

HOMELESSNESS IN SPAIN

Definition Methodology Research

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DEFINITIONS OF “HOMELESS PERSON” (HP)

In contrast to the situation in some other European countries, there is no official definition of the HP in Spain, be it from the central State, the Autonomías (17 States that compose the nation of Spain), or municipal authorities. Likewise, there are no official definitions of analogous concepts, even within the legislation of local or national social services. Nor there are any definitions of official terms that could be considered synonymous or close in meaning. This fact has, up to now, had serious social implications for the homeless, most importantly in relation to the legal vacuum that affects people in this situation, despite the fact that the right to an adequate housing is explicitly mentioned in the 1978 Spanish Constitution.

‘Homelessness’ seems to be an ‘invisible’ phenomenon, according to official figures, and it is only indirectly addressed in several official reports and documents. For instance, the last Spanish Census (2001), whose results, so far, have been partially published was aimed at not only to describe the demographic characteristics of the Spanish population but also included some questions on *housing conditions*, which might be related, in a broad sense, to homelessness. In fact, this new Census, not fully published yet, includes information related to occupancy status –i.e., owner, tenant, etc.-, problems related to the neighbourhood conditions (noise, cleanliness in the streets, odours, pollution, transportation, delinquency, and whether or not the housing unit has a bathroom. However, paradoxically, the Spanish census doesn’t gather information on non-domiciliated people (people who live on the streets, in institutions, etc.) which stresses the invisibility of the conditions of any houseless people.

This lack of consensus on the concept of HP has led to the fact that, over recent decades, different types of definition have been used by different authors and by the different social sectors involved in the problem. Below we present the main types of used concepts and briefly discuss their implications. First, we should mention some of the terms used in the Spanish language that over the years have attempted to represent, in one way or another, the group of people that today

could be defined as HPs. Using as a guide the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* (Dictionary of the Spanish Royal Academy) (1977), the terms mostly closed to the HP concept are:

- a) *mendigo* (**beggar**) (person who begs);
- b) *vagabundo* (**vagabond, tramp, bum**) (person who moves from one place to another without any fixed direction);
- c) *carrilano* (**traveller**) (person who lives “on the road”);
- d) *vago* (**tramp, bum**) (person without trade or profession).

All these terms refer to different sectors of the population whose definition may coincide to a greater or lesser extent with the term HP. At the same time, they all have markedly negative connotations in everyday language, and moreover, none of them includes all of the characteristics of this population. Today, all of these terms are used in some measure by the general population, but no specialist or official body would use them –indeed, there are campaigns against the use of this type of disparaging and humiliating term in this context (for an excellent review of the terminological aspect, see Salinas, 1994).

It is interesting to note that even institutions –Social Services, NGO’s,...- that handle the problems of homeless people (i.e., shelters, soup-kitchens, street interventions, etc.) do not explicitly state a definition of ‘homeless’ (who is the beneficiary of such service? Is there any requisite to participate in it?, etc.). It seems a sort of tautology: homeless people are those who use services for homeless people but there is no effort, or no intention, to use a formal definition using some operative criteria. An operative definition based on use of services is, obviously, inadequate as it may include people who are not HPs (false positives) and exclude authentic HPs that do not use services (false negatives).

Cáritas España (a Spanish registered charity) has preferred to use the term *transeúnte* (a term roughly equivalent to “vagrant”, but without the negative connotations) in this context (Salinas, 1994; Nerín, 1996). For this author, *transeúntes* are poor and marginalised people who use services (mainly hostels); “sin techo” (“roofless”), on the other hand, refers to the subset of *transeúntes* who literally live in the street (they do not use hostels).

HOMELESSNESS IN SPAIN

A) Official definitions of the Homeless Condition.

In Spain, in contrast to some European countries, there is no official definition of 'homelessness' or 'homeless people' made by the central State, the Autonomías (17 States that compose the nation of Spain), or local powers.

