

# **Extending the concept of homelessness**

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## **1. The area around strict homelessness**

Just how broad the concept of homelessness should be is a fundamental issue in the debate on homelessness and a particularly controversial issue, especially when definitions and classifications are attempted. The convenience and need to extend the question beyond the limits of strict homelessness and to larger populations than the (strictly) homeless is claimed by many. The chance in the CUHP programme to take this broader area into consideration is indicated under the objective of “identifying hidden homelessness” and in the attention paid to notions such as the “risk of homelessness” etc.

The reasons for considering borderline, potential situations or risk situations may be justified for both theoretical reasons and because of recent changes in the composition and profiles of homelessness. For both these reasons the tendency to extend definitions of homelessness has been fairly common in recent years, a tendency shared above all by the large NGO's and by researchers [Brousse 2004]. The extension has been made most often in the sense of including the various situations of housing hardship or marginal housing in homelessness or connecting them with it. The issue of broadening the definition (along the axis narrow/broad definition) has thus become wound up with that of the dualism of the notion of homelessness (along the axis homelessness as a problem of housing/homelessness and as a “social” problem or a question of social marginalisation).

The notion of homelessness in the debate on the subject appears as an intrinsically dual notion: reference is made to a housing dimension, the lack of accommodation, and also to a “social” dimension, the absence of social relations or ties which in turn would reveal situations of social exclusion or marginalisation. We may assume that the polarisation of the two meanings is constitutive of the problem homelessness [Tosi 1999].

Current definitions and images address this duality by combining the two dimensions in different ways, usually privileging one over the other. Social constructions of the problem of homelessness are developed on this basis, which reflect collective attitudes, the organisation of policies and types of welfare regime. The constructions are country specific and reflect these different ingredients, as well as and more than differences in the reality of homelessness in different countries.

Clearly there are no “objective” reasons and of course no empirical grounds for the use of one definition or the other: it is a question of seeing the implications, the advantages and disadvantages of one definition or the other, advantages and disadvantages that may vary according to the operations and which may be verified at the level of interpretation and that of policy construction. The implications in this sense of narrow definitions have been fully and clearly stated in the debate. This paper, however, will discuss the difficulties of adopting broader definitions/conceptualisations and the limitations of some practices involving broader definitions. The basic reference will be the main figure referred to in the debate and the construction of policies in Italy, which is that of the “no abode” (*senza dimora*) [Tosi 2003]. This is a typical example of a narrow definition for which it is easy to assess the analytical

and political implications. The connections between the two axes of the definition is also clear in this construction: the narrow/broad definition axis and the axis of homelessness as a housing/homelessness problem or as a “social” or social marginalisation problem.

Identification of the homeless with the no abode positions the problem in the area of social marginalisation/‘extreme hardship’. The accent is placed on particularly serious situations and (generally) on the advanced stages of marginalisation processes. Most often the term denotes the homeless characterised by multiple deprivation and by traits of desocialisation. Other components of the phenomenon of homelessness are given little mention in the debate: especially housing exclusion when not accompanied by accentuated traits of marginalisation.

In these portrayals, the strictly housing component - not having housing - is not central. It is implied in the definition, but is only considered important as part of the multiple dimensions of the problems of the no abode. Persons without a home, but not characterised by these traits tend to be classified differently. Different terms are used such as *senza casa* and *senza tetto* (without roof). A sort of distinction is made between the two conceptual areas connected with the notion of homelessness: housing exclusion and social exclusion. This separation reflects and confirms an accentuated (traditional) division between housing policies and welfare policies.

The definition of homeless used here is typically multidimensional, or a “cluster” definition. The condition of those who find themselves living on the street lies at the cross roads between problems of different types, that have intertwined and reciprocally aggravated one another. The condition of homelessness is treated as the extreme outcome of a chain of events and situations which have gradually compromised the possibility of maintaining a home [Torri, Tosi 2004].

