless and enhance the use strategies to conceal their homelessness (Gleason et al., 2022). This makes homelessness effectively less visible in rural settings (Cloke et al., 2000).

Geographical limitations

Lastly, the dispersed populations across wide geographical areas can contribute to the invisibility of rural homelessness (Knopf-Amelung, 2013).

Point in Time counts

Overnight street (PiT) counts tend to undercount rural homeless populations as they rely on the visibility of people. This is not in line with the way homelessness presents in rural areas (Gleason et al., 2022). In addition, reaching a representative sample of the homeless population in a rural area would require multiple counting teams conducting a simultaneous count. This would not only be costly but also may not be possible give the limited voluntary resources present in smaller communities in rural areas (Hall, 2017).

Service-based counts

Service-based counts are often considered as an alternative to overnight PiT counts for rural areas as the data collection period is longer and collection is done through support services, allowing for better chances to identify and count homelessness in rural populations (Hall, 2017). However, the availability of services in the area can impact the outcome and may lead to an undercount when services are more sparce (Knopf-Amelung, 2013). There is the additional consideration that service-based counts will only identify and count those who have reached out to services and, as previously discussed, some people in rural areas may choose to remain invisible to the local agencies to avoid being moved out of the area (Cloke et al., 2000).

5.1.3 Young people

Compared to the other populations considered in this section, there was a greater proportion of publications focussed on youth homelessness within the literature. Across the literature reviewed in this section the age range considered in each study varied anywhere from 13 to 26 years. This was pointed out by some of the authors as a challenge for the direct comparison of data from multiple sources (J. Smith, 2013). There was an intersection in the evidence between of youth, LGBTI and minority ethnic homelessness.

Reasons why this group might be missed from counts

Keeping appearances for fear of stigmatisation

A qualitative study with young people experiencing hidden homelessness in Canada reported that one of the factors contributing to the lower visibility of this population was the need to maintain appearances and keep their homelessness hidden from their social circle to maintain their social standing. Their social circle included employers, teachers, and friends, among others. It was also done to avoid being taken advantage due to their precarious situation (Gausvik, 2015).

Safety

A study in the US and another in Canada found that young people with experience of homelessness recalled overall good experiences in family shelters. However, this was not the case for adult homeless shelters for which they recalled negative experiences and expressed reluctance to engage with them once they were considered adults (Auerswald, Lin, Petry, Laura, & Hyatt, 2013; Gausvik, 2015). This could be one of the reasons some 'older' young people might be reluctant to approach support services and, therefore, not be identified as homeless.

Transient nature

Homeless youth tend to be transient, moving between locations during the course of a day and often traveling from one city to another (Clarke, 2016; Gausvik, 2015). The literature links this to the process of most young adults transitioning from their nuclear home or guardian institution into adult independent living after mandatory school attendance finishes. Nevertheless, the literature also highlights that this might not be a sufficient explanation and there is a need for further research into the pathways in and out of homelessness of young people (Clarke, 2016).

Intermittent nature of homelessness

The evidence reviewed here argues that young people have different homelessness patterns than adults and are often intermittently homeless (Clarke, 2016). This includes either returning home relatively quickly or cycling on and off the street (Morgan, 2013). This type of dynamic homelessness pattern requires a suitable longitudinal approach to be identified and counted. A cross-sectional approach might produce unreliable results for this population.

Fear of criminalisation/institutionalisation

Two studies of young people experiencing homelessness in the US, one with ethnic minorities and another on sofa surfing youth found that young people experiencing homelessness were often reluctant to approach support services due to fear of criminalisation/ institutionalisation. Fear of involvement of child protection services is specifically mentioned in the literature (Curry et al., 2017; Petry et al., 2022).

5.1.4 Minority ethnic people

The evidence discussed in this section refers to mainly three minority ethnic communities: Aboriginal populations in Canada; Gypsy/Traveller communities in Ireland and the UK; and Black and Minority Ethnic communities across the UK (Netto et al., 2004). The term 'Aboriginal peoples' is used in these studies to refer to the three legally defined culture groups in Canada: Métis, Inuit, and First Nations.