Housing plans

One would expect that in formal documents related to housing problems in the nation, there is any reference to homelessness. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Neither national nor local housing plans mention the problem of providing housing for the homeless people. These plans try to provide cheaper housing (either as owners or tenants) for people with few economic resources. However, the economic threshold to participate in these programs is far beyond the average income of homeless people and, furthermore, there is no specific initiative to facilitate stable accommodation for them. Whenever 'excluded people' is mentioned, its meaning is more related to economic difficulties of potential candidates than to the specific conditions of the homeless population.

International definitions: Poverty and social exclusion

In recent years various European research groups, coordinated around the European Federation of Services for Homeless Persons (FEANTSA) (Avramov, 1995), have noted the need for a common definition for all EU member countries. Indeed, demands for such a definition have been filed with all the governments concerned (Daly, 1993), but, unfortunately, have up to now gone unattended.

Initial efforts to produce a common definition have taken their cue from those used in the United States, including that of the McKinney Homeless Assistant Act (1987) and, especially, that of the United States Alcohol, Drugs Abuse and Mental Health Administration (1983), which defines the HP as:

“any person that lacks adequate accommodation, resources or links with the community”.

Thus, this definition covers the criteria of **poverty** and **social isolation**. The **Council of Europe** (1992) has defined the homeless as:

“persons or families that are socially excluded from permanently occupying a personal and adequate home. Persons or families that:

- a) have no roof over their head and are condemned to live in the street as vagrants;
- b) bare temporarily housed in hostels or centres for the homeless, especially created by public authorities or the private sector;
- c) are temporarily housed in the private sector, in bed and breakfasts, cheap hotels or private hostels, or with friends or relatives with whom they may be obliged to live;
- d) occupy, legally or illegally, unsafe housing, shacks, abandoned houses, etc.
- e) live in institutions, children’s homes, hospitals, prisons or psychiatric units, and have no home to go to when they leave;
- f) live in a dwelling that cannot be considered adequate or socially acceptable, thus converting them into poorly-housed persons or families.”

FEANTSA and the **European Observatory of the Homeless** (Daly, 1994; Avramov, 1995) reach a similar conclusion although emphasizing the problem of accommodation:

“The HP is that person who is incapable of acceding to and maintaining an adequate personal dwelling through his/her own means, or incapable of maintaining a dwelling with the aid of Social Services.”

In many of these definitions two relevant criteria are unified: economic poverty that impedes access to housing in the market context, and social exclusion, which, apart from the personal marginalisation implied, impedes access to housing through community assistance channels (social services). Also considered as HPs are those persons who currently live in institutions (hospitals, prisons, etc.) and have no personal home to go to on leaving, and those living in sub-standard housing or in conditions of overcrowding.

To sum up, the current situation in Spain indicates the increasing need for an official government definition of the term HP, agreed with the other EU member governments. The statistical, political and social service implications of such definition are obvious. In the meantime it would be advisable to employ the definition offered by the Council of Europe and later delimited by FEANTSA and the European Observatory of the Homeless.

2. HOW MANY HOMELESS PEOPLE ARE THERE IN SPAIN?

In Spain there are no official statistics, either global or regional, on the homeless. Therefore, the only data available comes from estimations based on different parameters and using different definitions (Cabrera, 1997; Vázquez, Muñoz and Rodríguez, 1998). Table 1 shows some of the main estimations of homeless persons in Spain. As can be seen in Table 1, the most realistic estimations with regard to the general phenomenon of homelessness were not made until 1995. In that year the European Observatory of the Homeless (Avramov, 1995) put the number of HPs in Spain at around 160,000. In order to arrive at this figure, Avramov took the number of persons per day sleeping in hostels (approximately 8,000), the mean duration of stay (2 months) and the percentage of those returning to the hostel (38.5%), producing a figure of some 11,000 people using hostels. She then combined this figure with those provided by Cáritas (Salinas, 1990; 1991; 1992; 1993) on vagrants (between 40 and 45,000 per year) and with those on people with urgent housing needs (around 100,000). Also in 1995, Salinas amended the figures on the Spanish situation, including a wider definition than that of transeúnte, which had been used up until then.

