

In the Shadow of Social Inequality: Homelessness

Abstract. The study adopts a critical approach to examine the challenges of measuring and researching homelessness, emphasizing the complex interplay between structural factors and social processes. Drawing on a literature-based theoretical framework, it integrates comparative analyses and policy recommendations to synthesize existing knowledge and promote the practical application of multidimensional approaches. The research highlights how socioeconomic inequalities, housing market deregulation, and punitive homelessness policies exacerbate structural barriers, further entrenching social exclusion. The study underscores the necessity of integrated social policy interventions and advocates for empirically validated strategies, such as the Housing First approach, legal anti-segregation measures, and cross-sectoral collaboration. Qualitative comparative analyses confirm that policies based on criminalization hinder social reintegration, whereas rights-based housing models, such as those implemented in Portugal and Scotland, promote long-term stability and social inclusion. Furthermore, the study calls for the broader application of the ETHOS model, which enhances the international comparability of homelessness definitions and improves the efficiency and impact of targeted policy interventions. By framing homelessness as a structural issue rather than an individual failure, the research advocates for a paradigm shift toward comprehensive, interdisciplinary solutions that integrate housing security, employment accessibility, and mental health support as fundamental pillars of social policy decision-making.

Keywords: homelessness measurement; social policy strategies; multidimensional approaches; ETHOS model; housing crisis management; social reintegration

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Introduction

Extensive research indicates that homelessness should not be viewed solely as a shortcoming of social welfare systems but rather as a global manifestation of social exclusion and deprivation, the intensification of which presents significant social and economic challenges for both developed and developing nations¹ (Olsen & Benjaminsen

1 According to the United Nations (2000) report (<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/623546?v=pdf> ; last accessed 01.12.2024.), urbanization and regional economic inequalities have exacerbated homelessness, posing significant challenges even for wealthier nati-

2018; EESC Lisbon Declaration 2021²). Over the past decades, homelessness has evolved into an increasingly pressing global social issue.³ At the turn of the millennium, an estimated 100 million people were experiencing homelessness, while the number of individuals living in inadequate housing conditions exceeded 1 billion—implying that approximately one in seven people worldwide was directly affected by substandard living conditions (United Nations 2000).⁴

Focus of the Study

Homelessness represents one of the most extreme manifestations of social inequality.⁵ This study critically examines the conceptual frameworks of homelessness, identifying key factors that hinder the international comparability of measurement methods and research findings.

Particular emphasis is placed on the diversity of social policy responses, highlighting the structural factors and institutional mechanisms that contribute to the persistence

ons due to the rising number of individuals living in worst-case conditions (Steffen et al. 2015; Alvarez & Steffen 2023). Data from 2001 indicate that in the United States, 5.3 million households lacked adequate housing conditions, while in Europe, this figure reached nearly 15 million (Bakos, n.d.).

- 2 [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_3044; last accessed 21.03.2025.]
- 3 Similarly, data published in Györi's study (2020) reveal a significant increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness in Hungary. While only 278 individuals were officially registered as homeless in 1990, the 2001 census recorded 4,629, and by 2011, this number had surged to 12,347. According to the census data from the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH 2022; https://nepszamlalas2022.ksh.hu ; last accessed 15.01.2025.), the recorded number of homeless individuals was significantly lower than earlier estimates. In 2011, a total of 5,557 people were registered as homeless, including 4,520 men and 1,051 women. By 2022, this figure had decreased to 2,615, comprising 2,029 men and 586 women.
- 4 Olsen and Benjaminsen (2019) highlight in their study that a decade later, by 2010, this figure had risen to 1.6 billion, indicating the escalation and global proliferation of the issue.
- 5 The 2019 United Nations General Assembly in Nairobi (https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2019/10/summary-egm-final-9sep.pdf; last accessed 07.01.2025.) focused on the eradication of homelessness, emphasizing the crucial role of social protection and affordable housing. The report highlighted that homelessness represents the most extreme form of poverty and social exclusion, posing a global challenge for both developed and developing countries. The document underscores that effective social protection measures and widely accessible, affordable housing solutions are essential in both preventing and addressing homelessness, fostering social inclusion, and promoting sustainable development. In Hungary, housing poverty remains a particularly severe issue (Mistetics 2017; UN 2019).

of homelessness. How do structural and institutional factors shape the effectiveness of homelessness policies across different socio-political contexts? This central research question guides the analysis, aiming to uncover the ways in which various governance models, policy approaches, and institutional structures influence both short-term interventions and long-term solutions. The study aims to map the complex, multidimensional relationships between social exclusion and the housing crisis, shedding light on the potential for developing integrated, sustainable social policy strategies. These strategies are not solely focused on managing homelessness and alleviating crises but also prioritize prevention and the promotion of long-term social reintegration.

