

PERSPECTIVE ARTICLE

A note on the Düsseldorfer Model for counting homeless people in a German city

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This article describes the Düsseldorfer Model which was developed for the city's homeless census in 2021. It allows focusing on the number as well as living situations of homeless people with the objective of analyzing their needs to derive concrete recommendations for action. A complete quantitative count of homeless people in the city on a key date was performed according to principles developed together with the actors of the homeless support system in Düsseldorf. Beyond that, qualitative interviews afforded insights into the living situation of homeless people from the user's perspective. Along with the research methodology, major results are briefly presented in the article, followed by an outlook with recommendations for action.

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affiliations.**1. Introduction**

There are different approaches to count homeless persons across different countries. For example, in the United States, homelessness has regularly been documented nationwide since 2003, known as a “point-in-time census.” The U.S.-wide count covers homeless persons living “on the streets” without any shelter and homeless persons temporarily housed in emergency shelters and transitional housing facilities (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2020). Persons without a permanent address who stay with acquaintances, in a hospital, or in police custody on the key date of the count are not included in the study. Moreover, the count takes place at the end of January, a time of year when homeless people are likely to seek protection in various places and therefore cannot be counted either on the street or in shelters (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2017).

However, in Germany, until 2022, the number of homeless people had been counted in different ways but without any uniform nationwide approach for a long time. In addition to the documentation system on homelessness of the Federal Association for Homelessness (Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft Wohnungslosenhilfe) and the resulting annual statistical reports and estimates (Lotties, 2021), there are in particular state surveys in North Rhine-Westphalia (among others, on hidden homelessness and the homeless without accommodation (Brüchmann *et al.*, 2022)). With the introduction of the Homeless Persons Report Act, regular statistics on homeless people are expected to be available from 2022 onward (BMAS, 2022). A solid database on homelessness in

Germany will be soon provided with the statistics for the first time in the near future (BMAS, 2022).

Since the previous estimates of homeless persons in Germany are subject to major uncertainties, estimates are based on the observation of changes in immigration, the housing and labor markets, and social welfare needs, as well as the local surveys of states and municipalities (Jordan, 2018), only limited statements on homelessness in Germany have been possible up to this point. In 2020, the total annual number of homeless people in Germany excluding recognized refugees was estimated to be 256,000 and with recognized refugees to be 417,000 (BAG Wohnungslosenhilfe, 2021). In comparison to previous years' numbers, the estimates in recent few years are increasing (BAG Wohnungslosenhilfe, 2019; 2021).

Nevertheless, the subgroup of "homeless people," that is, those who are affected by houselessness but who are not institutionally housed, is not counted in regular surveys, and is thus often not taken into account statistically. To capture this gap, various surveys are currently being conducted in a few cities at the municipal level, with the first citywide count in Berlin in 2020 being a case in point (Senatsverwaltung für Integration, Arbeit und Soziales Berlin, 2020). However, in those surveys, various methods (e.g., on-the-street censuses, questionnaire surveys in relevant drop-in centers for people who are homeless, data analysis by professionals at day centers and teams of street workers, and food banks) are used in an attempt to record the number of homeless people (Busch-Geertsema, 2019; Hermans & Pleace, 2020).

Another particularly difficult challenge in counting homeless people in Germany arises due to the definition of people who are counted. The experience of other European counts reveal that in Ireland, for example, "rough sleepers" are counted as people who "were either already asleep or had lain down to sleep on the street, in public places, or in dwellings not intended for human habitation on [the] key date night" (Busch-Geertsema, 2019, p. 39), while people "about to be bedded down" for instance, sitting on a sleeping bag or bench, have additionally been counted in the United Kingdom since 2010 (Busch-Geertsema, 2019). The treatment of individuals who spend the night in emergency shelters is not uniform either. They often do not belong to the so-called people living on the street.

