

# Is it legitimate to carry out surveys on the homeless? An ethical and scientific question

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Is it legitimate to carry out surveys on the homeless? The question might seem provocative in an age when opinion polls and statistics inundate us with numerical information about every category of individual and item. Is this sort of question asked when surveys are conducted on people in conventional settled housing (for example low-income inhabitants of social housing)? Any scientific approach, however, implies reflecting on the best method to use for the object to be observed. It can be recalled that the homeless are defined here as persons who, during the observation period, find accommodation in an emergency or long-stay shelter (CHRS, social hostels etc.) or sleep in public places and other locations not intended for habitation<sup>1</sup>. The choice of an appropriate statistical survey presents researchers with a set of scientific and ethical problems that are inextricably linked. In what follows the main lines of these complex debates are illustrated using examples drawn from the United States, where surveys on the homeless became common in the early 1980s, and from France, where this population<sup>2</sup> has generated growing interest since the 1990s.

Applying statistical survey techniques to a population as hard to observe as the homeless takes us to the limits of this quantitative method. Large amounts of resources must be mobilized to overcome the methodological and technical obstacles encountered. Measurement of social groups on the margins of a society represents a major political issue for decision-makers and militants, and can lead to a partisan use of statistics. Numerous methodological and ethical reasons can be found for abandoning this scientific ambition. So does the determination to approach homeless people and conduct surveys on them not indicate that statisticians and researchers (like policemen) are obsessed with social control? What are the motives for wanting to measure? Another difficulty is that the survey subjects are particularly “disqualified” socially<sup>3</sup>, and culturally disadvantaged in the context of a survey relationship. They would thus be ill equipped to deal with the symbolic violence created by this interaction<sup>4</sup>. Their extremely insecure situation may increase their vulnerability to risks of “invasion of privacy”. Lastly, there are concerns over the possible misuse, by political actors, of the numerical information that is obtained. We begin by detailing these objections, before presenting the main answers that can be made to them. As researchers who have conducted studies on the homeless, we make clear our own position.

## I. The main objections to statistical investigation on the homeless

The main arguments against statistical investigation on the homeless show the frequently artificial nature of separating the ethical and the scientific; these two dimensions, often inextricably linked, run all through the discussion that follows. In the interests of clarity we

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<sup>1</sup> We give merely an instrumental definition of the term “homeless”, corresponding to the usual field of surveys on populations experiencing severe housing insecurity. For more details see chapter 5 of *La rue et le foyer*, of which the present text forms chapter 4. It first appeared in *Revue des Affaires Sociales*, 1995, 2, with the title “Est-il légitime de mener des enquêtes statistiques auprès des sans-domicile?”

<sup>2</sup> The term “population” is not used here in the sense of a homogenous social group; it denotes the set of people who are homeless according to the definition given.

<sup>3</sup> In the meaning of E. Goffman (1963).

<sup>4</sup> According to P. Bourdieu (1993, p. 905).

distinguish the view point of the individual regarding statistical investigation from that of the scientific researcher relative to a quantitative approach. We begin by examining the fears that individuals may have about being questioned on their private life and about the uses that the government or official agencies might make of the results from this investigation.

### *1) Fear of invasion of privacy*

In any non compulsory survey the subjects can, by definition, refuse to meet the interviewer or reply to one or several questions<sup>5</sup>. Does conducting a statistical investigation on people who are completely destitute and hence vulnerable, not represent a particularly pernicious intrusion into privacy given that it concerns an “exposed” population that apparently has no private space? It is true that a homeless person can’t shut the door in the face of the interviewer and can’t always escape the gaze of other people. Some might conclude that a search warrant was unnecessary in the case of a person sleeping “on the street”. A policeman in Connecticut was convicted, however, for searching, without a warrant, the bags of a homeless person, since the judge took the view that the bushes, which hid them from passers-by, were the symbolic mark of a private space (Bordreuil, 1993, p. 142).

Another possibility is that homeless people are sometimes forced to accept (or refuse) to be interviewed, because they are alone and frightened, or because the leader of the group is at hand, or because they think they are dealing with social workers or volunteers from associations who may have something to give them, or because they are being “watched” by the organization that is looking after them. Experience in the field shows that people in situations of extreme deprivation do not mind refusing, being used to defending themselves against aggressions; but it is also true that certain situations, such as the presence of an official from a homelessness agency (or a personal caseworker, shelter warden, etc.) can produce a feeling of “having to reply”. Yet privacy advocates maintain that a failure to give everyone the possibility of freely accepting or refusing a survey infringes the right to protect one’s privacy.

The arguments used by each side are those of the classic opposition between the general interest and individual freedom. Researchers have the goal of obtaining information that is as reliable and relevant as possible while remaining as independent as possible from pressures of particular (including political) interests. The statisticians and/or researchers who work for government departments invoke their professional ethics<sup>6</sup> to refute charges of threatening the rights of the citizen (Choldin, 1988, p. 146). The libertarians, on the other hand, want to strengthen the independence of the private domain in relation to the state. Ends do not justify

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“This dissymmetry [in the roles of interviewer/interviewee] is compounded by a social dissymmetry whenever the interviewer occupies a higher position than the interviewee in the hierarchies of the various kinds of capital, in particular cultural capital.”

Symbolic violence is characterized by a disregard for the conditions and instruments of its action (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 67).

