

Poverty between the cracks. Complements and corrections to EU-SILC for hidden groups of poor people

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Every year the Belgian (and European) authorities publish figures concerning poverty and insecurity, based on the EU-SILC surveys (EU Surveys of Income and Living Conditions). From these, it can be seen that the at-risk-of-poverty rate in Belgium for the year 2009 was 14.6%. The EU-SILC also contains all kinds of other data that enable us to study the living conditions of households in a multi-dimensional way. Moreover, this survey is a 'rotating panel', which means that one quarter of the sample is renewed every year. In other words, every household forms part of the sample for between one and three years, which allows limited longitudinal analyses to be performed. Despite the wealth of information that can be extracted from the EU-SILC, problems do arise with the data related to poverty, which are attributable to the difficulty in reaching the poor in general. For this reason, the Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service (www.combatpoverty.be) submitted a research proposal in the context of the AGORA programme of the Federal Research Policy Office (www.belspo.be).

The purpose of this research can be summarised into three main points: (1) a statistical analysis of the selective non-response from groups that are included in the EU-SILC; (2) an identification of groups that for various reasons were not included in the EU-SILC, although it is known that they have a relatively high risk of poverty; (3) a complementary survey into the living conditions of some 'forgotten groups of poor people'.

1. Selective non-response in the EU-SILC

Within the sample of households that were contacted for the EU-SILC survey, it is presumed that poor households have a higher risk of non-response. This non-response has various levels and forms:

- initial non-response (after first attempt at contact) versus 'attrition' (non-response during a subsequent wave as part of a panel survey);
- unreachability (e.g. because the address is incorrect or the person in question does not respond to the attempt at contact), refusal and interruption of the interview;
- unit non-response (a household that does not respond) versus item non-response (no answer to certain questions).

Little is yet known about the *initial non-response*. In the first EU-SILC wave this amounted to approximately 40%, a little under half of which was attributable to refusals. Note that the term 'initial non-response' refers not only to the first wave of the EU-SILC, but also to the 25% of new households that are involved every year.

It is presumed that the non-response rate among poor households is higher, on the one hand because of language barriers among immigrants and, on the other hand,

for reasons similar to the attrition problem (see below). The potential distortion caused by initial non-response in the EU-SILC has so far not yet been thoroughly studied. Although only limited information is available for this, to us it seems possible and desirable to do this. For all households, we do have (a) basic information from the National Register (age, sex, nationality, profession, civil status, etc.) and (b) an address. The latter can be linked to socio-economic profile data about the statistical sector (neighbourhood) in which this address is located. In this way, the selectivity of the non-response can be fairly well mapped.

We were able to analyse attrition in detail because this involves households that have participated during a certain wave but no longer participated in a subsequent wave for some reason. Detailed information is therefore available about these households. We could indeed study the determinants per 'type' of non-response (unreachability, refusal or interruption of the interview). Although financial poverty as such does not have a significant influence on the various forms of non-response, it does seem that the lack of income from employment, a low level of education of the parents and the residential status (tenant as opposed to owner) have a clear effect. In addition, poor households move house more frequently, which increases the risk of unreachability.

Focus groups with experienced interviewers from the ASDEI¹ further demonstrate that non-response is related not so much to shame because of the low income, but to the following factors:

- general mistrust by those with a low level of education;
- the complexity of the questionnaire (paradoxically, the questions about income);
- the fact that tenants more often live in apartments or studio flats, where contact via an intercom leads to refusal more often than face-to-face contact at the front door.

The combination of statistical analyses with qualitative information from the focus groups can contribute to a better preventive and remedial approach to non-response. Non-response can be partially avoided by (a) simplifying the questionnaires (e.g. by offering respondents encountering difficulties the possibility of skipping certain questions); (b) further refining the documentation for interviewers and better training concerning complex items (especially relating to sources of income); and (c) enlisting experienced interviewers to train new colleagues. Experienced interviewers have developed a certain proficiency in anticipating non-response, in their way of making contact and their presentation style as well as in their knowledge of bottlenecks in the questions.