Homelessness as a Structural Challenge

Homelessness is widely recognized as one of the most pressing social policy challenges in both modern and developing societies (Shinn 2007; Allard & Small 2013; Henwood et al. 2015; Padgett et al. 2016; Pleace 2016; Olsen & Benjaminsen 2019). As the world grapples with an escalating housing crisis, it is crucial for governmental bodies and institutional systems to intensify their efforts in addressing the root causes of inadequate and unaffordable housing (Horsell 2013; Dubois & Nivakoski 2023; OECD 2024). Studies by Olsen and Benjaminsen (2019), as well as O’Flaherty (2019), emphasize that homelessness is not merely an economic issue but is intrinsically linked to various social factors that play a critical role in the expansion of the homeless population. Their analyses highlight that dimensions of social exclusion—such as geographical region, level of education, gender identity, ethnicity, unemployment, age, and sexual orientation—can significantly influence the risk of homelessness (Allard & Small 2013; Blaskó 2020; Győri 2022).

These factors do not operate in isolation; rather, they interact in a complex and interconnected manner, perpetuating structural exclusion and reinforcing the cycle of homelessness.⁶ Authors of key studies on the prevention and management of homelessness consistently stress that addressing this multifaceted social issue requires comprehensive social policy strategies. Such strategies must synergistically target various forms of marginalization and discrimination to create sustainable solutions (Allard & Small 2013; O’Flaherty 2019). Benjaminsen and Andrade (2015) highlight that socially excluded groups are disproportionately represented among those experiencing housing insecurity, which can be interpreted as one of the most evident symptoms of deficiencies within social structures and systems. This suggests that homelessness cannot be reduced solely to the question of individual responsibility but should rather be under-

6 These forms of exclusion often accumulate, leading to severe social marginalization and further increasing the vulnerability of those affected.

stood as a manifestation of deep-rooted dysfunctions within the social and economic system. These systemic issues necessitate urgent and targeted structural and social policy interventions to ensure lasting and sustainable improvements.⁷ Studies by Bakos (n.d.), Mistetics (2017), and Győri (2021, 2022) emphasize that the housing crisis is one of the key factors contributing to the persistence of homelessness. The authors further emphasize that the comprehensive implementation of programs such as Igloo Europe, Equal, Working Future, and the It's Your Move project serves as a clear example of how integrated housing and employment initiatives can facilitate the long-term social reintegration of homeless individuals (Bakos n.d.). Structural and institutional factors, as well as the application of best practices, play a crucial role in effectively addressing homelessness.⁸ These programs focus on individualized support, increasing employment opportunities, improving access to healthcare and social services, and enhancing the autonomy of affected individuals⁹ (such as the Rock Trust¹⁰). Such measures and services not only aim to directly address homelessness but also contribute to its long-term prevention and the promotion of social integration and reintegration.

Factors Affecting Measurement and Comparability of Results

According to the United Nations (UN) definition, homelessness can be classified into two primary categories: absolute homelessness and relative homelessness. Based on the UN's accepted definition, absolute homelessness includes individuals who live directly on the streets, in public spaces, or in abandoned buildings, with no formal access to housing. Relative homelessness, on the other hand, is a broader concept that includes individuals who lack permanent, safe, and adequate housing. This category encompasses those

7 The integration of housing and employment elements is essential for the effective, long-term management of homelessness and the promotion of social mobility. The coordinated implementation of these programs not only enhances individual living conditions but also plays a pivotal role in reducing structural barriers. Such comprehensive approaches foster sustainable social inclusion while mitigating social inequalities and ensuring the long-term support of marginalized groups.

8 Innovative solutions include the development of housing projects in mixed environments that reduce the formation of segregation (Padgett et al. 2014), the recovery-based "Housing First" approach (Bakos 2011; Dubois & Nivakoski 2023), and the British Housing Association, which prioritizes the provision of stable housing while actively supporting social reintegration (Tsemberis 2010; Varsányi 2013; Padgett et al. 2014).

9 Bakos' (2011) study highlights the complex, multidimensional nature of integration practices, emphasizing that the coordinated and simultaneous provision of housing, employment, and healthcare creates the most favorable conditions for successful social reintegration. The author stresses that the parallel development of these factors generates a synergistic effect, which not only addresses individual issues but also offers a comprehensive and integrated solution framework, significantly enhancing the chances and sustainability of social reintegration.

