

# MEASURING REPEAT HOMELESSNESS

**Authors:** Dr Ian Thomas - ThomasIR@Cardiff.ac.uk  
Dr Peter Mackie - MackieP@Cardiff.ac.uk

**Date:** July 2020

**This Data Insight explores different measures of repeat homelessness using individual level data on people applying to the Local Authority Housing Options team in the City and County of Swansea.**

## Approaches to measuring repeat homeless

Internationally, various methods are used to measure repeat homelessness or repeated use of homeless services. In Scotland, to be classed as 'repeat homeless', an application to a local authority must be within 12 months of another application, with their circumstance the same at both time points<sup>3</sup>. In the United States, 'returns to homelessness' form part of performance measurement of communities of services in receipt of government funding. Measures are generated for different time periods, including repeat homelessness in 6 months, 12 months, and 24 months following an exit from a homeless service into permanent accommodation<sup>4</sup>. Alternatively, in Australia, a person is considered a 'returning client' if they had previously been assisted by a specialist homeless agency at any time since collection of the Specialist Homelessness Services Minimum Data Set began in 2011–12<sup>5</sup>.

Measures of repeat homelessness are often reported as the proportion of service users in a specific period of time—often financial years—who have been seen previously. For example, for the 2018-19 period, 6% of applications in Scotland were considered 'repeat', whilst 58% of people accessing specialist homelessness services in New South Wales during 2018-19 were 'returners'.

As these international examples of repeat or returns to homelessness illustrate, the definitions used can lead to very different figures. Here we explore three definitions for measuring repeat homelessness, in order to illustrate the different policy insights they might generate.

### Background

Within the Welsh Government's 2019 homelessness strategy<sup>1</sup>, a goal has been set for a Wales where homelessness is rare, brief, and non-recurrent. Measures of repeat homelessness/use of housing services therefore provide a way of evaluating efforts to reduce the re-occurrence of housing issues. This Data Insight contributes to a wider discussion around improvements in homelessness data in Wales, namely individual level homelessness data collection, reporting, and analysis<sup>2</sup>.

### References

<sup>1</sup> <https://gov.wales/homelessness-strategy>

<sup>2</sup> <https://seneddresearch.blog/2018/10/04/revolutionising-homelessness-data-in-wales-steps-towards-a-centralised-data-collection-system/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/homelessness-scotland-2018-2019/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/coc/system-performance-measures>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/homelessness-services/shs-annual-report-18-19/contents/clients-services-and-outcomes>

## What we did

This analysis draws on homelessness administrative data from the Swansea local authority housing team. Available data covered all applications for assistance that ended in the period January 2011 to March 2017, regardless of their start date. Applications which ended outside of the 2011-2017 period were not included. Analysis presented in this brief is limited to periods of homelessness from January 2012 to December 2015, in order to reduce bias from 'missing' applications which started and did not end within the study time frame. After linkage and data cleaning, the final data set related to 8,349 applications for assistance.

As the data spans two different legislative regimes, we have not used the legal status of the application to attempt to categorise the episode of homelessness. Instead, we consider all people approaching the authority as being either homeless or in some form of housing insecurity.

Individual level homelessness data for Swansea relate to the main applicant for assistance, rather than all household members. The analysis presented in this briefing therefore only pertains to repeat homelessness where the main applicant was the same—therefore an individual's repeat homelessness will not be counted if they were not the main applicant.

For each year, annual estimates of repeat homelessness are generated. Three measures are explored:

- Measure 1 provides the proportion of applicants in a year who had made an application for assistance in the previous year, along the lines of Scotland's repeat measure;
- Measure 2 extends the time period of interest to two years prior to the current reporting year;
- Measure 3 adopts an approach similar to Australia, by using all available data to determine whether an applicant had sought assistance at any point prior to the reporting year, e.g. the annual estimate of repeat homelessness for 2015 would take into account applications made in 2012, 2013, and 2014.

As the measures require at least one year's prior data, annual estimates of repeat homelessness are produced for 2013 to 2015, however based on each measure's data requirements, only certain years can be estimated. Measure 2 requires at least 2 years of prior data, with estimates only being produced for 2014 and 2015.

It should be noted that for Measure 3, the 2012 estimate will be the same as Measure 1 in 2012, as both are based on a single year of prior data; whilst the Measure 3 estimate for 2014, is the same as that for Measure 2 in 2014, again, as both rely on 2 years prior data.

