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Leaving no one behind – Dealing with hard-to-count and vulnerable population groups in the census

Registers may provide higher-quality data on the homeless

Note by Statistics Estonia*

Summary

This article examines the issue of homelessness – a topic that has been difficult to measure in recent censuses in Estonia. People are more and more mobile, which leads to undercounts in census data. Counting the homeless is a major challenge. It is difficult to cover them by a traditional census and even more complicated to assess data quality. Estonia plans to transition to a register-based census in the next census round, and there is a need to create an improvement model for the issue of the homelessness, in order to ensure sufficient and adequate information for population and social policy decisions in the future.

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I. Introduction

1. Despite common programme requirements developed internationally for census rounds, different topics may be difficult to measure in different countries. Certain census topics are considered as difficult to measure for a variety of reasons, such as sensitivity of the topic, difficulty to understand, complexity, recall, subjectivity or prejudice. When filling in the census questionnaire, variations in understanding of the term ‘primary homelessness’ might be a source of confusion.
2. In order to ensure comparability of census data at an international level, it is important to follow international recommendations when preparing the census questionnaire. Estonia has followed international recommendations for the enumeration of homelessness since 1989.
3. For the preparation of the 2011 census as well as for the 2021 census, Estonia ensured that the topics covered by the census as well as the definitions and classifications were in accordance with the recommendations.
4. When it comes to the census, it is important to note that it is difficult to collect data for population groups such as illegal immigrants, the homeless and inhabitants of peripheral areas. Despite the fact that censuses in Estonia have so far been conducted by the traditional method, a number of problems should be recognized in terms of data quality. These problems emerged only during the development of the new census method in 2018. The problem does not lie only in the data sources and the choice of methodology, but in the absence of a consistent quality analysis of data collection and processing regarding marginal groups. An additional issue is certainly the fact that Estonia has no census dataset on the homeless for the Soviet period, and there are no comparative analyses of the census results of the Soviet period. Therefore, the reliability of census data on the homeless has been questioned since 2000 when the first census after the restoration of independence took place.
5. Undercounts were a concern for the first population census in the newly re-independent Estonia. Analysis based on the previous census and vital statistics showed an undercount of over 1.2 per cent (Tamm, 2002). At the same time, the reference data set of qualitative surveys revealed a greater undercount in terms of the homeless (Saava et al, 2002). In the second census, there was also a 2.3 per cent undercount, but it was not so remarkable for the homeless group (Tiit, 2014). Today, when the preparations for the third independent census are undergoing in Estonia, there is no consensus on whether the number of homeless people in the country is decreasing or rather increasing, as shown by the census data set.
6. This article presents an overview of available datasets on the homeless collected in censuses. The data of the 2000 and 2011 censuses are used, as well as the data of the 2019 pilot census, collected from administrative databases. The article argues that the number of homeless people has been underestimated in every census since 2000. A solution is to make use of administrative data sources for the topic of homelessness.

II. Data on the homeless in the 2000 and 2011 censuses

7. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Statistics Estonia included the topic of homelessness in the census programme in 2000, because the users of census data (social scientists) needed such data (population and housing census user survey 2006). With the restoration of independence, both economic and social changes had taken place, which also had an impact on social life. Not all people were able to adapt to the new situation, and therefore, some people became homeless for one reason or another (Ginter, 1998).
8. Statistics Estonia defined the concept of homelessness and agreed on it with Eurostat, but the necessary cooperation with different target groups, including municipalities, regarding the adopted definition did not take place, and the total number of 269 homeless persons was estimated by some social scientists not to be reliable (Kõre, 2003). Experts’ estimates of the number of homeless differed about 15-fold (ibid).
9. It must be taken into account that it was difficult to organize the first census after the restoration of independence in the country. There was no previous experience. The problem

of homelessness was not recognized during the Soviet period (Eatwell et al 2000). The development of a methodology for the enumeration of marginalized groups was also complicated due to the lack of statistics at the national level and the lack of a common understanding of the concept of homeless people. It was not known exactly who should be enumerated and where. At this time, in Estonia, it was considered that a homeless person was somebody who had the characteristic that he or she lacked a residence, lived in a place that was unfit for living or used the services of a night shelter.