In 2020 the Scottish Government published the Housing needs of minority ethnic groups: evidence review which found evidence that supports that there is an over-representation of some minority ethnic communities in homelessness applications in Scotland. There is agreement as well across the literature on the disproportionate representation of ethnic minorities in the homeless populations in the UK, US, Ireland and Canada (Bramley et al., 2022; Netto et al., 2004; David Robinson & Coward, 2003; Shankley & Finney, 2020). Some of the reasons given for this overrepresentation were:

- not enough appropriate (culturally and materially) accommodation available
- higher levels of deprivation
- presence of added barriers to access housing support such as:
    - discrimination from service providers
    - support services not being culturally appropriate
    - not perceiving themselves as homeless
    - lack of awareness of available services (The Scottish Government, 2021)

Although we have some understanding of the elevated prevalence of ethnic minorities in homelessness there is still work to do to understand if there is a proportion of that group experiencing homelessness that is concealed and missing from counts.

Some studies linked overcrowding to hidden homelessness for ethnic minorities in Ireland, UK and Canada (Addison et al., 2022; Belanger, 2013; Morgan-Williams, 2020; Shankley & Finney, 2020). This would mean that people of certain ethnic minorities may live in overcrowded accommodation to avoid, for example, sleeping rough. This was also linked with people not seeing themselves as homeless due to understanding homelessness solely as rooflessness. However, further research is needed to provide clarity on that link and to understand if there are specific forms in which hidden homelessness presents for ethnic minorities.

Reasons why this group might be missed from counts

When speaking about ethnic minorities it is relevant to note that this is a broad term which encompasses different communities with distinct cultures and circumstances that vary across different countries. Nevertheless, there are some barriers to enumeration that consistently appeared throughout the literature:

Discrimination

A publication by the Cork and Kerry Regional Traveller Accommodation Working Group reported that some Gypsy/Traveller people might not identify themselves as such to local authorities or landlords for fear of discrimination (Morgan-Williams, 2020). There are also, at the time this report was published, no specific homelessness services for Gypsy/Travellers in Cork and Kerry, and mainstream support services are often not sensitive to the needs of Travellers (Morgan-Williams, 2020).

This could also be related to the historical criminalisation of nomadism in UK and the Republic of Ireland, but more research is needed to understand these links (Drummond, 2007). A recent evidence review by the Scottish Government found that there is a considerable body of evidence that the Gypsy/Traveller population continues to face high levels of discrimination and harassment in Scotland (The Scottish Government, 2020).

A report by the Centre for Homeless Impact also highlighted that discrimination from housing service providers and overall systemic racism in US and Canada as an access barrier to support and, therefore, the inclusion of Gypsy/Travellers in homelessness counts. This report also noted a gap in evidence on the impact of racism and discrimination on homelessness outcomes for ethnic minorities in the UK (Finney, 2022).

Overcrowding is not always included within the definition of homelessness used in counts

When overcrowding is not considered as a form of homelessness there is a risk of undercounting ethnic minorities. Overcrowding has appeared consistently in the literature as one the most prevalent forms of hidden homelessness among ethnic minorities in the

UK, particularly Gypsy/Traveller communities (Addison et al., 2022; Bramley et al., 2022; Shankley & Finney, 2020; The Scottish Government, 2021). The evidence review conducted by Addison et al. (2022) suggests that minority ethnic groups are disproportionately affected by overcrowding in Wales across all age groups and in both urban and rural settings. Additionally, there is evidence to suggest that overcrowding particularly affects Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black African households in the UK (Bramley et al., 2022; Shankley & Finney, 2020).

In Scotland, Bangladeshi and African households have a 28% rate of overcrowding compared to 8% for 'White Scottish' households and 6% for' White: Other British' households (The Scottish Government, 2021, p. 42). A qualitative study by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) also found overcrowding to be an issue for households of Asian descend in UK (Department for Levelling Up, 2022).

Not perceiving themselves as homeless

A report by Morgan-Williams (2020) for the Regional Gypsy/Traveller Accommodation Working Group (RTAWG) of Cork and Kerry pointed out that the way homelessness is defined can lead to undercounting of homelessness in the Gypsy/Traveller population in Ireland. This report argues that the representation of situations of overcrowding as 'accommodation sharing', rather than housing insecurity or hidden homelessness, can contribute to this community also not perceiving themselves as homeless (Morgan-Williams, 2020).