Employing the definition of HP developed by FEANTSA (Avramov, 1995), and using the data from the Observatory reports of previous years and the Report of the FOESSA Foundation (1994), Salinas arrived at a figure for HPs of between 225,000 and 250,000, which includes those living in substandard housing conditions. This figure, which includes a broad definition of homelessness, would give Spain a rate of 7 HPs per 1,000 inhabitants, very close to the 7.5/1,000 estimated for the EU as a whole (Daly, 1993; Drake, 1994). Anyway, as it can be seen in Table 3, there are marked differences in the HP figures depending on the definition used: the highest estimations appear when the inadequate housing criteria are included and those of social exclusion are not. The lowest estimations correspond to the single criterion of sleeping literally “in the street”, while the intermediate ones, around 45,000 to 50,000 persons, are found in including those who sleep in the street and those who have serious problems gaining access to housing and suffer

extreme social exclusion. Using this latter, wider definition the figures of HP in Spain, which authors as Avramov (1995) have thought that are underestimated, come much closer to those of the rest of the EU countriesb.

3. CURRENT DEMOGRAPHIC ASPECTS AND CHANGES OVER TIME

Spanish census figures do not include valid references with regard to HPs as this population has been ignored in all statistical accounts. Thus, data on the demographic characteristics of the homeless population come from research projects or reports from service providers. Table 2 shows the data considered most relevant for defining the sociodemographic profile of HPs in Spain. All of the data comes from research related to the health status and/or needs of HPs, rather than from adequately designed surveys with strictly sociodemographic objectives. Furthermore, these studies not always have used comparable definitions of HP1.

According to the available data, and with the necessary precaution, it can be stated that HPs in Spain:

- a) Are predominantly male, although designs using more sophisticated sampling strategies find up to 21% females.
- b) Have an average age of around 40, the most numerous group being aged 31 to 45.
- c) Have a low educational level, equivalent to the primary level that is obligatory in Spain.
- d) Live alone, in the vast majority of cases.
- e) Have undergone experiences of institutionalisation in prison and/or psychiatric hospitals (a significant proportion as high as 30% if data are combined).
- f) Have a high level of unemployment.
- g) Having reached a situation of homelessness, tend to remain in that situation for may years, or even for the rest of their life. Eighty per cent of the current homeless population have been so for more than a year, and between 30 and 40% for more than five years.

In Table 3 it can be seen how changes from 1975 to 1995 in some sociodemographic variables only reflect significant alterations in the category of divorces (divorce was not legal in Spain until 1981). As mentioned earlier, the expected modifications in this profile (e.g., more women and more young people), though stressed by social observers, are not reflected in empirical studies, though this may be due to their lack of reliability. All of the above indicates the need to

carry out studies that estimate and define the sociodemographics of HPs in Spain, that are guided by the new European definitions of HP, and that use the most up-to-date sampling methods developed for this type of population (Burt, 1992; Marpsat and Firdion, 1996). In this line, as part of the R+D National Plan, the present authors have carried out a study on psychosocial factors related to the situation of the homeless. This study included a sampling system stratified by services, random and weighted as a function of the probability of being selected in the sample and of frequency of use of services; it also included a control group of persons that use HP services but have their own home. There is a 12-month follow-up study for each group.

LEGISLATION AND ITS LAST DEVELOPMENTS

B) Initiatives.

Social Inclusion/Exclusion Plans

In 2002, several plans to promote social inclusion were launched by national and local agencies. Although homeless people were mentioned in them, none of the plans included a definition of these persons.

Action National Plan for Social Inclusion of the Kingdom of Spain (2001-2003)

This is the first national plan aimed at reducing social exclusion in Spain. This plan suggests the need of improving and diversifying actions to promote specific services for homeless people as well as setting up comprehensive interventions for these people. This Plan also includes information about housing in Spain, based on data from the European Community Household Panel (ECHP) (table 2). The ECHP quantifies housing problems in terms of a number of facilities available in people's housing (indoor toilet, kitchen, light, running water) and physical characteristics of the building.

