The politics of counting homelessness: The case of Ireland

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Abstract

Homelessness remains a critical social issue in Ireland, yet its true scale is systematically obscured by definitional limitations, methodological inconsistencies, and political interference in data collection. While official statistics reported 16,058 individuals relying on emergency accommodation as of July 2025 (a rise of +244% since July 2015), this figure excludes substantial populations: rough sleepers, domestic violence survivors, asylum seekers, and those experiencing hidden homelessness through enforced parental co-residence. This article examines the politics of homelessness enumeration through a critical analysis of seven data sources, policy documents spanning 2014-2025 and stakeholder interviews. The study reveals how Ireland's measurement system exemplifies the political life of numbers. The analysis exposes five interconnected dimensions of measurement failure: fragmentation of sources and measurement approaches, methodological inconsistencies that undermine longitudinal analysis, systematic undercounting that renders substantial population invisible, documented political manipulation and data integrity concerns, and structural barriers that impede comprehensive data collection and analysis. The findings demonstrate how apparently technical decisions about data collection and analysis become sites of political contestation. The research reveals the measurement

politics in contemporary welfare states, demonstrating the need for inclusive frameworks, integrated systems, and transparent practices that prioritise social justice over administrative convenience.

Key words: homelessness; Ireland; data; measurement; consistency

Introduction

Homelessness remains a critical and complex social issue, underscoring systemic social inequalities and reflecting broader challenges in housing accessibility for all members of society. In Europe, homelessness measurement has emerged as a deeply contested terrain where technical methodologies intersect with political imperatives, revealing the political life of numbers. Porter (1995) explains this as the way in which quantification and objectivity serve as tools for negotiating power, establishing authority, and managing distrust in public life. Counting homelessness is fundamentally a political act rather than neutral, technical exercise. As Desrosières (2002) argues in *The Politics of Large Numbers*, statistical categories do not merely describe social reality, they actively construct it, determining which population become visible to policy interventions and which remain in the shadows of official recognition.

This dynamic is particularly pronounced in Ireland, where homelessness has become a defining political issue in the past decade. 16,058 people were recorded as residing in emergency accommodation (state procured hostel accommodation, bed and breakfast, hotels and family hubs for homeless individuals and families) during the week of July 21-27, 2025, including 11,044 adults and 5,014 child dependents (DHLGH, 2025). This figure is generated through the Pathway Accommodation and Support System (PASS)[1], an administrative database tracking individuals accessing Section 10-funded emergency accommodation[2] and homelessness services. PASS represents one of the most extensive and reliable systems of data collection on emergency accommodation usage in Europe, providing Ireland with detailed understanding of service engagement. However, as an administrative dataset designed for service delivery coordination rather than comprehensive enumeration, PASS captures only those interfacing with formal support systems, offering only a partial glimpse of Ireland's housing crisis. Homelessness figures based on PASS do not include people sleeping rough, those in shelters for domestic violence, and the vast population experiencing 'hidden homelessness' (individuals staying temporarily with friends, family or in other precarious arrangements that fall outside formal service systems).

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[1] PASS is an online shared system utilised by every homeless service provider and all local authorities in Ireland.

[2] Section 10-funded accommodation refers to homelessness services and supports financed under Section 10 of the Housing Act 1988. This section allows the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to provide funding to local authorities, which in turn support emergency accommodation, outreach services, and other homelessness interventions.

The scale of populations falling outside this administrative dataset is substantial. In Dublin alone, an additional 121 people were reported in the latest rough sleeper count, in spring 2025 (DRHE, 2025), a separate enumeration methodology conducted biannually that while subject to methodological limitations common to Point-in-Time (PIT) counts, provides complementary data on this population. A one-time report from the Domestic Abuse Services National Statistics reported 1,138 women and 1,667 children stayed for one night or more in domestic violence refuges and supported accommodation in 2018 (Safe Ireland, 2018) – population typically excluded from homelessness services datasets due to the separation of domestic violence support systems. Even more striking is the phenomenon of enforced intergenerational co-residence: Census data from 2022 revealed that 520,000 young adults in Ireland still live with their parents (CSO, 2023), with 56.2% of Irish adults aged 25-29 remaining in their family home (significantly above the EU average of 41.7%) (Eurostat, 2024). When surveyed, only 16% of young adults living with their parents did not cite financial constraints as their main reason (CSO, 2021). According to Simon Community[3], one in four people in Ireland has been affected by hidden homelessness, relying on family or friends for shelter while remaining invisible in official statistics (Simon Community, 2022). This has led researchers to speak of 'Ireland's hidden homelessness crisis' (Hearne and McSweeney, 2023), emphasising the pervasive, yet systematically uncounted, nature of housing insecurity.

This evidence base demonstrates how official monthly homelessness figures, limited to access to emergency accommodation, capture only a fraction of housing insecurity in Ireland. Different definitional frameworks yield substantially different counts: service-based definitions enumerate those accessing formal support systems, while broader housing insecurity frameworks encompass populations experiencing precarious arrangements outside these systems. As Cobham (2020) points out, policies and decisions are underpinned by evidential data; thus, being excluded from these datasets equates to being overlooked.

This article contributes to the growing literature on the politics of homelessness measurement by providing a detailed empirical analysis of how these dynamics operate in the Irish context; it examines how Ireland's homelessness counting practices reflect broader patterns of what Fraser (1987) terms 'needs interpretation' – the political process through which social problems are defined, bounded, and rendered amenable to particular forms of intervention. Through systematic analysis of official data sources – policy documents and reports – the article outlines the different sources of information on homelessness, revealing how Ireland's homelessness counting practices exclude substantial populations through definitions, politics, and service constraints. The result is a measurement system that serves particular political functions, but fails to capture the full scope of housing insecurity experienced by

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[3] Major network of non-profit organisations in Ireland that provide support and accommodation to people experiencing homelessness or at risk of becoming homeless.

Irish residents. By examining Ireland as a case study in the politics of homelessness measurement, this article contributes to broader theoretical debates on the relationship between quantification, governance, and social justice. It demonstrates how apparently technical decisions about data collection and statistical methodology become sites of political contestation through data debates, with material consequences for vulnerable populations. In doing so, it advances understanding of how measurement politics operate in contemporary welfare states and identifies potential pathways toward more inclusive and democratic approaches to social problem definition and policy response.