A. The 2000 Population and Housing Census data on homelessness

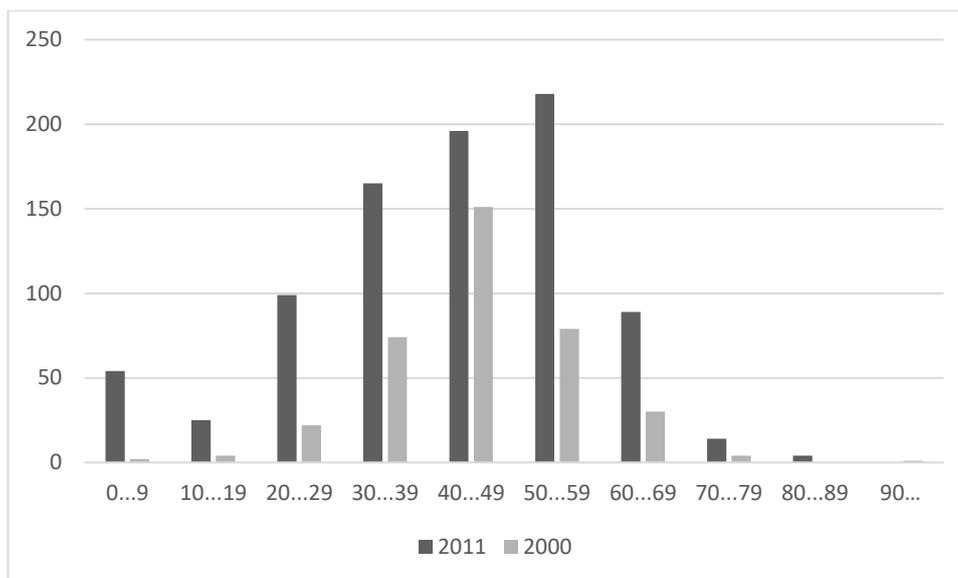
10. The census was conducted by the traditional census method (paper and pencil interview, PAPI) with the census moment of 31 March 2000. According to the concept which was in use in the 2000 census, a 'homeless' person was defined as a person who did not have a dwelling at the moment of census and spent odd nights in basements, staircases, heating rooms, abandoned buildings, huts, homeless shelters, etc. A person who lived for a longer period in a room not intended as a place for living (dwelling type 'non-dwelling used for habitation') was not considered homeless. The homeless could also form a multi-member household. The 2000 census data on the homeless can be found under the category of household type — households were divided into private households, collective households and households of the homeless. To sum it up, the public census dataset was limited to the above information. It can be admitted that there was under-coverage in the dataset on the homeless population, as there are several assessments of under-coverage in the 2000 census. According to Statistics Estonia's 2002 assessment, the under-coverage was 1.2 per cent, and the 2013 revaluation concluded an under-coverage of around 4 per cent (Tiit, 2014). It can be noted that the number of homeless people is likely to give us information about the primary homeless. Information on secondary homeless people was lacking.

B. The 2011 Population and Housing Census data on homeless

11. The census was conducted by the combined method (computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) and computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI)) with the census moment of 31 December 2011. In terms of the definition, only the primary homeless were considered. It should be noted that longer and more thorough interviewer training on the topic of population groups contributed to better access to the homeless. A total of 864 homeless people were counted.

12. As for the data on the homeless compared with the previous census, the situation was similar (Figure I). However, there was a major change in the number of homeless among children and young people. With regard to the rural population, there has been an increase in the number of homeless people, while the shares have remained the same.

Figure I
Number of homeless persons by age group, 2000 and 2011 census data



Source: Statistics Estonia RLO703 and RL 502.

III. How was the quality of the collected data measured?

13. In 2011, the European Committee of the Regions issued a series of recommendations to Estonia on the topic ‘combating homelessness’. One of the most ambitious recommendations of the Committee of the Regions was the vision of eliminating street homelessness by 2015. This task had to be carried out by the municipalities in Estonia. As there was a lack of data, it was necessary to conduct a study on homelessness in Tallinn, as the largest municipality.

14. Statistics Estonia, coordinating the population census, was also interested in interviewing the homeless. Statistics Estonia wanted to find out where homeless people stay at night and have a few census area supervisors meet some of the homeless, so that, at the time of the census, the enumerators would not fear homeless people. In order to gain experience, some census area supervisors of Statistics Estonia participated with the employees of the Tallinn Social Work Centre in carrying out street interviews with the homeless.

15. The reference data was the homeless population of the survey “Homeless in Tallinn”, which could be checked against the data of the population and housing census of 2011.