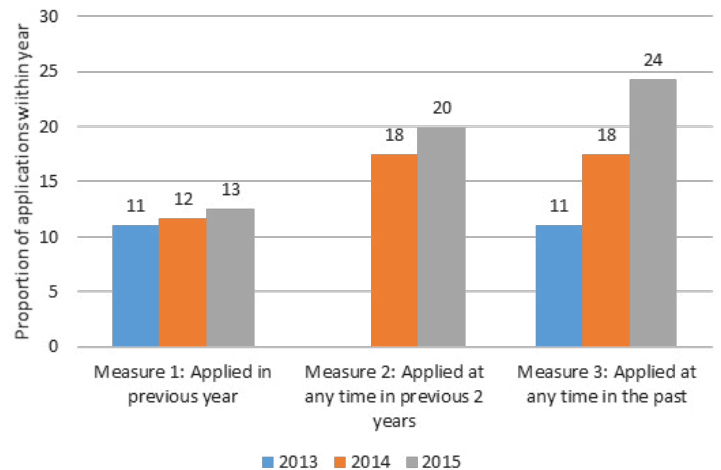


## What we found

Figure 1 provides annual estimates of repeat homelessness based on the three measures outlined above. Repeat homelessness based on applications in the previous year show some stability over time (Measure 1), at around 11-13% per year. Measures based on applications in the past two-years (Measure 2) were higher than those for a single year (Measure 1), at approximately 18-20%. With increasing years of observation, the annual estimates based on all available data (Measure 3) increase gradually over time—rising from 11%, based on one year of data, to 24% in 2015 when based on three years of data.

The figure for repeated homelessness based on Measure 3 may seem large in 2015, when based on 3 years of prior data. However, for context, the Australian measure for repeated homelessness based on the same definition indicates that 58% of clients were returners, when based on 6 years of prior data. It should also be kept in mind that as the data linkage/matching was not perfect, these figures may be lower or higher than presented here.

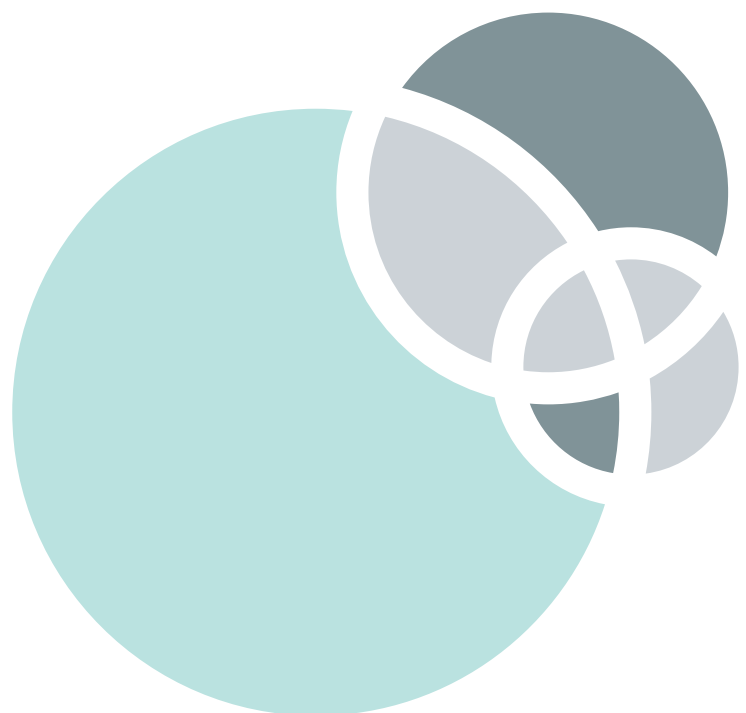
**Figure 1: Annual estimates of repeat homelessness based on three measures: applications 1 year prior; 2 years prior; and ever.**



## Why it matters

Welsh Government have set the goal of a Wales where homelessness is rare, brief, and non-recurrent. However, there is currently no national measure of repeat homelessness in Wales, and therefore a lack of clarity around whether 'non-recurrence' is being achieved.

The annual measures of repeat homelessness presented in this briefing provide insight into different approaches to measuring non-recurrence, and have very significant impact on the perceived scale of the issue.



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For further information please contact  
[Cathrine.E.Richards@Swansea.ac.uk](mailto:Cathrine.E.Richards@Swansea.ac.uk)

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