10 [<https://www.rocktrust.org/>; last accessed 17.11.2024]

without legal housing entitlement, individuals residing in temporary accommodations, as well as those staying with friends or family, facing the constant risk of losing their current housing situation at any time (United Nations 2000).¹¹ The varied interpretations of homelessness, its dynamic nature, and flexible characteristics, coupled with the lack of a universally accepted governmental definition, pose significant measurement challenges and methodological difficulties (Edgar et al., 2003; Culhane et al., 2011). This issue persists despite the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) having developed and introduced the European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) in 2005, aiming to comprehensively define the various dimensions and forms of homelessness and housing exclusion.

Olsen and Benjaminsen (2019), along with O'Flaherty (2019), highlight that the interpretation and classification of homelessness vary across countries based on the 13 housing crisis categories defined by ETHOS, thereby further complicating international comparability. These discrepancies are evident not only in the identification of different types of homelessness but also in measurement methodologies and policy responses. While some countries adopt the broader ETHOS framework, including those living in precarious housing conditions or facing severe overcrowding, others define homelessness more narrowly, considering only individuals living on the streets or in emergency shelters as homeless (see Edgar & Meert 2006: 58–68; Györi 2020: 339–340). The variability in national approaches and differences in data collection and interpretation continue to hinder a comprehensive and coordinated response to homelessness.¹² Another factor distorting the data is that in most countries, data collection and surveys are primarily focused on individuals utilizing services, mapping only those who fall into the absolute homelessness category.¹³ In North America, for instance, statistical data typically include only those staying in emergency shelters, while often excluding individuals who are forced to rely on alternative housing arrangements (Edgar et al. 2003; O'Flaherty 2019; Sousa et al. 2023). The measurement and management of homelessness are not only social but also highly political issues. As a result, in many cases, national governments—seeking to maintain a more favorable political image—manipulate macro-level statistics presented to the public and adopt narrower definitions of homelessness, thereby distorting the actual scope of the issue (Györi 2021; Olsen & Benjaminsen 2019).

11 [https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/623546?v=pdf ; last accessed 01.12.2024.]

12 Confirming the earlier findings of Edgar and Meert (2006), the lack of convergence poses a significant challenge in international comparative research. The absence of unified definitions and standardized measurement criteria hinders the comprehensive understanding of homelessness and its effective management on the international stage.

13 National research typically relies on centralized datasets. For instance, in Canada, measurements are primarily based on statistical data from homeless shelters, whereas in the United States, data collection is largely derived from decennial census updates.

A Possible Dimension for Standardizing Measurability and Comparability

The ETHOS¹⁴ typology, developed by FEANTSA, could serve as a fundamental tool in addressing the methodological challenges of defining, measuring, and comparing homelessness on an international scale.¹⁵ The ETHOS model categorizes homelessness using a multidimensional approach, considering three main dimensions: legal, physical, and social (see Figure 1). The physical dimension refers to the presence of safe and stable housing, the social dimension pertains to the ability to maintain social relationships, and the legal dimension encompasses the security of tenure. According to this typology, a dwelling qualifies as a home only if it meets all three criteria. Additionally, the general model identifies seven subcategories that cover different forms of housing exclusion and homelessness (see Table 1).

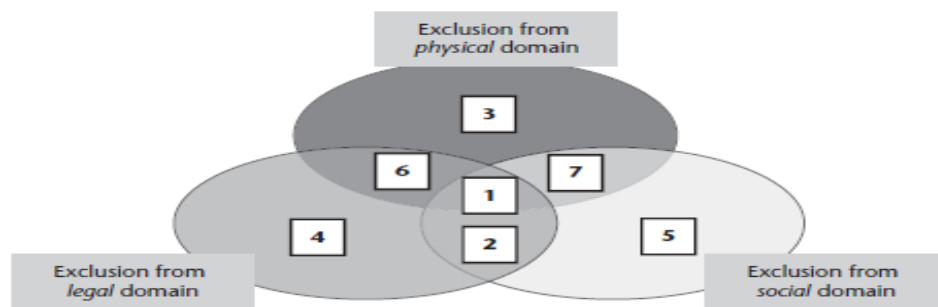


Figure 1. The domains of homelessness/housing exclusion (ETHOS). Source: Olsen & Benjaminsen 2019: 396

Notes:

- 1 Rooflessness.
- 2 Houselessness.
- 3 Inadequate housing (secure tenure).
- 4 Insecure housing (adequate housing).
- 5 Social isolation within a secure and adequate context.
- 6 Insecure and inadequate housing.
- 7 Inadequate housing and social isolation within a legally occupied dwelling.

