Quantitative methods in Homelessness Studies: A critical guide and recommendations

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1. Introduction

Quantitative and qualitative methodologies are complementary when dealing with homelessness. Having acknowledged the importance of both types of methodologies, this paper will focus on the role of quantitative methodology in the research of this collective. For this purpose, we will review the work carried out in various meetings of this network by several of the teams.

Data of the quantitative works are obtained from several sources: registers or administrative data, the homeless people, professionals, or the general population. Such sources are selected taking into account primarily the goals of the work. (Marpsat, 2003; Marpsat, 2003b; Muñoz, Vázquez, Panadero & Vázquez, 2003; Stax, 2003).

For this paper, we decided to divide the works that use this methodology as a function of the temporal criterion; that is, we divided them into quantitative cross-sectional studies (works in which the quantitative data are collected at a certain time or within a short period of time and which contribute valid data for a specific point in time) and longitudinal studies (studies in which there is more than one evaluation moment, that is, data is gathered at different times). Although some aspects in these types of works are similar, they present specific features that justify this differentiation, such as, for example, goals, limitations, etc.

2. Methods commonly used in quantitative studies on homelessness

2.1. Cross-sectional approaches

The first studies of the homeless were chiefly cross-sectional works that attempted to determine the number of homeless people, their main characteristics and needs. This type of works, with just one point of evaluation, have been and still are the most common within the homelessness studies. They have also been used to determine the opinions and attitudes of the general population and to describe the services aimed at attending this collective.

– Surveys and interview-based cross-sectional approaches

These kinds of works have been the most common in the cross-sectional studies. Various strategies have been used, from direct (obtaining data directly from the homeless) to indirect approaches (collecting data provided by workers, volunteers, etc.).

The works that have addressed the topic of homelessness through the homeless people themselves, essentially seeking to describe their main features, have considered diverse variables: sociodemographic variables, physical health (illnesses undergone, perceived health, health habits, etc.), mental health (mental disorders, consumption of alcohol and drugs and drug-related disorders, etc.), stressing life events, homelessness history, etc. In order to evaluate these variables, a great variety of instruments has been used, principally surveys and interviews (structured, semi-structured, or open).

The results of this kind of work are influenced by some variables that must be taken into account; chiefly, homeless people's characteristics vary depending on the way homelessness is defined, sample selection, the time lapse considered and the design, the definition of the characteristics and the way they are assessed (the instruments employed), as well as the sampling strategies utilized (Shinn & Fischer, 2004).

The type of sampling strategies employed is crucial in order to guarantee the representativeness of the samples used and, hence, to be able to produce estimates and accurate conclusions about the collective addressed. The importance of developing sampling strategies for the homeless who proportionately represent all the services and include the homeless who do not use any service has been emphasized by various authors (Koegel, Burnam, & Morton, 1996;

Marpsat, Quaglia, Razafindratsima, 2005; Muñoz, Vázquez, & Vázquez, 2003; Rossi & Freeman, 1989) who have suggested the use of sampling strategies that include multicenter, multiservice, and multiday sampling, and sampling places where the homeless get together.

From the results obtained in the studies performed at various locations of the USA—using counting strategies that include the homeless who are not services users—Burt (1993) estimated that a sample that included shelters, public soup kitchens, and the "visible" homeless on the streets would account for approximately 70-80% of all the homeless people from the urban areas. However, data from the District of Columbia Metropolitan Area Drug Homelessness Study (Dennis, 1993) indicated that, at least in Washington DC, 93% of the homeless would be accounted for if only shelters and public soup kitchens were sampled, and this amount would exceed 94% if the visible homeless people out on the streets were sampled as well. That is, these data indicate that, in different cities, the difficulties involved in reaching the largest possible number of homeless people may vary significantly.

