

Counting the deaths of people experiencing homelessness in Poland

People experiencing homelessness do not disappear, they die. From data collected in other countries we know that they often die at a young age, and that, contrary to popular perceptions, deaths of hypothermia account for only a small percentage of these deaths. We also know that the experience of homelessness itself is a contributing factor to premature death. Therefore, by examining homeless mortality, we can identify critical gaps in the support system.

Research on mortality is primarily the domain of demography and public health. Meanwhile, our understanding of social problems is also constructed through statistics. Data become parts of stories; metaphors that describe a particular group and its problems. Statistics define the distance between social groups and what we think is appropriate. Data shape therefore the goals and means of public policies. At the same time, the implementation of social policies increasingly requires evidence: reliable data and analysis, it requires data collection.

For years, a lack of adequate post-hospitalization care for people without safe housing in Poland has been raised as a problem, along with many other issues where health care and social support meet. However, there is a dearth of research on mortality of people experiencing homelessness in Poland.

The project will analyze examples of homeless mortality studies from selected countries: data sources, methods of analysis, and usefulness for public policy making. Sources of data concerning mortality of people experiencing homelessness in Poland will be identified. A critical analysis of obtained figures, along with their limitations, what has been omitted, and their implicit presumptions, will allow to partly reconstruct the narrative about homelessness in Poland. This exploration of the process of homelessness knowledge production will be supplemented with an analysis of interviews with the staff of public institutions and support organizations. Finally, obtaining even partial data will allow to identify the most important gaps in the existing support system and to formulate recommendations on collecting and analyzing Polish homeless mortality data and applying this data to future policy making.