14 "The term *ethos* originates from Greek and means moral perception, belief, concept, or character. In a broader sense, it refers to an ethical attitude or action that reflects a commitment to the practical implementation of values" (Cambridge Dictionary 2024; Catholic Encyclopedia 2024; Arcanum 2024).

15 [<https://www.arcanum.com/hu/online-kiadvanyok/Lexikonok-a-pallas-nagy-lexikona-2/e-e-7C62/etosz-8DF3/> ; <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/learner-english/ethos>] [<https://lexikon.katolikus.hu/E/%C3%A9thosz.html> ; last accessed 19.11.2024.]

Absolute homeless individuals face disadvantages in all three dimensions, whereas those living in temporary shelters generally have access to physical housing, yet their legal and social situations remain uncertain. The ETHOS framework offers a comprehensive classification that includes individuals living in inadequate conditions and those relying on temporary housing arrangements (see Table 1), facilitating a more nuanced analysis of the various forms and dimensions of relative homelessness (Edgar et al. 2003; Bakos & Györi 2006 in: FEANTSA 2007: 24).

<i>Conceptual category</i>	<i>Physical domain</i>	<i>Legal domain</i>	<i>Social domain</i>	<i>Operational definitions</i>
1. Rooflessness	no dwelling (roof)	no legal entitlement to space for exclusive possessions	no private and safe personal space for social relations	• “living rough” (on the streets) • staying in overnight shelters or emergency accommodation
2. Houselessness	has a place to live, fit for habitation	no legal entitlement to space for exclusive possessions	no private and safe personal space for social relations	• living in homeless shelters, hostels, refuges, and other temporary accommodation • due for release from institution/ residential care centers (penal, medical, children’s)
3. Inadequate housing (with secure tenure)	dwelling unfit for habitation	has legal title and/or security of tenure	has space for social relations	• living in tents; makeshift shelters, shacks, or shanties; overcrowded housing; or other dwellings not intended for human residence or deemed unfit by legislation or building regulations
4. Insecure housing (with adequate housing)	has a place to live	no security of tenure	has space for social relations	• temporarily living with family/friends • living with no legal tenancy or subtenancy • illegally occupying land • eviction or repossession orders underway
5. Social isolation (with secure and adequate housing)	has a place to live	has legal title and/or security of tenure	no private and safe personal space for social relations	• living in overcrowded conditions
6. Insecure and inadequate housing	dwelling unfit for habitation	no security of tenure	has space for social relations	• unlawfully occupying shelters unfit for human habitation (e.g., barns, sheds)
7. Inadequate housing and social isolation (in a legally secure context)	dwelling unfit for habitation	has legal title and/or security of tenure	no private and safe personal space for social relations	• families doubling up in inadequate dwellings

Table 1. Conceptualizing and Operationalizing Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS).¹⁶ Source: Olsen & Benjaminsen 2019: 395

¹⁶ Based on the ETHOS category table and statistical data from 2020–2022, it is evident that a significant portion of Hungary’s population lives in inadequate housing conditions.

Olsen and Benjaminsen (2019) emphasize that exclusion from a specific area can also result in extreme living conditions comparable to the daily experiences of homeless and roofless individuals. The general governmental adoption and widespread application of the ETHOS typology would not only be crucial for comparative research but would also provide a comprehensive framework for understanding and addressing the complexity of homelessness (Edgar et al. 2003). The standardization and general acceptance of statistical databases, measurement methods, and the ETHOS framework could facilitate the development and adaptation of more effective social policy strategies, enhancing the efficiency of interventions while enabling more targeted and differentiated responses to the various dimensions of homelessness (Benjaminsen & Dyb 2008; Dyb et al. 2021).

