



Homelessness research :

Definitional issues and first mapping of methodologies

Maryse Marpsat, France

I. Definitional issues

The purpose of this paper is to initiate a discussion on the definition of homelessness and of homeless people (which are two different issues), taking into account both the spatial aspect (the housing situation) and the time factor. As a side issue, other categories will be mentioned, such as people “at risk”, “invisible homeless”, households suffering from “housing needs”.

A. Definition of homelessness, definition of homeless people

A distinction needs to be made between the definition of homelessness and the definition of homeless people. The homeless are not a social group distinct from the rest of the population: they are people who find themselves, at a given time or for a given period, in a situation called homelessness. When we are conducting research on homelessness, we first have to decide if this situation should be defined only by the housing situation or should include other factors of exclusion; and, as regards the housing situation, we have to select which aspects of the situation will be labelled as homelessness, be it “literal” or in a broad sense, or “at risk” situations etc. To define who is homeless, we have to decide on the time aspect of the definition. I shall broach this subject simply to stimulate discussion and to indicate the position of French research.

B. Two aspects in the definition of homelessness

Two questions need to be addressed when discussing the diversity of definitions of homelessness and of people excluded from housing (“at risk”, badly housed, etc.) in different countries:

- is the definition based on the housing situation alone or does it include other factors, such as family estrangement, social disaffiliation etc. (treated as part of the definition rather than as causes or consequences of homelessness)? It is to be noted that, if in the French case there is some agreement among statisticians to limit the definition of homelessness to the housing situation, this is less clear for other European countries (see transcribed discussion).

- if, as in France, the USA etc., it is based mainly on the housing situation, which situations are taken into account ?

B1. The French case: a classification of housing situations

In France, for example, a detailed classification of housing situations has been established (see article by François Clanché, 2000, translation provided) thanks to which various kinds of housing difficulties may be identified. Different methodologies can provide insight into these various situations. No single method, no single survey or file works for all these situations at once.

The housing situation is described by means of four classifications (see appendix): housing type; occupancy status; housing quality; stability/insecurity.

Using several classifications simultaneously was deemed necessary because a situation can be favourable according to one of the classifications (for example, according to the occupancy status hierarchy, owning one's house) and unfavourable according to one of the other three (for example, according to the housing quality classification, owning a dwelling without running water).

Each of these classifications corresponds to one aspect of what can be called bad housing conditions, or housing needs. Examples include living in shelters or in the streets, for the housing type classification; being "doubled up" with parents or friends, living in a squat etc., for the occupancy status classification; living in a place (which can be the street or any place not meant for human habitation) without access to running water, etc. for the housing quality classification; at risk of being evicted, living in housing or in a shelter provided by an association but at the end of the maximum duration of stay, for the stability/insecurity classification.

In France, surveys on homelessness, whether local (in Paris) or national, consider as "literally homeless" (*sans-domicile au sens restreint*) people who are sleeping on the street or in other places unfit for human habitation, and persons living in shelters, hotels or flats paid for by NGOs or public agencies, and hence use a combination of two classifications, housing type and occupancy status. But French statisticians (at INED and INSEE) are also interested in other situations, such as people living in squats, "doubled up" or living in insanitary conditions or at risk of eviction. Various surveys are being used to complement the homeless surveys: questions about doubling up and about the quality of housing in the Housing Survey, studies of people at risk of eviction etc. It is a survey system that is constantly being improved, and INED and INSEE are working to produce a general assessment of poor housing conditions through quantitative surveys supplemented by qualitative studies.

To date, the subject of squats is the category of poor housing conditions that has proved hardest to study through quantitative methods.

B2. Other aspects of housing situations

The French classification presented here provides a basis for discussion, but was limited to the aspects in which the homeless situation could find its place, which were devised during the meetings of the Homeless Group of the French National Council of Statistical Information. When working on housing difficulties in general, other aspects of housing situations should also be taken into account. The main ones involve the **comparison between the characteristics of the household and the characteristics of the dwelling**.

One criterion is **affordability**, which is based on comparing housing costs with a household's ability to meet those costs. Households with an affordability problem can be identified as those for which housing costs represent more than a given percentage of their income.

Suitability, which, according to the Australian Institute of Statistics (2001), "refers to the match between a household's housing needs and the extent to which its dwelling meets those needs", has several dimensions. One that immediately comes to mind relates to the utilization of space. In this case suitability can be measured by any indicator which relates the size (and possibly composition) of the household to the size of the dwelling. Various indicators can be used, such as the number of bedrooms per person, or a more complex indicator with coefficients of different values for children and for adults, etc. For example, the Canadian National Occupancy Standard (developed by the CMHC, Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation, see CHMC, 1991; CHMC, 1992) specifies that:

- “- there should be no more than two persons per bedroom;
- children less than 5 years of age of different sexes may reasonably share a bedroom;
- children 5 years of age or older of opposite sex should not share a bedroom;
- children less than 18 years of age and of the same sex may reasonably share a bedroom; and
- single household members aged 18 years or over should have a separate bedroom, as should parents or couples.”