<sup>5</sup> Surveys of all kinds are subject to statistical confidentiality: French law no. 51-711 of 7 June 1951 amended (1962, 1984, 1995), law no. 92-684 of 22 July 1992 (article 226 on breaches of confidentiality). This is distinct from the fact that a person cannot, in theory, refuse to meet an interviewer in the case of a compulsory survey. A survey is made compulsory by a decision of the CNIS (*Conseil National de l’Information Statistique* - National Council for Statistical Information). This is the case for the general population census.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to the rules of professional confidentiality, a “Code de déontologie Statistique” (Code of Statistical Practice) was drawn up in 1986 by the INSEE Administrators and economic statisticians alumni of the ENSAE (R. Padiou, 1991). This followed the “Declaration on Professional Ethics” of the International Statistical Institute, adopted in 1985 (ISI, 1986). On the great importance civil servants attach to the defence of the general interest against private interests, see Chevallier (1982, pp. 173-8) and Nizard (1982, p. 316).

means, and they insist that the person be fully informed about the survey topic and of its non compulsory nature. They are particularly concerned about the creation of any file (especially in computerized format) that could be used for other than the stated purposes and for the matching of data from different sources. It is clear that these two goals are in part irreconcilable. For example, epidemiological studies, with a public health objective, can encounter resistance when they have to use data collected for other purposes. In the field of poverty studies, France's National Commission of Data Protection and Privacy (CNIL) has prohibited any linkage of data files on the beneficiaries of RMI (the French Minimum Social Insertion Income), a decision seen by some actors and observers of the law on the RMI as an obstacle to a better understanding of the phenomenon and hence as a "sort of non-assistance to people who are socially in danger" (Chopart, 1991, p. 9). Too often the argument for the protection of individual liberty overlooks the fact that some populations, notably those in conditions of extreme deprivation, are unable to exercise this freedom due to absence of choice and that in this case one of the strategies for guaranteeing its respect is to conduct research on these persons' situations.

## *2) Central government, local authorities and low-income populations*

A question of more concrete implications is whether a survey on a marginalized population can have negative consequences at the individual level. In the United States, for example, militants have denounced the indiscretions committed during the 1990 Census by enumerators who thought it acceptable for them to transcribe nominative information from a list of residents of an emergency shelter (O'Malley, 1992).

The homeless are the poorest of the poor, that is, marked by an inferior and devalued social status, and for a long while were denied the possibility of exercising their right to vote. The capacity of the homeless to defend and assert their rights is especially limited. One of the tasks assumed by the voluntary groups that claim to defend or represent this population is providing a vigilant protection against the abuses to which it is exposed. When a statistical survey is conducted by an institution linked to central or local government, some fear that one or other of these will seek to use it for controlling a population that is judged dangerous or potentially criminal because it cannot be observed. In France, having no dwelling was for long a presumption of dangerousness (law on municipal police, 1791, article 3) and could result in imprisonment (Code Pénal, section, V, articles 269 to 273; Beaune, 1983, p. 126). The crime of vagrancy was only removed from the Penal Code in 1994. In the United States, police harassment of homeless people is often alleged (Blasi, 1994, p. 579; Roberts and Keefe, 1986, p. 413), and since the early 1990s many local authorities have adopted exclusionary policies towards them, such as the New York Transit Authority, which in 1990 made it unlawful to beg or sleep in the subway, and in parks and leisure areas (Neuman, 1994, p. 13). In France too, some local authorities have introduced bylaws banning begging and vagrancy in their jurisdiction (Damon, 1995) and a law has been introduced in 2003 prosecuting "aggressive" begging in central cities. Is there not a danger that publication of enumerations will exacerbate these local measures? Coexistence between a highly marginalized population and its local neighbourhood sometimes leads to conflicts<sup>7</sup>. Once a survey had identified certain sorts of places as being those the homeless often use or

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<sup>7</sup> As P. Meca has written (1994):

"We're an inconvenience. Physically, because it's a strong presence, due to the smells, and also because we stay put in a place that's intended just for moving through. And psychologically, because our importuning disturbs". J. Wright quotes a journalist who invoked the property right of the citizen, as a tax-payer, over the pavement to demand that the homeless be evicted (1989, p. XV).

congregate in, the local authorities or groups of individuals might take action to try to drive them away. Anonymity of records is a major imperative, as is a minimum aggregation of the data to prevent release of information at too detailed a level.