Another study noted that there are differences in the meanings attached to homelessness between minority ethnic communities in Scotland (Netto et al., 2004). For example, many minority ethnic people living in over-crowded accommodation, due to inability to access other housing options, may not see themselves as being homeless (Netto et al., 2004). People who do not see themselves as homeless are less likely to consider approaching their local authorities for housing support, which makes them less likely to be counted.

5.1.5 Migrants, people who are seeking asylum or are refugees

This section focuses on analysing the literature on ways of identifying and counting migrants, refugees and asylum seekers experiencing concealed types of homelessness. Although these groups may be also understood as minority ethnic in their new context, they have the distinctive characteristic of experiencing a different legal situation relating to citizenship/right to remain and different access to local resources (social and economic) (Hermans et al., 2020).

Studies from the UK suggested that migrants, asylum seekers and refuges are more likely to experience homelessness than the general UK population (Flatau, Smith, Carson, & et al., 2015; David Robinson, Reeve, & Casey, 2007). People who have arrived in the UK seeking asylum make up the 0.6% of the total UK population (Oxford University Migration

Observatory, 2022). Depending on the circumstances in which migrants enter a country they might not have the same recourse to public funds as a local and, therefore, may not be entitled to the same support (Gray, Rodriguez-Guzman, Argodale, & Bartholdy, 2021). Citizens Advice estimated that by the end of 2019 there were 1.376 million people in UK that had no recourse to public funds (Oxford University Migration Observatory, 2020).

A report by the European Observatory of Homelessness found that among in countries like Denmark, Finland and the UK, asylum seekers, refugees and irregular migrant who had not been granted asylum were not present in homelessness services in large numbers or visible in their records (I. Baptista, Benjaminsen, Busch-Geertsema, Pleace, & Striano, 2016). This makes counts through local authorities or housing support services less likely to identify and count them.

Overall, the literature reviewed here highlights the need for bespoke and wide-reaching strategies to produce robust counts of the homeless migrant population. Given the complexities of capturing data about this group, the literature supports the use of a combination of methods that includes a combination of street counts, national surveys, and/or administrative data from multiple service types (Hermans et al., 2020; Netto et al., 2004).

Reasons why this group might be missed from counts

Factors that contribute to the hidden homelessness of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees are multiple and closely linked to each country's laws regarding movement in and out of their territories (Kissoon, 2010). Patterns of migration, legal requirements and, therefore, pathways into and out of homelessness faced by migrants change over time (Fiedler, Schuurman, & Hyndman, 2006; Hermans et al., 2020). Any homelessness data collection strategy needs to be responsive to these changes.

Limited access to homelessness support

The evidence suggests that limited access to housing support is due to complex but interrelated circumstances of those who migrate. Focusing on the UK, people who have migrated here might have no recourse to public funds depending on their status. Furthermore, asylum seekers and refugees in UK are often placed in temporary accommodation that is dispersed across a territory where they have no connections or local social networks to turn to in case of need (Netto et al., 2004). Additionally, while obtaining their refugee status, they are often required to navigate a number of complex systems, including a new housing system with very little social and economic capital (Shankley & Finney, 2020).

In relation to this, a study published in 2004 on homelessness of minority ethnic people (including recent migrants) in Scotland noted that having limited access to information due to language barriers is also an obstacle to accessing support and, consequently, being counted through service providers records or routine homelessness data collections (Netto et al., 2004).

Concerns over disclosure

In the evidence it was noted that service providers often found themselves considering how ethical it was for them to count people in irregular situations. The term ‘functional ignorance’ was used to refer to the practice of ignoring the legal or illegal immigration status of people who approach support services for help to avoid turning them away (Hermans et al., 2020). The disclosure of personal information of residence status for migrants presents a challenge to consistent enumeration of this population. This could be a contributing factor to the lower presence of migrants, asylum seekers and refugees in homelessness services or local authority data.

5.1.6 LGBTI people

The literature on LGBTI hidden homelessness reviewed here had a substantial overlap with the literature on youth hidden homelessness. The evidence highlighted the overrepresentation of LGBTI people in the homeless population and particularly of LGBTI youth across multiple countries (Ecker, 2016; Gausvik, 2015; Norman-Major, 2018; Norris & Quilty, 2021; Sanders, Whelan, Murcia, & Jones, 2022). There was therefore a gap in research on adult LGBTI homelessness.