The first section examines the theoretical foundations of data politics in homelessness measurement, reviewing critical data studies scholarship, the European context of enumeration practices and the methodological challenges that perpetuate systematic exclusions. The second section outlines the mixed-methods used to analyse Ireland's homelessness data ecosystem and presents the different data sources identified and the findings, revealing systematic exclusions, methodological inconsistencies, and temporal variations in data reporting practices. Finally, the last section discusses five critical dimensions of measurement failure: the fragmentation of sources and measurement, inconsistency in measurement, the scale and politics of homelessness undercounting, documented political manipulation and data integrity concerns, and structural barriers to comprehensive data collection that undermine evidence-based policymaking.

The data politics of homelessness

The measurement of homelessness sits at the intersection of technical methodology and political power, embodying what Desrosières (2002) identifies as the fundamental tension between statistical objectivity and social construction. Within this contested field, Critical Data Studies have illuminated how seemingly neutral quantification practices embedded within particular institutional and political contexts serve to reinforce existing power structures while rendering certain populations invisible to policy intervention. This review of the literature examines three interconnected dimensions of homelessness measurement politics: the theoretical foundations of data politics, the European context of homelessness enumeration, and the methodological challenges that perpetuate systematic exclusions.

Data as political infrastructure

The politics of homelessness measurement must be understood within the broader theoretical framework of Critical Data Studies, which challenges the assumed neutrality of quantification practices. Gitelman's (2013) foundational assertion that 'raw data is an oxymoron' establishes the premise that all data is constructed through particular ways of seeing and organising social reality. This insight proves especially relevant to homelessness measurement, where definitional boundaries determine not merely what gets counted, but which lives are recognised as deserving of policy attention. As an example, the exclusions mentioned previously are not merely a technical oversight but reflect the

inherently political nature of data infrastructures (Bowker and Star, 1999). Bowker and Star's analysis of classification systems reveals how apparently technical decisions about categories and boundaries serve to normalise certain arrangements while marginalising others. In the context of homelessness, these infrastructural politics manifest themselves through the design of data collection systems that privilege certain forms of housing insecurity, typically those interfacing with formal service systems, while systematically excluding others. The work of D'Ignazio and Klein (2020) on data feminism extends this analysis by demonstrating how data systems reflect and reproduce existing hierarchies of power. Their framework, rooted in the ideas of feminist philosopher Donna Haraway, reveals how traditional approaches to data collection often embody what they term 'the view from nowhere, from a distance, from up above, like a god' (p. 76), perspectives that align with institutional priorities rather than lived experiences of marginalised populations. This critique proves particularly relevant for homelessness measurement, where service-based counting methodologies inherently exclude those who avoid or cannot access formal support systems. Marquardt's (2016) concept of 'ontological ignorance' serves specific political functions, allowing governments to avoid acknowledging the full scope of housing insecurity while maintaining claims to evidence-based policy making.

According to the Housing Act (1988), a person is defined as homeless in Ireland if:

(a) there is no accommodation available which, in the opinion of the authority, he [sic] together with any other person who normally resides with him or might reasonably be expected to reside with him, can reasonably occupy or remain in occupation of, or

(b) he is living in a hospital, county home, night shelter or other institution and is so living because he has no accommodation of the kind referred to in paragraph (a) and he is, in the opinion of the authority, unable to provide accommodation from his own resources.

The exclusive use of the masculine gender in the definition is an initial bias illustrating how measurement practices are shaped by social constructs. Even if in reality, gender is not considered an exclusion in Ireland's homeless statistics. Calculating the number of people who meet this definition is not straightforward, and the accurate identification of the number of homeless individuals remains a persistent methodological and political challenge. There are two primary issues. The first concerns defining homelessness and the extent to which the Housing Act identifies all people who are homeless. As Cordray and Pion (1991) point out, definitions of homelessness vary significantly across contexts and jurisdictions, often influenced by political and institutional agendas. Second, developing inclusive and reliable enumeration methods capable of capturing data about all homeless people. For example, Williams (2011) highlights that capturing data on a transient and stigmatised population introduces additional challenges, questioning the reliability of enumeration results. The conceptual ambiguity surrounding hidden homelessness warrants critical examination, as the term encompasses multiple, sometimes contradictory meanings. As Deleu et al. (2023) demonstrate in their scoping review, hidden

homelessness functions simultaneously as a descriptor of statistical invisibility (those absent from official counts), a legal-administrative category (the non-statutory homeless in England), a specific housing situation (sofa surfing or temporary arrangement with family and friends), and a broader condition of housing inadequacy and insecurity. This semantic multiplicity creates methodological challenges, conflating fundamentally different phenomena: the visibility gap (being homeless but not counted), the definitional gap (experiencing housing insecurity outside official definitions), the service gap (avoiding or unable to access formal support), and the housing adequacy gap (living in insecure or inadequate conditions). Each dimension reflects different political dynamics and requires distinct policy responses, yet the umbrella term obscures these crucial distinctions. Moreover, as Deleu et al. (2023) observe, hidden homelessness can inadvertently perpetuate hierarchies of suffering by implying certain forms of housing exclusion are less severe than rough sleeping or shelter use, marginalising the lived experiences for those enduring precarious arrangements, particularly women fleeing domestic violence, young people in sofa surfing situations or families trapped in intergenerational co-residence. This article therefore employs hidden homelessness as a situated, contested category rather than a fixed analytical concept, recognising that what remains 'hidden' is determined by political choices embedded in measurement systems rather than intrinsic characteristics of housing situations. This raises a central dilemma: How can accurate data be collected on a population that is both diverse and often deliberately hidden?

