

Short paper, 6 and 7 March 2003 / The Netherlands

1. Introduction

This document examines three topics. Paragraph 2 presents a summary of the efforts made to establish the number of homeless people in the Netherlands. Paragraph 3 outlines the various terms and definitions used. Finally, Paragraph 4 presents a brief description of the academic approaches to homelessness and the research methods employed.

2. How many homeless people are there in the Netherlands?

The number of homeless people in the Netherlands can only be estimated. Various studies and counts have been made, leading to a number of different figures being put forward. Indeed, the numbers cited vary considerably, partly due to the fact that the researchers employ no uniform system of research nor any standard set of definitions. Moreover, the results of the studies are often subject to dispute, since homelessness is a politically charged topic (Deben c.s. 1997). First we will describe the main counting studies on a national and local scale and afterwards the collection of client registration data.

- *Countings on national scale*

The first large-scale study intended to quantify the number of homeless people in the Netherlands was the LSTO study of 1986. This was based on the number of clients seeking shelter at nineteen officially recognized welfare facilities, and arrived at an estimate of 30,000 homeless people. However, the structure of the study is subject to a number of reservations. Firstly, it seems highly probable that some people would have been counted more than once, since no effort was made to establish whether admissions related to new clients, or the people concerned had already made use of one of the other facilities. Secondly, the count was restricted to those people who were present on the welfare organization's premises at that time. Accordingly, those sleeping rough, deliberately trying to avoid contact with welfare services, or with some other form of (incidental) accommodation were not considered. For example, those who had found shelter in the 'non-official' sector, such as commercial, boarding houses, church-run or other charitable facilities would have been excluded. Furthermore, the study failed to define exactly who was to be regarded as 'homeless' and who was not. This led to a discussion in the literature which quickly became known as 'the definition question' (see Paragraph 3).

In 1989, the University of Nijmegen performed a study which led to the publication of the PLOTT report (Heydendeal c.s. 1990). The results suggested that the number of homeless was somewhere between 26,400 and 33,600. The PLOTT report predicted a marked growth in the numbers, which would rise to over fifty thousand by the year 2000. The results of this study were based on secondary data analysis involving recalculations of various existing data sources concerning the number of people in the Netherlands who could fall into the relevant category or who were at increased risk of becoming homeless. The high-risk categories were taken to include: single men, the socially isolated, the long-term unemployed, drug addicts and persons with a psychological disorder. This study was also subject to certain criticisms. Some said that the risk factors were so general and broadly formulated that practically all Dutch people would fall into one category or another: an exaggeration, of course. The researchers defined their research category using the term *thuisloos* ('homeless', in the sense of having no fixed abode), as opposed to the more current Dutch term '*dakloos*', which literally means 'roofless' (see Paragraph 3). This drew the criticism that 'homeless' had not been unequivocally defined in the study. There were also questions concerning the apparent precision of the figures. However, the main objection related to the prediction of a substantial increase in the number of homeless people, which could not be substantiated on the grounds of the research findings. The researchers who made this pessimistic prophecy were even accused of having ulterior motives: it may have been to their advantage to exaggerate the numbers since this could have resulted in greater financial resources being made available for a follow-up study.

In 1990, the Department of Statistics of the Federation of Netherlands Local Authorities (VNG) conducted yet another survey (Zwet c.s. 1990). The figures arrived at were very much lower: between 17,500 and 24,000, based on the number of people

of at least eighteen years of age who had made use of official facilities. Here too, the collection of data was based on 'second-hand' information, namely a sample survey in some thirty Dutch local authority areas, followed by interviews with 'key figures' in the towns concerned. These included local politicians, council officials, the directors of welfare organizations and shelter managers. The interviews were mainly conducted by telephone, whereby each respondent was asked for his or her personal estimate of the number of homeless in the area. The results of this data collection process were then extrapolated to arrive at an estimate for the country as a whole. One reservation expressed with regard to this study was that the research method adopted may have led to some distortion of the figures, since it could have been in the respondents' own interests to 'colour' the results. For example, local politicians may have sought to downplay the homeless problem in their constituency by offering an (artificially) low estimate, while the directors of welfare organizations may have derived some benefit from overstating the problem, offering an (artificially) high figure.