Even though homelessness is not only perceived but also addressed differently in every country, the European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless, commonly known as "FEANTSA," developed a European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) in 2005 to offer a comprehensive framework for data collection, policymaking, and monitoring purposes

(FEANTSA, 2017). ETHOS differentiates four main categories of living situations: rooflessness, houselessness, insecure housing, and inadequate housing. The definition has been adopted for this research and is based on that same broad understanding of homelessness. In this research, houseless is used to refer to people who do not have their own home but who have a place to stay and thus a shelter (e.g., with acquaintances or in emergency shelters). By contrast, rough sleepers, representing rooflessness, are individuals who (have to) spend their lives "outside" and who "make a living" (FEANTSA, 2017). That criticism of ethics regarding the definition of the target group is accompanied by a criticism of power, because it is neither made clear who defines which group of people to be counted and for what reasons nor whether the people counted have any control over their categorization, in other words, "about whether someone should be categorized, or tagged, as "homeless" by research, or administrative process, over which they cannot exercise any control" (Hermans & Pleace, 2020, p. 47). Thus, despite various criticisms of common counting practices, the numbers clearly have a relevant function for lobbying (Hermans & Pleace, 2020) as well as for political decisions and public administration. Often, using the numbers is the only sufficient way in which economic resources can be made available to offer support. The numbers provide the basis for preventive concepts as well.

In the city of Düsseldorf, the Düsseldorfer Model was developed with actors of the homeless support system to perform the first full, citywide count of homeless individuals on October 28, 2021 (van Rießen *et al.*, 2021). Although a biennial night count had been conducted by municipal order since 1994, it was only based on quantitative data in specific parts of the city (Plitt, 2021). The full citywide count was further developed in 2019 on behalf of the Department for Migration and Integration and a working group of actors in the field. The Association for Research and Practice Transfer in Social and Cultural Work was also assigned to provide scientific support and assistance in conducting a study that addresses two questions: (i) How many people are homeless in Düsseldorf on the selected key date? How can they be counted? (ii) In which living situations do homeless people live in Düsseldorf?

Taken together, we aim to investigate these questions in this article. The following sections of this article first present an empirical approach of collecting data, which is based on the establishment of a coordination group that represents homeless support institutions and actors in Düsseldorf. Within the framework of the group, the principles and research design were developed, which are herein described along with the major results of the count and a brief summary of the qualitative study. The article

concludes by providing an outlook with recommendations for action. Although the results provide a justification for the establishment and funding of support services for homeless people, a comprehensive count of homeless individuals in Düsseldorf remains needed, for a key date count provides only a momentary picture and was a limitation of the study.

2. Empirical approach

To date, research on homelessness has focused on people who are either homeless and live on the street or (have to) spend the night in emergency shelters. As a result, neither “people who are homeless and have no contact with the institutions of the municipalities and providers of homeless assistance” (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2020, p. 488) nor those who live in unacceptable housing conditions (e.g., sleeping in a car, temporarily staying with acquaintances, or living in cheap boarding houses) are included in the study. From a scientific perspective, it is necessary to empirically as well as qualitatively analyze the perspectives of those people, who have categorically been neglected so far.

As a basis for the count, a workshop was organized to which all actors of the Düsseldorf homeless support system (DHSS) were invited to agree on the realization of the count and the standards as well as principles that would guide it. The developed principles enabled the count to be called “qualified.” In contrast to other counts, the actors in the field were involved in the development of the research design, and professionals and previously qualified people were a part of the count.

In the workshop with actors of the DHSS, the results of a literature-based analysis of previous counting procedures were presented, namely with experiences from Berlin, Dublin, Hamburg, and Paris. Based on these findings and the specific subjective experiences of the actors in DHSS, a concept was jointly developed for the count of homeless people: The Düsseldorfer Model. It was decided that the objective of the count in 2021 would be, firstly, to perform a count on a key date, with the purpose of analyzing the needs per a full count of Düsseldorf (i.e., “night count”) and a supplementary survey of relevant institutions and actors in clinics, police, job centers, and shelters to obtain and analyze information available on the key date. This means that the number of people who are homeless, in clinics or police custody, as well as the number of people who receive social support benefits for being unemployed from Germany’s job centers but do not pay for housing, as well as their registered postal addresses at homeless support institutions, were collected on the key date. Those relevant institutions and actors were identified together with actors in DHSS. Nevertheless, it must be mentioned

that any count can only ever be a momentary snapshot. Even though many counting teams assisted and various housing support institutions as well as hospitals and police custody were taken into account, it must be mentioned that any count can only ever be a snapshot. Second, the key date survey was complemented by a qualitative study, in which 30 people who are homeless as defined by the ETHOS typology participated in semistructured interviews aimed at gaining insight into their living conditions. This method enabled to include people on the verge of losing housing and ones who live in more insecure housing situations (e.g., “couch-surfers,” people temporarily housed by friends and acquaintances, as well as women who are dependent on male housing providers).