European homelessness measurement: from ideal to reality

Ireland's approach to homelessness measurement both follows and contrasts with the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) framework developed by the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA), which encompasses a broader spectrum of housing exclusion across the physical, legal, and social domains of "home" (Edgar and Meert, 2005). Indeed, the European context of homelessness measurement has been significantly shaped by the development of the ETHOS. Edgar and Meert's initial articulation of ETHOS represented an attempt to create a comprehensive framework that could capture the full spectrum of housing exclusion across physical, legal, and social domains of 'home'. The theoretical sophistication lies in its recognition that homelessness cannot be reduced to rough sleeping or service use, but encompasses a wider spectrum of housing exclusion. As Busch-Geertsema (2010) demonstrates, ETHOS provides a multidimensional approach that acknowledges how the absence of secure tenure, adequate space, or social relationships can constitute forms of homelessness even when individuals have physical shelter. This comprehensive approach contrasts starkly with the narrow service-based definitions employed by many national governments. Ireland's legal definition under the Housing Act (1988), which focuses on lack of accommodation that can be "reasonable occupied" shares conceptual similarities with ETHOS categories, particularly ETHOS Light operational categories 1-3 (rooflessness and houselessness). However, significant divergences emerge in both operational enumeration practices and coverage of

the full ETHOS Light typology. While Ireland's legal framework is theoretically broad enough to encompass multiple ETHOS categories, operational data collection practices systematically narrow this scope. As Baptista and Marlier (2019) document in their comparative analysis of 35 European countries, Ireland's data systems for emergency accommodation and rough sleeper enumeration place it among countries with relatively sophisticated data infrastructure, closer to ETHOS Light implementation than many EU Member States. However, critical gaps remain: ETHOS Light categories 3.6 (Women's shelters or refuge accommodation), 4 (people living in institutions with no housing to return), 5 (people in non-conventional dwellings), and 6 (people temporarily with family/friends) are not included in official homeless statistics. Develtere's (2022) overview notes that only 14 of 35 European countries include category 6 in their definitions, with only four collecting actual data, illustrating that Ireland's exclusion of hidden homelessness reflects broader European patterns rather than unique Irish limitations. The gap between ETHOS as a theoretical framework and its practical implementation across European countries reveals the persistent influence of political considerations on measurement practices. Indeed, the politics underlying these definitional choices become evident in Fitzpatrick and Stephens's (2007) analysis of how different European welfare regimes approach homelessness measurement. Their comparative study reveals how liberal welfare regimes tend toward individualised definitions focused on service use, while social democratic regimes adopt broader housing-right approaches that encompass wider forms of housing exclusion. These variations reflect not merely technical differences but fundamental disagreements about the state's responsibility for housing provision. Pleace's (2017) critique of European homelessness measurement practices highlights how the apparent objectivity of statistical enumeration often masks complex political negotiations about resource allocation and governmental responsibility. The author's analysis reveals how governments may adopt narrow definitions not just due to methodological constraints, but also to limit the scope of acknowledged need and corresponding policy obligations.

Methodological politics and systematic exclusions

The methodological literature on homelessness enumeration reveals persistent tensions between the goal of comprehensive measurement and the practical constraints imposed by resource limitations and political considerations. PIT counts, while widely adopted across Europe and North America, have been subject to extensive criticism for their methodological limitations and systematic biases. Schneider et al. (2016) provide a comprehensive critique of PIT methodologies, demonstrating how their reliance on visible homelessness and service engagement systematically excludes significant portions of the homeless population. Their analysis reveals how PIT counts favour chronic, visible forms of homelessness while missing the episodic and hidden experiences. This methodological bias has profound political implications, as it reinforces public perceptions of homelessness as primarily affecting single adult men with complex support needs.

The challenge of hidden homelessness has received increasing attention in recent years, with researchers documenting how traditional enumeration methods systematically exclude women, families, young people who avoid formal services or find temporary accommodation through informal networks. Mayock et al. (2015) demonstrate how women's homelessness often remains invisible due to gendered patterns of help seeking and service avoidance, while Hoolachan et al. (2017) reveal how young homelessness people are frequently obscured through definitions that do not recognise precarious arrangements with friends or acquaintances.

Research has also highlighted how enumeration methodologies embed particular assumptions about who deserves to be counted as homeless. Baptista et al. (2016) analysis of European counting practices reveals how definitional boundaries often exclude migrants, asylum seekers, and other populations whose legal status complicates claims to housing assistance. These exclusions reflect what Fassin and Gomme (2012) identify as hierarchies of lives, where certain populations are deemed more deserving of statistical recognition than others. The work of Andrews et al. (2020) on LGBTIQ+ homelessness exemplifies how methodological choices can perpetuate the invisibility of particular populations. Their research demonstrates how traditional enumeration approaches do not capture the specific pathways into homelessness experienced by sexual and gender minorities, while service-based counting methods miss those who avoid mainstream services due to experiences of discrimination.

These systematic exclusions from official counting practices drive many marginalised populations toward alternative spaces and survival strategies that further compound their statistical invisibility. Herring's (2014) ethnographic analysis of homeless encampments reveals how these spaces serve paradoxical functions as both tools of spatial containment by local authorities and preferred safe grounds for those experiencing homelessness. This work demonstrates how large-scale encampments are shaped by urban policies and administrative strategies, challenging assumptions about their functional uniformity while illuminating the complex socio-spatial dynamics that remain hidden from traditional policy approaches focused solely on service provision. This spatial dimension of exclusion reinforces the limitations of enumeration methods that rely primarily on formal service engagement, as those who create autonomous spaces or avoid official systems remain systematically uncounted. The development of critical enumeration approaches, drawing on feminist and decolonial methodologies, offers additional pathways to address the politics of homelessness measurement. These approaches recognise that the goal is not simply to count more accurately, but to transform the power relations embedded in the enumeration process itself (Cobham, 2020).

The apparent objectivity of statistical enumeration masks complex negotiations about which populations deserve recognition, which forms of housing insecurity warrant policy attention, and which measurement approaches can be sustained within existing political constraints. The Irish case, as examined in the following sections, provides a particular clear illustration of how these theoretical

insights manifest in practice, revealing both the mechanisms through which certain populations are rendered invisible and the political stakes involved in measurement reform.

