

Housing is a Human Right

With the current cost-of-living crisis driving more people into homelessness and excessive heat, droughts, and floods occurring across the globe, what is the UN's role in ensuring that people have access to adequate and affordable housing?

In February 2020, the UN produced their [first-ever resolution on homelessness](#), which was created by the 58th Session of the Commission for Social Development (CSocD). However, since this resolution was created, a global pandemic and cost-of-living crisis has occurred, and the effects of the climate crisis have worsened, with increasingly unstable weather conditions leaving millions of homeless people more vulnerable as temperatures soar in the summers and winters become harsher. Then, perhaps it is time to revisit this resolution and ensure that the topic of homelessness is not left out in the cold.

What is homelessness?

The CSocD's report on *Affordable housing and social protection systems for all to address homelessness 2020* explains the importance of creating a [definition of homelessness](#). A definition is considered a vital first step because it can act as a springboard for governments and other bodies to collect data, which is currently lacking on both a local and national level. It also creates an opportunity for the data from different countries to be compared, which would allow homelessness to be more comprehensively addressed by international bodies, such as the UN.

At the European level, a [typology of homelessness](#) called ETHOS has been developed by the European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless, as well as a shorter version called ETHOS Light. This typology groups homelessness into six categories: (1) *People living rough*, in the streets or public spaces, (2) *People in emergency accommodation*, such as overnight shelters, (3) *People living in accommodation for the homeless*, such as homeless hostels, temporary accommodation, or women's shelter or refuge accommodation, (4) *People living in institutions*, such as mental health or penal institutions, who have no accommodation to be released to, (5) *People living in non-conventional dwellings due to lack of housing*, such as mobile homes or temporary structures, and (6) *People living temporarily in conventional housing with family and friends*. A typology can

help create a nuanced and context-based definition of homelessness but is so far missing on an international level.

In Germany, the coalition government that formed in 2021 have pledged to tackle homelessness, with a target to end homelessness by 2030. They intend to do this by expanding new housing construction and focusing on affordability. Importantly, in Germany, [a law](#) was enacted in 2020 that makes it a legal obligation to collect data and report on homelessness. This law aims to close the information gap on homelessness and provide vital data at a national, regional, and municipal level to help tackle the problem.

Housing First Policy

In some countries, policies are created with a clear understanding that to tackle many other structural and social problems, people first need the security of a home. This understanding has led to the use of the housing first models in several countries, such as the US, Canada, Finland, Uruguay, and Brazil. In Finland, this policy has reduced the homeless population to the degree that there are now almost no rough sleepers (i.e., people who sleep on the streets or in public spaces without sufficient shelter). In 2018, [5,482](#) people were homeless, and by the end of 2021, this had reduced further to around [3,950](#). These numbers have reduced from approximately 20,000 in the 1980s when the Finnish government began to make the eradication of homelessness a priority. [Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has a right to housing](#), and the Housing First principle builds on this understanding: providing people with adequate housing must be the first step towards tackling any other issues a person may be experiencing, such as social or health problems like the loss of a job or addiction. Adequate accommodation provides a person with a safe and secure space to begin working on any other issues they may have. Following the Housing First principle, once an individual has been provided with housing, they are then offered clinical, community integration, and housing support services. However, the housing is not offered on the condition that the individual uses the services. This is voluntary. Eveliina Heinäluoma, a member of the Finish Parliament, argues that following this model is economically beneficial as “homelessness is [more expensive](#) than securing affordable living”.

Lack of Access to Affordable and Adequate Housing

The CSocD’s report on homelessness categorises drivers of homelessness into two categories: (1) structural social and economic conditions and (2) personal or family

dynamics. A lack of access to affordable housing, which is defined as when the housing cost exceeds 30% of a household's income, is globally a significant problem. With housing having become increasingly privatised in many countries, public institutions are unable to regulate costs effectively, which has led to [housing costs](#) in the last 20 years having “increased three times faster than the average income in OECD countries during the same period”. Not only is housing increasingly unaffordable for the majority of the world's population, but also much of it is inadequately built and maintained.

The current climate crisis highlights further inadequacies in terms of how housing can cope with the strains of floods and excessive heat, for example, that are currently affecting much of the world's population. The United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) state that 96,000 new affordable housing units must be built every day to house the estimated 3 billion people who will need access to adequate housing by 2030.

Following the CSocD's report, it is clear that much work still needs to be done to continue to tackle homelessness and the housing crisis in countries across the globe. Firstly, it is crucial for housing to be recognised as a human right. Secondly, a clear, nuanced, context-based typology of homelessness is needed that can be used as a springboard for data collection, and data collection on homelessness must be prioritised. Also, more adequate, affordable, and accessible housing that can withstand the pressures of the changing climate must be built. As stated in the Housing First model, providing adequate housing is the first step towards tackling numerous other issues that individuals face.

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