2.1. Quantitative study

2.1.1. Counting principles

For the night count of homeless people in Düsseldorf, Germany, the following principles were defined to ensure a standard of quality characteristics by the group of actors from the homeless support system:

2.1.1.1. Principle of ethics

During the night count, only people who seem or are homeless were to be counted. People were not to be woken up or interviewed at “their” place or “home,” so to speak. The people who were institutionally connected or known to the homeless support system were informed in advance by the street workers to reduce fear and worry about criminalization and/or registration. No offensive advertising or public announcement was broadcast in the local media to prevent self-appointed counters from joining the count unauthorized and thereby creating further dangers and uncertainties (e.g., knowledge of people’s hidden overnight locations and threats of violence). The count personnel involved were aware that it is ethically difficult to count the homeless and to thus categorize people as homeless without involving them. However, following the existing definitions, it was decided to mark people as being homeless in the night count if they were in public places (e.g., on the street, in parks, or under bridges), building entrances or other private spaces (e.g., bus stations, train stations, and ATM lobbies at banks), or dwellings that were not or no longer intended for continuous human habitation, and if they were already sleeping there, had lain down to sleep there, or were preparing to spend the night there (e.g., with sleeping bags, sitting on cardboard or benches, or even standing, sitting, or moving with other people and/or dogs). Meanwhile, places were counted if it appeared that they had been used in the past 24 h.

2.1.1.2. Principle of professionalism

The social authorities and all agencies of the independent homeless support system were continuously and consistently involved throughout the process of preparing, implementing, and interpreting the results (e.g., information on the current status of the scientific monitoring gathered at regular meetings and by distributing the protocol). To that purpose, a coordination group was initiated that was open to all actors involved. The count was planned within the group, while all other actors were consistently informed at regular meetings. All counters participated in an information-sharing and training session before the count. In that way, the quality of the count was guaranteed. Again, all persons involved in count were made aware of the count's objective and thus that not the number analyzed but instead the follow-up perspectives resulting from it were what mattered. By extension, both the quantitative and qualitative results were analyzed by a group of the homeless support system, and needs for improving the living conditions of homeless people were identified, along with recommendations for the further development of the support system.

2.1.1.3. Principle of the full count

The night count completely covered the city of Düsseldorf, which was divided into count areas based on the city's sociospatial structure (Landeshauptstadt Düsseldorf, 2017). The sociospatial knowledge of the professionals in the homeless support system and street workers was the basis of mapping to mark places within the count areas where homeless people usually stay. Those places were color-coded on the counting documents issued, for example, maps, so that personnel performing the count knew that those places were locations where homeless people can typically be found. Assigned count areas with more than one of those places were walked or driven past by personnel familiar with the target group or who were experienced in interacting with them. Each count area was walked or driven past by pairs of counters containing a professional and a volunteer.

2.1.2. Quantified count supplemented by the numbers in institutions on a key date

To enable a full coverage count of homeless people in Düsseldorf, a key date was set for the count: October 28, 2021. That date was chosen for two reasons. First, it is in the fall and thus neither too cold nor too hot, unlike in summer or winter when homeless people tend to choose various different overnight locations; and second, the yearly count conducted in some parts of the city since 1994 had also been conducted in late October (Plitt, 2021). On that key date, counting in all 179 social areas of Düsseldorf

was organized along with the collection of the number of people staying in institutions (i.e., hospitals, police stations, and shelters). Depending on their size, the social areas were walked or driven through by a team of two people. Each team consisted of a professional – a street worker or a specialist from the homeless support system or the social administration – and a volunteer. The volunteers were not sought through public appeals or volunteer agencies but were approached individually by the participating institutions.