The Irish Homelessness Ecosystem

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining critical data analysis with documentary research and interviews with stakeholders to examine the politics of homelessness measurement in Ireland. Based on phase 1 of "Data Stories: Telling stories *about* and *with* planning and property data" project, a total of 125 interviews (38 state; 36 business; 22 civil society; 29 academic) were conducted with 135 key actors who worked for 78 organisations (23 state; 29 business; 16 civil society; 10 academic) between 2023 and 2025. The organisations were selected after conducting an audit of entities that produced and shared/sold property and planning data, or were key consumers of such data whom generated secondary outputs (e.g. analytics, reports) that were widely shared. Interviewees were recruited through purposeful (their role and expertise regarding the management of data within an organisation) and referral (suggested by earlier interviewees) sampling. A number of interviewees worked or had worked in homeless services and 28 interviews discussed homelessness, including homeless service providers, local authority, housing departments, NGO representatives, advocacy organisations and academic researchers specialising in homelessness and housing policy. The interviews were semi-structured in format, following a guide of open questions, and were conversational in nature, diverging from the guide to ask follow-up questions or pursue interesting points as they arose. The interviews focused on the respondents' knowledge of the property and planning data ecosystem, issues such as data availability, gaps, silences, quality, fit-for-purpose, maintenance and repair, their organisations' data holdings and data usage, and their own data work, experiences and views. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim where consent was given. Analysis followed an iterative thematic approach informed by Critical Data Studies, whereby interview transcripts were coded through MaxQDA for themes relating to data itself (e.g. how it is produced, managed, governed, analysed and specific issues relating to the data), to data work (e.g. collaboration) and data issues (e.g. data debates, data ethics, etc.) and to the politics of homelessness and homelessness organisation. This fieldwork was complemented by desk-based research examining policy documents. The present article draws selectively on interview quotes to illustrate and substantiate patterns identified through the analysis of homelessness datasets. This strategic deployment of interview material serves to illuminate the lived experiences and professional perspectives that contextualise the quantitative patterns and documentary evidence presented throughout the analysis. The methodology is designed to interrogate not only what is counted but also how counting practices themselves shape policy responses and social understanding of homelessness.

Data Landscape Mapping

The first part of the research involved a comprehensive mapping of Ireland's homelessness data ecosystem to identify all institutional actors involved in data collection and the different populations they enumerate. This mapping exercise identified seven primary data sources documenting homelessness populations at national and Dublin levels (see Table 1), each operating under different definitional frameworks, geographic coverage parameters, and temporal collection schedules. Although national-level data sources were prioritised to maintain a comprehensive perspective on Ireland's housing crisis, particular analytical attention was devoted to Dublin Regional Homeless Executive (DRHE) data for two key reasons. First, Census 2022 data indicates that approximately two-thirds of Ireland's homeless population resides within the Dublin region, making this area disproportionately significant for understanding national trends. Second, while the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH) relies on PASS data covering all regions for its national statistics, it specifically incorporates rough sleeper counts exclusively from the Dublin region, creating a methodological asymmetry that requires a focused examination of Dublin-specific data collection practices. The analysis examined both the formal scope of each data collection system and the practical boundaries that determine inclusion and exclusion.

Table 1. Irish homelessness data landscape

Data Source	Type of Data Collected	Data Coverage	Geographic Scale	Temporal Aspects (frequency and collection period)
Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH)	Homeless families, individuals in emergency accommodation	People accommodated in state-funded facilities	National and regional	Monthly reports since 2014, based on PASS data
Dublin Region Homeless Executive (DRHE)	People in emergency accommodation, rough sleepers	Homeless services, including rough sleeper counts	Dublin region	Monthly reports based on PASS data and biannual rough sleeper counts
Central Statistics Office (CSO)	Homeless people (individuals and families)	Census data on people identifying as homeless	National	Census every 5 years. Homeless count included since 2011
International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS, formerly Direct Provision)	Asylum seekers awaiting status	Living conditions of asylum seekers in accommodation centres	National	Regular reports, continuous data collection since 2004 (monthly 2019-2022; weekly since 2023)

Safe Ireland & Domestic Violence Refuge Services	Women and children fleeing domestic violence	Access to refuges and support services	National	Data collected continuously with periodic reports. Last Domestic Abuse Services National Statistics report in 2018
Simon Community	Hidden Homelessness surveys	People experiencing or knowing someone experiencing hidden homelessness	National	Annual survey carried over a week in 2022
Tusla	Young adults (18-22 inclusive) receiving an aftercare service: accommodation	People accommodated in aftercare service	National	Data collected continuously with quarterly reports. Started date unknown

A data audit was conducted of data used in official government publications, NGO reports and policy documents spanning the period 2014-2025. This temporal framework was selected to capture the evolution of Ireland's homelessness measurement system over 10 years after the introduction of PASS in 2014, which established the current foundation for official homelessness statistics. The data audit involved a systematic examination of metadata (if available), footnotes, and methodological appendices. Additionally, interviews with producers or users of these data help to trace changes in definitions, methodologies, and reporting practices over time. Particular attention was paid to moments when counting practices changed, populations were reclassified, or new exclusion criteria were introduced, as these represent critical junctions where political negotiations around measurement become visible.

Multi-source data comparison allows the examination of discrepancies between different data systems and identifies gaps in comprehensive enumeration. This comparative approach illuminates the substantial divergences between different counting methodologies and their implications for understanding the scale of homelessness. This comparison also helps to understand the gap in analysis between official figures and alternative estimates to quantify the extent of systematic exclusions. This involved triangulating data from multiple sources to estimate the scale of uncounted populations, including rough sleeper count, individuals in domestic violence refuges, asylum seekers in Direct Provision centres, young adult receiving aftercare accommodation service, and those experiencing hidden homelessness. This methodology has some limitations as the analysis relies primarily on publicly available data sources and documents, supplemented with interviews, potentially missing

internal deliberations, or unpublished research that might illuminate the politics of measurement decisions. As such, this research does not aim to provide a definitive account of homelessness in Ireland, but rather to interrogate the practices and methodologies underlying its enumeration, acknowledging all data – including that generated through this research process – are produced within particular social and political conditions. The methodology is designed to contribute to broader theoretical debates about the relationship between quantification, governance, and social justice while providing specific insights into the Irish case that may inform both academic understanding and policy reform efforts.

Methodological constraints on homelessness data

As detailed in Table 2, each homelessness data source employs different collection methodologies and operates under specific constraints that limit comprehensive enumeration. Some are primary data sources, with the primary objective of counting homeless people, and others are secondary data sources that count social issues that arise from potential homelessness situation.