Generally, estimations based on the use of resources provide a partial view of the problem, as they do not take into account the homeless people who do not use these services. Therefore, a strategy that somehow takes these persons into account is required. In order to identify the proportion of homeless people who are left out of the multicenter sampling, "S-night" strategies have been used (Cousineau & Ward, 1992; Devine & Wright, 1992; Edin, 1992; Hopper, 1991, 1992; Martin, 1992; Stark, 1992; Wright & Devine, 1992). The "S-night" strategy has been used to estimate the largest possible number of homeless persons in urban areas who are literally sleeping on the street on a certain night. The basic strategy consists of combing the streets of the city, identifying all the people who are sleeping on them. For this purpose, a night of maximum occupancy of city resources is chosen— generally very cold nights—and a certain number of city streets or areas are combed. Areas can be selected by random procedures—more useful in urban areas with a large number of homeless people—or by guided procedures, in which the streets or areas with a higher concentration of homeless people are selected—more useful in urban areas with a small amount of homeless people. However, this method has limitations: it does not take into account people who are hidden during the night, or in squats, or moving; the questionnaires cannot be very long, so the data collected may be too few to estimate bias properly.

This strategy has been used in some studies carried out in European cities. For example, in Madrid, the use of this strategy allowed us to determine that 97.5% of the homeless people had used shelters, public soup kitchens, public baths, or clothing donation centers in the 4 weeks prior to the S-night. Therefore, it was concluded that a sampling strategy that included all the weekdays, sample stratification as a function of the kind of resource (shelters, soup kitchens, public baths, and clothing donation centers), and that was extended for 4 weeks or that took into account this time lapse, would represent 97.5% of the homeless people in Madrid (Muñoz et al., 2003).

The weighting strategy is focused on the services provided in each center, according to the type of resource sampled. But the probability of a person being selected is also a function of the probability of selecting the service which that person is receiving and of the probability of that person being contacted again in another service. In turn, this second probability is a direct function of the utilization of other centers by that person (Muñoz et al., 2003).

Two specific problems are to be addressed in this kind of surveys:

1. Since the survey samples services, it is necessary to elaborate complex weighting systems to correct the bias due to different levels of service use by each person (multiplicity) and thus obtain a sample of persons (Burt, 1992; Firdion, 1995; Koegel & Burman, 1992; Marpsat & Firdion, 1998; Marpsat & Firdion, 1999). Several methods have been used: for example, a method derived from the Poincaré formula (Marpsat & Firdion, 1998; 1999) and the weight sharing method (Ardilly & Le Blanc, 2001). A truly representative sampling strategy should consider each user's usage frequency for each resource; otherwise, the sample will over-represent the people who use resources more frequently and under-represent those who use them to a lesser extent.

2. Duplication is only a problem if the respondent is interviewed twice in the same service site; otherwise the methods described above (such as the weight sharing method) adjust for the respondent being interviewed twice in different service sites. Thus, the sampling strategy should avoid or control possible duplications in the same service site.

Data weighting should therefore be considered a particularly relevant aspect in order to obtain representative samples.

As mentioned before, most of these kinds of works have focused mainly on counting the homeless and analyzing the characteristics of this collective. However, some of these studies have attempted to go beyond this and determine the causes of homelessness. For this purpose, they generally resort to comparing samples of homeless people with other collectives (chiefly domiciled people with economical problems). Two kinds of data have been used for these comparisons: either existing data on the general population (or a deprived subset of it) of the same urban area (Marpsat & Firdion, 2001), or ad hoc surveys (Muñoz et al., 2003). This second kind of works adds significant difficulties to the descriptive studies, such as the identification of the appropriate comparison groups and access to these groups. However, efforts have also been made in this direction over the last few years in the European context, carrying out works of this type in various countries (i.e., Craig & Hodson, 1998; Muñoz et al., 2003).

However, in this sort of studies, direct information from the homeless themselves has not always been used (although it is the most usual approach). The phenomenon of homelessness has also been addressed by means of interviews with experts or professionals from the services provided to this collective. This approach has been used to investigate the ways of attending this collective, among other goals; that is, description of the services to assist the homeless, chiefly, by means of questionnaires directed at the professionals or persons responsible for these centers. For example, in Spain, two works of this sort were carried out in the last few years at a national level (Cabrera, 2000; Instituto Nacional de Estadística [INE], 2004). These studies elaborated a directory of resources for the homeless in this country, indicating their main characteristics as well as their lacks.