Count personnel were qualified to engage in the context of information events, equipped with count-related folders, and received a telephone number of the count office for emergencies. In the information-sharing event offered at various times both on-site and online, the counters were informed about the counting method, their assignment to the count areas, and the precautions to be taken during the count. Among other things, counters were instructed to take a flashlight, not put themselves in danger, and take care of themselves by wearing warm clothing and taking warm beverages with them. They were also advised, if possible, to familiarize themselves with the count area in advance, in daylight, to aid their recognition at night. Counters could also ask questions concerning their task. Each pair of counters was given a folder with maps showing the specific area for which they were responsible. Each folder also contained a count sheet asking the counters to report how many people had been counted. The gender and age group of each person counted could also be recorded on the sheet based on estimates. It was also possible to indicate how many of the people counted were encountered in a couple and/or with dogs. However, no exact information was provided on the location of the person recorded if they were more than 18 years old and medical intervention was not required. Contact persons were available by telephone throughout the count.

In addition to the number of people counted, the numbers of postbox addresses were collected on the key date by the 10 homeless support institutions in Düsseldorf that provide postbox addresses. Postbox addresses serve as registration addresses for homeless people that are made available to them by such institutions as long as they regularly retrieve the mail. In Germany, unlike in other countries, the authorities are unwilling to accept an email address as a means of contact; instead, a registration address is generally required. Furthermore, the number of people receiving “unemployment benefit II” (ALG II) without housing costs was collected on the key date. Within the framework of basic security for job seekers, the German Social Welfare Act II stipulates that, under certain conditions, people can receive benefits for integrating into work as well as for securing their basic needs. ALG II is

intended to enable people who are capable of working to meet their basic material needs, insofar as they cannot cover those expenses with their own resources or with the help of others. The purpose of ALG II is to grant eligible individuals benefits that enable them to live in dignity. The number of postal addresses and the number receivers of ALG-II were expected to be similar to the numbers counted and were used as control numbers.

2.2. Qualitative study from the user's perspective

Conducting a qualitative survey from the subjective perspective of users allowed to clarify the conditions of the use or non-use of spaces at both social and institutional levels. Thus, the focus was which spaces enable a specific use for users of social work contexts, on the one hand, and, on the other, which location-specific behavior is associated with it. Such sociospatial user-based research allows focusing on “which (non-)benefits the social work services have from the perspective of the users (content level) and how the users make use of the social work services (process level)” (van Rießen, 2022a).

Following the approach of sociospatial user research, 30 users of the homeless support system participated in semistructured interviews (Helfferrich, 2011) to gain insight into the living situations of homeless people, which allow interviewees to speak as freely as possible to approximate an open conversation. The guidelines used in the interviews enabled setting thematic emphases to similar extents and ensured the comparability of the interviews (Gläser & Laudel, 2010). The interview guideline developed based on Susanne Gerull's (2018) first systematic life situation study, considers the multidimensionality of different areas of life as well as their interactions and thus enables “a holistic view of people's life situation” (Gerull, 2018, p. 3). The starting point was therefore the empirically analyzed perspective of users on the topics of their material situation, employment, housing, health, security, social participation, and social networks, along with a question about their hopes for the future. Those life situation areas were extended with questions about the reasons for the interviewees' homelessness, their everyday life, and recent changes in life due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Other possible categories could not be considered in this study. The transcribed guided interviews were analyzed using content-structuring analysis following Kuckartz (2018).

The interviews were conducted not only with people who are homeless but also with people who spend their nights in various settings (e.g., with friends or in inpatient facilities) because they do not have their own residence. Because the interviews could be conducted only with users of the homeless support system, only people who

were interested and users of the homeless support system could be reached. The interviews were arranged by the professionals but conducted by employees of the association responsible for this study. Nevertheless, the setting of the homeless support system, given the institutional context, could have biased interviewees toward giving socially desirable responses. To minimize that potential influence as well as to reach diverse users, interviews were available to be conducted at different times of day, and interviewees could be interviewed wherever they wanted and with interviewers of whichever gender they preferred.

3. Key findings

3.1. Results of the quantitative key date survey

The counting was performed on October 28, 2021, between 10:30 p.m. and 1:00 a.m. During that time, all 179 social areas of Düsseldorf were walked or driven through by 70 teams, for a total of 141 counters. Table 1 presents the results of the night count. Ultimately, 239 people who were or seemed to be homeless were recorded by the teams during the night count: 186 men, 31 women, and 22 people of unknown gender. Furthermore, 22 people with no permanent address were reported by the clinics, and no one without a permanent address was in police custody. On the key date, 198 people — 124 men and 74 women — were accommodated in Düsseldorf's shelters.