The consequences of this construction are obvious: the material and structural factors of the question risk being neglected, the housing component is undervalued and the non extreme, non “pathological” and non chronic components of homelessness are not given the attention they deserve. Moreover the risk of conveying the idea that the field of homelessness can be “cut out” and separated from the broader processes that produce social and housing exclusion is high. Finally the scarce recognition of homelessness and housing exclusion when this does not involve social marginalisation means that the prospects of reinsertion involving strong/multidimensional intervention or intervention with a heavy dosage of social work support tend to be generalised. While homelessness associated with mere poverty/material needs or with sectoral needs are situations which may require only ‘weak’ intervention or material support.

## **2. The theoretical and methodological meaning of broadening the definition**

The theoretical and methodological reasons for broadening the definition relate to the new historical situation in which homelessness is set. The main reason for broadening the definition is furnished by the theoretical debate on the new poverties and on the processes of social vulnerability that have invested the more developed societies: these tell us to see situations of severe marginalisation/social exclusion as the result of broader processes of social fragilisation, considering the impacts that these have on the dynamics of impoverishment and social exclusion that regard specific groups in the population. This means looking at even the extreme cases in terms of processes of social decomposition and reconstructing the processes and chains of factors that led to the condition of social exclusion in which the homeless constitute a paradigm figure.

In this perspective understanding “what happens before” in the path to homelessness is of great importance. Furthermore, the attention in terms of defining/classifying factors extends to “what surrounds” the conventional figure of the homeless: which and how many situations that are not part of a literal definition of the homeless are implicitly homeless or at risk of homelessness. The borderline cases fall within this set of situations, situations of non explicit or non visible homelessness (hidden homelessness, potential homelessness, etc).

Broadening the definition, shifting the viewpoint from “situation” to “process” can have different meanings. It may – in line with the suggestions of the new dynamic approaches to the study of impoverishment processes [Tosi 2004] – attenuate the deterministic character of analyses of paths to extreme marginalisation (understood as regressive paths in which the original causes of deprivation are followed by behaviour which reinforces the causes with the accumulation of new hardships until an unsustainable situation of social exclusion is produced). It may throw light on the limits of research practices that accompanies narrow definitions of the problem of homelessness.

For example research on the “no abode” in Italy tends to privilege approaches of an individual type which concentrate on analyses of the “careers” of the no abode and of some correlated concepts (phases, events). The career concept allows, in this sense, interpretation of the transitions that determine changes along the time axis of individual biographies. Attention is *de facto* concentrated on the outcomes, on the final stages of the exclusion processes and on the process of adaptation to street life from the moment in which these people arrive there. The careers of the no abode tend to coincide with passages which start with arrival on the street and mark out a deteriorating path of the progressive loss of the capacity to react. What is in fact observed is the final phase of a process which for reasons already partly known from the literature and in part reconstructed from case histories has pushed these persons to the margins of society, but whose potential vulnerability is clear well before true and genuine exclusion actually occurs.

Connecting exclusion with precariousness, the situation with the process and analysing the factors that precede exclusion itself, instead of merely controlling the visible effects, is an operation for which instruments such as risk and similar concepts have been found to be important.

The concept of risk, which has a common root in the notion of social vulnerability, indicates, generally, a phenomenon of intensification of the forms of social hardship and complication of the map of inequalities along a growing range of lines of division. These disparities relate increasingly less to solely and simply one dimension such as income or consumption and are increasingly dependent on the interactions of different factors that contribute to the determination of disadvantaged positions. The metaphor of the “risk society” [Beck 1986] underlines the increase in both conditions and occasions of risk and also in the proportion of the population that is exposed to it, showing at the same time the inadequacy of the forms of protection developed by the welfare state in the course of the twentieth century. The accent on the dimension of risk allows the extent of the area of exposure to be examined because it is vulnerable or affected by phenomena which produce precarisation.

The scheme of social vulnerability, contiguous with and partly overlapping the concept of risk is to be considered in relation to the big social trends (general processes of the reorganisation of work, of the family and welfare systems) on the one hand and to the specificity of phenomena that are multidimensional, fluid and complex, with non linear relations between deprivation, isolation and capability deficit on the other [Castel 1995, 13].