Table 2. Methodological constraints on Irish homelessness data

Data Source	Type	Data Collection Method	Constraints on Data Collection
Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (DHLGH)	Primary source	PASS (data entered by local authorities on people in emergency accommodation)	Covers only those using state-funded services, possible underestimation of hidden homelessness
Dublin Region Homeless Executive (DRHE)	Primary source	PASS + rough sleeper counts	Difficulty identifying all rough sleepers, data entered by different teams with potential variations
Central Statistics Office (CSO)	Primary source	National census (specific questions on homelessness, plus young adults living at home)	5-year frequency, self-reporting by individuals, difficult to identify hidden homelessness
International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS, formerly Direct Provision)	Secondary source	Data collection on residents in asylum accommodation centres	Data limited to people staying in these facilities, does not cover asylum seekers without accommodation
Safe Ireland & Domestic Violence Refuge Services	Secondary source	Data collected by refuges and support organisations	Frequent underreporting of domestic violence cases, limited capacity of refuges leading to exclusions

Simon Community	Primary source	Survey answer based on people experiencing or knowing someone experiencing hidden homelessness	Based on voluntary participation, cannot be an exact representation of the population
Tusla	Secondary source	Quarterly data collected based on people requiring an accommodation after care service	Covers only people using official care services

It is important to acknowledge that this critical examination should not obscure Ireland's relative achievements in homelessness data infrastructure from a European comparative perspective. PASS, despite its limitations, represents a sophisticated administrative database that provides monthly granular data on emergency accommodation usage, a level of temporal frequency and administrative detail that surpasses many European jurisdictions. Furthermore, Ireland's integration of rough sleeper count alongside administrative data, though currently limited to the Dublin region, demonstrates awareness of the need for multiple sources that many countries have yet to develop. However, a crucial distinction exists between PASS internal capacity and its external accessibility. For those working within homelessness services and governmental departments, PASS functions as a sophisticated tool, providing real-time data for service allocation and case management. Yet for external stakeholders (NGOs, researchers, independent analysts, etc.) the access to data is not straightforward as it is demonstrated in the next section.

Key issues in homeless data

The empirical findings of this study illuminate the complex political dynamics underlying Ireland's homelessness measurement system, revealing how seemingly technical decisions about data collection become contested sites of governance with profound implications for vulnerable populations. The following discussion examines five interconnected dimensions of measurement failure that collectively demonstrate the utility of analysing homelessness data: the fragmentation of sources and measurement approaches; methodological inconsistencies that undermine longitudinal analysis; systematic undercounting that renders substantial population invisible; documented political manipulation that compromises data integrity; and structural barriers that impede comprehensive data collection and analysis.

Fragmentation of sources and measurement

The gap between Ireland's Housing Act definition and the homeless data generated exemplifies the disconnect between legal/conceptual frameworks and operational measurement systems (Busch-Geertsema, 2010; Pleace and Hermans, 2020). Ireland's Housing Act definition theoretically

encompasses situations where individuals lack accommodation they "can reasonably occupy", language broad enough to include ETHOS categories 4-6. Yet operational practices restrict monthly official figures to those accessing Section 10-funded emergency accommodation, effectively implementing a service-based definition far narrower than either the legal framework or ETHOS Light would suggest.

The DHLGH relies on PASS to capture data on individuals in state-funded emergency accommodation. Similarly, DRHE combines PASS data with rough sleeper counts in Dublin, yet faces uncertainty identifying all rough sleepers and potential variations in entering data across different data collection teams, as the rough sleepers count is done by staff or volunteers within the Simon Community, an NGO. However, it should be noted that the volunteer team is trained before counting rough sleepers. The CSO uses national census data with specific homelessness questions every five years, constrained by infrequent data collection and reliance on self-reporting that may not fully capture homelessness issues. Household data can be used to infer potential hidden homelessness, but it is not formally measured. International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS) focusses exclusively on asylum seekers in accommodation centres (but not those outside the state system), while Safe Ireland and domestic violence refuge services face frequently underreporting of domestic violence cases and capacity limitation leading to the exclusion. Furthermore, Simon Community conducts one-off surveys on hidden homelessness experiences, but these are based on voluntary participation and cannot be an exact representation of the population. Tusla's quarterly data collection covers only people who access official aftercare services, representing another example of service-based limitations that characterise Ireland's fragmented data landscape. The focus on specific forms of homelessness – from emergency accommodation, to rough sleeping, to hidden homelessness surveys – without integrated methodologies risks perpetuating fragmented understanding of the homelessness issue in Ireland. Each system's particular limitations create blind spots that, when combined, result in systematic undercounting and incomplete comprehension of housing insecurity patterns. The fragmented approach to homeless data in Ireland highlights the tension between the operational needs of data collection and the demands of robust longitudinal research, reflecting the socially constructed and contingent nature of data, shaped by resource constraints, organisational practices, and changing priorities. The constraints detailed in Table 2 demonstrate how administrative and operational requirements – from service delivery focus, to resource limitations, to voluntary participation models – fundamentally shape what can be measured and how, ultimately determining which populations become visible in official statistics and policy discourse.

Inconsistency in measurement

Ideally, how data are measured, processed and shared remains consistent over time ensuring that they are directly comparable longitudinally. However, for varying reasons, datasets often lack consistency. This has been the case with respect to homeless data in Ireland. Prior to 2014, homeless data were largely generated on an ad hoc and piecemeal basis, providing no consistent, long run count of homeless.

Since then, the DRHE has generated a sequence of homelessness data; the analysis here focuses on it for two main reasons. First, DRHE represents the most comprehensive single data source in Ireland, uniquely combining emergency accommodation records (via PASS) and rough sleeper enumeration within a defined geographic area. Second, since the Dublin region accounts for the majority of Ireland's homeless population (CSO, 2023), DRHE data provide substantial coverage of the national homeless population while maintaining geographic consistency. However, its methodological consistency has been weak.

Analysis of the nine most recent rough sleeper count reports from DRHE, spanning spring 2021 to spring 2025, revealed inconsistencies that systematically undermine longitudinal comparability. The temporal scope of the analysis was deliberately constrained to reports from spring 2021 onwards due to a methodological discontinuity in data collection practices. Before spring 2021, DRHE employed single-night count protocols, whereas subsequent reports used week-long counting periods. This shift represents a break in the data series that precludes direct comparison between pre- and post-spring 2021 reports, as the extended temporal window fundamentally alters both the scope of enumeration and the probability of contact with rough sleeping populations. While the transition to week-long enumeration processes since 2021 represents an improvement in data accuracy, notable variations in age categorisations compromise trend analysis. For example, the first age grouping varied from '20-25' in spring 2021, to '19-25' in winter 2021, and '18-25' in spring 2022. Similarly, the oldest age category shifted from '46-61' in spring 2021 to '62+' in subsequent reports. These variations appear to be the result of ad hoc adjustments rather than systematic methodological improvements. As a DRHE staff member noted:

> I would have to see the report to be clear about what was happening, because it does sound like that, that maybe somebody working on the Excel spreadsheet was the oldest person here was 62. [Added the 62+ age group]. I don't know. That's very odd. (IP35)

However, this slight difference is not critical, as standardising these would have hardly any difference in overall numbers. But this variation could hinder efforts to accurately identify trends and compare populations over time.