Evidence points at the complexity of LGBTI homelessness as it is related to complex circumstances (Norman-Major, 2018). Some of the structural drivers of LGBTI homelessness mentioned in the literature, and specifically for LGBTI youth homelessness, were discrimination, poverty and inequality (Ecker, 2016; Norman-Major, 2018; Norris & Quilty, 2021). In addition, the intersection of these circumstances with personal experiences of being in care; the presence of family conflict, violence and instability and the rejection of caregivers because of a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity have been identified as potential triggers of a homeless episode (Norris & Quilty, 2021).

Reasons why this group might be missed from counts

Discrimination

One of the difficulties for this group to be included in homelessness figures is directly related to the discrimination faced by LGBTI people (Ecker, 2016; Ecker, Aubry, & Sylvestre, 2019; Norris & Quilty, 2021). Norris & Quilty (2021) noted that LGBTI homeless youth do not often use mainstream homeless services in the US for fear of experiencing discrimination and they remain unrecorded in homeless statistics. There is a risk that when counts are conducted through mainstream service providers LGBTI people may not want to present as such for fear of discrimination.

Another study in the US and Canada found that LGBTI people tend to have specific patterns of support service use (Ecker, 2016). For example, LGBTI people in the US and Canada made more frequent use of sexual health clinics, food programmes and mental health services than non-LGBTI people experiencing homelessness (Ecker, 2016). As this was a known pattern, this study included these kinds of services to increase the chances of this population which proved a successful strategy.

Inconsistencies in data collection

Inconsistencies in the way the gender and sexual identity are recognised and defined can skew results and complicate compiling and comparison of data across service providers (Ecker et al., 2019; Norris & Quilty, 2021). The main risk is that inconsistent categories and groupings can lead to an undercount of parts of the LGBTI community and limit the understanding of their specific circumstances when homeless. It can also lead to small sample sizes which are an issue for achieving necessary power in statistical analysis (Ecker, 2016).

A qualitative study by Norris and Quilty (2021) with LGBTI people experiencing homelessness in Ireland took an inclusive approach to definitions of gender and sexual identity which helped capture better quality data on this population. To avoid excluding people from the LGBTI community they used a broad definition of gender identity. This helped include as many people as possible from across the spectrum of LGBTI identities in the sample. This meant using the expansive abbreviation of LGBTQI+ meaning lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and other sexual orientations and categories not accurately described by the previous terms used in research to cater to the continuous expansion of our understanding of gender and sex orientation.

Concerns over privacy

The previously mentioned study in Ireland also noted that LGBTI homelessness is sometimes unrecorded in official homelessness counts because service providers have concerns about the ethics and privacy implications of collecting data on homeless people's gender identity and sexuality (Norris & Quilty, 2021). Fears of pressuring people to 'come out' or disclose information they do not feel comfortable sharing can lead to lower response rates of questions relating to gender and/or sexual identity in surveys administered by support services staff.

Not perceiving themselves as homeless

A study with homeless LGBTI youth in Ireland found that there was a widespread perception that being homeless is exclusively being roofless and this complicated their self-identification as homeless when spent the night sofa surfing or in hostels (Norris & Quilty, 2021).

6. How does the evidence relate to the Scottish context?

6.1 Insights from international methods for identifying hidden homelessness

This section reflects on Scotland's approach to producing a homeless count inclusive of people in concealed forms of homelessness based on the evidence on enumeration methods used internationally. Because most of the evidence reviewed for this report was collected from other countries some of its conclusions will not be fully applicable to Scotland. However, understanding how others approach homelessness counts that are inclusive of populations that are experiencing forms of hidden homelessness provides a starting point to reflect on what can be learned to strengthen Scotland's overall approach to producing homelessness counts.

Strengths of Scotland's approach to homelessness counts:

The definition and understanding of homelessness

The framework of rights for people who experience homelessness in Scotland means that most people that find themselves homeless, or are at risk of it, can approach their local authority for support. When a household presents to local authorities for homelessness support, statistical data is collected from homelessness applications. One of the strengths of producing a homelessness count using data collected routinely by local authorities at the point of applying is that it has the potential to include people experiencing multiple kinds of homelessness regardless of them being ultimately deemed intentionally or unintentionally homeless.