Currently, social policy measures aimed at addressing homelessness often fail to provide sustainable and effective long-term solutions, as government interventions primarily function as “crisis management” rather than preventive or restorative measures¹⁷ (O’Flaherty 2019; World Habitat 2023¹⁸). In many countries, social policy measures focus on individual responsibility, undervaluing and overlooking the structural factors that contribute to the emergence and persistence of various forms of homelessness, while frequently restricting the operational scope of civil society organizations and other non-governmental organizations (e.g., NGOs; Mikula 2024: 132).¹⁹ These eco-

According to Habitat, 20% of the Hungarian population (1.9 million people) reside in housing that does not meet basic housing standards, such as leaking roofs, mold-infested walls, lack of heating, or the absence of a bathroom or toilet. The data further indicate that 1.6 million people (16.76%) live in overcrowded environments, while housing insecurity affects 432,000 individuals (4.5%). According to 2022 figures, the number of children in temporary children’s homes and foster care reached 22,236, while 86,586 individuals resided in mass shelters (Ámon 2023; <https://habitat.hu/sites/lakhatasi-jelentes-2023/megfizethetoseg/> ; last accessed 05.02.2025.)

17 In contrast to crisis management-based models, there are well-functioning, politically supported programs and initiatives aimed at social reintegration and the reduction or elimination of homelessness. One such example is the 2012 expansion of Scotland’s housing program, which granted a fundamental legal entitlement to housing for all residents of Scotland, applying a broader interpretation of homelessness (Edgar & Meert 2006: 49; Missetics 2017: 25; OECD 2024: 24; Scottish Federation of Housing Association 2024 [<https://www.sfha.co.uk/>]; last accessed 20.11.2024.)

18 [http://www.budapestinstitute.eu/uploads/wh_housing-led-in-cee_BRIEFING-HUNGARY_HU_FINAL.pdf; last accessed 02.01.2025.]

19 This approach is particularly prevalent in countries where the neoliberal economic model dominates, reinforcing individual responsibility as a core principle. The expansion of neoliberalism further exacerbates social inequalities, as the prioritization of competitiveness and privatization leads to the erosion of public services, particularly in education, social welfare, and healthcare systems. (Fitzpatrick & Powell 2019: 6)

conomic policy trends often exert a significant impact even at the micro level, amplifying neoliberal and individualistic social norms and values.²⁰ As neoliberalism continues to exert an increasing influence on global economic policy processes, society as a whole is shifting toward a stronger emphasis on individual responsibility. This transition may erode social solidarity, decrease the number of professionals entering the social work sector, and undermine the field's collective, structural perspective.²¹ This process may significantly reduce professional commitment to social justice and equality while also diminishing students' willingness to take on traditional helping roles—a trend that has already been highlighted in numerous studies over the past years (Aviram & Katan 1991; McCartan et al. 2020; Wilson & McCrystal 2007; Petersén 2024; Mikula 2024a).

The Complexity of Social, Health, and Social Policy Challenges in the Context of Homelessness

For individuals experiencing homelessness or struggling with housing insecurity, employment is not merely a first step toward financial independence but also significantly contributes to various aspects of their lives, particularly in maintaining mental health and fostering social integration (FEANTSA 2007). Despite this, homeless individuals are among those most excluded from the labor market, even though employment plays a key role in building social relationships, expanding practical experience, developing skills, and strengthening self-esteem.

In their study, Boróka Fehér and Ivetta Kovács (2016), referring to the work of Fruzsina Albert and Beáta Dávid (2001), highlight the personality-shaping role of social relationships and communal lifestyles, which are often absent in the lives of homeless individuals. The authors emphasize that basic social support networks, such as family and close companions, not only provide emotional support but also foster psychosocial development, promoting social integration and individual well-being. According to estimates by the Abbé Pierre Foundation²² (2023), approximately 895,000 people in

20 "According to the traditional view, homeless individuals end up on the streets as a result of their own decisions; therefore, it is primarily the role of those around them to point out that what they have done or are doing is wrong" (Gurály 2021: 202).

21 In his study on students' attitudes toward poverty, Negron-Velazquez (2016) identified significant regional variations in the perception of poverty's causes. His findings suggest that Mexican and Ecuadorian students, aligning with the majority societal perspective, tend to emphasize individual responsibility and personal explanations, whereas Chilean and Argentine students predominantly attribute poverty to structural factors.

22 [https://www.feantsa.org/public/user/Resources/reports/2023/OVERVIEW/Rapport_EN.pdf ; last accessed 23.11.2024.]