In addition, 2241 postbox addresses (1620 men, 620 women, and 1 other) were provided on the key date by the ten homeless support institutions in Düsseldorf that enable postbox addresses. The job center also reported 461 people who were receiving ALG-II without housing costs on the key date. Those figures were collected as control figures. Table 2 shows the number of postbox addresses and the number of recipients of ALG-II without housing costs.

The high number of people with postbox addresses was discussed with actors in the homeless support system, who determined that the number indicates the large population living in precarious housing conditions. Examples include postal delivery workers living in their cars, people living in inadequate housing or houses without official postal addresses, or people living in precarious housing conditions that prevent them from providing such addresses as their postal addresses.

3.2. Results of the qualitative study

From September 21 to November 24, 2021, semistructured interviews were conducted with 30 people who are homeless. The qualitative study reached 30 homeless people, all 24–60 years old, 23 of whom were men, and seven of whom were women. Although the use of the category “person with migration background” is often

Table 1. Results of the night count

	Men	Women	Other	Unknown	Total	Couples included	Families including	Dogs*
I. People living on the street and accompanied by dogs								
Total	186	31	0	22	239	6	0	8
II. Persons staying in institutions and accompanied by dogs on the night of October 28-29, 2021								
Hospitals	16	6	0	0	22	0	0	0
Police Stations	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Shelters	124	74	0	0	198	4	1	2
Total (1-3)	140	80	0	0	220	4	1	2

Note: *Information about dog ownership was gathered in this study due to the challenges that it poses for users of the homeless support system because only certain institutions allow dogs.

Table 2. Number of postbox addresses and number of recipients of ALG-II without housing costs

	Men	Women	Other	Unknown	Total
III. Postbox addresses					
Total	1,620	620	1	0	2,241
IV. Total number of recipients of ALG-II without costs for housing					
Total					461

Note: ALG-II refers to unemployment benefit II.

criticized, especially for its implied homogenization of diverse life experiences and situations in relation to a specific criterion (e.g., Stošić, 2017; Castro Varela, 2013), the criterion was collected to make those experiences visible. Based on the definition of *migration background* from the perspective of the person interviewed, 11 people with such a background provided qualitative data. The summary results of the empirical analysis are presented in the following based on the themes of their life situations identified and the supplementary questions of the interview guidelines.

3.2.1. Reasons for homelessness

The loss of personal and family relationships as well as long-term drug addiction, often dating back to adolescence or criminal offenses and imprisonment, had resulted in instability and the loss of housing. Other reasons for homelessness mentioned were the loss of a job, the shame of seeking support, and the lack of integration into the labor market. In some cases, psychological burden in the context of separation and custody disputes had led to the loss of employment and, in turn, the loss of housing. Eviction lawsuits, the demolition of residential buildings, housing auctions, or the termination of leases were other reasons for the loss of housing. Gender-specific reason for homelessness mentioned from almost half of the women interviewed was violence in their intimate relationships. By nationality, persons not of German nationality additionally reported a lack of structural conditions that

would prevent homelessness, including the impossibility of obtaining a work permit.

3.2.2. Everyday life structure

Most interviewees reported living an everyday life structured mostly by the structure of the help system and regular appointments for food distribution, for housing viewings, and with authorities and doctors. Women in the sample mentioned the importance of finding a warm, safe place, and being at an emergency shelter as early as possible in the evening. Meanwhile, individuals being rehabilitated for drug abuse with substitute drugs reported seeking overnight accommodations as close as possible to the site of their medical care.

3.2.3. Relevance of participation and social networks

There is barely any contact with past contacts due to the fact that the networks had “grown apart” because of unemployment and that leisure activities had changed or are no longer financially possible. While for about one-third of the interviewees, new romantic relationships, and a new group of friends play an important role in terms of their own social network and provide cohesion, other interviewees lack social contact and feel lonely. If contacts do exist, they are often with “homeless acquaintances.” The intensity of contact with parents and other family members is heterogeneous and ranges from daily contact to no contact. All interviewees experience varying degrees of support from social institutions, social workers, and probation officers. In shelters, contacts are described as “superficial” due to the lack of common rooms.