This framework of rights for people experiencing homelessness used in Scotland encompasses multiple circumstances that in the evidence drawn from other countries was sometimes considered as hidden homelessness. These circumstances range from living in overcrowded accommodation; being at risk of eviction; staying in accommodation unsuitable for human habitation or staying with friends and family in a non-permanent basis. Here in Scotland, although people in these circumstances might be in hidden homelessness, they could approach their council for support. That is the main objective guiding this review, to understand how to best identify people who are entitled to support but are not currently getting it.

Geographical reach

Another strength of this approach is the geographical coverage that local authorities have across the whole Scottish territory allowing for both urban and rural areas to be included in the count.

Ability to identify trends and allow comparisons across time

Through this method of employing routine service-level data, primary data is collected continuously which allows to identify trends over time. This helps keep consistency by using the same data collection tools across the territory and across time, also allowing comparisons.

Longitudinal data collection

The use of a unique identifier and the way data is collected in multiple points of an applicant's journey through the system (PREVENT1, HL1, HL2 and HL3 data returns) allows for the following of a household's journeys through the system and can identify repeat applications.

Based on the evidence reviewed there are a number of lessons applicable to the Scottish context:

Counting people who exit the application process prematurely

Although people who exit the application process before getting temporary or settled accommodation would be initially included in the count, there is still work to be done to understand the reasons behind households who exit the process before accessing the requested support. We know that households can chose to refuse the offer of temporary accommodation by a local authority. There were 3,385 refusals of temporary accommodation between April and September 2022 from unintentionally homeless households (The Scottish Government, 2022c). More research is needed to understand the reasons behind each of these refusals and map their pathways in and out of homelessness.

Counting people who do not approach their local authority

The evidence reviewed for this report suggests that people in vulnerable situations might be reluctant to approach their local authority for multiple reasons such as: fear of discrimination; because they do not see themselves as homeless; because are not aware of the services' existence or their eligibility to get support from them. Although there are some indirect estimations of the number of those not included in homeless counts, as discussed previously in this report, the extent of this issue is not known for Scotland.

Further research is needed to understand who might not be approaching their local authority in Scotland and why.

One size does not fit all

One of the main insights from the evidence reviewed is that one single method, no matter how robust, can seldom capture the broad spectrum of homelessness experiences. This was at least partially resolved in countries like Sweden, Denmark and Norway by combining more than one form of data collection. In these countries a mix of longitudinal and cross-sectional methods are used. The combination of methods selected can vary according to the known characteristics of the area's population or any targeted group.

There is evidence that suggests that a count conducted through services other than those providing homelessness support can better reach people experiencing hidden forms of homelessness who might not approach their local authority (Benjaminsen et al., 2020; Kauppi et al., 2020). Any of these methods will require tailoring to the community where it is used and the known characteristics of its population. Overall, evidence suggests that triangulating and using multiple methods reduces the risks of bias and increases the potential to identify and count those experiencing hidden homelessness.

6.2 Insights about hidden homeless populations in Scotland

The evidence focussed on six population groups that may be at risk of experiencing hidden forms of homelessness in different countries, including Scotland (Husbands, 2018). Specific barriers were identified to the inclusion of each of this groups in homelessness counts. These barriers are linked to the way homelessness is understood, the methods used to produce homelessness counts and wider societal perceptions of those experiencing homelessness.

Of those barriers, some do not apply to Scotland due to Scotland's adoption of a broader framework of rights for people experiencing homelessness which is less restrictive than some of the countries where the research reviewed here was conducted. In other cases, the methodological critiques do not apply to the methods currently used here in Scotland to produce homeless counts. However, to improve on the current data landscape, there are valuable insights and lessons to be learned from their approaches to identify and count populations who, based also on the evidence reviewed for this report, may be at risk of being undercounted in homelessness statistics.

Households led by women, women who are parents and minority ethnic women

Overall, the evidence reviewed for this report highlighted the need of an intersectional and gendered lens on homelessness. There are multiple factors some studies suggest could be contributing to an undercount of women experiencing homelessness, but there is not sufficient evidence to understand if and how this applies to Scotland.