Although exact figures are still not available, the number of homeless people in the Netherlands is currently estimated to be in the order of thirty thousand, a figure which goes unchallenged.

- Countings on local scale

Since the 1990s, the local authorities of a number of larger Dutch cities have been active in trying to establish the number of homeless people in their own locality, commissioning research to quantify the number of homeless in the relevant town, city or region. To date, surveys have been carried out in the five main cities (Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam, Utrecht and Groningen) as well as in several smaller cities. The research methods employed are more reliable than those used in the national studies. They include making a physical headcount of representative groups of homeless people, who are often also asked to answer a few questions or are interviewed at greater length. Using the 'catch - recatch' method, the numbers are then extrapolated to arrive at the total number of homeless in the entire city or region. Such local headcounts are frequently combined with the collection of demographic information, such as age, gender, ethnic origin and details of any drug addiction or psychological problems. On a number of occasions, researchers have also been instructed to enquire into the wishes and requirements of the homeless people themselves. This has proven a particularly difficult undertaking and methods by which the needs of this category can be identified are even now still in their infancy.

Of all the local surveys, that conducted in Amsterdam was the most thorough. A large scale study involving a physical headcount was conducted, intended to establish the number of people 'sleeping rough', i.e. outdoors in public areas (Deben c.s. 1999). Every two years between 1995 and 2001, night-time counts were made at various times of the year. By repeating the counts periodically over several years, with the same research design used on each occasion, Amsterdam hoped to enhance the reliability of the research data while also gaining a clear picture of any increase or decrease in the number of people sleeping rough. The counts were conducted by the University of Amsterdam's Department of Sociology. The research team was assisted by a large number of students who, accompanied by police officers, took to the streets armed with flashlights. They combed certain designated areas of the city to find the research subjects bedded down in various nooks, crannies and doorways. They could then conduct their interviews. Here too, the 'catch-recatch' method was used to extrapolate the data to those areas of the city in which no physical count had been made. One of the problems inherent in this research was that it was difficult to decide who should be classified as 'sleeping rough'. Should this category be confined to only those actually lying down and sleeping in public areas, or should it include those wandering around? Many homeless drug addicts are in the habit of taking brief naps whenever possible, spending most of the night pursuing the next 'hit'. Indeed, some homeless people have a routine so disrupted that night becomes day. They sleep by day and spend the nights wide awake. The researchers also came across a number of drunken individuals who were fast asleep on the streets but did eventually have a home to go to.

When the results of this survey were published in 2001, it became apparent that the actual number of people sleeping rough on the streets of Amsterdam was somewhat lower than had been thought. Moreover, the number had declined slightly over the years. Yet again, the homelessness problem proved itself to be a politically charged subject. The research client, in this case the City of Amsterdam, found the results rather encouraging. However, the findings caused considerable commotion among certain other interested parties, notably the press and the staff of the shelters for the homeless. They considered the numbers cited to be improbably low and distanced themselves from the results. The researchers were accused of having failed to find all the people actually sleeping rough.

- *Collection of client registration data*

The various organizations offering temporary accommodation and other assistance to homeless persons collect certain information about their clients. Various registration systems are in use. These vary from the very simple to the relatively advanced. The more readily accessible facilities, such as church-run 'drop-in' centres, day centres and shelters, generally go no further than manually noting the names of their clients on a list. It is rare for the names to be checked, and many clients use an alias. This form of registration is intended solely to provide an indication of who is actually present on the premises on any one-day. Such lists can also be used to count the overall number of clients using the facility on a monthly or annual basis, information which can then be published in the annual report.