3.2.4. Safety

Most interviewees reported experiencing highly threatening situations, ranging from robberies, threats of violence, and being pepper-sprayed in their sleeping bags to injuries due to beer bottles, knives, fights, and even being doused with oil while sleeping. Among the interviewees, women reported more instances of sexual assault than men. Regarding safety in shelters, the lack of rooms with

locks and secure places for belongings was also mentioned. Factors reported to reinforce a sense of security were having a residence of one's own, the prospect of a job, and, at least for some interviewees, knowledge of self-defense skills. To avoid attention and involvement in dangerous situations, the interviewees also mentioned trying to "always be neat and tidy" and evading contact with other people whose center of life is the street and to thereby "not get involved in their problems."

3.2.5. Health

Although nearly all interviewees have health insurance, the use of medical services is a major hurdle for two-thirds of the interviewees due to embarrassment as well as the challenge of fixed appointments or bad experiences with doctors in the past. There are hardly any fixed contacts with general practitioners or dentists, which also means, among other things, that "doctors are not visited as often as they should be." On the other hand, the medical care center and outreach services are mentioned positively and are used. All interviewees rated their own health as poor. The health complaints can primarily be classified into three categories: Dental health, addiction-related complaints, and consequences of exposure to cold.

3.2.6. The relevance of housing

The interviewees stated that they stay with friends, in shelters, or on the streets. The shelter facilities are evaluated heterogeneously: Although the "roof over one's head" and not being in the cold are described as positive, the lack of privacy is criticized. The need for a home of one's own, "a door that you can close behind you" is expressed from everyone and often related to the idea of "having a normal life." According to the interviewees, the challenge of finding an apartment can be attributed to stereotypes of landlords, lack of social housing, and high costs.

3.2.7. Employment

Most of the interviewees reported being unemployed and living on social benefits. Whereas some older respondents had various work experiences characterized by different levels of education, a wide variety of fields, and diverse employment relationships, a few of the younger interviewees stated that they were even working for temporary employment agencies or in illegal sectors of the economy. To be able to afford their own residences, they greatly aspired for employment.

3.2.8. Material situation

The interviewees also reported receiving social benefits. However, because the benefits are insufficient, several of the interviewees have resorted to "scrounging," selling newspapers, or collecting donations. For the interviewees,

buying clothes, making unplanned purchases, and engaging in leisure activities are hardly possible due to their limited financial means. Therefore, the many different offerings of social work institutions in Düsseldorf, including of breakfast and clothing, are regularly sought.

3.2.9. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

The interviewees predominantly evaluated their experiences and restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic negatively. The limited opening hours of public institutions due to the risk of infection have meant that spaces to escape the elements or engage in activities have been rare – for example, libraries are closed, and public transportation has to be avoided to prevent infection. Beyond that, services offered by institutions for people who are homeless have changed or been reduced, and legally imposed curfews have been difficult for people without housing to obey. The interviewees also reported perceiving an increased potential for violence and changes in interpersonal relationships while living on the streets.

3.2.10. Future

When asked about their life situations in a year's time, nearly half of the interviewees mentioned the desire and basic goal of having their own home. That wish was accompanied by the imagination of having "a totally normal life again." A family or stable relationship was also desired, along with employment, which together were thought make such a life is possible. However, regarding the salary and cost of living in the city, one interviewee also stated, "Düsseldorf is too expensive for normal people. Housing is luxury in this city."

4. Concluding remarks

The Düsseldorfer Model of counting homeless people allows focusing on the number and situation of homeless people in Düsseldorf, both within the framework of a quantitative count (i.e., a complete night count of the city's areas according to specific criteria and a key date survey of actors involved in the homeless support system) and a qualitative survey. Only following the qualitative approach, however, was it possible to ascertain how many people are homeless and to reveal their living situations. Analogous to experiences reported in other cities, such quantitative analyses of the number of homeless people and qualitative supplements of their living situations are prerequisites for deriving concrete recommendations for action (e.g., Arbeitskreis Wohnraum für junge Menschen, 2021; Busch-Geertsema, 2019; City of Paris, 2021; Hermans & Pleace, 2020; Gerull, 2019). Based on the empirical findings, recommendations for action for homeless support institutions are as follows.