Analysis of homeless families reports from DRHE, based on PASS data, revealed similar consistency challenges with more serious analytical implications. Between July 2015 and November 2017, families were classified as 'individual adults with dependents" and 'number of dependents". This classification system changes in November 2017 to count 'individual adults with children" and 'number of children" instead of 'dependents' without further explanation provided and the October 2017 report is not available on the DRHE website. The definitional implications of these changes are substantial. During interviews, DRHE staff clarified that "dependents" differ from "children":

Well, dependence would, in my understanding, be, say… As a household, any children you have under 18. Over 18, they are dependent. (IP35)

However, reports do not clarify these definitional shifts, creating analytical ambiguities for anyone trying to use the data. Reclassification has potentially obscured trends in youth homelessness. As one academic researcher explained:

So young people who are… so dependents of a family unit that are between the ages of 18 and 24 previously were captured as child dependents, but now have gone into the adult [category]. [...] There is an increase in youth homelessness that's getting hidden in that. (IP63)

These reclassification ambiguities underscore the challenges of tracking methodological choices and their impacts on data accuracy, representing what the analysis describes as an unexamined tension between administrative convenience and analytical clarity. The identified variations in both examples presented above could have direct implications for the ability to track homelessness trends and inform policymaking.

Undercounting homelessness

In their analysis of homelessness in Ireland, Hearne and McSweeney (2023) contend that Ireland's official statistics on homelessness systematically underestimate the true scale of housing insecurity through definitional exclusions and methodological limitations. The scale of these exclusions is considerable. In 2018, 1,224 women and 1,817 children stayed one or more nights in domestic violence and supported accommodation (Safe Ireland, 2018). Census 2022 revealed that 522,486 adults aged 18 years and older lived with their parents, including 33 percent of 25-29 year olds, and 15% of 30-34 year olds (CSO, 2023). Hearne and McSweeney (2023) calculated homelessness using the ETHOS framework, estimating that 23,881 individuals were in a situation of homelessness (rooflessness and houseless) in Ireland (almost double the official number at the time of publication) and a further 51,061 were experiencing housing exclusion in insecure and inadequate housing.

Indeed, this study revealed systematic exclusions that reflect narrow definitional approaches to homelessness. These exclusions particularly affect vulnerable populations and demonstrate what can be characterised as political considerations shaping measurement practices. As one interviewee explained:

[...] But there's, I suppose, notable exceptions to the DRHE data in that it doesn't include the non-Section 10-funded accommodations[4]. [...] I think it's around 200 people that are in non-

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[4] Non-Section 10-funded accommodations in Ireland refer to homelessness solutions not financed through Section 10 of the Housing Act 1988, which provides government funding for homelessness services via local authorities. These accommodations are typically run by private charities, community initiatives, or philanthropic organisations relying on independent funding, and may also include privately funded temporary solutions such as hotel placements.

Section 10-funded homeless facilities around the country, that's not even in Dublin. […] It doesn't include the domestic violence data, it doesn't include direct provision. (IP63)

These omissions not only under-represent the scale of the problem but also minimise the visibility of intersectional vulnerabilities. Women, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and LGBTIQ+ people are disproportionately affected by such exclusions. The need for systematic equality data collection was highlighted:

I think the question of equality data should be really addressed in a public data […]. Therefore, systematically capturing ethnicity, systematically capturing and including Travellers' ethnicity, capturing disability, capturing, you know, all those under all the equality grounds and in a more systematic way would be really, really insightful. Having a better understanding of the hidden homelessness, so expanding the definition of or at least, you know, having an alternative data set that also includes the hidden homelessness. (IP63)

The exclusion of hidden homelessness is particularly problematic for women, whose homelessness experiences are systematically undercounted across Europe. As Pleace (2017) documents, women's homelessness is characterised by concealment, women avoid rough sleeping for safety reasons, rely on precarious temporary arrangements with friends or family and face gendered stigma that deters service engagement. Bretherton and Mayock (2021) emphasise that measurement systems designed around male patterns of homelessness (visible rough sleeping, use of mixed-gender emergency accommodation) fail to capture women's distinct pathways, which more commonly involve domestic violence, hidden homelessness and move through inadequate temporary arrangements. The systematic underrepresentation of women in official statistics reflects not merely methodological limitations but gendered assumptions embedded in data infrastructure about what homelessness 'looks like'. Multiple publications emphasise this invisibility, noting that domestic violence survivors, a significant subset of hidden homelessness, are rarely captured in official statistics (Bretherton and Mayock, 2021; Mayock et al., 2015; Mayock and Sheridan, 2012; Reeve et al., 2006). Other countries, such as Norway and Sweden, provide a more comprehensive picture by including such groups in their homelessness data (Benjaminsen et al., 2020), illustrating the potential for adopting broader frameworks in line with ETHOS. It should be noted that these data have already been collected in the Dublin region. In 2008, survey-based research on homelessness was carried out using a broader definition of homelessness, which included people fleeing domestic violence (Homeless Agency, 2008). Unfortunately, no further counts of this type have been carried out since then.