It has also been suggested that social housing agencies could adopt potentially discriminatory practices towards certain populations whose profile, on the basis of survey results, looked like that of people at high risk of defaulting on rent payment. To date, however, no cases of misuse of information have come to light. Indeed, over and above the dangers for the individual that some fear, statistical studies contribute rather, through the publicizing of their results, to breaking down the secrecy of information. Without them, knowledge of situations of extreme deprivation “would often be restricted to that, private, of the operators, or that, more emotive, of the mass media” (Bouguet and Nogues, 1994, p. 82)<sup>8</sup>. Statistics in the modern nation-state contrasts with the political arithmetic of the *ancien régime* by the public character of its output (Westergaard, 1932, p. 113). Whereas political arithmetic sought to inform the sovereign, statistics, from the French Revolution on, became charged with a broader responsibility towards government departments and the citizenry. Thus the Comité de Mendicité (Committee on Begging), set up in 1790 with the brief of reporting to the Assembly “on the means to eradicate begging” (quoted in Forrest, 1981, p. 24), supported its recommendations with “detailed and systematic research into the nature and extent of France’s social problems” (Forrest, 1981, p. 24). In response to society’s “inviolable and sacred obligation” to the needy, whose role in the revolutionary process was thereby acknowledged (Procacci, 1993, p. 69), the work coordinated by this Committee was based on statistics provided by the eighty-five *départements*. Besides the concern to avoid wasting state funds, these demands for statistics also reflected the aim of elaborating a general law on poor relief (Guégan, 1991, p. 23). If the publicizing of statistics also had a function of demonstration or legitimation<sup>9</sup>, it aimed to “ward off false opinions among individuals and false measures among the rulers” (quoted in Brian, 1991, p. 216). The abandon of the handwritten report “locked away in government archives” (Desrosières, 1993, p. 47), in favour of printed formats accurately reflects this turning point (publication of the annual handbooks for the *départements* began in 1799). The information put in the public domain (by government, learned societies, individuals, etc.) could be analysed, used and drawn upon by a large fraction of the social actors. For example, the publications of surveys and reports fuelled the debates on pauperism and working-class living conditions in the nineteenth century (Perrot, 1972).

### 3) *Risks of material and psychological disturbance*

Negative consequences for the survey subject can also originate in the best of intentions. Giving a sum of money in return for the time spent answering a questionnaire might seem a fair reward for people experiencing severe hardship, but is it not a sign of contempt or pity? Moreover, such a transaction could provoke jealousy or aggression if witnessed by someone else. In France it is not customary to remunerate people for participating in surveys. At most a gift is offered when the survey is particularly restrictive, requiring a record to be kept of daily expenses, for example. In the United States, by contrast, most surveys conducted on homeless people “in the street”<sup>10</sup> have included payment (\$5-10 depending on the length of questionnaire. Details in *La rue et le foyer*, chapter 2), which is in line with standard practice

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<sup>8</sup> The “operators” referred to here are the social actors implementing an anti-exclusion policy.

<sup>9</sup> Of a policy orientation (Lévy, 1977), of the power of the state (Armatte, 1991, p. 171), of a new economic order such as free trade (Charbit, 1981).

<sup>10</sup> In the sense of any public space: street, shopping centres, railway and metro stations, car parks, alleys, etc.

for questionnaire-based surveys on individuals. Adopting that approach in France, however, would mark the homeless out as a distinct population requiring a form of data collection different to that used for the “ordinary” population (in the sense of households in “ordinary dwellings” as defined by the French statistical agency, INSEE). We return to this point in the discussion of the scientific problems.

People working with the homeless population often mention the risks of psychological disturbance. Every survey situation is an “examination situation” (Mauger, 1991, p. 130)<sup>11</sup> in which the interviewer sets the rules. The characteristics of the interviewer (dress, body posture, tone of voice) and of the language (used in the questionnaire, since the interview is standardized) are indicative of a position in the social sphere and hence prompt an adjustment (conscious or unconscious) on the part of the person being investigated. A survey situation will therefore be less disturbing for respondents who already possess a repertory of social roles enabling them to select the “self-presentation” best suited to the circumstances. Yet this capacity is “very unequally distributed socially” (Mauger, 1991, p. 139)<sup>12</sup>. The danger is that the range of social personalities available to the homeless population is limited, thus making it hard to set up a “distance from the role” of respondent (Paugam, 1991, Schnapper, 1989)<sup>13</sup>. Evoking painful memories (such as relationship breakdowns) is likely to increase mental distress, as too is relating successive failures (education, family, work). An official of the US 1990 census, which included a dedicated count of the homeless, at the time of S-Night (see chapter 2 of *La rue et le foyer*), observed that many interviewers had been upset by the accounts they had heard. The official added that regrettably no one knew what the effect of evoking these memories had been on the individuals being interviewed (Taeuber, 1991, p. 5). It might be thought that the harm inflicted on people sleeping rough, by disturbing them in the night or early hours to ask a series of questions, is slight compared with that they are exposed to through their insecure situation. But the opposite point can also be argued, namely that the constant aggression of a hostile environment should at all costs not be increased when and where the homeless person is most vulnerable (the counts generally took place at night; Firdion, 1995). The US 1990 census provides another example, this time of an old lady, sleeping on a heat outlet in Washington DC, who shouted at the census agents:

“Can’t you go someplace else and let me get some sleep!” (In “Counting homeless proves daunting task for Census Bureau”, *The Washington Post*, 22 March 1990).

Some consider that “the use of such questionable procedures [waking people who are asleep] for studying some populations is as good a measure as there is of how they are actually regarded by both researchers and the general public” (Snow and Anderson, 1993, p. 328).

But while we need to be extremely vigilant over the possible effects of survey methods, it would nonetheless be simplistic to see the interviewer-respondent interaction as presenting only a risk of disturbance. Equally important, as we shall see, is to note the positive effect for people who feel totally ignored, of an individual interview with an interviewer in which their life, experience and opinions are recorded and that can contribute to the elaboration of

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<sup>11</sup> F. de Singly (1992) refers to a sense of “*perquisition*” (being searched) (p. 77).

<sup>12</sup> The author adds: “all the larger as the respondent’s own ‘social surface’ is larger”.