The evidence suggests that women often exhaust informal housing arrangements, like staying with friends and family, before turning to local authorities for support (Bretherton & Pleace, 2018; Engender, 2020a). Additional insights would be needed to understand if this factor is contributing to the sustained trend where there were more male homelessness applicants. For example – in the first half of 2022/23 financial year there were 54% male applicants compared to 46% female (The Scottish Government, 2022c).

Separation of mothers from their dependent children was another emerging thread across international literature. We know that in 2022 in Scotland 17% single parent households experiencing homelessness were led by a female compared to 5% led by male single parents (The Scottish Government, 2022c). It is unclear if there are women who are parents and are not presenting as such in homelessness statistics.

Across the literature domestic abuse was presented as a circumstance that leads to a loss of accommodation when women exit the abusive relationship and, therefore, they are more likely to experience homelessness because of it. There is evidence linking women's experiences of homelessness and gender-based violence in Scotland (The Scottish Government, 2010). As mentioned previously, in the 2021/22 homelessness statistics it was reported that 14% of households selected 'dispute within household abusive or violent' as their main reason for making a homeless application (The Scottish Government, 2022b). This makes it the third most common reason given for a homeless application. Out of a total of 4,820 households that selected this reason for having to leave their accommodation, 3,745 (77.7%) were led by women (The Scottish Government, 2022a).

Lastly, relationship breakdown linked to domestic abuse also emerged as a common theme in research on minority ethnic and immigrant women's homelessness in Scotland (Netto, 2006; Netto et al., 2004). In these cases, the loss of a home often comes with the loss of their community and informal support networks. Out of the 4,820 households selected 'dispute within household abusive or violent' as their main reason for making a homeless application, 535 were led by someone from a minority ethnic (including White Polish) and 260 refused to provide their ethnicity, but it is unclear how many of them are female (The Scottish Government, 2022a). Based on these insights we need to further our understanding of women's hidden homelessness prevalence in Scotland.

Minority ethnic people

Evidence suggests that minority ethnic groups are more likely to experience homelessness in Scotland (Bramley et al., 2022; Husbands, 2018; Netto, 2006; Netto et al., 2004; The Scottish Government, 2021). It was reported in Scotland's 2021/22 homelessness statistics that 9% main applicants were non-White[1], yet the 2011 census shows that only 4% of the total population of Scotland was from a minority ethnic background (The Scottish Government, 2015, 2022a). Although these figures might not be directly comparable, this still signals a likely overrepresentation of minority ethnic people among those experiencing homelessness in Scotland.

[1] Caribbean or Black; Asian, Asian Scottish or Asian British; Mixed or multiple ethnic groups and Other ethnic groups.

Gypsy/Travellers were one of the minority ethnic groups linked in the evidence to hidden homelessness, specifically to living in overcrowded accommodation. In previous reports, based on the analysis of the 2011 census, Gypsy/Traveller households were found to be more than twice as likely to be living in overcrowded accommodation (24% of Gypsy/Traveller households were overcrowded compared to 9% of all households) (The Scottish Government, 2015). In October 2019, the Scottish Government and The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) published a joint plan on Improving the lives of Gypsy/Travellers Action Plan which includes a commitment to provide more and better Gypsy/Traveller accommodation. Work to progress this includes the £20m Gypsy/Traveller Accommodation Fund to develop modern sites, gather learning and build skills in site development among Local Authorities. A lack of evidenced need is a key issue in increasing accommodation provision. The Scottish Government plans to commission research to make it easier for local authorities to identify and plan for unmet Gypsy/Traveller accommodation needs, including developing a toolkit to support inclusion of Gypsy/Traveller accommodation needs in routine data collection.

The Housing needs of minority ethnic groups: evidence review conducted by the Scottish Government in 2020 found that lack of visibility, accessibility and appropriateness of mainstream support services were barriers to some minority ethnic groups accessing housing support services. Another report on housing of ethnic minorities in Scotland also noted that racism among housing staff could be a potential barrier to the accessibility of services (Netto, 2006). Further research is needed to understand how local authorities are responding to the needs of minority ethnic groups and if this is linked to hidden homelessness for this population.