Social vulnerability is the category which perhaps best interprets the consequences that are not just economic of the decomposition of the wage society and the disappearance of the structural and identity protections connected with it [Castel 1997]. In a fragmented context like that which emerges from the decomposition of the wage society, and also from the loosening of family and social ties, vulnerability is the condition of those who do not possess sufficient resources to access or remain anchored in the spheres of activity and protection that provide citizenship (of work, above all) and also of those who lack sufficiently strong ties to prevent or contain the effect of undesirable events during the course of life (the family and, more generally, relations of support and mutual help). It is also, however, the condition of those who although not completely without resources find difficulty, for various reasons, in converting them into well being.

From this perspective, the increase in social vulnerability, from an employment viewpoint as much as from one of fragile social ties [Castel 1997], may be more significant than the size of the population currently excluded, because it indicates an increasingly numerous presence of individuals that are fluctuating in the social structure and occupy the places between the cracks without ever finding a rightful place. In actual fact the original meaning of the concept of social exclusion does not identify a specific social group (that of the “excluded”) so much as the existence of specific social processes that lead more frequently than in the past to situations of extreme hardship:

family break-ups, the loss of a job, the failure to gain access to public welfare, social isolation, the loss of housing, or of a recognised social identity.

Within this scheme housing poverty can be interpreted in two ways: on the one hand as an expression of specific forms of poverty/risk which as such require their own conceptual and analytical apparatus; on the other hand it can be considered as a component of a broader process which poses the question of how it relates to other factors of housing hardship and also the cause and effect factors involved. This means relating housing hardship to a range of risk factors, reconstructing life paths in which these factors interrelate and understanding how housing works in the processes that govern the passage from “normality” to hardship and then poverty.

### **3. Problems in conceptualising a broader area**

The notions of risk of homelessness, vulnerability, “persons threatened by homelessness”, hidden homelessness, potential homelessness etc. are characterised by a common intention: that of identifying/classifying the problem areas that, to differing extents, are contiguous with homelessness in the narrow sense and seeking possible relations capable of throwing light on the processes that potentially lead to homelessness. Nevertheless, the uncertainties and overlaps between the different concepts employed produce considerable problems in attempting to deal with the “area around” strict homelessness.

The difficulty in distinguishing between concrete situations is linked to the fact that these categories are in some way interchangeable. For example hidden homelessness and risk of homelessness are two possible ways of defining the same situation. Living temporarily with family/friends, no legal tenancy etc. may be classified differently as non visible homelessness, risk of homelessness, or marginal housing etc.

The difficulties increase because of the uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding the concept of risk. In its most generally used form the “risk” category is of the broad or preventative type to include the “possibles” in the analysis or the definition, without any clear theoretical status of the notion. The concepts of “risk” and of “context factors” are often used for both the social and the housing components “as a substitute for facing the difficulty of defining the relationships, for suggesting 'possible' (causal) relationships in conditions of uncertainty, and in the absence of empirical validation” [Tosi 1999a, 115].

In most cases the notion of risk has a predictive function: this trait could be on the one hand a factor that distinguishes it from other similar notions and on the other hand it is not without problems. When for example it is located in an epidemiological paradigm, the notion of risk (in this case: of “risk behaviour”) “combines the primacy of prediction over understanding with its recourse to multifactor causality centred on the individual”. “From a sociological viewpoint, these studies dedicated to at risk behaviour have the inconvenience of making the social dimension of human behaviour disappear” [Peretti-Watel 2004].

However, it does not seem possible to identify the recourse to the notion of risk with an individualist orientation. As mentioned above, the origin of the concept may relate to structural transformation of western society and the possibility of the concept having a social meaning is evident. The alternative between individual and structural approaches in reality regards all research into homelessness and the whole debate on it. If many uses of the notion of risk are of an individualist stamp, this is because “in the field of homelessness approaches focused on the individual predominate: biographical interview approach, and social policies in the same vein – target of individualised measures” [Brousse 2004,27].

Further problems arise from the dualism intrinsic to the notion of homelessness – a housing and/or a social (social marginalisation) problem. The prevalent way of broadening the definition is in the direction housing and there is a certain identification between the two defining axes: the narrow definitions generally give precedence to the “social” meaning, while the broader definitions more often give priority to the housing dimension. In reality, even if they may be associated, it is best to maintain the two distinct axes. If it is recognised

that the polarisation of meanings is intrinsic to the homelessness issue, it must be assumed that the broadening can (must?) be developed in either direction.