<sup>13</sup> E. Goffman (1963), pp. 168-9) notes that: “these individuals, out-and-out deviants, social deviants, minorities and sub-proletariat can on occasion find themselves the same as stigmatized, worried about what’s in store for them and overwhelmed by the different reactions they engender”.

measures in the general interest<sup>14</sup>. Satisfying immediate needs is primordial but should not completely overshadow the need to feel socially useful.

#### 4) *Resistance to statistical research*

Scientific researchers can also have reservations about the statistical method, different to those of citizens, or fear a use of the results for partisan purposes (political, lobbying, etc.).

The critique of statistical inquiry reflects a longstanding current in the social sciences (see Desrosières, 1989; Herpin, 1982), which contrasts quantitative approaches assumed to reduce the diversity of reality with qualitative approaches claimed to allow an in-depth understanding of the behaviour of the social agent<sup>15</sup>. The statistician is seen as creating fictive individuals (the sampled person) that are taken to represent the whole of the social group to which they belong. The real individual is lost from view in the statistical tables and models of behaviour. This argument may have extra force in the present case because the observed universe is composed of an extremely marginal population whose way of thinking differs greatly from that of the researcher, who generally comes from a higher social background. Undeniable is that the greater the distance (sociologically) between the survey milieu and that of the statistician, the harder it is for the latter to find categories that are meaningful for the people being interviewed and hence to formulate the corresponding questions<sup>16</sup>. The risk of “class ethnocentrism” is particularly great. But it is important to stress that the methods of ethnographic observation also carry risks of shortcomings, such as a focus on the “most folkloristic, most exotic aspects” (Grignon and Passeron, 1989, p. 54) or a recourse to “spontaneous statistical statements” (Héran, 1984, p. 34) based on observation of a small number of cases. The sociological practice of questionnaire-based surveys does nonetheless have to face one very strong objection:

“what to do when a proportion of the people interviewed do not have adequate cultural resources to answer or even to feel qualified to answer?” (Héran, 1991, p. 482).

Over and above the problem of cultural competence, there is the fact that society views involuntary poverty as a personal failure, despite awareness of structural effects that transcend particular cases (like for the “ashamed poor person”, i.e. the healthy poor person, victim of economic circumstances, Castel, 1989, p. 18), which leads to expectations that the investigator will not be able to understand the causes or the situation. On occasions this produces a refusal to be the object of analysis for other people:

“Maria felt as an insult, as a provocation, the fact that she was asked to talk about poverty in front of people other than the poor: *‘Besides, there’s nothing to tell’*” (Meca, 1988, p. 41).

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<sup>14</sup> “I think it's a great idea for them to come to the shelter. It might help the government realize how many people are out here on the streets” (Al Raske, a Phoenix shelter resident, quoted in “Census of homeless disputed on the street”, J. Sidener, *The Arizona Republic*, 22 mars 1990).

<sup>15</sup> Mention can be made of the reservations expressed by J. B. Say in the early days of statistics: statistics simplifies, always lagging relative to the complexity of the object (see C. Ménard, 1976, p. 4). For a contemporary example, see J. Dreyfus (1982).

<sup>16</sup> The phenomenon is especially acute because the survey subject is situated at the very bottom of the social scale. These points were discussed, for example, when the new socio-occupational categories were being elaborated (Desrosières, Goy and Thévenot, 1983) and implemented (Merllié, 1990). In the American case, instances can be mentioned of questionnaires in which measurement scales for depression have been applied indiscriminately to the homeless, with questions like: “do you feel unhappy about the way your life is going?”. Not surprisingly, these surveys find a particularly high prevalence of depressions (Snow *et al.*, 1994, p. 465).

Another objection to the quantitative approach concerns its role in reinforcing preconstructions of the social world, by counting and then conferring the legitimacy of established science on the figures produced, without defining a scientific object. The full significance of this emerges when we examine the political use of the figures (see below), when the definition of a homeless person becomes a major issue (Cordray and Pion, 1991; Shlay and Rossi, 1993, pp. 132-3). The broader and more loosely drawn this definition, the greater the number counted but the less operational the concept, hence the lack of consensus over the notion of *homeless* (Kondratas, 1991a, p. 642)<sup>17</sup>. In dividing up the social space according to these preconstructions, the statistician can quantify these groups and falsely prove their existence as a category. Here he is the agent of a system of domination. In addition, these categories of perception, employed in the statistics produced, have a potential for *labelling* and stigmatizing the populations viewed negatively by the dominant classes (who designate as “*classes dangereuses*” the populations that are alien to their social group or way of life). The dangers of imposing a norm (these people here are the homeless) and a stigma (the “irretrievable” categories and other “social casualties”) are clearly real. Over and above the individuals thus labelled, these terms are known to influence the mental categories of the social actors (Starr, 1987, p. 53). The most destitute populations “are the least able to control their self-image” (Champagne, 1993, p. 67; Schneider and Ingram, 1993); strategies for turning back the *label* or stigma are only possible in certain circumstances, when the discredited actors perceive themselves to have a common identity (Schnapper, 1989, p. 25; Gruel, 1985, p. 451). The homeless have no identity around which to unite to initiate a process of protest or defence. They are individuals who have in common merely a “shameful difference” (Goffman, 1963, p. 163): that of not having a home<sup>18</sup>. In recent years, however, a few militant organizations (*Droit au logement*, *Comité des sans-logis*, etc.) have managed to bring together some of them (who seem to possess shared trajectories, such as evicted families, young people leaving the parental home) and organize them for the purpose of protest.