Other dimensions of suitability take into account other characteristics of the household (for example, if a household member is handicapped (disabled), the dwelling may be more or less adapted to that person's condition).

In Canada, the measure of housing needs (used for the distribution of federal social housing budgets) is based on **affordability**, **suitability** (measured as described above) and on a third criterion, **adequacy**. The adequacy norm

requires that the dwelling possess basic plumbing facilities and is in a good state of repair. It is similar to our housing quality classification, the main difference being that the classification approach describes all dwellings while the adequacy norm identifies sub-standard dwellings.

B2. Classifying, describing norms

The Canadian adequacy norm reflects the same preoccupations as the French housing quality classification, though from a different point of view. More generally, the classification approach is useful for obtaining a general view of all housing situations; the “norm” approach (that is, the description of a threshold below which a dwelling is deemed inadequate) enables identification of households in bad housing conditions and can be a basis for intervention. Such a threshold can be specified for each type of classification. The threshold reflects the norm in a given society, and can differ from country to country and between periods. In Europe, for example, northern and southern countries may have different approaches over the necessity of central heating. So it seems that, however great the difficulties involved (especially given the diversity of housing policies in Europe), agreeing on a set of classifications will be less problematic than agreeing on norms (this is the same debate as that concerning poverty lines).

C. The definition of the homeless “population” and the issue of time

“Population” is used in inverted commas because, as noted earlier, the homeless do not form a social group distinct from the rest of the population. They are people who find themselves, at a given time or for a given period, in a situation called homelessness. We use “population” in the statistical sense of a set of people defined by certain characteristics, in this case being in the same situation.

As said before, in France most studies have chosen to define homelessness as a special case of housing situation, while seeing other factors, such as the employment and family situation, etc., as causes or correlates of homelessness, or as having the same cause. The approach may be different in other countries and this should be part of the subsequent discussion, together with the respective pros and cons of these definitions (see the transcription of the subsequent discussion in the first workshop). Another factor is that there is **no official definition of homelessness in France** (as opposed to the United Kingdom, for example), though there is a common definition used by most of the surveys, which means that there is no official definition of priority categories (like homeless mothers etc.) entitled to help from the state or municipalities.

But even when the definition of homelessness is restricted to the housing situation, the issue of time still has to be addressed. Should we consider as homeless those who are in this situation at the time of the survey (in the French national INSEE survey, people are considered homeless if they spent the night before the survey in a place unfit for habitation or in a shelter or a place paid by an association or another organization), or at least once during a given period (the previous week, month, year, etc.), or every day during a given period etc.?

To sum up, the definitional issues seem to concern the following questions:

- do we agree that there is a difference between defining “homeless” and defining “homelessness”?
- what are the aspects of housing situations that should be taken into account when defining homelessness but also housing needs etc.?
- what are the pros and cons of including the other dimensions (employment, social networks, etc.) in the definition of homelessness? Which countries have done it?
- which countries have an “official” definition of homelessness and what links are there between this definition and housing policies?
- how should we handle the time factor in the definition of the homeless “population”?

All these issues will be examined in more detail in workshops 2 (“taxonomy of homelessness”) and 5 (“identifying hidden homelessness”; “final work on taxonomy of homelessness”) (see Technical annex of our network).

Classifications of housing situations

(These classifications are described in detail in Clanché, « Le classement des situations de logement. Les sans-domicile dans des nomenclatures générales », in Marpsat, Firdion (ed), *La Rue et le foyer. Une recherche sur les sans-domicile et les mal-logés dans les années 90, Travaux et Documents de l'INED*, n°144, 2000, translation available on this website, <http://www.cuhp.org/definitions.cfm>).

Appendix 1. Classification of housing types

1. Individual dwelling

1. agricultural (dwelling part of farm buildings)
2. non-agricultural

2. In a block of flats

1. block with fewer than 5 dwellings
2. block with 5-9 dwellings
3. block with 10 or more dwellings

3. In a building whose function is not housing

(for example, caretaker's flat in factory or sports ground, housing attached to schools, stations, hospitals)

4. Hotel accommodation

1. tourist sector hotel
2. rooming hotel

5. Independent room with its own entrance

(e.g. former maid's room, garage or room at bottom of garden: room part of an ordinary dwelling but self-contained)

6. Hostel or shelter

1. hostel dwelling (independent living collectively run) or social residence
2. collective hostel (collective living) on permanent basis. (e.g. hostel for the disabled or infirm.)
3. temporary shelter open all the year
4. seasonal shelter

7. Other institutional accommodation

1. hospital or nursing institution
2. prison
3. garrison
4. religious institution
5. boarding schools, halls of residence

8. Mobile dwellings that are actually mobile (gypsies, sailors ...)

Caravans, houseboats, motor-home, camping car

9. Personal dwellings that are temporary or intended to be

1. caravan or houseboat (fixed position), site hut
2. individual (single household) mobile-home, unable to move unaided
3. collective (several households) mobile-home.

