

Constructing Understandings of Homeless Populations (CUHP)

Summary of the 2003 Report

General objectives of the CUHP network

The CUHP network has five main objectives:

- To discuss the different definitions of homeless and homelessness employed by researchers, NGOs and policy makers in different member states, and provide a framework for comparative research across member states;
- To assess methodological procedures that provide robust results when used to research homeless populations, and to provide a guide to methods that can be replicated in other countries or at the national level, by research institutes or NGOs;
- To share the substantive findings of the participant research teams, the policy issues that have emerged in their nation states, and the conceptual frameworks used by the various teams;
- To share knowledge of good practice in relation to reinsertion programs;
- To construct a research proposal in the field of homelessness.

The CUHP network is organized as a series of five two-day Workshops and one final conference. The second day of the Workshops is opened to NGOs of the country of the host team; the NGOs present their work with the homeless, their requirement for information and the main questions they would wish answered by research. In response the CUHP research teams describe different research projects in other countries that might provide interesting results for the NGOs.

What was accomplished in year 2003

- From a methodological point of view

Definitions: the group started the discussion on the possible definitions of homeless and homelessness. Three main issues were discussed: the existence of an official definition in a country and its influence on research (the case of UK); the debate between a definition of homelessness based on the housing situation only, or based on other characteristics of the persons such as mental health or social network; the issue of time in defining homelessness.

A first classification of housing situations was also presented as a basis for further discussions.

Data gathering: the first Workshop of the network, held in Paris in March 2003, proposed a first mapping of robust methodologies. The main mapping criteria proposed were:

- point-in-time data versus longitudinal data;
- record-based data versus sample survey (or census) data;
- interviews of 1. service providers, use of service files or administrative data/ 2. interviews of homeless people / 3. interviews of the general population.

Other criteria of classification of the data sources discussed were: national/ local; qualitative / quantitative.

A more exhaustive list of criteria is being prepared, in order to describe accurately the various sources and studies: sampling procedures, number of people interviewed, weightings, existence of a control group...

After this general introduction on methodologies, the second Workshop, which was held in October 2003 in Madrid, dealt with the collection of point-in-time data in more detail. At the Madrid Workshop the method of collecting data that was discussed was that of sample surveys, and the discussion focused on issues of creating sampling frames for homeless populations, and on the instruments used to measure psycho-social health characteristics. The method using record-based data, which is used by several member countries, was not detailed or discussed in this workshop since it will be presented in the next Workshop about longitudinal data.

In relation to the creation of sampling frames a good solution, for those countries with developed services for the homeless, is to sample service users; this approach has been used several times in Madrid by the Complutense University and in Paris by the French National Institute of Demography (INED), and at a national level by the French National Institute of Statistics, the INSEE. However, this sampling method requires that data be weighted to correct for multiuse of the services, and also that the NGOs collaborate with the survey, which is less easy at least at a national level in countries where NGOs are not federated or collectively organized.

Sampling people in services other than shelters (such as food programs, for example), enables the survey team to reach a part of the homeless population which is not covered by surveys conducted in shelters only, i.e. homeless people who sleep in public space at the time of the survey. This is also true of record-based data, though recording contacts with the homeless in services other than shelters is not an easy task.

In countries where the services are less developed (hence where neither record-based data nor service users surveys give a good coverage of the homeless population) alternative strategies are being explored. Although street surveys in general are unable to provide comprehensive coverage of the homeless population, some versions of street surveys, such as was implemented in Hungary where a sample was taken among the homeless contacted by outreach services, could give good results. Places where the homeless gather (such as the railway stations in some countries) could also be used as sampling sites.

A presentation was also made by the Spanish team of various instruments used in the psycho-social assessment in point-in-time sample survey questionnaires. These instruments were assessed in relation to their data gathering function in the questionnaire, such as sociodemographics, important life events, quality of life, health, social support, services, psychosocial and neuropsychological functioning. The paper was especially useful in detailing specific instruments with good psychometric qualities that can be used with the homeless population.

- From the point of view of policy issues

Two main points came out as a result of the first two Workshops:

- In the two countries (France and Spain) the main questions in which the NGOs were interested had to do with: the different categories of homeless populations, and how to answer their specific needs while helping them to access to the services used for the general population; the impact of social policies and the evaluation of the work of social workers and volunteers; housing difficulties in general, and the existence of a "right to housing"; longitudinal issues (who exits homelessness, how to help people exiting homelessness?); prevention issues, particularly for young homeless people; and giving a voice to the homeless.

- A high level of collective organizing of the NGOs and a collaboration between NGOs and researchers dating back to 1993 has been a great help to the conducting of surveys in

France. It seems that in some countries the NGOs are less collectively organized and according to the NGOs and the researchers, it makes difficult both the collaboration of the NGOs in daily work and the conducting of a national survey on homelessness.

- Several NGOs and government members in Spain said they had to raise the level of awareness of the media and of the public on the homeless issue. In France, the issue raised was more that of the type and quality of this attention (only in Winter, only the most spectacular cases, a stereotyped image of the homeless...).

- *From the point of view of dissemination strategies*

A website has been built on which it will be possible to find, for each Workshop, the presentations of all the participants. The website is organized in several themes: definitions; methods; policies and legislation; NGOs; ethics; theories; bibliography; links. The website includes a presentation of all the partners, an index and there is a possibility to contact CUHP and leave comments or information.

- *A bibliographical database*

A bibliographical database is being implemented in which the most prominent studies in each country will be listed. A Word version of this database will be included in the website.