The U.S. Bureau of the Census was careful not to put forward a definition of homeless persons on the occasion of S-Night in 1990, even though it attempted to count the segments of this population (Taeuber, 1991, p. 2, 93). The project of the Federal Plan to Break the Cycle of Homelessness states clearly that forming a distinct population category—the homeless—is both meaningless and ineffective<sup>19</sup>.

The homelessness working group of the Conseil National de l’Information Statistique (CNIS - the French national statistical council) came to the view that the:

“the diversity of the figures was closely related to the diversity of the situations. There is no single category of homeless people, but a continuum that runs from the person living in the street to the person experiencing housing insecurity. Accordingly one of the first tasks for the group was to compile a list of these housing situations” (Gounot, 1994, p. 53).

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<sup>17</sup> This can be compared with the difficulty of defining the concept of “social exclusion” (Bouget and Nogues, 1994, pp. 70-1).

<sup>18</sup> Those who have committed an act considered as deviant do not form a homogeneous social category.

<sup>19</sup> In HUD (1994, p. 17), we read: “A simple conviction lies at the heart of this document: it profits us nothing as a nation to wall off homelessness as a novel social problem made up of a distinctly ‘different’ population. Nor is it something that requires separate and distinctive mechanisms of redress, isolated from mainstream programs”.

Some risks are introduced by a lack of overall perspective among researchers who focus on the individual characteristics of the homeless. This has the effect of concentrating attention on the deficiencies and pathologies of the persons, and leads to finding the causes of vagrancy in the individuals themselves. The solution then is to treat the case, by medical or social therapy. Ultimately this results in “blaming the victim” (“drunk, stoned, crazy and sick”, Snow et al., 1994, p. 462) while ignoring the structural factors and historical circumstances that create and perpetuate acute poverty (S. Wright, 1993, p. 12). The actual way in which the scientific question is asked determines the response mode. Moving from “what can improve the lot of the homeless?” to “what can reduce the risks of housing exclusion?”, shifts the discussion from the domains of psychology and health (mental and physical), for example, to those of the social production of poverty, and of the economy (Kiesler, 1991, p. 1245). Another problem is that associated with the “politics of compassion” approach, which presents the homeless person as deserving (a victim of economic crisis, family problems, deinstitutionalization or physical handicap) and leads to reasoning based on types of clientele for specialized social services (battered women, mentally sick, Vietnam veterans in the US, lone mothers, Timmer et al., 1994, p. 5). A generously “indignant” (Lahire, 1991) discourse can carry the danger of producing stigmas, directed at those who do not correspond to “deserving” cases, and of using categories that have not been constructed for the purposes of scientific analysis. Characteristics thus need to be taken into account at both the individual and macro-social levels if we wish to improve our understanding of the phenomenon and respect the dignity of homeless people.

It is important to distinguish the work of defining a population from that for the study (and enumeration) of people experiencing particular situations of housing insecurity, situations which are transient (or not) and part of human trajectories (Blasi, 1994, p. 579). Statistics constructs its object, but this

“construction is not artefact. Making that confusion is to imagine, *a contrario*, that somewhere there could exist a method of observation of practices that was non constructed, natural, authentic, immanent” (Héran, 1991, p. 477).

##### 5) *The political use of numbers*

The production of numbers has an effect on the social world. So too does the intention to produce them. “The representation of poverty contributes largely to the representation that society has of itself” (Messu, 1994, p. 139). This is reflected in pressures and constraints to produce the *right* number, that which will justify social action or not taking a decision (Chelimski, 1991, p. 687; Melnick, 1990, p. 383). These conflicting demands of different interest groups necessarily interfere with scientific research<sup>20</sup>. The incorrect or improper use of the results, by the social actors and the media, further complicates the neutral position of the researcher, and makes it virtually impossible to avoid involvement in the spheres of power, prestige, honour. And finally:

“the spectacular character of the insecurity of life in the street make it a perfect subject [for journalists]” (Damon, 1994a, p. 117),

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<sup>20</sup> According to A. Gagnon (1989, p. 620), “knowledge and power thus both pertain to modern forms of domination, because the knowledge obtained by social research will be used for partisan purposes to defend such and such a policy and to reject other values and other interests”.

“because [these events] are out of the ordinary [...] and, as a result, commercially profitable” (Champagne, 1993, p. 61).

The precise number of homeless people in the United States was the subject of a major political debate throughout the 1980s (Firdion, 1995; Bordreuil, 1993). In 1982, the Community for Creative Non Violence (CCNV) evaluated the number of homeless at between 2.2 and 3 million. These figures received wide media attention, despite their lack of serious methodological basis (see chapter 2 of *La rue et le foyer*). In 1983, the Federal Government charged the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) with producing a more “reliable” number. The estimated figure was between 250,000 and 350,000, that is, ten times less. One member of Congress spoke of “Nazi propaganda”, and the CCNV of a “stupid survey” (Horowitz, 1989, p. 67). Once under way, the polemic was fuelled by a series of estimates, of which even the most rigorous were subject to virulent attacks, from either the defenders of the homeless or from the currents hostile to social reforms on their behalf, depending on whether they confirmed or invalidated the initial figures. The census of the homeless by the US Census Bureau, in 1990, also generated violent criticisms, with some militants even going so far as to call for a boycott<sup>21</sup>. Many advocates for the homeless felt that defects in the data gathering coverage would cause a serious under-estimation.<sup>22</sup>