Migrants, people seeking asylum or that are refugees

Because refugee status is not specifically considered to be a protected characteristic in the UK there is often not a necessity to record it as part of equalities data for homeless applications. That makes it difficult to collect information on homelessness among people are seeking asylum or have been granted refugee status. In addition, language barriers and not having recourse to funds also appeared in the literature as the main barriers to access homelessness support, and therefore, counted (The Scottish Government, 2021). This last two points are also true for people who find themselves in an irregular migration situation.

In the evidence multiple barriers to access services were identified like language, fear of criminalisation, navigating a new and unknown system and not having recourse to funds. These should be considered, especially when designing data collection methods so that use services as a point of contact.

LGBTI people

There is a gap in relation to LGBTI people’s homelessness data in Scotland as this equalities data is not collected at the moment as part of the homelessness application. The evidence reviewed pointed out that internationally there were two related barriers to data collection on gender and sexual identity. One, some LGBTI people experiencing homelessness chose to not disclose this part of their identity for fear of discrimination from service providers. Second, concerns from service providers over privacy and pressuring people to disclose their identity (See section 5.1.6). These issues where not resolved in the evidence reviewed for this report and might require further focus to find a way to avoid pressures or fears of disclosure for LGBTI people.

Young people

In the evidence from UK and North America hidden homelessness of young people was expected to present mostly as sofa surfing or sleeping in hostels (paid for the young person). Scotland's homelessness statistics contemplate both circumstances, so it is unclear if this type of homelessness is hidden here with regards specifically to young people. There was only one study from the UK which produced an estimation on the prevalence of hidden homelessness for people under 25 years in Scotland and it was cautioned by their authors as having significant limitations (Clarke, 2016).

Other populations

Other population groups such as veterans, disabled people and care leavers are mentioned in the wider literature on homelessness but no evidence was found of studies that specifically referred to their enumeration as hidden homeless. The lack of specific evidence could be interpreted in many ways. It could be that they are not that often found to experience hidden forms of homelessness, but it could also be due to a lack of dedicated studies focussing on these groups.

With regards to people leaving institutional care, in 2021-22 5% of people applying for homelessness support in Scotland cited being discharged from prison/hospital/care or other institution as the main reason for being homeless (The Scottish Government, 2022b, p. 15). While this information is captured when someone presents to their local authority, data is not collected when someone is discharged which could provide a better understanding if there is people being discharged from an institution experiencing homelessness but that do not present to their local authority. This was a gap in the evidence reviewed for this report and will require further research.

Overall, national statistics and previous research give us valuable insights to begin to understand who could be missing from our counts. However, more research is required for most of these groups to understand if any of these or other populations are likely to experience hidden forms of homelessness in Scotland.

7. Conclusions

This report explored the international evidence base on methods to identify people who are facing or have faced hidden homelessness. It also presented those populations who were described in the literature as potentially at risk of experiencing hidden homelessness and reflected on the barriers for them to be included in homelessness counts. Finally, it assessed the existing evidence base on hidden homelessness enumeration methods and reflected on gaps and limitations. From this, several insights have emerged:

- There is a wide variety of methods and strategies used internationally to identify and count people experiencing homelessness. This is closely related to each country's laws and policies on homelessness.

- The definition and framework of rights for people experiencing homelessness used locally is tied to service provision and is central to understanding who is included and who might be missing from counts. The more inclusive these are of circumstances beyond rooflessness, the more likely it is that counts will include people otherwise experiencing hidden homelessness.

- Methods that rely on the physical visibility of those experiencing homelessness, like night counts and capture/re-capture methods, are less likely to identify and count those in hidden homelessness. This includes people who conceal themselves while sleeping rough and people who are not sleeping rough (sofa surfing, in overcrowded accommodation or any alternative arrangement), which evidence suggests is often the larger proportion of those experiencing homelessness.

- Methods that rely on service providers to count people experiencing homelessness, like community services or local authorities, benefit from longer periods of data collection to identify and count those that might only occasionally reach out to support services. Evidence pointed out that the wider the variety of services participating in the count, the more likely it is to reach people experiencing hidden homelessness. Nevertheless, these types of counts can undercount people experiencing homelessness that do not approach support services or local authorities.

- The use of administrative data or public records as secondary sources needs careful consideration to avoid inadvertently excluding those that might not engage with the service from which the records are pulled. That being said, a study that used health records in Scotland has showed promising results on the identification of people experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness (See section 4.2.1).