16. According to a survey of the homeless, carried out by the Tallinn Social Work Centre, there were 1,225 homeless people in Tallinn in the period September to January 2011. They were categorized as follows:

- (a) Adults who filled the homeless questionnaire: 926 persons (their analysis is included in the survey report);
- (b) Children of the latter: 183 children (for them, only an age breakdown by the current place of residence is given in the survey report);
- (c) People placed in general care homes in 2008–2011 due to homelessness: 116 persons.

17. Census data (population and housing census 2011) allow a partial comparison of the first and second groups. It was clear that only the data on the homeless in Tallinn (capital city) can be compared, as in other places this group of residents was divided differently by types of living places (shelters, night shelters, etc.). It was not possible to distinguish the third group in the census data, because the census does not include questions about why a person has been placed in a care home.

18. However, it should be noted that the comparison of the survey and census data may be complicated by the fact that the census data were collected as at 31 December 2011, while the homeless survey was carried out between September 2011 and January 2012. During this period, the homeless population as well as the possibility of locating them may have changed (e.g. in cold weather, there are more people in night shelters. Unfortunately, the cold period in 2012 coincided with the data cleaning period of the census).

IV. Preparation of the 2021 census

19. Statistics Estonia has been making methodological and information technology preparations since 2010 in order to organize the 2020 population and housing census based on registers. This requires that all mandatory census characteristics are covered by the registers and that all persons, including the homeless, are covered by the national system of personal identification codes, on the basis of which all personal data registers have been identified.

20. It is necessary to carry out a relatively large amount of preliminary methodological work for the first register-based census. For the census to be successful, Statistics Estonia performed two pilot censuses. The first pilot census was carried out in 2016 and, according to its results, the data quality of the registers is good, the registers are systematic and data from different registers can be linked. The main rehearsal for the census and testing of the methodology is underway. Data from 25 registers are used in the pilot census. A report on the results will be available at the end of the current year. However, it is already known that improvements are needed in the model for enumerating the homeless.

21. On 5 January 2019, a request for information was sent to municipalities, in which they were asked to provide a list, with addresses, of the authorities which are expected to submit data to the population register on the presence of homeless persons. This is a query for determining the estimated size ranges for the pilot census. Additionally, Statistics Estonia plans to turn to umbrella organizations of municipalities to obtain registration information on homeless people accommodated in shelters.

22. Unfortunately, it is not possible to check the register-based place of residence of the homeless and its validity based on the registration information of the shelters. Therefore, Statistics Estonia made a proposal to the registrar of the population register to amend the law. This Act entered into force on 1 January 2019, and it will serve as the basis for submitting data by accommodation and care and other facilities and/or by authorities to the population register on people staying in these institutions. This will help Statistics Estonia, in addition to the cross-usage of data, to identify primary and secondary homelessness in the country.

23. The first results on the homeless are good, but the data collection model should be improved, in order to clearly identify which categories of the homeless are increasing or decreasing and where (i.e. in which cities).

24. As at the 31 December 2018 pilot census moment, 1,102 homeless people were counted in 62 municipalities (Statistics Estonia, 2019). The data are used only in a generalized form in connection with the pilot census, hence it is only possible to tell the number of homeless people, as well as the administrative sources of the information. A persistent problem was the understanding of the terminology; it was necessary to advise the municipality staff by telephone.

25. The definition of the homeless in the 2019 pilot census is as follows: the homeless can be persons who live in the streets and do not housing that could be classified as a dwelling (primary homelessness) or persons moving frequently between temporary places of accommodation (secondary homelessness).

V. Conclusion

26. Homelessness is visible, and the phenomenon requires a very good measurement instrument. A traditional census may not be the best enumeration method to capture information on the homeless. The census experience of Estonia's independence period says

that the best results can be achieved by combining data sources. When comparing the data, it is necessary to cooperate with other institutions in order to obtain survey data on homelessness. Comparability of data is good if the survey is carried out close to the moment of census. The terminology regarding the homeless still requires clarification and specification.

27. Information on homeless people in Estonia is available from administrative sources, as municipalities have made progress on making services available to socially excluded groups, although it cannot be said that the homeless people themselves contact the authorities.

28. The problem of homelessness has been acknowledged by the producers of statistics, who are looking for the best solutions in order to ensure up-to-date, comparable and accurate data on homeless people.

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