

QUALITATIVE STUDIES OF THE HOMELESS POPULATION IN SPAIN

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Short paper for the Workshop 4, London, October 2004

As mentioned at previous meetings, the studies carried out in Spain on homelessness have been developed mainly over the past 15 years. Most of these works have used a quantitative methodology to address the study of this phenomenon. Very few Spanish studies have used qualitative methods in their development. The goal of this article is to describe the only two qualitative studies that we are aware of that have been recently carried out (and published) in Spain.

STUDY 1 (Muñoz, Vázquez, & Vázquez, 1998).

The first of these works was published in 1998 under the title *Atrapados en la calle* [*Trapped in the street*], and falls within the framework of a more extensive study, the European Project of Mental Health and Social Exclusion (Leonori, Muñoz, Vázquez et al., 2000), aimed at qualitative evaluation of users' needs and the response of social and health institutions to these needs in seven European cities (Madrid, Lisbon, Rome, Brussels, Copenhagen, Paris, and London).

The chief goal of this research work was to identify and delimit the psychosocial factors that affect the origin and persistence of homelessness. The study was carried out with homeless persons who had mental disorders and who were users of various resources aimed at this type of population.

METHOD

Sampling

Although no representative sampling strategy was used, when planning the sample, achievement of adequate stratification was attempted, taking into account sex, age, and services used.

The following inclusion criteria were used in the study:

- Being over 18 years of age
- Having spent the past month mainly in one or two places not normally considered a home (shelters, abandoned houses, the street, subway stations, etc.)
- Presenting apparent symptomatology of some mental health disorder, according to the opinion of the technicians of the services where the interviews were carried out. It was considered unnecessary to confirm this information with a specific additional test.

With regard to the centers, the following places were sampled:

- Mental Health Services (5 men and 1 woman)
- Social Services for the Assistance of the Homeless (6 men and 3 women)
- Streets of Madrid (4 men and 1 woman)

The services of Madrid that eventually participated in the project were: UMES (Unidad Móvil de Emergencia Social [Mobile Social Emergency Unit]–Madrid City Council), Centro de Acogida de San Isidro ([San Isidro Shelter]–Madrid City Council), and the Mental Health Center from the Central District (Madrid). The participants were chosen randomly in each of these services.

The final sample was comprised of 20 homeless people (75% men, 25% women) who had a probable mental disorder.

Areas evaluated and evaluation procedure

As the goal of this study was to determine the diverse psychosocial factors that affect the origin and persistence of homelessness, different areas were explored. Specifically, information about the following areas was collected:

1. Antecedent factors of homelessness:
 - Emigration

- Family of origin
 - Institutionalization
 - Studies and employment history
 - Physical and mental health
2. Maintenance factors:
 - Duration of homelessness
 - Reinsertion attempts
 3. Causal perception of homelessness:
 - Study of interviewees' perceived causality
 4. Relations with the services:
 5. Future expectations:

All participants underwent a semi-structured interview covering the aforementioned areas. These interviews were recorded with the interviewees' authorization and were carried out without any time limit. Mean duration of the interviews was two 90-minute sessions.

The information obtained by means of the interviews was complemented with information about the participants that was available at the services. This information was accessed with the interviewees' permission and was contrasted during the interview process with each participant.

Subsequently, the interviews were transcribed and the transcriptions were analyzed, after which the interviewers completed an Assessment Schedule developed in order to assemble all the information from each person interviewed. Subsequently, the data from all the interviews—which, together with the literal transcriptions, were published in Spanish (Muñoz et al., 1998)—were analyzed and appraised individually and conjointly.

RESULTS

Life circumstances

Family history

By means of the interviews, it was observed that in the reconstruction of these people's lives, there was an accumulation of circumstances, sometimes from infancy, that hindered any possibility of a normal trajectory. From the interviews, it could be observed that institutionalization processes and early abandonment, very frequently suffered by the

homeless persons who participated in this study, were the remote factors that had played a relevant role in their homelessness.

Histories of separation and abandonment were common to the majority of the participants. An important part of the participants reported the existence of separation, divorce, and/or frequent severe fights in their family environment during their infancy or adolescence. Parents' separation and the absence of family support during the participants' infancy also seemed common.

Moreover, other important indicators of the deterioration of the participants' family relations were also observed: parents' problems with alcohol, death of significant persons in the family environment, and physical maltreatment in infancy.

Institutionalization

By means of the interviews, institutionalization experiences were observed to be a constant in the lives of a large number of the participants. A high proportion (one fourth of the sample) had been in some kind of institution (orphanage, reformatory, etc.) before the age of 16. Even more common were psychiatric institutionalizations. Experiences of institutionalization, prison, and legal problems appeared repeatedly in the lives of these persons; one out of every four had been in jail and had frequently had problems with the police or with Justice.