4.1. Interpretation of the number of homeless people with postbox addresses

The high number of people with postbox addresses may indicate a high number of people who are not yet homeless but who live in precarious housing situations. However, more detailed analyses and interpretations of their numbers are necessary to learn who exactly is behind the postbox addresses and what support services they need. With such information, it is possible to provide specific services to the target group. Indeed, the high number of postbox addresses found in this study shows a need for action.

4.2. Consideration of diverse life situations

Even if DHSS is characterized by an array of services, whether current services comprehensively address the diverse, living situations of homeless people remains unclear. The empirical analyses of the interviews suggest that people who are homeless are not a homogeneous group and that their specific life situations have to be considered in a highly open-minded way. That need raises the questions of not only whether services are sufficient for specific situations (e.g., women and couples) but also who uses the services, who does not, and why they do not. Those questions bring into focus of the institutional barriers and limitations that lead to homeless people not using them. For instance, as the empirical analyses showed, shelters do not afford privacy. In response, single and double rooms need to be part of the future standard to enable security, autonomy, and privacy.

4.3. Analyses of (non-)users

Because the conducted qualitative research using interviews in facilities for homeless people, only individuals who were institutionally connected were reached. For that reason, people with psychological handicaps, who generally do not access the services of homeless support, were not reached (Bäumel *et al.*, 2017). Thus, groups of people do not or cannot use the help system need to be identified, as do the services specifically for them that should be developed or expanded.

4.4. Importance of own housing for social participation

The importance of having one's own housing became specifically clear in the empirical analyses of living situations as an essential element of comprehensive social participation. Without one's own housing, incidents with violence and theft remain unavoidable, both on the street and, in some cases, in shelters. Newer models of homeless support such as Housing First (Tsemberis, 2010), which understands homeless people as active subjects and

thus seeks to develop and realize perspectives beyond homelessness, therefore needing to be in sharper focus. In addition, whether a quota exists for the construction for Housing First residences needs to be determined so that sufficient living space is available for homeless people.

4.5. Access to work

The empirical analyses revealed that the interviewees want to work. In that light, it would be relevant to develop job offerings after housing is created. In addition to creating offerings for employment, services that structure day-to-day life can provide the kinds of orientation and support that enable integration into the labor market.

4.6. Sociospatial-related social work

The empirical analyses additionally captured the experiences of exclusion that homeless people experience daily. Thus, added to the recommendations mentioned here, the question of spatial exclusion should be investigated in the context of sociospatial social work (e.g., Deinet 2009; Knopp & van Rießen 2020). It is also necessary to create solutions with the people themselves, as well as the professionals, the administration, and policymakers, that do not perpetuate displacement and that account for the fact that people who are homeless also need structure and places to stay.

4.7. Organization of the support system

According to the empirical analyses, entry into the support system, especially at shelters, should be organized so that people take the help offered and are accompanied when they leave the system, which should happen as soon as possible. By offering housing within the framework of Housing First projects and enabling everyday structure, systems can enable them to change and improve their living conditions in the long term.

4.8. Challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic

Needless to say, the pandemic has exacerbated the homelessness crisis in many parts of the world due to job losses, rising living cost, other financial hardships, and reduced social services caused by the pandemic (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2021; Watts *et al.*, 2022). Counting the number of homeless people has become more challenging than before as the case of Düsseldorf due to increased undercounting, hidden homelessness, and people who are not regularly in contact with support services, and the situations will likely continue in the years to come. A more refined comprehensive method is clearly warranted to count the homeless population more accurately, especially in the crises, such as the pandemic.

All in all, the aspects mentioned herein show that the support system for homeless people has to be developed not only for but also with the people. The empirical analyses of the qualitative interviews especially highlight the need to understand homeless people as experts of their own lives and to enable them to build a foundation so that they can sustainably improve their living conditions. In social work, the subject orientation as a normative principle guiding action thus offers an opportunity to focus on the people themselves and to promote perspectives on autonomy and self-determination (van Rießen, 2020; 2022b).

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Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study was guided by the research ethics code of the German Society for Social Work, which includes research ethics principles and scientific standards for social work research.

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Availability of data

Not applicable.

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