¹ ADSEI = General Directorate for Statistics and Economic Information, the government department responsible for the EU-SILC survey.

In so far as selective non-response and attrition still occur, they can to a certain extent be remedied by reconsidering the observations in the dataset. At the moment, weights have been estimated in the EU-SILC datasets, but there is still substantial room for improvement in the estimation methods, including using individual estimation models for initial non-response and for attrition.

2. Population groups with a high risk of poverty that are not included in the EU-SILC surveys

A second goal of this survey was to examine which groups with an elevated risk of poverty were not included in the EU-SILC *from the outset*. We identified a number of groups and, based on existing studies, drew an approximate picture of their risk of poverty based on existing studies. In the first place, this involves groups that fall outside the sampling frame of the EU-SILC, specifically:

- collective households (including elderly people in residential homes, people living in institutions, prisons and convents/monasteries). With the exception of the latter, we can say that these groups have an elevated risk of poverty;
- people who are not listed in the National Register (or related registers). This applies to undocumented immigrants, who are presumed to have a (very) high risk of poverty but whose numbers are unknown.

In addition to groups that 'by definition' fall outside the sampling frame, some groups rarely or never stay at their legally registered address and, consequently, cannot be reached. This group includes, for example, rough sleepers and homeless people, as well as caravan dwellers and itinerant groups.

Taken together, the aforementioned groups constitute between 2 and 3% of the Belgian population (210,000 to 320,000 people). Estimates vary greatly, particularly of undocumented immigrants (between 30,000 and 140,000). The impact of these groups on the 'corrected' risk of poverty in Belgium is difficult to estimate, but could lie somewhere between 0.6 and 1.7 percentage points. With the exception of their quantitative significance, some groups are also important because of their specific living conditions (e.g. caravan dwellers) or their extreme poverty (e.g. rough sleepers or undocumented immigrants).

3. Complementary survey among hidden groups of poor people

The majority of our research related to a complementary survey among two selected population groups that do not form part of the sampling frame of the EU-SILC: rough sleepers and homeless people, and undocumented immigrants. These

groups were chosen because of their high level of obscurity, their relative size and their particularly high level of deprivation.

3.1 Methodology

The survey was preceded by long and careful preparation: following a survey of the relevant literature, consultation took place with target group organisations and specialised services concerning the appropriateness of a survey. The content and procedure were thoroughly examined in focus groups. An initial pilot survey was conducted by staff of the Combat Poverty, Insecurity and Social Exclusion Service, that also served as a hub for contacts with services in the field. The questionnaire was adapted in several stages and question modules were developed per target group with respect to specific aspects of their living conditions. IPSOS (the market research company which was responsible for the field work) provided a selected group of interviewers and was constantly supported by the research team.

Despite the remaining bottlenecks, we can state that the methodology of this survey proved its worth and can serve as a model for similar complementary surveys in the future. Collaboration between the research team, the survey team and social sector services is in our view an absolute condition for effectively reaching the intended target groups, although compromises do have to be made with respect to the 'random' nature of the sampling and even the formulated sampling quotas. An alternative approach using the snowball method appeared to produce only a limited return.

As far as the actual field work is concerned, despite all precautions, our experience teaches us that:

- the questionnaires should be further simplified;
- a balance must be sought in the sampling between scientific criteria and practical feasibility;
- undocumented immigrants are particularly hard to reach – partly as a result of language barriers and partly as a result of their fear of being caught;
- the interviewers must be given clear instructions relating to the interpretation of key concepts that sometimes have a different meaning within the context of extreme poverty (household, work, level of education, etc.);
- the interviewers themselves must also be psychologically counselled so that they can cope well when faced with extreme poverty;
- translation problems must be anticipated as fully as possible;
- sufficient time must be provided for this kind of survey.
- Finally, the remuneration of respondents proved to be a sensitive issue: it is best to agree in advance with the intermediary organisations about whether this remuneration will be given to the organisation or to the individual and whether it will be paid in cash or in kind. However, in the first instance, the

budget must provide room for this remuneration and the red tape must be kept within reasonable limits.