Another area of knowledge of homelessness addressed by this type of work is the general population's public attitudes towards the homeless population. This kind of research can be especially enlightening about attitudes towards the homeless and the tendency to help, as well as about homeless people's perception of the general population (e.g., Link, Schwartz, Moore, Phelan, et al., 1995; Toro & McDonell, 1992). Despite the relevance of this sort of studies, they are very few in the European context.

However among surveys of the general population some have included questions in order to describe the respondent's previous episodes of homelessness (e.g. in France the 2002-2003 Health survey and the 2006 Housing survey; at the European level the Eurobarometer survey includes this type of questions since 1993). Other surveys (such as the French Housing Survey since 1996) includes questions about people doubling up with family or friends.

- **Register-based cross-sectional approaches**

Data registers or administrative data have often been used to attempt to estimate the number of homeless people, defining a register as "a set of standardized quantitative data that can be re-associated with the concrete object that the data is intended to inform about, where the object can be an enterprise, a person, or a similar unit" (Stax, 2003).

Over the last few years, various European countries have used registers to collect information about the homeless (see a description of research on homelessness in Europe in Brousse, 2004). The Danish case is paradigmatic of the development of this kind of registers. As indicated by Stax (2003), since the early eighties, Statistics Denmark has collected data about the homeless, the clients of institutions, once a year for a week. This information did not include an identifier for each person, so there was no information about how many different persons used the shelter beds during that week, nor was there any information about who these people were, nor why they used a shelter. It was simply an enumeration of the institutions, beds, average use per day, and persons employed in this kind of resources.

These limitations were overcome with the creation of a national register that gathers information about most of the shelters and includes the users' personal number and increases the number of variables taken into account. This leads to improvement of the information collected: it allows counting the number of people who use these resources, how frequently, discharge intervals and duration, etc. The variables collected in this register are: the institutions, the number of beds, admission and discharge, age and gender, referral agencies, the kind of income the people were receiving when admitted, where they go when discharged (if known), and how and why they are discharged.

The registration of the personal number makes it possible to obtain knowledge on the users from the general registers e.g. on employment history, education, medical history etc. However, this kind of data from general registers also presents some problems. First, the register is already elaborated, which limits the possibility of gathering other data or of freely designing a research project, because the variables are clearly determined. There are also some problems concerning the validity and reliability of the register data, occasionally related to the characteristics and fluidity of these people's life situation (Stax, 2003).

Another significant limitation to be taken into account is that the registers provide interesting information to improve our knowledge about homelessness but only about a specific type of homeless person (those that use this kind of services), excluding those who live on the street, or who live temporarily with friends or relatives, etc.

This kind of register involves other problems such as: the difficulty to create one single database that includes the data of all the services that attend this population (including the small services), problems recording the information (incomplete information, rigor of the register, etc.) (Van Doom, 2003).

2.2. Quantitative Longitudinal Analysis of Homelessness

Longitudinal analysis enables the study of homelessness in a long term or life course perspective. In life course individuals may undergo transitions from a situation of a relatively stable housing situation, to a situation of homelessness, and eventually maybe re-establish a stable housing situation. A distinction between stock and flow reflects that even though the number of homeless people may be relatively constant over time, the number of people who at some point have experienced homelessness may be considerably larger than the current number of homeless people suggests.

The conception of causality involved in explaining homelessness must be based on a complex understanding of homelessness as a social phenomenon which is the result of processes operating on a macro level (such as exclusion processes on the labour and housing markets) increasing the risk for certain groups to experience homelessness, and social and psychological factors on a micro level further increasing the risk of certain individuals. The interplay of many different processes explains why certain individuals experience homelessness during their life course, and why some individuals are able to get back to a stable housing situation. The longitudinal study usually follows a group of initially homeless people over time and thereby generally strengthens explanation of such complex processes by adding a time span to the analysis. This gives a possibility to explain which factors cause flows out of and back in homelessness and also to establish possible future consequences on living standard, health etc. Also a longitudinal study could (theoretically) follow a segment of the general population and analyse differences between those who do and do not experience homelessness, but the rarity of this event would result in a very large sample size. Statistical analysis offers correlations between certain characteristics, transitions and social situations, e.g. movements in and out of homelessness, and received services. Thereby knowledge on which services more successfully enables people to obtain and maintain a home can be achieved. Thus, the longitudinal study is also relevant when it comes to evaluating the effects of different services and programs aimed at homeless people.