The issues involved were those of demonstrating the scale of the phenomenon (to put pressure on the policy orientations of local authorities, federal and state governments<sup>23</sup>) and revealing its nature (to make this population worthy of attention<sup>24</sup>), and justifying the subsidies provided by the Federal government. The production of figures was therefore indispensable. Many of the social actors set out to persuade or to convince, to increase awareness or arouse sympathy, though rarely to inform or to try to understand (Rossi, 1987, p. 76)<sup>25</sup>. Much of the work produced at this time was part of militant strategies intended to show that the homeless were people like anyone else, or that they were far more numerous than was thought (Foscarinis, 1991) or, on the contrary, not as numerous as all that (Kondratas, 1991b), or that regulation of the housing market had caused the shortage of low-cost housing (Tucker, 1991). In France, political and media interest in the homeless also resulted in the publication of figures for *S.D.F.* (“*Sans Domicile Fixe*”) and “*exclus du logement*” (housing exclusion victims), to which labels such as “official” or “representative sample” were sometimes stuck to support the arguments being made. Such artifices did not conceal the absence, at this date, of a reliable estimate for the size of these populations (CNIS, 1995).

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<sup>21</sup> “While it's true that CCNV workers denied census workers access to our building, it was a symbolic denial. We distributed the forms within the shelter and did nothing to discourage our guests from filling them out” (M. Snyder, “CCNV: Counts...”, *The Washington Post*, 15 April 1990). “Like M. Snyder, we too refused to cooperate with the Census, because we believe it will result in an undercount of the homeless” (J. Byrne, member of *Zaccharus Soup Kitchen*, “Plenty of People Still Support Mitch Snyder”, *The Washington Post*, 11 April 1990).

<sup>22</sup> M. Snyder (CCNV) attacked the politicians who claimed that the problem was not as large as the advocates said (*Washington Times*, 21 March 1990). Many social workers feared the repercussions of these enumeration defects on the next funding allocation (A. Aldricht quoted in “Homeless census comes up short where it counts”, *Los Angeles Times*, 22 March 1990).

<sup>23</sup> The policy of the Bush administration was called “Shelter with Services”. The militants wanted to go beyond these emergency measures.

<sup>24</sup> “To count ‘homelessness’ rather than ‘vagrancy’ is the statistical counterpart to transforming deviants into victims” (P. Starr, 1987, p. 45).

<sup>25</sup> Mention can also be made of the comparison between politics and statistical production described by K. Prewitt:

“if [...] politics has become how much for how many, it is clear that measurement moves toward the centre of political life” (1987, p. 261).

We could endorse the view expressed by B. Wiegand, militant and researcher:

“If numbers are political and only political, then we [as scientific researchers] have lost” (Wiegand, 1992, p. 38).

For what is the point of supplying a scientific backing for this partisan game? However, while not claiming that strict neutrality is ever possible (Grignon and Passeron, 1989, p. 12), the researcher and statistician can usefully contribute to fighting the caricatures and stereotypes that ultimately harm the cause of those who use them. In the United States, the strategy of presenting homeless people in a favourable light and the solution to their problem in a simple form is now criticized because it had various negative side-effects, including disappointment and loss of compassion among citizens and decision-makers over the persistence of the problem despite the resources deployed (Blasi, 1994). In reaction against this, therefore, present debates over homelessness appear to reflect a consensus about the extent of the problem, its complex nature (for example, the link with poverty) and its multidimensional character (there is not “just” a shortage of low-cost housing or of places in shelters and psychiatric care facilities, etc.), as was noted by the Federal Plan for fighting homelessness (CNIS 1996, Culhane, 1995, p. 3; HUD, 1994).

But an incorrect or deliberately misleading use of figures is not confined to militants, homeless advocates and ill-informed journalists. An American example illustrates this point well. Mental illness was very early on put forward as a possible cause of vagrancy (because a parallel could be established with the phenomenon of deinstitutionalization a few years earlier and with the reform of Social Security Disability Insurance in 1981 that excluded 20% of beneficiaries, Bassuk, 1984, p. 29). However, these analyses were sometimes based on very small samples, or indeed exaggerated the results. For example, one could read:

“an increasing number — I would say a large majority — of the homeless suffer from mental illness”, and a little further in the same article: “a 90 percent incidence of diagnosable mental illness” has been found at a shelter in Boston.

The shelter in question was in fact run by a mental health association (Bassuk, 1984, p. 30), which suggests that it had a specific clientele. Some authors draw on results like these to argue that the main cause is the “social dysfunctioning” of individuals rather than poverty or lack of housing<sup>26</sup>. Other studies have been biased by the fact that the people examined were all clients of health centres (as part of the National Health Care Homeless Program), which led J. Wright (1988) to find a prevalence of mental illness three times higher than that observed by D. Snow et al. (1988). Another team of researchers showed the differences in health status between a population of homeless users of a particular medical service and the homeless not using it (Piliavin et al., 1989). But estimates for the prevalence of mental illness among the homeless range between 10% and 33%, causing A. Shlay and P. Rossi (1992, p. 138) to point out that while these rates are higher than in the “normal” population, the great majority of the homeless are not suffering from mental illness.