Europe are effectively homeless, while millions more face inadequate housing conditions.²³ These conditions include overcrowding, pollution, health hazards (such as mold), and life-threatening situations caused by structurally unstable and fire-prone housing. According to World Habitat estimates, approximately 30,000 people in Hungary are homeless, while 3.2% of the population (around 300,000 people) live in insecure housing conditions, and 15.5% reside in unacceptable or severely inadequate housing conditions (Mistetics 2017: 4).²⁴ The Transformation Institute (2017) and the OECD (2024: 20) highlight that while Hungary faces significant challenges in homelessness and housing, it remains one of the few OECD countries without a comprehensive, well-funded national housing and homelessness strategy supported by governmental approval or policy initiatives.²⁵ The sector suffers from significant underfunding (Mistetics 2017: 41), with most existing services focusing on managing temporary crisis situations, while long-term solutions remain consistently neglected (World Habitat 2023²⁶). Ensuring the basic needs of homeless individuals and those facing housing insecurity—such as maintaining social relationships, accessing employment and healthcare, and receiving mental health support²⁷—is often overlooked in the design and implementation of social policy programs. However, these factors play a key role in the development of long-term, sustainable solutions, as they directly contribute to improving quality of life and increasing social reintegration prospects for affected groups (Bakos n.d.; Bakos 2007; Abbé Pierre Foundation 2023).

The health status of people experiencing homelessness or the worst housing conditions is systematically worse compared to the general population (Fadgyas-Freyler 2017: 121–217; National Health Care for the Homeless Council [NHCHC], 2011, 2019²⁸), as these individuals are highly exposed to trauma (Gurály 2021: 204–205),

23 In his study, Bakos (n.d.), citing data from the FEANTSA-Observatory, estimates that the number of homeless individuals in Europe is approximately 3 million, while around 15 million people live in inadequate housing conditions.

24 “Homelessness in Hungary today is a problem that has affected at least one in every 200 people at some point in their lives” (Gurály n.d.: 8).

25 Despite the fact that over the past three decades, several strategic plans have been developed—such as the works of Györi and Marothy (2008), Györi (2015), and Hegedüs et al. (2015)—aimed at the social reintegration of homeless individuals, the problem still persists.

26 http://www.budapestinstitute.eu/uploads/wh_housing-led-in-cee_BRIEFING-HUNGARY_HU_FINAL.pdf ; last accessed 02.01.2025.

27 According to Judit Popovics, a clinical psychologist, nearly 90% of homeless individuals struggle with some form of mental health or psychological disorder (Takács 2024: <https://wmn.hu/ugy/63240-a-hajlektalansag-kez-a-kezen-jar-a-psziches-zavarokkal> ; last accessed 07.12.2024.).

28 https://nhchc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/HIn_health_factsheet_Jan10-1.pdf ; <https://nhchc.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/homelessness-and-health.pdf> ; last accessed 07.01.2025.

diseases, mental health disorders, substance use disorders,²⁹ infections, and other serious health risks (OECD 2024: 98).³⁰ The cumulative nature of health issues among homeless individuals is particularly alarming (Pleace 2016), as they frequently lack timely access to basic medical care, screening programs, and mental health services (NHCHC 2011, 2019).

Limited access to healthcare severely deteriorates the psychosocial and physical well-being of homeless individuals, significantly hindering improvements in their quality of life and life prospects (Bakos n.d.; Bakos 2006; NHCHC 2011, 2019; Fadgyas-Freyler 2017; Mózer 2017: 232; OECD 2024: 99). These challenges not only are critical at the individual level but also place considerable strain on financial, public health, and social policy systems. The lack of adequate access to healthcare deepens existing social inequalities, making it more difficult to develop effective public policies and preventive strategies. Addressing these systemic challenges requires complex intervention mechanisms that simultaneously respond to individual needs as well as broader social and public health consequences.

Potential Instruments for Social Policy Interventions

Rather than adopting extreme policy positions, moderate and inclusive social policy interventions can serve as effective tools for addressing and mitigating the multidimensional challenges of homelessness and the housing crisis (Allard & Small 2013; Dubois & Nivakoski 2023). These interventions should primarily focus on national strategies formulated by governments, aiming to establish clear guidelines, achieve measurable outcomes and implement integrated measures.³¹ A key element of the inclusive approach is the development and execution of social policy strategies based on multi-stakeholder cooperation, as this is essential for achieving effective and sustainable results. Therefore, cross-sectoral collaboration is indispensable, involving government

29 In his study compiling summary data, Péter Győri (2022) highlights that the health status of homeless individuals living in Budapest is exceptionally poor, with a particularly high proportion of homeless individuals under the age of 40 suffering from psychiatric disorders.

30 World Habitat (2023, http://www.budapestinstitute.eu/uploads/wh_housing-led-in-CEE_BRIEFING-HUNGARY_HU_FINAL.pdf ; last accessed 02.01.2025.) and Raoult et al. (2001) emphasized in their studies that overcrowded shelters, which often serve as the only available refuge, create favorable conditions for the spread of infectious diseases and epidemics, thereby exacerbating public health risks.