Residential facilities for the homeless generally employ a more advanced computerized registration system, in which details other than just the name can be recorded: gender, age, country of origin, specific needs, etc. At present, two registration systems are in use. The first is used in all Dutch facilities run by the Salvation Army, an organization responsible for a large number of shelter facilities throughout the country. The second is used by the other residential facilities. Both systems would appear to have a number of shortcomings. Firstly, the clients' personal details must remain confidential, due to the provisions of the Data Protection Act. This means that the details of clients who use several different facilities over the course of the years cannot be collated and it is impossible to follow the progress of a given client from one centre or facility to the next. Neither is it possible to derive information concerning recidivism. Moreover, the data formats of the two registration systems are largely incompatible.

The Netherlands Institute for Care and Welfare (NIZW) and the umbrella organization for the sector (*Federatie Opvang*; Federation of Shelters) have now been asked by the government to collect the information from both registration systems, whereby national statistics can be generated and trends identified (*Federatie Opvang* 2000). The statistics will in turn be used by the Trimbos Institute, which in 2002 was given the task of developing a monitoring system in which all available information concerning the homeless population can be collected and maintained. This project is to be conducted under the auspices of Judith Wolf, who was appointed to the research fellowship in Welfare Services for the Homeless in 2002 (see Wolf et al., 2000). The monitoring system will also be used to create greater uniformity in the use of the various definitions. There is also to be greater thought devoted to the formulation of survey questions to be included in national censuses, whereby an indication of the number of Dutch people who have experienced an episode of homelessness at some stage of their lives may be gained.

The two registration systems currently used by welfare organizations do not meet modern requirements. Accordingly, a new and uniform registration system is being developed. In future, its use in all welfare facilities for the homeless will be required by law. The system will enable the personal details of clients to be registered, whereupon those who use more than one facility can be identified and their progress monitored over time. The data will also be aggregated to produce national statistics. The new system is expected to come into use in mid-2003. In the 'low threshold' facilities (which rely on the services of volunteers and in which computers are a rare commodity), the introduction of the new system within the relatively short period required by law will require considerable effort.

3. The definition question

One of the problems faced when attempting to count the homeless is that Dutch researchers have yet to arrive at any standard definition of the target groups. Various terms are used alongside each other and interchangeably. In many cases, the terms are not operationalized in any uniform manner. This causes significant problems with regard to the interpretation of research results and renders the comparison of results difficult. To date, there is no official definition of 'homeless' used by the government or other agencies. However, in 2002 the national government did insist that a research project (*Monitor Maatschappelijke Opvang*, or 'Social Shelter Services Monitor') be set up to try to arrive at a standardized set of definitions and operationalization criteria. This has proven to be no simple undertaking, not least because the terms already in use conceal a vast array of implications, visions, opinions, academic approaches and ideological views. This paragraph examines the most common definitions. In Paragraph 4 we shall examine the social-scientific approaches and visions which lie behind the definitions stated.

In the Netherlands, the main area of dispute concerns the use of two Dutch terms: *dakloos* (literally 'roofless') and *thuisloos* ('homeless'). It is a question of semantics, whereby the distinction cannot readily be made in translation.

The term 'roofless' is generally taken to mean that the person in question does not have guaranteed shelter for the night. He (or she) may camp out in public areas, try to gain admittance to an official shelter, or try to find some other temporary, possibly improvised, solution. The term 'roofless' therefore refers exclusively to the physical lack of a guaranteed shelter. It is a one-dimensional term that is relatively easy to operationalize, simply by stating what we mean by 'a guaranteed shelter'. In academic studies based on a sociological approach, this is generally the preferred term.

The term 'homeless' refers more to the social-psychological component. The person in question has no fixed abode and is thus 'indigent', due to the inability to establish a permanent base, to enter into long-term social relationships or commitments, and the lack of ability or desire to create a stable living and working environment. It is therefore a multidimensional term and the operationalization of the dimensions in the literature becomes particularly difficult. The term is most commonly used in scientific publications produced by social psychologists.

A form equivalent to 'roof-and-home-less' is also in use, being a portfolio version of the two foregoing terms. It seeks to link the physical and social-psychological components. However, it may be asked whether the two designations do indeed overlap: are all roofless people necessarily homeless or *vice versa*? In any case, the combination of the two terms can only lead to further confusion.