3.2 Results

Firstly, the gravity of the poverty situation in both target groups is noticeable. Not only does the vast majority live below the poverty line (72% of rough sleepers and homeless people and 96% of undocumented immigrants) but most of them live well below it. Income is extremely low, especially among undocumented immigrants. Both target groups therefore also demonstrate material deprivation indices of 100% and, despite their health problems, sometimes go without health care for financial reasons. Among rough sleepers, specific indications of hardship are evident (no access to potable water, toilet or shower in their place of residence); the quality of accommodation among undocumented immigrants is often below the minimum standards.

One in five male rough sleepers and homeless people and one in five undocumented immigrants have worked in the previous month. The fact that most of them still live below the poverty line demonstrates the precarious nature of that work: it is agency work, part-time or temporary work, it is badly paid and often also involves moonlighting - sometimes unpaid or remunerated in kind. In other words, work is not a way out of poverty for these groups.

Twenty-four percent of rough sleepers and homeless people and 37% of undocumented immigrants assess their own health as 'poor' to 'very poor'. Their psychological and nervous conditions are striking: sleep deprivation, loneliness, anxiety and addiction. Among rough sleepers, alcohol abuse affects one in four but sleep problems encourage the use of alcohol and narcotics. It is also worrying that those who are sick do not see a doctor because of the financial obstacles. The serious risks of this are evident for instance from the example of a homeless person with diabetes who cannot afford any medical supervision.

3.3 Implications for research and policy

In the first instance, our survey points to the importance and the feasibility of specific additions to the EU-SILC survey. The fact that this has worked in two target groups that are very hard to reach suggests that it should also work with other target groups, provided the required resources and preparation are envisaged for this.

It seems desirable to us that (a) this type of survey also be carried out among the other population groups that currently fall outside the EU-SILC samples (those in 'collective households', caravan dwellers, itinerant populations, etc.); (b) this type of survey should take place regularly (even if annual follow-up, as in the EU-SILC,

is not feasible); and (c) the methodology be propagated at EU level. As is the case for poverty in general, it is desirable that the living situation of these hidden groups be repeatedly measured (in order to monitor evolutions) and can be compared among countries.

Specific research projects in order to utilise these data further are of course just as desirable. Within the context of this report, only the first analysis of the data collected has been performed.

Of course, the *policy implications* of these surveys also deserve due attention. We are thinking specifically of the following aspects:

- theoretically, adequate rules are in place to make the guaranteed minimum income accessible to rough sleepers and homeless people. The fact that the majority, even among the homeless people housed in shelters, are nonetheless living below this level raises serious questions about the application of the relevant legislation;
- that undocumented immigrants live below the minimum subsistence level was to some extent predictable, but the intensity of their poverty does raise questions about a more humane response;
- the large number of women in our target groups who live with children is striking: 31.7% of rough sleepers and homeless people, and 53% of undocumented immigrants. The rates of long-term poverty for these children are extremely high. Consequently, these families most urgently deserve shelter facilities;
- notwithstanding the precarious health of both target groups, some of them remain beyond the reach of health care services – even though emergency services do exist. It would be desirable to expand free medical services for these groups;
- local authorities, Public Social Welfare Centres (OCMWs) and the homeless shelter sector can learn lessons from the survey data to improve the living conditions for rough sleepers. As an initial step towards this, basic provisions could be ensured in the immediate vicinity of places where rough sleepers are bedding down, such as drinking water and sanitary facilities. Other signals concern the (in)adequacy of the number of emergency shelter places, quality of reception in shelters, flexible financial regulations, access to shelters for animals, etc..