

**ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION – Final Session of CUHP conference
November 3rd-4th 2005, Brussels.**

Maryse Marpsat (INED) asked three questions of the six round table participants:

- Had anything particularly struck them during the two-day Conference?
- Was anything missing from the discussion?
- Was there any messages for homelessness research?

Ingrid Sahlin (University of Gotenburg, Sweden)

The conference worked well and, overall, has been very valuable, touching upon all the eternal problems within homelessness research. The synthesised reports are of value for researchers outside the network but this depends on dissemination.

But what is missing?

1. I think the definition issue is unsolveable and must be solved anew for each research project. But every time we discuss it our separate definitions bring out our conceptions about policy. It raises questions about broad definitions of homelessness in relation to what are the limits?; what of a homeless person who has a house but is still getting together with other homeless people?; do you include people with permanent support? Thousands of people have somewhere to live but no social contract – are they homeless?

2. The policy discussion around the houseless homeless and homeless homeless is important. Conservatives target the most vulnerable and then there is a grey stone (tomb-stone) for those who are the next most vulnerable. But if you have a universal policy, as in Sweden, those policies also have exclusionary outcomes resulting in rough sleepers. It is necessary to take a critical look at local housing systems, local shelters, and homeless policies. If a country such as Sweden has a working housing allocation system then homelessness is not put on the policy agenda and that is the worse problem

3. Discussions of homelessness should not be focussed on the individual and their problems but on the structural causes of homelessness. If you look at the individual you look for the causes within the individual. It is important to discuss other kinds of qualitative studies e.g. the interaction between homeless people and shelters, how do social workers talk about homeless people, and the discourse of homelessness i.e. what social workers say about it – a qualitative analysis of decision making. This type of information is not accessible through quantitative methods and steers away from the homeless person as the problem.

4. We should applaud the development of Permanent Supported Housing in the US; all researchers love the cities and countries that have high level of problems and high level of activities to do something to solve them. We should compare the municipalities who had serial long-term homeless in US and Sweden; we would learn from housing policies and that would be interesting to research.

Maryse Marpsat

There is a qualitative study of the relationship between social workers and their clients - Tobias Berner Stax did such a study in Denmark and it is reported on the CUHP website.

Iskra Dandolova (Institute of Sociology, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences)

The results of the thematic network will be important if it is possible to improve the definition of homelessness which is an endless problem.

One of the missing discussions is of the macro-level ruptures in society that create homelessness – such as happened in the Socialist States and in the UK. These contribute to micro-level ruptures such as divorce, and unemployment and suicide.

Wars also create homeless people as do massive natural disasters; we have seen two million people without house or damaged house. These figures need to be immediately collected and added to the numbers who are long-term homeless, without a roof. Following an earthquake people can be without a roof for several years you will become a long-term homeless person. Families similarly; if a man loses his house with three children, then two of these become homeless. Who could be homeless? Those people who don't own their house; but this situation is changing.

This raises the importance of people's identity through space and the place; the connection between identity and someone's own space gives security.

This is very important; for example, 30 years ago, part of Bulgaria was split between three countries – Greece, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia. Therefore six times I have changed my name; if I have no house to identify with I will kill myself.

Populations that struggle to exist have an extreme identity with the house, their identity with their space is absolutely critical.

Missing subject – Is it possible to be homeless without being poor? Such cases should be studied. People who have had some shock in their life – a building collapses and they lose flat. Are there a lot of cases like this? This could be important to enlarge. Homelessness is a socially important subject.

Martha Burt, the Urban Institute, Washington, US

I am most impressed by your persistence in the face of your highly diverse opportunities for research in different countries.

What would I try to do in order to achieve cross-country knowledge? First, there is a demand for a common indicator. Who knows how to do that, and how could I turn such a demand into my advantage? You all have different circumstances and different situations in relation to housing but I still believe that if you all put on the table what has to be known to meet your own country's definition of homelessness it is not impossible to measure these different standards in each country. You don't have to necessarily use the same method, you could use several methods at once. A variety of methods were articulated by the Sp and Dk – household surveys, registers, occupation institutions, street counts. All these measures can be used to try and put the pieces together. In some countries you would have far fewer people in the 'literally' homeless situation than in others and then it would be possible to look at macro issues. What does the housing market look like in each country? Who supports what kind of housing? Who is offering what kind of subsidy? What does the employment market look like?

Homelessness is about a lack of housing and it is a balance between what housing costs and what the household has to pay for it. The issue is trying to get that balance aligned. Different countries support the household in different ways and different amounts, and support the housing market in different ways and different amounts. There are also different varieties of macro support systems, including education, so that some countries train more of the low end of the population.

The three important things are the housing, education and employment markets.

How the heck can you do this? It could be brilliant and it would have major policy implications.

Maryse Marpsat

FEANTSA has worked on this last question and there is also the EUROSTAT report

Martin Gruber, University of Hamburg

It was an interesting conference and two issues stand out besides those already discussed.

First, the discussion here has been concentrating on definitions but theoretical understanding is needed to compare the findings from different countries, cross-nationally. In which ways do different circumstances influence the lives of homeless people in these countries? Maybe that should be a further study of this network.

Second, one issue that has been missing is the structural reasons for homelessness. A new quality of poverty is developing in Germany. We had one of the most developed welfare states but now social benefits are cut and rents are rising. Not working poor, but people relying on minimal benefits; there are now 5 million unemployed people in Germany and homeless people at the bottom of the social ladder. Most will not be joining the first labour market again and will rely for the rest of their lives on social benefits.

Maryse Marpsat

Some work is being done on the macro situation. A group of homeless researchers are comparing Tokyo, Los Angeles, Paris and San Paulo. Each city has a different team of experts in homelessness and we are comparing quantitative and qualitative data, different social policies. There is data on the frameworks of the study, such as used for follow-up studies in Los Angeles.

Paul Koegel, Rand Health, US

Two comments. First, your homelessness problem is your homelessness solution. In Copenhagen there are people sleeping on the streets and in shelters now but we in the US are 20 years ahead of you in relation to your problems. You should accelerate this process of research by following what we have found out. You have an opportunity to look at structural issues i.e. how were the babies getting into the river in the first place? It is important to stop homelessness at the source through prevention.

Second, randomised clinical trials – an ethical basis for this. Fair way for the services to provide them randomly. Then you could prove who needed the services and the cost saved by carrying them out.

General Discussion

Several points were made.

1. Although not explicitly referenced the structural causes of homelessness frequently underlie a research project.
2. One question for European researcher is how to link with the Lisbon Process; what can we ask from our politicians? If our politicians are working to create more jobs then will there be a filtration effect for homeless people of these new jobs.
3. Health care and debts, and look at deinstitutionalisation process (new member states), individualisation of rights, address the problems of ISKRA of ethnic minorities.
4. The EUROSTAT group plus representatives of associations such as FEANTSA, deal with those problems and definitions that exist. There is a difference between the definitions of FEANTSA and EUROSTAT. Study will be launched next year; we are expecting a number of results from this study. A huge study on definitions, and types of information that could come from different definitions. EUROSTAT – definition, we are basing it on Eurostat's work because it is a community project but not limited to what Eurostat has done.
5. Street culture is important for people – homeless people are qualified on street culture.