To suggest the contrary, no doubt unwittingly, is to run the risk of encouraging a medicalization that is inappropriate and harmful because it provides no answer to the main problems facing this population. On the other hand, the works give less attention to, for

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<sup>26</sup> A. Baum and D. Burnes (1993, *A Nation in Denial: The Truth about Homelessness*, West View) quoted by Snow et al. (1994, p. 462) as an example of a biased portrait of this population.

example, the strong over-representation of ethnic minorities in the homeless population (Blasi, 1994). Yet a number, like a photograph, “seems a piece of reality rather than an interpretation of it”; “numbers seem superior in objective reality to “mere” words” (Starr, 1987, p. 52). This case shows how scientific standards can be endangered when pressure groups seek to focus attention on some aspects of a phenomenon rather than on others, or propose study conditions that create serious bias unless they are rigorously controlled for.<sup>27</sup>

Statistical surveys on the homeless involve particular difficulties not encountered in surveys on the housed population. An exhaustive list of dwellings, derived from an updating of the census, and in which dwellings, and hence subjects for interview, can be selected at random, clearly has no equivalent for homeless people. There is then a strong temptation to limit these surveys (as seen above in some studies carried out in the United States) to users of one or several shelters, or of some other services for the homeless, whose “clientele” usually presents very particular characteristics and cannot, without precautions, be used to form a representative sample of homeless people. Another methodological risk is of not making it sufficiently clear that the results apply to people in a certain situation at a given date (analogous to the unemployment figures) or to those experiencing this situation at least once in a given period (for example, during the previous six months). Both results are interesting and legitimate, but they can differ widely, as regards both the number and characteristics (age, sex, etc.) of the people involved.

All in all, intellectual honesty and respect for the people in these difficult situations require that the sampling procedures be of an equally high standard as those for ordinary statistical surveys<sup>28</sup>. A survey that is methodologically demanding will necessarily lead to a critique of less rigorous approaches.

## **II. The legitimacy of surveys on the homeless**

Faced with these multiple objections, should we abandon any quantification of the phenomenon, as was suggested to us by one voluntary sector militant: “Figures are no use, what are needed are homes for people”<sup>29</sup>? Or should we take the view that “figures can restore to politicians their faculty of vision”<sup>30</sup> —a particularly important consideration, in France as in the United States, in this period of budget cutbacks—and that not counting or studying the most disadvantaged groups deprives them of the possibility of representing their social reality and of formulating demands<sup>31</sup>?

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<sup>27</sup> K. Prewitt (1987, p. 272) wrote: “If statistical identification facilitates political consciousness among some resource-poor groups, these same statistics make invisible to the policy process other groups at the margins of social and economic life, where measurement often fails – the undocumented workers, the illegal aliens, and the vagrant, homeless populations”.

<sup>28</sup> Jencks (1994, p. 3) writes:

“[...] one needs to distinguish between scientific and political numbers. This distinction has nothing to do with accuracy. Scientific numbers are often wrong, and political numbers are often right. But scientific numbers are accompanied by enough documentation so you can tell who counted what, whereas political numbers are not”.

<sup>29</sup> An official of a voluntary sector organization working with the homeless (Paris, February 1995).

<sup>30</sup> T. Specht, first president of FEANTSA (The European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless), quoted in J. Damon (1994b, p. 5).

<sup>31</sup> Thus the French organization ATD-Quart Monde noted:

“While not ignoring the real disadvantages of an overly precise determination of the populations in situations of acute poverty [...] a minimum evaluation of the number of potential beneficiaries of measures intended to combat such situations is necessary as a basis for a realistic policy and to support the growth of awareness in society” (Wresinski, 1987, p. 32).

“Alive, the person of no fixed residence [*S.D.F.*] is denied, he does not exist, he is nothing because he has nothing [...]. Having no possessions, he does not appear in statistics. Dead, the mortal remains that his soul has abandoned again become an accounting item. Every winter, the press tots up the *S.D.F.* who have died, yet is unable to estimate the number of *S.D.F.* who are alive” (D. Brigou, 1994, pp. 61-2).

Having had to deal with these questions when conducting surveys of the homeless in France, we now offer our point of view on the legitimacy of a scientific approach to the phenomena of housing exclusion.

### 1) *Scientific legitimacy*

Producing a scientific work implies an effort to expose the social processes at work. In the present case, this means weakening the stereotypes and caricatures that dominate representations of the homeless: the “*chemineau*” (hobo) of bygone years, the “*clochard*” (tramp) of the more recent past, up to the homeless person or *S.D.F.* (*Sans Domicile Fixe*) of today. In the media and in many literary works, attention often concentrates on the most “folkloric” figures. Thus the “*clochard*” has been made to appear as the symbolic figure of a neighbourhood. A spontaneous culturalism<sup>32</sup> tends to depict individuals as belonging to quite distinct cultural entities (sub-cultures) possessing specific traits; this can lead to representing the homeless as a separate population with fairly stable characteristics. Some actors, such as the press (including the newspapers of the “homeless”) and the sellers of street papers, contribute to the construction of a new image of the homeless person that is urban and modern, of an unattached individual with no social visibility. These images all lose much of their importance in a sociological and statistical approach; it shows that one is dealing more with very diverse situations (temporary or transient) rather than with a homogeneous population. These precarious situations are highly fluid, form a continuum and are part of complex personal histories that present regularities and also reflect a broader economic and social history. The final report of the CNIS working group (1996) recommended an analysis of the processes of housing exclusion, through reconstructing the life histories of homeless people at a particular point in time, and through studying the situations of families threatened by eviction and the housing conditions of very low-income households. Furthermore, with the existing statistical system it is fairly simple to obtain complementary material from surveys on the housed population, which can be asked, for example, about past episodes of homelessness or whether they have ever taken people in.