	Number	
<i>Housing inappropriate of a human living occupancy</i>	387.000 houses	3.1%
<i>Housing in ruins</i>	37.000 houses	0.3%
<i>Shanties</i>	48.000 houses	

Table 2. Housing in Spain.

Madrid Plan Against Social Exclusion (2002-2006).

As the National plan, the Madrid Plan mentions homelessness too, but it does not describe who are considered to be 'homeless people'. This Plan proposes the need of providing stable housing for these people. The program also focuses on the needs of homeless people with mental health problems.

TABLE 1
Number of homeless persons in Spain,
according to different estimations

SOURCE	Persons using hostels per year	Persons with urgent housing needs	Homeless persons (FEANTSA definition)
Salinas (1989-1993)	40 - 45.000	--	--
Avramov, 1995 (estimated)	11.000	100.000	160.000
Salinas (1995) Combining data on hostel use and from the FOESSA Report (Extreme poverty + sub-standard housing)	30.000	--	225.000-250.000

TABLE 2				
Demographic characteristics of homeless persons in Spain (percentages).				
	Madrid ¹	Aranjuez ²	Barcelona ³	Gijón ⁴
N	262	524	99	170
Percentage males	79	95.2	85.9	87
Age				
18-30	24	N.A.	24.2	24.5*
31-45	38	N.A.	41*	38.9*
46-60	28	N.A.	32*	26.4*
>60	10	N.A.	1	7.5*
Mean (SD)	41.9	40	39.2	39.9
Years of education (mean)	7.7	8*	10*	8*
Marital status				
Married	7	7	12.1	3
Widowed	5	4	5.1	4
Separated or divorced	24	19	37.4	35
Never married	64	70	45.5	57
Total not married	93	93	87.9	97
Previous psychiatric hospitalisation	25	18	N.A.	22.2
Previous imprisonment	28	24	24.2	N.A.
Currently employed	97	88	68.7	75
Duration of homelessness (years)				
Less than 1 year	20	N.A.	54.5	38
1-5 yrs	39	N.A.	31.24	32
5-10 yrs	16	N.A.	N.A.	13
>10 yrs	25	N.A.	N.A.	17
¹ Muñoz, M., Vázquez, C. and Cruzado, J.A. (1995). ² Rico, P., Vega, L.S. and Aranguren, L. (1994). ³ Lucas, R. et al. (1995). ⁴ Vega, L.S. (1996). * Estimated from indirect data provided by the author. N/A: Data not available.				

TABLE 3
Changes in some demographic
characteristics in the last 20 years

	1975 ¹	1984 ²	1991 ³	1995 ⁴
Age				
18-39	48	40	56	43
40-59	43	42	36	42
>60	9	17	7	8
Mean (SD)	41.9	40	39.2	40
Years of education (Mean)	N.A.	N.A.	8	8
Marital status				
Married	18	16	7	5
Widow/er	6	10	8	4
Separated or divorced	3	10	23	30
Never married	73	53	57	60
Total non-married	82	84	93	95

¹ Cáritas (1975).

² CEDIA Report (Spain).

³ Adicso -Incis Report (unpublished).

⁴ Averaged data from Muñoz *et al.* (1995); Rico *et al.* (1994); Lucas *et al.* (1995); and Vega (1996).

N/A: Data not available.

¹The study carried out in Aranjuez (Rico, Vega and Aranguren, 1994) uses as an inclusive criterion the use of services provided by a hostel; that of Barcelona (Lucas *et al.*, 1995) includes persons using hostels and those that sleep in the street; that of Gijón (Vega, 1996) uses data on persons selected at random from those using any HP service offered in the city; finally, that of Madrid (Muñoz, Vázquez and Cruzado, 1995) considers a random sample from the hostels, social services, canteens and streets of the city.

²This is an extremely relevant matter for Spain and possibly other Mediterranean countries, since levels of poverty and poor housing are relatively higher than those of other countries, but these levels do not correspond to proportional levels of literal homelessness (Avramov, 1995).