In longitudinal studies of homelessness different designs reflect the different available data sources and possible ways of following individuals over time. However, a common problem or challenge in longitudinal designs is how to keep contact to a group of homeless people who may or may not live as homeless after a certain period in order to do follow-up interviews. Two studies from Spain (Muñoz, Vázquez and Vázquez, 2003 and Muñoz et al, 2004) are based on establishing an initial contact and conducting interviews with a group of homeless, and then at a later stage reestablish contact and conduct new interviews. A study from Denmark (Stax 1999) is based entirely on official data registers in order to analyse trajectories of people who were registered in homeless shelters at a given time. Another Danish study (Geerdsen et.al. 2005) combines register data on former users of homeless institutions and survey data. In all the studies there are problems related to identify and make contact to all homeless people at a certain time of period.

- **Examples of interview based follow-up studies**

A longitudinal study by Muñoz, Vázquez and Vázquez (2003) involved a group of homeless persons and a control group of persons who are at risk of becoming homeless. The former group was identified among users of shelters and soup kitchens in Madrid. Criteria to define the group of homeless people were: to have spent the night before the interview on the street, in a shelter for the homeless, in an emergency centre, or in a place unfit for habitation. 289 persons were identified as belonging to the group of homeless and subsequently they were interviewed. The risk group included 136 persons who have their own place, yet they went to soup kitchens or other services for homeless people. Sampling strategies were developed to ensure representativity and validity for instance by representing all services proportionally. However, due to the low number of persons in the risk group these criteria of ensuring representativity were only employed for the homeless group.

A number of subjects were covered in the interviews such as employment and economic resources, physical and mental health, life history and crucial events, social benefits and usage of services, and expectations for the future. A series of standardized instruments were used such as the general health questionnaire by Goldberg (1978).

A round of follow-up interviews was planned to be conducted 12 months after the first round of interviews. Almost all the first-time-interviewees agreed to participate in the follow-up interviews and provided the researches with their personal contact details. Various procedures were employed to reestablish contact such as phoning the numbers provided by the interviewees, contacting family and services, putting up posters, searching in streets and hang-out places etc. Due to the unstable situation of the study population it was expected that the re-interview rate would decrease between first and second round of interviews. 27 per cent (n = 78) of the homeless people were re-interviewed over a period of 11 to 25 months from the first interview. Less than 10 per cent of the control group of risk persons were interviewed again which has to do with the fact that the risk group use the services less than the homeless group.

Comparing characteristics of the interviewees in the first interview round and the follow-up round, there was a tendency to a higher average age in the follow-up group. In terms of ethnicity, civil status and educational level there were only minor or non-significant differences. Furthermore, there were differences between the initial interview group and the follow-up group related to an improvement of physical and mental health, and a decrease related to sentiments of abandonment and loneliness. It was difficult to assess whether these patterns reflected actual changes or a bias in the follow-up group.

It was also possible to compare the homeless people in the follow-up group, and those individuals who had achieved adequate housing in between the first and second round of interviews. It turned out that those with adequate housing on average had a higher educational level, a higher share of qualified employment, and had been living as homeless for a shorter period than those individuals who still lived as homeless. In addition, those individuals who had obtained housing were characterised by receiving money from family and friend, greater participation in psychosocial rehabilitation programs, less use of soup kitchens, and no cases of alcohol dependence. A discriminant analysis confirms that longer periods of living as homeless, prolonged unemployment, alcohol dependence and less participation in psychosocial rehabilitation programs increase the risk of remaining homeless. This generally points out the importance of an early intervention. However, according to Vázquez and Muñoz, the opposite circumstances do not predict the achievement of adequate housing at the follow-up with sufficient precision.

