

# Energy poverty in Belgium

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In Belgium, the topic of energy poverty is rather well known in the public thanks to communications from non-governmental associations dedicated to poverty alleviation in general or to energy poverty in particular.

Energy poverty is rather high in the country, for several reasons. The building stock is old: in Flanders, 68.9% of the buildings were built before 1981, in Wallonia, 79.4% and in the Brussels Region, 93.5%. Stated otherwise, in 2011, 23% of Belgium's population lived in a dwelling built before 1919 (STATBEL 2018). This old building stock is poorly insulated. It has been estimated that 99% of the houses and 95% of the apartments do not comply with the 2050 energy norms (Recticel Insulation 2020). The Brussels Region has a much higher proportion of apartments (78%) than the other two regions (23% and 20% in Flanders and in Wallonia, respectively). In Flanders and Wallonia, most dwellings are owner-occupied (70% and 64.5% respectively for dwellings built before 2006), but the reverse is true in the Brussels Region (38% owner-occupied, STATBEL 2018), which may further hinder energy retrofits there.

Belgium has no official definition of energy poverty. Therefore, there is a wide range of estimates of the proportions of households in energy poverty, varying according to the definition and proxy used. Based on EU statistics on income and living conditions (EU-SILC) data, between 2004 and 2016, 4% to 6% of households reported arrears on their utility bills in the prior twelve months. So-called "objective" measures indicate that in 2013, 14% of households in Belgium were deemed to be in energy poverty because they spent too high a proportion of their income on energy bills (overconsumption supposedly due to energy inefficient housing), and a further 4.6% because of their underconsumption of energy, with

a 0.1% of households belonging to both of these two categories (Meyer et al., 2018: 280). Even small, this latter proportion questions these estimations.

Based on the Belgian 2009 data from the Generation and Gender Programme (GGP) and with another definition of energy poverty, Bartiaux et al. (2018: 1226) estimate that 10.3% of Belgium's households were in energy poverty in 2009. They form a heterogeneous category: 58% live in urban areas, 42% own their dwelling, 30% are below the poverty threshold; half have at least 12 years of schooling with the corresponding diplomas; 43% live alone while 14% are lone-parent families. Sixty percent of the respondents of these energy-poor households are women.

Policies against energy poverty are varied but the complex institutional structure of Belgium makes it difficult to define and implement a policy targeting households in energy poverty: social action (including the management of households' debts) is a federal matter, usually implemented at the municipal level with some room for manoeuvre, whereas policies targeting housing and energy savings are regional matters. For example, subsidies for energy retrofitting a private dwelling vary from one region to another, while the conditions required to qualify for a social tariff for electricity and for gas are decided at the federal level, but regions may add (and pay for) other categories of beneficiaries. Unlike the Flemish and Walloon Regions, the Brussels Region has decided to have no prepayment meters. Energy-poor persons having a prepayment meter, either for electricity, or for gas, or both, curtail their energy consumption for heating, cooking, or showering, and live in anxiety of being disconnected; some feel stigma when reloading the prepayment meter in public space (Baudaux et al., 2019: 57-68).

## References

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