



Towards a European Pillar of Social Rights

HOUSING

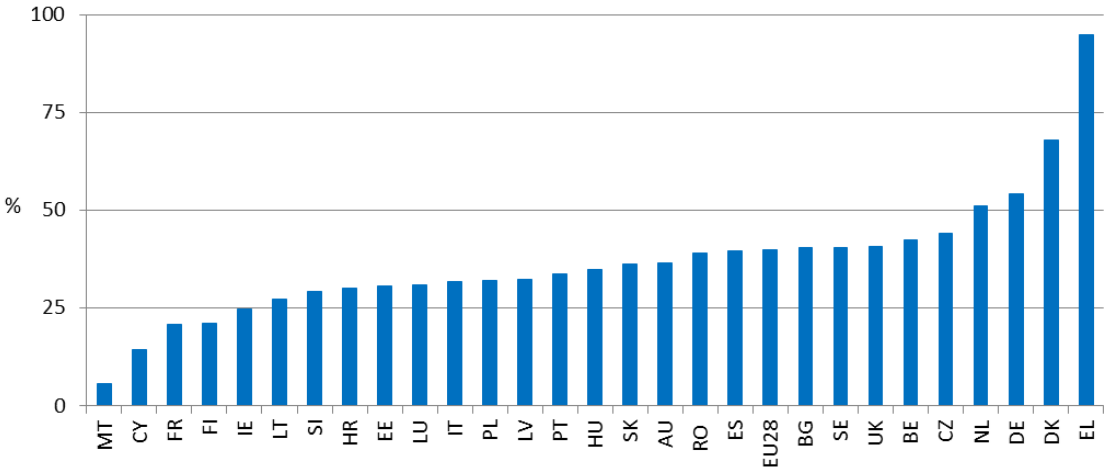
Access to housing is essential to meet basic needs, but it is also a precondition to participate in society and access a job. Housing costs take up a large share of the household budget and represent the largest single expenditure for many people, by the time elements such as rent, gas, electricity, water, furniture and repairs are added up. Cash housing assistance plays an important role in addressing poverty. Moreover, access to shelter (emergency, temporary accommodation) and linking up shelter to basic support services are important to reduce homelessness.

Challenges

In 2014, 70% of the EU population lived in owner-occupied dwellings, 19% were renting accommodation at market price and 11% were tenants in reduced-rent or free accommodation. Limited access to affordable housing can be an obstacle to labour market adjustment and job uptake. Faced with growing demand, particularly cities have a limited capacity to supply additional affordable and quality housing. New investments, particularly in new construction, slowed down during the crisis due to the adjustment in house prices from elevated pre-crisis levels and existing zoning regulations. Mortgages lending activity also decreased considerably. Growing financial difficulties for people on low and middle incomes have resulted in more frequent arrears in rental and mortgage payments and a rise in evictions and foreclosures.

Barriers to receiving cash housing assistance and to affordable social housing for the most vulnerable people are increasing the risk of homelessness. Housing assistance improves the incomes of those affected by poverty and plays an automatic stabilisation function in economic downturns, as it tends to grow or remain constant while incomes decline.

Figure: Share of people in poverty for whom housing costs represent more than 40% of disposable income



Source: EU-SILC; Note: People in poverty-below 60% of median equalised income.

The demand for shelter changes seasonally and may sharply increase following crisis situations. The main challenge is thus to enable universal and rapid access to shelter for people in all kinds of emergency situations, while taking into account available means of Member States in particular to mobilise extra capacities in times of crisis. There are gaps in the degree to which shelters are adapted to individual needs, for example by ensuring accessibility for disabled persons, and in access to more permanent accommodation.

Situation at EU level

In accordance with Articles 151 and 153 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the Union and its Member States have the objective to combat social exclusion, and the Union shall support and complement Member State activities in this domain. Article 34(3) of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union recognises, in accordance with the rules laid down by Union law and national law and practices, inter alia the right to housing assistance for ensuring a decent existence for all those who lack sufficient resources.

As regards access to shelter, EU legislation lays down specific protection for particularly vulnerable people such as unaccompanied children, asylum-seekers and refugees.¹ Article 9 of the EU Victims' Directive establishes minimum rights for victims of crime, including victims of gender-based violence.² The Employment Guidelines emphasise the role of affordable, accessible and quality services such as housing.³

Situation in the Member States

Directly enforceable rights to housing exist in a few Member States only, although provisions on the protection of the home appear in most national constitutions. Housing markets, regulations and support forms are very different but only a few Member States have a large social housing sector. Some forms of emergency accommodation are provided in each Member State, with usually separate mechanisms for asylum-seekers and refugees. Significant differences exist across the EU in terms of shelter quality, coverage, capacity and support services. Homelessness has increased during the last decade in almost all EU countries and prolonged or recurrent shelter stays are

¹ Council Directive 2013/33/EU laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection.
² Council Directive 2012/29/EU establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime.
³ Council Decision 2015/1848 of 5 October 2015 on guidelines for the employment policies of the Member States for 2015.

common, yet only about half of the Member States implement integrated homelessness strategies. Shelter needs are especially high in countries receiving many migrants and/or refugees.

International dimensions

Various international provisions related to the right to housing and access to shelter apply e.g. the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; The Council of Europe's European Social Charter and Revised Charter⁴, the European Convention on Human Rights; the Convention on the Rights of the Child; the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention.⁵ The United Nation's sustainable development goals promote access to basic services and adequate, safe housing.

⁴ The European Social Charter is a Council of Europe treaty which was adopted in 1961 and revised in 1996.

⁵ Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence
<http://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/090000168008482e>.