Another longitudinal study by Muñoz et al, (2004) was aimed at studying the effectiveness of services for the homeless. 130 users of 11 different services in Madrid were interviewed in an initial round. Two rounds of follow-up interviews were carried out respectively 6 and 12 months after the first interview. In order to locate the interviewees all data the researchers were able to gather (name, nickname, family addresses, phone contacts, etc.) 42 per cent participated in the first follow-up and also 42 per cent participated in the second follow-up. 33 per cent were interviewed in both the first and the second follow-up whereas 59 per cent were interviewed in one of the two follow-ups. A smaller number could not be re-interviewed due to death, mental problems, imprisonment, refusal, or they were out of town at the time of the interview. 22 per cent were not located either at 6 or 12 months.

The results indicate that there were no significant differences on demographic variables (sex, age, civil status and education) comparing the participants in the different interview rounds. Comparison of the initial group and the follow-up groups show that the economic situation in the follow-up groups is better than in the initial group, and also some health indicators and general life satisfaction show improvement.

The two Spanish interview based follow-up studies illustrate that one of the major difficulties involved in longitudinal studies of homelessness is to keep contact to the interviewees over time and moreover it involves intensive use of time and a significant economic cost. The studies suggest the importance of obtaining as many contact details as possible. A comparison of the studies suggests that a shorter interval between the follow-up studies (e.g. 6 months) increase the success rate in maintaining contact with the interviewees.

- **An example of register based longitudinal analysis**

In countries with extensive official registers, longitudinal analysis can be carried out based on register data. If a segment of the homeless population can be identified, it is possible to follow this group in a time span through the registers and to compare this group to other population groups or to the general population. Homeless shelters in Denmark register the identification number (Central Personal Register number) of the users. This makes research based on data on various aspects of homeless individuals' lives from early childhood (only for younger individuals) to adulthood possible. The public registers include data on for instance demographic variables, housing, education, employment, income, taxation, health etc.

A study by Stax (1999) has been based entirely on data from official registers. The study follows 1,185 persons who stayed in an institution for homeless and/or centres for battered women in the municipality of Copenhagen in period from medio 1988 to medio 1989 for more than four days in a row. The users were between 18 and 35 years of age. These 1,185 had been registered for the purpose of another research project conducted by P. Brandt (1992).

A data set was established including variables for instance on sex, age, citizenship, household category, civil status, transfer income, unemployment, criminal record, enrolment in treatment for drug abuse and also data on death causes were obtained for 139 persons in the data set who had died.

A number of general issues can be raised regarding the use of register data. Generally there is a restricted assess to the data, which are only available for research and administrative purposes. According to Stax, not all the relevant information was provided by Statistics Denmark due to the sensitivity of data. Some of these data were actually obtained from primary sources such as police records. Another general problem is that the data are predefined and the researcher does not have the possibility of the survey of formulating questions aimed at the particular problem in question. Instead the data is the result of administrative registrations of interactions between data individuals and for instance the public system.

Especially, regarding the longitudinal perspective the different data sources involved meant that not all data could be obtained covering the same time periods. For instance the information available on treatment for the use of illegal substances covered two years only and every year another period was added and the oldest deleted. When Stax tried to perform qualitative follow-up interviews with part of the individuals in the data set, in a number of cases the formal address of the data individuals turned out to be invalid. This may reflect that some of the individuals are actually still homeless and also gives an indication that the registers do not always reflect reality adequately. In this regard the register data like any other kind of data must be regarded as constructed data and are not in themselves more or less objective than other kinds of data.

Among the results of the study the mortality rate of those formerly enrolled in homeless institutions and who were between 18 and 35 years old was 14 times higher than the general population. Drugs or AIDS were primary death causes for a large proportion of those who had died. The study also revealed that among those who had been enrolled in shelters and receiving public income transfers and increased proportion over time received permanent transfer income like early retirement pension as opposed to temporary benefits like social assistance or unemployment benefits.

- **Combining register and survey data in longitudinal studies**

The possibility of following users of homeless shelters through public registers also enables combining register and survey methods. Thereby it is possible to reduce the problem of conducting follow-up studies on the homeless population as the registers can provide some of the information which is difficult to gather through follow-up interviews. The register data also has an advantage when it comes to retrospective data, for instance income in previous years which can be difficult to obtain exact information on in an interview. For younger cohorts it is even possible through the registers to gain childhood data, for instance whether the data individuals were living in an institution when they were children.