31 National strategies typically place a strong emphasis on preventive measures, the implementation of low-threshold services—such as the Housing First approach—and the development of integrated support systems, as these elements are fundamental to the prevention and effective management of homelessness (Culhane et al. 2011).

actors, civil society organizations, faith-based institutions, researchers, and affected communities, particularly those with lived experience of homelessness or housing insecurity (Pleace 2016).³² The involvement of governmental bodies, stakeholders, and individuals experiencing homelessness plays a pivotal role in grounding intervention strategies in practical realities. Gille et al. (2024) emphasize that considering the lived experiences of homeless individuals not only facilitates the identification and effective resolution of housing barriers but also helps reduce discrimination. Moreover, engaging affected individuals serves as a key tool for strengthening social inclusion and empowering self-determination, enabling them to regain control over decisions affecting their lives.

Legal anti-segregation approaches and anti-discrimination measures, similar to those implemented in Scottish and Portuguese legislation, play a key role in ensuring the fundamental rights of individuals facing housing crises and homelessness.³³ These measures facilitate access to stable housing, employment opportunities, and essential services, thereby promoting social inclusion and reducing systemic inequalities. Innovative and evidence-based programs, such as initiatives ensuring hygiene as a human right (Meehan et al. 2022), municipal regulations in France and the UK guaranteeing the right to permanent housing (Mistetics 2017), the UK's "ProxyAddress" program providing temporary virtual addresses, and Australia's free "Postbox" service, significantly contribute to the promotion of social justice while effectively eliminating administrative barriers. Such innovative initiatives facilitate employment opportunities, access to healthcare, and social benefits, while also demonstrating the effectiveness of inclusive policy measures in improving service accessibility and promoting social reintegration (OECD 2024: 29).

Conclusions

Governments frequently interpret or manipulate homelessness statistics for political purposes, often overstating individual responsibility.³⁴ However, the primary causes of rising homelessness frequently stem from deficiencies in social and economic struc-

32 The active involvement of affected individuals is crucial to ensuring that interventions appropriately and effectively address real needs and challenges.

33 Portugal's national strategy places the fundamental rights of homeless individuals at its core, ensuring a minimum level of housing and social support (OECD 2024). Similarly, Scottish legislation no longer criminalizes homeless people living in public spaces. Instead, the government guarantees the right to stable housing for all homeless individuals, marking a significant step towards the realization of an inclusive society (Scotland Act 2003; 2012; 2020; 2022, <https://www.gov.scot/policies/homelessness/>; last accessed 14.12.2024.).

34 This type of extreme approach not only distorts public perception but also narrows policymakers' perspectives, significantly hindering the effective management of the issue.

tures rather than individual choices.³⁵ Inclusive social policy interventions should aim not only to manage homelessness but also to eliminate its structural causes (Allard & Small 2013).³⁶ Dubois and Nivakoski (2023) and the OECD (2024) emphasize that long-term, coordinated strategies are essential for sustainably reducing homelessness and ensuring the protection of the fundamental rights of those affected.³⁷ The existing social problem cannot be effectively addressed by government policies that focus on criminalizing homelessness.³⁸ Repressive approaches negatively affect the social perception of homelessness and public debates on homelessness, while creating significant barriers to social inclusion. Effectively tackling homelessness and the housing crisis requires taking into account the structural factors and economic disparities between regions that contribute to the exacerbation of these problems in social, economic, and political processes. The effective management of homelessness and the housing crisis is only possible if social, economic, and political processes take into account the structural factors and regional economic inequalities that exacerbate these issues. These factors include, among others, the lack of well-paying jobs, gentrification, the deregulation of the housing market, and the continuous defunding of community services and public financing (Shinn & Weitzman 1996; World Habitat 2023: 3).³⁹ To ensure the long-term sustainability of best practices, governments must move beyond narrow-sighted approaches and use economic, political, and legal tools to tackle structural challenges. To achieve sustainable solutions, it is crucial to address the shortage of affordable housing and improve housing conditions, ensure legal security of tenure, and actively engage key stakeholders, including municipalities, NGOs, faith-

35 Accurate and standardized data collection and monitoring play a fundamental role in addressing homelessness, as they enable the evaluation of strategy effectiveness, the tracking of progress, and the ensuring of accountability. The Monitoring “FrameWork” system implemented in the United Kingdom serves as a strong example of how data analysis can support results-oriented decision-making and the development of long-term strategies (OECD 2024).