As we shall examine further below, the term 'homeless' was long the most common in the Netherlands because the social-psychological approach formed the dominant paradigm. However, with the emergence of studies adopting a more sociological perspective in the mid-1990s, the term had gradually given way to the alternative form which we have translated here as 'roofless'. This term is itself undergoing further definition by means of a number of subcategories which refer to the person's actual situation with regard to accommodation: 'marginally accommodated', 'absolute roofless', and 'residential roofless'.

Marginally accommodated: people who do have a roof over their heads, but do not have accommodation of their own, i.e. a room or rooms intended for residential purposes for which they pay rent or mortgage repayments. Whatever accommodation they do enjoy can therefore be readily lost. They have no rights of tenancy and the accommodation may not comply with the minimum requirements for human habitation. It may be an unauthorized subletting, a squat, a lodging house or premises intended solely for holiday occupation. The 'marginally accommodated' also include adults who are living (on a more or less permanent basis) with friends or family members.

Absolute roofless persons: This term is used to refer to those who generally spend the nights on the streets or in some temporary, readily accessible, shelter. These are the people who spend much of their time walking around and/or sleeping outdoors.

Residential roofless persons: This term refers to persons who do have a more or less permanent address at a shelter or lodging house, either run by the welfare services or in the private sector. This category has a further sub-category, the 'semi-residential roofless', i.e. those whose registered address is at a recognized welfare services organization but who, with the assistance of professional counsellors, are able to live more or less independently, whether on their own or in a small group.

Another term which has been widely used over the last decade is 'socially vulnerable'. This is a somewhat loosely defined category encompassing all the above terms. It refers not so much to a person's accommodation situation, but rather to the social, psychological and physical well-being, the economic position of the person concerned being a significant factor. 'Socially vulnerable' people are those with serious problems in various areas including accommodation, employment, personal contacts, psychological and physical health, etc. These factors, depending on their severity and complexity, may render the people concerned unwilling or unable to make use of the welfare facilities intended to alleviate such problems. The group includes the long-term unemployed, drugs users, ex-prisoners, women subject to domestic abuse and

undocumented immigrants. Both the 'roofless' and 'homeless' can fall under the heading of 'socially vulnerable'. The number of socially vulnerable people in the Netherlands is estimated to be 65,000.

4. Scientific-academic approaches and research methods

A number of slants and centres of gravity may be identified within the social-scientific debate on homelessness in the Netherlands. The emphasis of Dutch studies is generally somewhat different to that of studies in the United States, where the debate is very much polarized and politicized. Researchers into homelessness often adopt explicit political standpoints, of which three are most common.

The first standpoint is that the homeless are the authors of their own misfortune: they have no one to blame but themselves. Supporters of this view regard homelessness as a conscious choice on the part of people who are simply anti-social and lazy. The adherents to this view seek to solve the problem by restricting the welfare services available, increasing repressive measures and applying various forms of compulsion.

The second standpoint, which appears to enjoy greatest currency, is that homelessness may be identified as a product of poverty and housing issues. The supporters of this view suggest that the poor, including 'ordinary people' and families with children, may find themselves out on the streets because there is a shortage of affordable housing and social security benefits are inadequate. They attribute the increase in the number of homeless in the mid-1980s to the erosion of welfare and social housing systems during the Reagan and Bush Sr. administrations. They find further confirmation of this standpoint in the fact that there was a parallel increase in the number of homeless people in Britain under the conservative Thatcher and Major governments. They therefore seek solutions to the problem by means of political reforms in the areas of welfare and housing legislation (cf. Kozol 1988; Jencks 1994).

The third standpoint is largely similar to the second, but its adherents criticise the lack of attention that the second view devotes to homelessness as a welfare issue. They suggest that the homeless are too readily regarded as 'ordinary people', with little or no consideration for the fact that many of the group in question are psychiatrically disordered, alcoholic or addicted to drugs. The emphasis on 'ordinary people', they suggest, may well increase social acceptance of the homeless and may enhance willingness to provide support on the part of politicians and the public, but at the same time it presents a particular danger. Ignoring the psychological or addiction component as a cause of homelessness obscures welfare aspects, and in particular the failings of the healthcare and welfare systems (cf. Farr et al. 1986; Burt 1992).