Bringing to light these processes and mechanisms avoids the reification of the “homeless” and, looking beyond the logic of emergency interventions, allows prevention strategies to be envisaged. People do not find themselves without a dwelling because they are by nature and irremediably “homeless”. The inclusion in surveys of questions on the *life history* and *social universe* of people without housing makes it possible to move beyond an excessively static picture of the situation of the homeless, entirely fixed in the present and identified with their current situation, and instead give some depth, complexity and relief to their social trajectories. In its aims, therefore, the scientific approach has certain affinities with the efforts of certain social actors in favour of a reintegration (*réinsertion*) that is adapted to the situations encountered and to the positive attributes that individuals can mobilize.

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<sup>32</sup> Culturalism is a classic theory of American anthropology, exemplified notably by Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, which inspired the works on the “culture of poverty” (the adaptive response of the poor to their marginal position in society).

This approach leads to relating the qualitative and quantitative approaches and to establishing exchanges with the social actors who have a good knowledge of this population.

## 2. *Democratic legitimacy*

Not to be included in statistics is to be excluded from the *cit * (civil society) and from citizenship. This reinforces the social exclusion through housing that in schematic terms is equivalent to a vicious circle: having no address is an obstacle to finding work, which results in having no status.

“Without a dwelling, there is in fact no right or access to training or to work, no right to privacy, no civil rights [...] and only with great difficulty access to the right to health care” (Commission Nationale Consultative des Droits de l’Homme, Report *Grande Pauvret  et Droits de l’Homme*, 7 January 1992, quoted in Wodon, 1992, p. 134).

Enumeration also bestows a status of legal entity on the individual, who can then acquire a voice, express needs or demand rights.

Deciding not to apply the statistical method to the homeless, on the grounds of genuine methodological problems, presumes the existence of a discontinuity or fundamental heterogeneity in the social world. This is certainly why some organizations and social actors have strongly affirmed the right of the homeless to be surveyed “like other people”<sup>33</sup>. But conducting specific surveys on this population only partly satisfies this demand: these persons will still be excluded from surveys on the population of “ordinary” (as understood by INSEE) households, although the inclusion of homeless people in some general surveys would improve coverage of the totality of situations. Failing this, the results of a survey on the homeless cannot be compared with those on a larger population. The scope for analysis would be correspondingly reduced. There is a sense in which the homeless, who are often excluded *from* statistics, would be excluded *by* statistics. Analysing their difficulties independently of the situation of the rest of the population carries a risk of reinforcing their alterity.

## 3. *Humane or humanist legitimacy*

The dwelling is one of the fundamental components in the construction of social and personal identity; it is no accident that most quantitative surveys are conducted in this space. But many elements suggest that conducting a survey on homeless people in humane conditions is not an impossibility.

The questionnaire and the survey situation provide a structuring framework; they organize a contact and ensure that what survey subjects say about themselves will be taken seriously. This standardization means that survey subjects are not reduced to the singularity of their own experiences but can perceive the collective dimension of the misfortunes that have befallen them, and can thus situate themselves as belonging, with others, to the social world, even if many of them have rejected it. Evidence for these positive effects on the interviewee is stronger than for the alleged disturbances. Several monographic studies have reported that the main thing people “in the street” complain about is loneliness. Paradoxically, it is necessary to

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<sup>33</sup> This position recalls that of the working-class newspapers which, after the July Revolution, demanded an inquiry into the “situation of the workers” or “workers’ conditions”, up to the “P tition Ledru-Rollin” (published in 1844 in *La R forme*) calling for an “official inquiry into the living conditions of workers” (See M. Perrot, 1972, and H. Rigaudias-Weiss, 1936).

highlight the human content of interviews or conversations that have no *immediate* utilitarian purpose, unlike interviews with social workers, physicians or psychiatrists, or conversations with people who have been asked for money. Talking about oneself, even in a structured framework, presents an opportunity for self-observation, for escaping briefly from the tyranny of everyday life and for counteracting the sense of social invisibility.

## Conclusion

Can a survey contribute to improving the definition of the needs and processes associated with reintegration (*réinsertion*)? Does it have a political effect? Yes, to the extent that it helps to modify the regard and shift the debate away from numbers. Political debate cannot be only about the number of places in emergency shelters. If scientifically established figures are available, the debate over figures can give way to debate over other issues. When homeless populations are included in their sample, quantitative surveys concerned with analysing the processes that lead to situations of severe insecurity such as loss of housing can shed light on structural causes: for example, the dwindling stock of low-quality, cheap housing. This could lead to the elaboration of more urgent recommendations for housing policy. In addition, the great diversity of situations suggested by these surveys could lead the actors to adopt a wide range of *reintegration* strategies. Finally, identifying the itineraries that lead to loss of housing highlights the importance of *prevention* and indicates some measures for avoiding these situations.

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