10. Individual makeshift shelter where personal effects can be stored (the shelter is home exclusively to the person or to their household)

1. cellar, garage, attic, shed (or any more or less lockable place, permanent structure)
2. car, trailer, boat (but not houseboat cabin or caravan)
3. factory, office, warehouse, farmbuilding or disused non-residential building
4. derelict building, building site, cave, tent (not closed place)

11. Collective makeshift shelter where personal effects can be stored (shelter shared with other households)

1. cellar, garage, attic, shed
2. car, trailer, boat
3. factory, office, warehouse, farmbuilding or disused non-residential building
4. derelict building, building site, cave, tent

12. Makeshift shelter with no possibility of storing personal effects

1. cellar, garage, attic, shed
2. car, trailer, boat
3. collective parts of a building (corridor, staircase, landing)
4. factory, office, warehouse, farmbuilding, disused non-residential building
5. factory, office, warehouse, farmbuilding, non-residential building in daytime use
6. derelict building, building site, cave, tent

13. Use of public places

1. Metro (subway, underground), corridors of shopping centre, public building
2. street, bridge, park, railway

Appendix 2 **Classification of occupancy status**

1. Owner-occupier

1. making loan repayments

- receiving state aid
- not receiving state aid

2. not making loan repayments

2. Tenant of unfurnished accommodation

1. HLM social housing agency
2. social housing not HLM
3. private landlord

3. Tenant of furnished accommodation

1. tourist sector hotel
2. rooming hotel

3. furnished flat
4. Housed without charge (with a dwelling for the individual or their household)
 1. provided by employer
 2. agricultural accommodation
 3. provided by family or friends
 4. provided by an institution, voluntary organization or other establishment
5. Housed by a private individual (the household that occupies the dwelling)
 1. person housing them is a family member
 2. person housing them is a friend
6. Sub-letting furnished or unfurnished accommodation from a private individual
(sub-tenant has a legal tenancy agreement)
7. Resident, sub-tenant or housed in accommodation run by the state or by a charitable, voluntary, religious or other organization
 1. accommodation subject to CHRS (Centre for Shelter and Social Readaptation) legislation
 - in return for payment or work
 - without charge
 2. hostel (including emergency shelter), hostel housing (young or immigrant workers, disabled, elderly) or social residence, regardless of legal status (except CHRS)
 - in return for payment or work
 - without charge
 3. voluntary organization whose principal activity is not housing
 - in return for payment or work
 - without charge
 4. other structure whose principal activity is not housing (voluntary organizations excluded)
 - in return for payment or work
 - without charge
8. Other non-legal occupant
 1. with agreement of owner (undeclared, evicted but staying on in dwelling)
 2. without agreement of owner
9. Without a place
 1. with an address where to receive mail
 2. without an address

Appendix 3. **Criteria for evaluating housing quality**

- Do you have running water in your housing (home) or, if not, access to a water supply?
- Is there an indoor toilet?
- Is there a shower or bath inside your housing?
- How many rooms does your housing have (not counting the kitchen if less than 12m², bathroom, corridors)?

- How many people live there?
- In the last twelve months, have you had any problems in your home with dampness (infiltration, leaks, flooding)?

Appendix 4. Classification of stability/insecurity

1. Owner-occupier, tenant, sub-tenant, or housed without charge, and at no clear risk of having to move out in less than a year
2. Owner-occupier, tenant, sub-tenant, or housed without charge, but at risk of having to move out in less than a year
3. Has a dwelling or shelter for a period apparently longer than one year but with no security
4. Has a dwelling or shelter for between 6 months and one year
5. Has a dwelling or shelter for between 1 and 6 months
6. Has no housing security beyond 1 week
7. Has no security but usually sleeps in the same place
8. Has no security and no regular sleeping place

References

Classifications of housing situations, definitions of housing needs, etc.

- ARBONVILLE, D., 2000, « Normalisation de l'habitat et accès au logement entre 1984 et 1992, une étude du 'parc social de fait' ». In M. Marpsat & J.-M. Firdion (eds), *La rue et le foyer. Une recherche sur les sans-domicile et les mal-logés dans les années 90*, Travaux et Documents de l'INED, 144, ch. 1, 31-62. Paris : INED.
- AUSTRALIAN BUREAU OF STATISTICS, 2001, *Measuring Well-being : Frameworks for Australian Social Statistics (chapter 8 : housing)*.
- CHMC, 1991, *Core housing need in Canada*.
- CHMC, 1992, "A Comparison of Housing Needs Measures Used in Canada, The United States and England", *Research & Development Highlights*, socio-economic series, Issue 7.
- CLANCHE François, 2000, « Le classement des situations de logement. Les sans-domicile dans des nomenclatures générales », in Marpsat, Firdion (ed), *La Rue et le foyer. Une recherche sur les sans-domicile et les mal-logés dans les années 90*, Travaux et Documents de l'INED, n°144, 2000, translation available at INED.