36 The central element of education, healthcare, and social system reforms is to prioritize social justice and equity, as opposed to the market-driven approaches promoted by neoliberalism (Fitzpatrick & Powell 2019).

37 To reduce social exclusion, it is essential to articulate and implement critical pedagogical approaches that not only emphasize individual responsibility but also address systemic inequalities (Fitzpatrick & Powell 2019).

38 Since 2010, Hungarian government policy has increasingly prioritized the criminalization of homelessness. Consequently, the Fundamental Law now classifies the habitual residence of homeless individuals in public spaces as a punishable act (Mistetics 2013 in: World Habitat 2023: 2. http://www.budapestinstitute.eu/uploads/wh_housing-led-in-cee_BRIEFING-HUNGARY_HU_FINAL.pdf ; last accessed 02.01.2025.).

39 In regions where rising housing prices continuously displace low-income groups, the social divide deepens, while the risk of homelessness significantly increases among marginalized and disadvantaged populations.

based organizations, and civil society actors. Furthermore, strengthening integrated support services and preventive programs, as well as taking a firm stand against discrimination, are essential measures in effectively addressing housing insecurity and homelessness (World Habitat 2023⁴⁰).

This study provides a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of homelessness, detailing the challenges faced by social policy interventions aimed at preventing and addressing the issue. It emphasizes that homelessness is not merely an individual social problem but a structural consequence of the dysfunctions and inadequacies of modern economic and social systems. Therefore, addressing homelessness effectively requires a holistic, interdisciplinary approach. If a common consensus could be reached, the international adoption of the ETHOS model could serve as a promising tool for comparing the various forms and dimensions of homelessness globally. However, the analysis underscores that the effectiveness of social policy programs can only be enhanced if governments are able to accurately identify and address the structural political, social, and economic dysfunctions that fundamentally contribute to the rise of homelessness and impede efforts to combat it effectively.

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Appendix

Table 2. ETHOS – European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion from FEANTSA

Conceptual Category	Operational Category	Living Situation	Generic Definition
ROOFLESS	1 People Living Rough	1.1 Public space or external space	Living in the streets or public spaces, without a shelter that can be defined as living quarters
	2 People in emergency accommodation	2.1 Night shelter	People with no usual place of residence who make use of overnight shelter, low threshold shelter
HOUSELESS	3 People in accommodation for the homeless	3.1 Homeless hostel 3.2 Temporary Accommodation 3.3 Transitional supported accommodation	Where the period of stay is intended to be short term
	4 People in Women's Shelter	4.1 Women's shelter accommodation	Women accommodated due to experience of domestic violence and where the period of stay is intended to be short term
	5 People in accommodation for immigrants	5.1 Temporary accommodation / reception centres 5.2 Migrant workers accommodation	Immigrants in reception or short term accommodation due to their immigrant status
	6 People due to be released from institutions	6.1 Penal institutions 6.2 Medical institutions ¹⁹⁰ 6.3 Children's institutions / homes	No housing available prior to release Stay longer than needed due to lack of housing No housing identified (e.g by 18 th birthday)
	7 People receiving longer-term support (due to homelessness)	7.1 Residential care for older homeless people 7.2 Supported accommodation (for formerly homeless people)	Long stay accommodation with care for formerly homeless people (normally more than one year)
INSECURE	8 People living in insecure accommodation	8.1 Temporarily with family/friends 8.2 No legal (sub)tenancy 8.3 Illegal occupation of land	Living in conventional housing but not the usual or place of residence due to lack of housing Makeshift shelter, shack or shanty Occupation of dwelling with no legal tenancy, illegal occupation of a dwelling Occupation of land with no legal rights
	9 People living under threat of eviction	9.1 Legal orders enforced (rented) 9.2 Re-possession orders (owned)	Where orders for eviction are operative Where mortgagor has legal order to re-possess
	10 People living under threat of violence	10.1 Police recorded incidents	Where police action is taken to ensure place of safety for victims of domestic violence
	11 People living in temporary / non-conventional structures	11.1 Mobile homes 11.2 Non-conventional building 11.3 Temporary structure	Not intended as place of usual residence Makeshift shelter, shack or shanty Semi-permanent structure hut or cabin
INADEQUATE	12 People living in unfit housing	12.1 Occupied dwellings unfit for habitation	Defined as unfit for habitation by national legislation or building regulations
	13 People living in extreme overcrowding	13.1 Highest national norm of overcrowding	Defined as exceeding national density standard for floor-space or useable rooms

Source: FENTSA 2007: 49.