Given the temporal misalignment between data collection frequencies – with rough sleeper counts conducted biannually, domestic violence refuge data published periodically, and census data available every five years – alternative data sources cannot effectively supplement or correct the omissions from the monthly DRHE homeless figures. In addition, it remains impossible to know how

many adults living at home with parents constitute hidden homelessness, a CSO (2021) survey revealed that 88% would prefer to live apart from their parents, suggesting substantial hidden housing need. These exclusions reflect what Marquardt (2016) and Thomas and Macki (2021) identify as the inherent complexity of measuring homelessness, where the definition of homelessness, who is to be counted in any measure of homelessness, and how the measure works in practice, varies across jurisdictions. The Irish system's reliance on PASS database to track emergency accommodation usage reflects both its strengths and inherent limitations. As one interviewee observed: while it represents "*[...] just a database of people in emergency accommodation, of those databases, it's probably one of the best in the world. It's just, it is not a measure of homelessness*" (IP59). This observation capture the central tension: PASS excels at its intended purpose – tracking service usage for operational coordination – but was never designed nor intended to provide comprehensive enumeration of all forms of homelessness. However, it remains the main source of information on homelessness, especially for the government. Denmark provides a particularly instructive example of how countries can bridge the gap between administrative convenience and comprehensive measurement. As documented by Busch-Geertsema et al. (2014) and Benjaminsen et al. (2020), Denmark maintains administrative registers tracking service use while conducting periodic national surveys designed to capture all ETHOS categories. This dual approach, combining continuous administrative data collection with survey-based comprehensive enumeration, allows Denmark to maintain efficient service coordination systems while periodically assessing the full scope of housing exclusion beyond formal service engagement.

Political manipulation and data integrity concerns

Official statistics data relating to the use of emergency accommodation are generally understood to be of good veracity, being assembled from PASS used to allocate beds. There are, however, some concerns with the data. In particular, there have been accusations that the government department responsible for the data, DHLGH, has interfered in how the data are compiled. This political interference in data compilation occurred several times during the period from October 2017 to November 2018. These incidents contributed to a motion of no confidence in the Minister for Housing, Eoghan Murphy, and highlight the political dimensions of homelessness measurement. In October 2017, the Minister was "accused of 'Orwellian' manipulation over homeless figures" by Sinn Féin's housing spokesman, Eoin Ó'Broin, for suggesting progress was being made when overall figures were increasing (O'Halloran, 2017). The controversy intensified by May 2018 when Ó'Broin accused the Minister of 'manipulating the homeless figures' to keep the figure under 10,000 by instructing local authorities to leave 600 people housed in temporary privately rented accommodation off the homeless list. The Minister insisted they had "encountered an error" in the figures, arguing that since people were not in hostels, hotels or hubs they "never went into homelessness" despite losing their homes and lacking secure tenancy (Holland ,2018a; O'Halloran, 2018). By September 2018, 1,606 people (625 adults and 981 children) previously classified as homeless by local authorities had been reclassified by the Department (Holland, 2018b).

Opposition members and Focus Ireland called for transferring homeless figure collation to an independent body such as the CSO. In response, Minister Murphy "said he believed some people had become 'obsessed' with the wrong issue. 'It's not about the numbers and about the lists, it's about solutions'" (Hillard, 2018). Professor Eoin O'Sullivan, co-chair of a 2013 government committee on homelessness categorisation, stated that reclassification "undermined confidence in the data" and argued for definitions based on "the legal basis of residence rather physical characteristics of residence" (Holland, 2018c). As one interviewee observed, these decisions were:

> *unfortunate even for the Department, because… they wouldn't be able to, like, celebrate exits from that particular cohort exits from homelessness… So I think decisions such as reclassification… could be regarded as quite confusing, quite confused decisions. For example, no rationale and the inclusion of some and not others is really detrimental for confidence in data and reliability in data (IP63)*

These episodes of political interference are analytically distinct from the inherent limitations of datasets discussed earlier. The documented data debate underscores a critical insight: Homelessness measurement is never purely technical but inherently political, reflecting competing interests in how social problems are defined, quantified, and addressed. This politicisation of enumeration practices, combined with definitional exclusions and methodological inconsistencies identified earlier, reveals the measurement of homelessness as a site of contested governance where decisions about 'what counts' have a profound implication for 'who counts' in policy interventions. Understanding these dynamics requires examining not only explicit political manipulation, but also the structural constraints and technical barriers that shape data collection and analysis practices in less visible but equally consequential ways.

Structural barriers to comprehensive data collection and analysis

The analysis revealed systematic structural barriers that fundamentally undermine Ireland's capacity for comprehensive homelessness data collection and analysis. These barriers operate at multiple levels—technical, organisational, and systemic—creating what Marquardt (2016) describes as spaces where databases "are usually not designed for statistical purposes" but rather are "narrative-based to suit the social worker-client relationship and also vary with regard to the working definitions of homelessness" (p. 310). The cumulative effect of these barriers extends beyond methodological limitations to constitute what can be characterised as infrastructure impediments to evidence-based policymaking.

The most immediately apparent barrier concerns the deliberate restriction of data accessibility through inappropriate dissemination formats. Ireland's homelessness data are systematically published in what stakeholders term "dirty PDFs" (non-scrapable), creating substantial obstacles for analysis and utilisation. As one interviewee emphasised:

Homelessness data that's released monthly comes in a PDF and it's a dirty PDF. […] Some of the most important figures that we should be looking at every month. Why is that coming out in an inaccessible PDF? (IP86)

This practice represents a particularly problematic form of what could be term 'infrastructural gatekeeping', where technical choices actively impede data utilisation despite the availability of more appropriate formats. The same interviewee noted the following:

The data clearly is in a spreadsheet before the PDF. You don't have to do anything fancy with it, make it into an excel or CSV. You don't need to do anything fancier than that with it. So that would suggest that there's a reluctance to do it. (IP86)

This observation illuminates how technical barriers can serve political functions, limiting external scrutiny while maintaining claims to transparency through publication. The implications of these format restrictions extend beyond inconvenience to constitute systematic barriers to academic research, policy analysis, and public accountability. The manual extraction process required for PDFs introduces opportunities for transcription errors, limits the scope of feasible analysis, and effectively restricts serious data engagement to those with substantial resources for data processing. This technical gatekeeping particularly disadvantages smaller NGOs, community organisations, and independent researchers who lack the capacity for extensive data cleaning and verification processes. The distinction between internal and external accessibility illuminates how measurement infrastructure can simultaneously succeed in administrative data collection while failing in democratic data dissemination. The documented failures examined here reflect the gap between what the infrastructure captures and what it makes available for scrutiny, and between sophistication of data collection for service delivery and the barriers erected against independent analysis.

In addition, the study revealed significant gaps in data archiving that compromise longitudinal analysis and historical understanding. Archival gaps particularly affect the ability to assess methodological changes over time and their implications for data interpretation. For example, the unavailability of the October 2017 family homelessness report coincides with definitional changes from "dependents" to "children", preventing researchers from understanding the rationale and implications of these shifts. Such gaps suggest institutional amnesia, where organisations lose track of their own methodological evolution.