#### **4. The case of homeless women in Italy**

The subject of homeless women in the Italian case provides an illustration of the conceptual problems of defining the broader area and of the relation between these problems and the social construction of the question of the homeless. Furthermore the case of female poverty and homelessness confirms the limits of the vision of homelessness centred on the 'no abode'. Women homelessness provides additional reasons for the need to distinguish different situations within the area of female homelessness. Women are rarely 'of no abode', i.e. explicitly or visibly homeless, or affected by advanced stages of exclusion.

According to the 1999 Italian report to the Feantsa Observatory [Tosi 1999,b], women account for 13-16 per cent of no abode. Much higher percentages of women are usually found among users of services for "persons in difficulty". This shows a structure of the problem characteristic of the Italian case: "a paradoxical combination of high risk of social precariousness and, at the same, relatively limited social exclusion" [Ruspini 1998]. Three possible (interrelated) explanations may be given for this: that women are less affected by (extreme) poverty/marginalisation; that extreme female poverty and female marginalisation/homelessness are less visible; that women have a different relationships with (public) services.

The specificity of female poverty reflects the type of protection, both informal and institutional afforded women in the Italian system. This ensures that they have stronger roots in the fabric of society, and has given rise historically to specific service provision that prevents exclusion or stops risk situations from progressing to extreme forms of hardship and marginalisation. On the background, there is the role that family play in the protection system in Italy. The availability of family support emerges as a fundamental factor in the prevention of poverty and the absence or loss of this type of support is a critical factor in the production of poverty. This fact, of general validity for the Italian system, is even more markedly true for women. The data on services and the analysis of case histories suggest that the relationship with the family and family networks is a critical factor in the paths towards female exclusion.

Current explanations put the accent on the persistent capacity of the family to prevent women from falling into exclusion and at the same time on the limits of this preventative capacity. At the level of individual case histories, the research indicates the lack or failing of this resource as the main determining factor of (risk of) marginalisation/exclusion. Women are more protected by family networks and more sensitive to risks deriving from a weakening or break of them.

The different relationship of women with services for the marginalised is an expression of both their position in the overall service provision system and of cultural specificities in use models. On the one hand the smaller presence of women among users of public sector services for persons in difficulty tells us that women at risk are also covered by other services, specific (for women with children) and general (state pensions, assistance in the home provided by special local administration services for the elderly etc.). On the other hand the very small presence of women among users of (public sector) services for the 'seriously marginalised' tells us that female demand is covered by a universe of voluntary organisations, religious bodies, and so on, which perform important preventative functions.

On the other side, the smaller degree of involvement in stories of serious marginalisation seems to depend, for women, on maintaining ties with the family network. Rootedness, maintenance of ties with networks seems to occur even in the case of homeless women, so that female homelessness normally assumes a different form to that of men. Continuity of contacts with social networks means persistent contact with vital worlds. Women in even extreme poverty live more often in houses - social or private rented accommodation - and

maintain a 'fixed residence' more often than men. This means that women maintain stronger ties with a 'regular' life even when in conditions of extreme poverty or marginality. That they maintain a fixed address and ties with 'normality' - with normal life: accommodation in a house is the expression and condition of this normality - makes social exclusion qualitatively different.

On the whole the 'private character' [Maye 1995] and scarce visibility of female homelessness is more accentuated in Italy than elsewhere, and its latency is greater and longer. Taken together, the factors mentioned mean a low percentage of homelessness among women, scarce visibility of such phenomena, and at the same time a high percentage of latent marginalisation and homelessness. The longer latency of female homelessness means less reversibility of the outcomes of marginalisation. It usually means that no abode women experience more serious break-ups: the stronger the motives the more difficult it is to heal the rifts.