On the other hand, the survey can give information which is not available in registers, for instance interviewees' subjective experiences of the causes that have lead to a situation of homelessness, actual experiences of living as a homeless and their experience of current living standard. Combining the two sources of information can strengthen the design of the study, increases the overall validity of the data obtained and helps to overcome some of the inherent difficulties in longitudinal studies on the homeless population. The use of the register data strengthens the possibility to evaluate whether the interviewed persons are representative of the whole group as register information is available for all. However the issues of confidentiality and anonymity must be taken into account.

In another Danish study (Geerdsen et. al. 2005) identification numbers on 4,579 users of homeless shelters in 1997 in the City of Copenhagen and five counties were obtained.[1] On the basis of the identification numbers register data were obtained from different sources mainly from the databases of Statistics Denmark. The register data covered a number of aspects such as demographic variables, children, income, transfer benefits, education, and crime. Further information was obtained from administering a survey to a fraction of the study population. It was not possible to contact 1,724 persons due to various reasons, such as death, emigration and imprisonment. Furthermore 14 per cent of the former users of the shelters had requested not to be contacted for research purposes (an option available in registration forms used when moving formal address). Of a net population of approx. 3000 persons, 1,600 were randomly selected for interviews. A survey questionnaire was carried out in this group of 842 persons, which resembles a response rate of 52 per cent. It turned out that there were no significant differences between the gross population and the interviewed persons and this comparison was only possible through the use of the register data.

From the survey knowledge is obtained on the causes for inherently enrolling in the homeless shelter. Major reasons are alcohol problems and broken relationships/marriages. Furthermore 20 per cent state that they could no longer live at friends and family suggesting that a large problem concerns the issue of hidden homelessness.

The study reveals that more than half of the former users of homeless institutions live in a regular home five years later. The group which has the lowest odds of having their own home five years later is the male drug abuser, who is 30-40 years of age, and has a criminal background and no education. It also turns out that about one out of four are on the labour market. The highest chance of being in employment is found among those living in relationships and whereas the chance of having a job is very low for single women with children. According to the survey about every second interviewees find their standard of living is improved. The survey also shows how data debt to public authorities lowers chances of leaving homelessness behind. When it comes to the effect of homeless services there is no relationship between the duration of the stay in a homeless institution and the chance of having a home five years later and also no relationship with having received other kinds of services, except for contact with a residence councillor. The lack of significance of having received various services, may be explained if the most intensive

[1] Shelters under the section 94 (previously § 105) in the Law on Social Services were included in the study. This includes most homeless shelters in the five cities and counties, as the section 94 institutions offers both short and longer term stays. However, a few emergency shelters which only offer night accommodation and which do not gather personal numbers from the users were not included.

effort from the services has been received by those initially worse off within the homeless population.

3) Comments

Based on the information provided in this paper about quantitative studies of homelessness, the following final comments and recommendations can be made:

- It is essential to use representative samples when addressing the phenomenon of homelessness. It is therefore important to continue working on the development of sampling strategies and to promote and encourage their use by investigators.
- Despite the fact that this work has only addressed the quantitative methodology in the study of the homeless, it is important to point out the relevance of carrying out studies in which quantitative and qualitative methodologies complement each other.
- As can be seen from the above, studies of the general population in Europe on the homeless issue are very scarce and could provide interesting information, for example, about the population's attitudes towards and knowledge of this phenomenon or about previous spells of homelessness.
- National representative surveys of the homeless population (either using register data or sample surveys) are still scarce in Europe, which is an obstacle to tackling this problem.
- It is crucial to perform longitudinal studies despite their high cost and difficulty, because they provide essential information about the causes of the exits from homelessness and multiple homeless episodes, as well as the development of these person's life situation, recovery processes, etc. For this purpose, methodological and strategic efforts have been made to discover instruments that are useful to locate these people. However these surveys are very difficult to conduct on a large urban area or at the national level, at least for large countries.

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