Moreover, this research revealed significant understaffing within key data collection agencies that directly constrain their capacity for methodological improvement and system integration. A DRHE staff member explained the scope of resource limitations:

"At the moment we're only, including myself, there's only three people. But we're expecting to have… really [it] should be a team of five. So we are currently understaffed, but hoping to recruit in the next few months" (IP35)

This understaffing represents more than an operational inconvenience; it fundamentally limits the organisation's capacity to implement the reforms necessary for comprehensive data collection. Resource constraints prevent transitioning to centralised databases, improving data validation processes, developing integrated systems across agencies, and maintaining consistent methodological standards over time. Resource constraints also create drift in data collection, where data collection practices change not due to systematic improvements, but through individual staff decisions made under pressure. In addition, the systemic fragmentation of data across sources has profound implications for understanding homelessness trajectories and developing appropriate policy responses. Current systems capture isolated snapshots rather than tracking individuals' pathways through different forms of housing insecurity. The inability to trace transitions from temporary housing situations to long-term insecurity or recurring homelessness fundamentally limits policy effectiveness, constraining responses to reactive, short-term measures rather than proactive, systemic interventions.

Conclusion

This study has examined the politics of homelessness measurement in Ireland through the lens of Critical Data Studies, demonstrating how quantification practices embody political choices with material consequences for policy development and vulnerable populations. Through systematic analysis of Ireland's homelessness data ecosystem spanning 2014-2025, the research identified five interconnected dimensions of measurement failure that illuminate the contested nature of enumeration practices in contemporary welfare states.

As Desrosières (2002) demonstrates, statistical categories are never neutral tools of observation but active instruments that construct social reality and distribute resources, recognition, and political power. Desrosière's analysis reveals how quantification systems encode particular ways of seeing the social world, privileging certain interests while marginalising others. In homelessness measurement, administrative convenience (operationalised through service-based definitions, narrow eligibility criteria and data collection optimised for existing bureaucratic processes) systematically produces invisibility for population whose housing insecurity manifests outside formal service systems. Bowker and Star's (1999) concept of 'infrastructural inversion' (making visible the usually invisible work of categorisation), illuminates how seemingly technical choices about database structure, reporting formats and definitional boundaries constitute political decisions with material consequences. Their analysis of how classifications become embedded in infrastructure helps explain the persistence of narrow definitions despite documented exclusions. However, acknowledging enumeration's political

dimensions does not resolve practical tensions between comprehensiveness and feasibility. As Desrosières (2002) observes, statistical systems must navigate between 'realist' perspectives (measuring objective reality) and 'constructivist' perspectives (recognising measurement constructs social categories). The solutions should therefore be understood not as technical fixes producing 'complete' or 'objective' measurement, but as political choices shifting the balance of visibility toward currently marginalised populations. The goal is not measurement perfection but rather systems whose exclusions and limitations are explicitly acknowledged, democratically negotiated, and oriented toward expanding rather than restricting recognition of housing insecurity in its diverse manifestations.

The empirical analysis reveals that Ireland's homelessness measurement system is characterised by fragmentation across seven primary data sources, each operating under different definitional frameworks, geographic coverage parameters and temporal collection schedule. This fragmentation produces systematic blind spots where isolated snapshots substitute comprehensive understanding. Second, the study documented methodological inconsistencies including unexplained changes to age categorisations in rough sleeper counts and definitional shifts from "dependents" to "children" in family homelessness reports, compromising longitudinal comparability and obscuring trends in youth homelessness. Third, systematic undercounting through narrow definitional boundaries excludes substantial populations including rough sleepers, domestic violence survivors, asylum seekers, and those experiencing hidden homelessness. Fourth, the research documented political manipulation interference during 2017-2018, when over 1,600 individuals previously classified as homelessness where reclassified by the DHLGH, undermining data integrity. Fifth, structural barriers including deliberate data publication in non-machine-readable formats, chronic understaffing and fragmented systems create obstacles for data collection and analysis while limiting capacity for comprehensive integration.

These findings contribute to scholarly understanding of homelessness measurement politics in three significant ways. Theoretically, the study operationalises concepts from Critical Data Studies demonstrating their applicability to welfare state enumeration practices. The Irish case provides empirical grounding for theoretical arguments about how statistical categories construct rather than merely describe social reality, revealing the mechanisms through which certain populations become visible to policy intervention while others remain systematically excluded. Methodologically, the research demonstrates the value of multi-source data comparison and systematic documentary analysis for illuminating the political dimensions of ostensibly technical measurement decisions. By examining metadata, methodological appendices and moments of definitional change, the study makes visible the contested negotiations underlying seemingly neutral quantification practices. Empirically, the research addresses a lacuna in comparative homelessness literature by providing detailed analysis of how a specific national context navigates tension between administrative data requirements and comprehensive enumeration. While existing literature documents the gap between ETHOS as

theoretical framework and its limited implementation across Europe (O'Sullivan et al., 2020; Pleace, 2017), this study examines the specific mechanisms – political, structural and technical – that produce and maintain this gap in practice. Moreover, the Irish case study illuminates a broader theoretical point: administrative datasets (PASS) inevitably reflect their organisational purposes, and problems arise when such systems become the main measure of complex social phenomena. It exemplifies how operational efficiency in service delivery may coincide with measurement inadequacy for policy planning, a tension likely present in other jurisdictions relying on administrative data for social policy evidence. Additionally, the study's findings regarding systematic exclusions illuminate intersectional dimensions of homelessness measurement. Current practices render invisible specific populations – notably women , ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and LGBTQ+ individuals. The study thus provides valuable insights for international discussions of homelessness measurement politics, demonstrating how local challenges reflect broader patterns in contemporary welfare states where quantification serves particular governmental functions while potentially marginalising vulnerable populations. Addressing homelessness requires not only reformed housing policies but also critical re-evaluation of the evidentiary foundations underpinning policy decisions, ensuring that measurement practices prioritise social justice over administrative convenience while acknowledging the inherent limitations and political dimensions of all enumeration efforts. As illustrated, Ireland is a good example of asymmetric accessibility rather than complete absence of infrastructure. Highlighting that solutions require not wholesale system redesign but rather political commitment to democratic data shoring alongside existing technical capacity.

Data availability statement

Not applicable

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