- The use of the national census as an opportunity for data collection on (hidden) homelessness has proven to be a successful way to estimate prevalence of homelessness at the time of a census in other countries. Actively including people experiencing homelessness in the national census also has the potential to increase its coverage and improve its overall data quality. However, given that national census only takes place every 10 years, it can only be considered as an in addition to other more regular forms of data collection on homelessness.

- The evidence reviewed suggests that because (hidden) homelessness is a complex and fluid phenomenon the triangulation of methods (including primary and secondary data collection) and mixed methods (including qualitative and quantitative) can assist to better capture its complexity and identify those experiencing it that might otherwise be missed. There may be value in conducting additional less frequent in-depth data collection to identify and count specific hidden homeless populations in Scotland and shape service provision accordingly. This would act as complementary to the ongoing statistics data collection.

- Research involving people with lived experience of hidden homelessness in Scotland might provide insights on the specific pathways that lead to hidden forms of homelessness here.

- The population groups described as experiencing hidden homelessness in the literature are not exclusive. Characteristics and experiences are intersectional and this needs to be considered when designing enumeration procedures.

- Fears of institutionalisation and discrimination may deter some people- especially those in more vulnerable circumstances- from presenting to local authorities for help or accessing support services. This was mentioned with regards to women in situations of domestic abuse, minority ethnic people, underage young people, LGBTI people and refugees and asylum seekers.

- More information is needed to understand the experiences of homelessness of minority ethnic people in Scotland that actualises and expands on work carried out in 2004. It would also be relevant to have a smaller piece of research to understand if overcrowding is a form of hidden homelessness experienced by minority ethnic communities to avoid being roofless in Scotland.

7.1 Ongoing and future work

The Scottish Government is currently in the process of commissioning research into the lived experience of people who have or are experiencing hidden homelessness, are at imminent risk of homelessness or who face housing insecurity, but do not appear in Scotland's official figures to understand their experiences and pathways. An improved understanding of the different routes into and out of homelessness and hidden homelessness will help us address gaps in provision and make Scotland's homelessness system more responsive to people's needs.

The Scottish Government is currently undertaking a review of their homelessness data collection. This review aims to improve the data collection process conducted by local authorities as part of their delivery of their statutory duties around homelessness and homelessness prevention.

The Scottish Government is also working closely with the Office of National Statistics (ONS) to make sure our work is complimentary with their ongoing work on the topic of hidden homelessness.

Ongoing work within the ONS is aimed at improving the coverage of hard-to-reach population groups, including hidden homelessness, in UK data and evidence. Research is currently being conducted to explore the development of a methodology for identifying and counting women experiencing hidden homelessness across the UK. Subject to available funding, future research will likely involve piloting this methodology across the four UK nations.

Annex one

There are three stages involved in a homeless application in Scotland:

1. The Application stage where the household first presents to the local authority.

2. The Assessment stage which determines:

    a. if the household is eligible for assistance. Households with no recourse to public funds are not eligible for homelessness assistance, though may be provided temporary accommodation while their status is assessed

    b. whether the household is homeless or threatened with homelessness

    c. if the household is homeless, whether this is ‘unintentional’ or ‘intentional’ and

    d. if unintentionally homeless, whether there is a connection to the local authority to which the application was made and/or to any other local authority.

    Temporary accommodation must be offered, if it is required, while the household is awaiting an assessment decision.

3. The Outcome stage. A case can be closed only once the local authority has fulfilled its statutory duty or contact has been lost for 28 days. (Source: Homelessness statistics - gov.scot (www.gov.scot))

If a household is unintentionally homeless (or threatened with homelessness), the local authority must offer settled accommodation. Until this is available, the local authority must offer temporary accommodation. If a household is intentionally homeless (or threatened with homelessness), the local authority has no statutory duty to provide settled accommodation (although they may choose to do so). There is a duty to provide temporary accommodation and advice and assistance to help the household secure alternative accommodation.

A household can accept or refuse offers of accommodation. A local authority’s duty to secure accommodation for unintentionally homeless households would be fulfilled by an offer that is refused, provided that the offer is a reasonable one. We know that not all households assessed as homeless enter temporary accommodation.

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