Origin and emigration

Separation and breaking of these persons' ties are also reflected in the biographical trajectory of the migration histories of many participants. These persons' testimonies indicate high mobility: Half of the participants were not born in Madrid and an important percentage of them had emigrated from Spain at some point in their lives or had moved around from place to place. This distance from the place of origin contributes to these persons' lack of ties with their family environment, which sometimes is extremely deteriorated.

Taking all this into account, it seems that physical and emotional uprooting is a persistent biographic element throughout these peoples' lives.

Level of studies and employment history

Regarding level of studies, the interviewees reported a medium-low level of studies, and a large percentage (more than half of them) had failed academically. Although almost all

of the participants had developed some kind of work activity at some time in their life, an important history of long-term unemployment (almost 10 years on average) was observed.

Health status

The interviews also indicated a rather deteriorated health status in these people. Most of them presented physical health problems (hepatitis, pneumonia, tuberculosis, etc.), which, in some cases, could be considered a consequence of homelessness itself, because these problems are highly related with the lack of hygiene derived from homelessness. These health problems could also be playing a role in the persistence of homelessness, as they could be a severe problem, for example, when looking for a job, trying to rent a home, etc.

Regarding the participants' mental health, the most frequent disorders were affective disorders, which affected almost half of the participants, followed by schizophrenic disorders. Suicide attempts also appeared repeatedly in the participants of the sample: Seven of them had attempted suicide at some time (mostly after having become homeless).

With regard to disorders related to alcohol abuse and to psychoactive substance dependency, these were also observed repeatedly in the participants' life histories (with each one affecting one third of the interviewees).

Homelessness history

Duration of homelessness

With regard to the duration of homelessness in the participants of the sample, emphasis is placed on the sample's chronicity, as practically all the participants (90%) had been homeless for over one year, and 45% had been homeless for over five years.

Attempts to overcome the situation and difficulties encountered

Economic factors, lack of adequate training, mental health problems, and the family's rejection were subjectively considered the main obstacles to overcoming homelessness.

Participants' most frequent source of income was: the IMI (Ingreso Mínimo de Inserción [Minimum Insertion Income]) (20%), some kind of pension (25%), and begging (25%). It is noteworthy that more than one half of the sample (12 persons) kept in touch with their family, and, in the majority of cases, they understood and justified their family's reasons for not inviting them (the homeless participants) to live with the family.

Subjective causal perception

Regarding the perceived causes of homelessness, economic problems and health problems (including those derived from consumption of alcohol or psychoactive substances) were more frequently reported by the homeless interviewees. To a lesser extent, other causes such as family problems or relationship problems were also mentioned.

Use of resources

Concerning the use of specific resources for the homeless, in the first place, over one half of the interviewees (13 of them) reported having adequate knowledge of the location and functioning of the public assistance centers. However, there seemed to be less knowledge of private assistance centers. Within the resources, the most frequently used were shelters; practically the entire sample used some kind of similar resource (shelters, public baths, clothing donation centers, etc.). When problems with the services arose, they were usually due to the relation with other users and not to the relation with professionals from the resources or to the resource functioning.

Health services were also frequently used by the study participants. Specifically, their relation with the Mental Health Centers seemed to be fairly regular and adequate.

Future expectations

Regarding the persistence of homelessness in the future, the most noteworthy point was that most of the interviewees (18 of them) believed that this was a temporary situation. Regarding the person's own perception, although the majority perceived their situation to be difficult, they considered it to be supportable, as well as transitory.

STUDY 2. (Sánchez, 1999).

The goal of this work was to investigate the treatment of the problem of homelessness from the area of sociology, to delimit the problem, and to perform a typology and profile of the homeless people in Spain. In addition, another aim was to analyze the perspective of these people throughout history, as well as the processes of prevention, rehabilitation, and reinsertion into society. A third goal was to investigate homeless peoples' viewpoint of the world and the foreseeable evolution of this phenomenon in the future.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

In this case, the participants in the study were not exclusively homeless people but instead, other participants, who were directly related to attending this collective, were also included. Specifically, several series of interviews were performed with: (a) professionals and the people in charge from the Administration who worked in programs aimed specifically at the homeless (11 interviews), (b) homeless people who literally lived in the street (6 interviews), and (c) homeless people living in a shelter (3 interviews). Not only were interviews used: Two discussion groups were also carried out in a shelter (13 participants).

Areas evaluated and evaluation procedure

In the user-interview guide, diverse aspects were included: sociodemographic data, work history and current work status, economic status, health status, help received, perception of causality of homelessness, implications of homelessness (i.e., risks), future expectations, resources (knowledge, use, and satisfaction), and social relations.