Although the second of these standpoints is prominent in the American debate on homelessness, in the Netherlands the issue is generally regarded as falling within the purview of the social welfare system. The causes are generally identified in terms of individual dysfunctions. There is little or no tradition of linking the homelessness problem to more general questions of poverty or housing policy. This can be explained by the fact that the Netherlands has a relatively social attitude with regard to the alleviation of poverty and social housing. Another contributing factor may be that the country has no great tradition of sociological research in this sphere: it is the social-psychological perspective which forms the dominant paradigm, an approach which emerged in 1969 with the publication of Heydendael's social-psychological dissertation. A research fellowship was then created, a post held by Heydendael until 2001.

Since the late 1960s, Heydendael and his colleague Nuy (based at the University of Nijmegen) have joined other social psychologists in publishing various studies and articles, and in so doing established the tone of academic-scientific studies into homelessness. These authors (who consistently use the term 'homeless' rather than 'roofless') tend to seek the explanation for homelessness in terms of the psychological development of the homeless persons themselves. They place the emphasis on 'intra-psychological' factors. Among their assertions is that the homeless display a number of characteristic psychological traits not found in the general population. They have poor social perception, evident as an inability to distinguish the important from the trivial, an inability to anticipate or comprehend situations, and an inability to react appropriately to their consequences. They may also demonstrate a lack of social skills, whereby the people concerned are not able to establish their own 'territory'.

In the Netherlands, this social-psychological approach to homelessness is well established and has produced many new insights into the problem. However, a number of reservations must be expressed. There is a danger that the homelessness problem will be overly individualized, de-politicized and not fully recognized as a social problem. By placing too much

emphasis on the identification of individual dysfunctions, the influence of external factors is overlooked. Moreover, these studies generally offer too few indications of possible policy interventions whereby the solutions to homelessness may be found and recurrences of the situation precluded.

Only when the first sociological studies appeared during the 1990s were the first tentative links made between homelessness on the one hand and housing and poverty issues on the other (cf. Deben et al. 1992; Greshof 1994; Spierings 1996; Van Doorn 1994, 2002). In these studies, the authors generally avoid the term 'homeless', preferring the alternatives discussed above ('roofless', marginally accommodated, absolute roofless, residential roofless and so forth.) In other words, the use of the various definitions which have emerged in the Dutch language is parallel to the vast range of varying scientific-academic approaches, political standpoints and opinions regarding possible solutions to homelessness itself. The discussion concerning definitions is therefore an extremely intricate one.

When reviewing the studies into homelessness conducted in the Netherlands, we may conclude that the emphasis to date has been on establishing the *numbers* of homeless people and their *demographic profile*. Quantification is indeed a logical first step in gaining relevant insights. As stated above, there has also been considerable attention devoted to identifying the *social-psychological* factors underlying homelessness. This type of study generally takes the institutional setting as the starting point. The research population consists of those people who are actually to be found in a shelter for the homeless. The lives of those homeless people elsewhere, i.e. on the streets, has enjoyed relatively little consideration. However, this aspect did begin to receive greater attention in the late 1990s. The sociologist Rensen, for example, has commenced an ethnographic study of those sleeping rough, the results of which will be published in mid-2004.

The majority of Dutch studies have taken the form of cross-sectional surveys, which means that homelessness is examined at one particular moment in time. Although these studies have produced much useful information, their 'snapshot' character carries with it the danger of forming a static, one-dimensional picture of the homelessness issue. The development perspective, i.e. the notion that homelessness has a beginning, a middle and an end, is largely ignored. This approach fails to answer the question of how episodes of homelessness relate to certain incidents in the course of the homeless person's life, and how they relate to the availability of institutional services. Recently, a longitudinal study in which homeless people were followed for seven years was completed (Van Doorn 2002). The findings of another research project (Greshof & Deben 1995), in which 25 homeless people were followed over the course of several years, are to be published shortly. It may then prove possible to compare the information derived from the various studies.

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