In the case of the interviews of the people in charge of the shelters or the politicians, the interview guide explored aspects such as causal processes of homelessness, problems associated with homelessness, typology of the homeless person, activities aimed at prevention of homelessness, possibility of reinserting homeless persons, services for the homeless, appraisal of the social policies aimed at addressing the problem of homelessness, and the future projection of the homelessness phenomenon.

In addition to the interviews, two discussion groups were carried out with homeless persons in a shelter, one group made up exclusively of men and the other of women, in which the implications of homelessness were explored.

RESULTS

The authors point out the following results from the interviews and the discussion groups carried out.

Homeless persons

Sociological profile of homeless persons

First, the authors studied the homeless persons' profile. The data collected indicated the existence of changes in the traditional profile of the homeless person (male, single, with low level of professional training and low educational level). Specifically, they found an increase in the number of young people in this situation, as well as of immigrants and mentally ill people. They also noted a decrease in older people in the street, as a result of the improved protection of this collective.

Identification of needs

Another important point addressed in this study was the identification of homeless persons' needs. The testimonies gathered indicated that the homeless persons from the study had very diverse needs. The authors underlined the following as the most significant: basic housing needs, problems concerning a normalized job market, problems with affective relations, problems with physical and mental health, and problems related to other problems such as alcohol, drugs, etc., and rejection by the general population.

Typology of the homeless persons

The authors state that, in order to classify the homeless in a way that is useful to design specific interventions, one would have to consider four stages of analysis: situations of risk or vulnerability for homelessness, slight or moderate homelessness, advanced stage of homelessness, and chronic homelessness. The delimitation of these levels is obtained by the combination of 5 basic variables: work status, family relations, relational ties, health status, and contact with the specific assistential network for the homeless. Combined, these 5 variables comprise the continuum upon which the diverse levels of uprootedness and the various assistential responses are located.

Intervention in the homeless collective

Prevention

The information collected in the interviews and the discussion groups indicated that prevention of homelessness should be approached from a dual perspective: early detection of persons who are in the first stages of uprootedness and social vulnerability and prevention by means of the organization of specific assistantial and reinsertion services for the homeless. The experts proposed concrete preventive actions in various areas: housing, employment, education, assistance with alcohol- and drug-related problems, as well as the development of more flexible assistantial models.

Rehabilitation and reinsertion

The authors indicated that the actions aimed at rehabilitation and reinsertion of the homeless should start with individualized treatments and address four basic aspects: housing, employment, health, and adequate social protection. They also noted that these rehabilitation processes should have as their aim the person's autonomy, that is, for the person to become capable of autonomous self-maintenance with resources from normalized sources.

Solutions to homelessness

By means of the interviews of the homeless people, an important difference in the opinions of men and women about the way to overcome homelessness was observed. Whereas the men believed that the solution to their problems was by means of access to the job market, the women thought that finding adequate housing or living with a partner was a priority. In general, when asked about the solution of the homelessness phenomenon, they proposed changes in the structure of society and in the values and mentality of the general population.

Use of specific resources for the homeless

Among the participants who were habitual users of resources for the homeless, a tendency towards "addiction" or dependence on the assistantial network was observed. Among the participants who did not use this type of resources, their rejection of this network was mainly derived from their rejection of institutions (usually because of the discipline imposed) or because of the lack of attention attributed to the assistantial network.

Social perception of the homeless collective

The experts who participated in the study underscored that the homeless are people who are generally not very aggressive and that their sojourns in jails and their legal problems were chiefly derived from the kind of life they live and the lack of adequate resources aimed at persons who are released from prison. Despite this, the authors noted the strong social stigmatization suffered by these persons.

Forecast of the evolution of the homelessness phenomenon

The forecast of the homelessness phenomenon, both by the experts and by the homeless people themselves, revealed an accentuation of the problem, a tendency of an increase in the number of homeless persons, which would be linked to structural elements.

CONCLUSIONS

After expounding the qualitative studies developed in Spain in the last few years, we would like to emphasize the following conclusions. In the first place, we underscore that, in general, the results of these works coincide with those that were observed in quantitative studies in our country. However, despite the fact that the results of both types of studies coincide, the qualitative works have made interesting contributions. This type of work has been very useful to identify relevant variables that were not taken into account in previous quantitative studies. Listening more openly to the homeless about various concerns has often led to interesting issues that had not been studied previously.

But these works also present some deficiencies, mainly concerning the analysis of the data obtained. More systematization in order to interpret and explain the results of works using qualitative methodology may be necessary.

In any case, although these works are costly and the information collected by means of this methodology is difficult to analyze and systematize, because of its usefulness, more efforts should be made to overcome its deficiencies and increase the number of studies of this type performed in Spain, which, as noted, are currently very scarce.

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