## **5. Historical reasons for the broadening of the term**

In addition to the interpretational reasons, the "broadening" can be considered in relation to the changes that have occurred in the sphere of homelessness in this decade. It reflects the change in the composition and the appearance of new figures in homelessness. On this basis, with new populations entering the risk area in Italy, the traditional focus on the 'no abode' is perhaps broadening with more openness towards other identifications. The figure of the no abode which has been at the centre of the debate and policies over the years, is still dominant today. Nevertheless this view has started to lose its credibility in recent years and signs of a possible broadening of perceptions and definitions are starting to be seen.

One first move in this direction came from the increase in the numbers of homeless immigrants and of immigrants among the homeless, and of immigrants using services for the no abode. Homeless immigrants provide a clear example of a type of homeless that contradicts the prevailing construction of the phenomenon centred on the figure of the no abode.

In most cases homelessness among immigrants, often of the "street" variety, results from difficulties arising from being without documents, from difficulty in gaining access to housing markets and from insecure employment. There is a high probability of immigrants suffering housing exclusion without serious elements of marginalisation occurring and an even higher probability of them suffering housing exclusion without those features of personality de-structuring that characterises many no abode. They are simply poor people without a home. For them the lack of housing may be nothing more than a stage on the road to integration in a new society.

After this, the perception of an increase in the processes of impoverishment connected with an increase in the material, economic component of poverty risk contributed to the change in the images: a fact that focuses attention on the involvement of "normal" groups in the population in processes of extreme poverty and on paths to impoverishment which pass through "normality". At a certain point it was realised that these new processes also regard homeless populations.

A more important role for the economic/material dimensions of the problem was also affirmed for the homeless/no abode. Flexible to the point of precarious work, housing emergency, expensive rents were cited by a survey carried out in ten Italian stations as among the causes that led the 'new poor' (families, young people, women) to life on the street. An increase among the homeless of persons with a "normal" past, which must be added to the traditional no abode is reported partly as a consequence. "There is an increase in those with a 'normal past' behind them. In past decades we knew a person of no abode ... who presented a biography marked very strongly by marginalisation and exclusion (absent families, institutionalisation, prison, mental hospital, etc). This figure, which is certainly still present, is no longer prevalent. We observe people on the street marked by profoundly different biographies, who do not have a past history of marginalisation and exclusion, but of a normal life" [Bergamaschi in TRA Flash 2004].

Caution is required over this development. A number of researchers, with typical self-justifying rhetoric relate the shift of emphasis in definitions entirely to the appearance of new groups of the homeless: they ignore, that is, the fact that the alternative between narrow and broad definitions has been a constant factor in the constructions and that even before this historical change in the composition of the homeless, there were clear reasons for objecting to the reduction of the problem to the no abode [see Tosi 2003]. However these new factors are perhaps going to modify the dominant images and the bases for the social construction of homelessness in the country. In fact they challenge the traditional identification with the no abode and could help a more comprehensive view of the problem, one that is more consistent with the terms of the current debate on homelessness in Europe.

## **6. Reasoning on estimates of the number of the homeless**

Estimates of the number of the homeless are naturally affected by how broad the definitions are. Reflection on them may offer further indications on the location adopted along the axis that defines the issue as either narrow or broad and on the different strategies for broadening the definition.

The differing estimates of the numbers of homeless that are constantly brought up in academic and political debate are to a large extent the result of the conceptual uncertainty that surrounds the definition of homelessness and this focuses attention on the contrasting definitions that fight for prominence in the construction of the problem.

As has been said two types of definition co-exist in the definition of homelessness. The first is connected with processes of marginalisation and social exclusion. The second meaning relates directly to housing. It does not identify specific social figures or types, but the objective lack of housing. In general the first construction, as has been said, implies narrower definitions than the second.

Estimates of the phenomenon in Italy are not unaffected by these problems. The narrowness, or the breadth of the different definitions adopted obviously affects estimates of the numbers of the homeless. While the number of the no abode was estimated in 1993 at about 50,000 persons, when a broader definition of the homeless proposed by Feantsa (European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless) was used, estimates came to between 150,000 and 200,000 persons.

The conceptual uncertainty surrounding the definition of homelessness also affects definitions in the narrow sense of the term, those that identify the no abode or the street homeless or roofless. Even when the definition of homeless is narrow, the types of figure and the cases that are included can vary. Recent estimates put the number of no abode at between 70 and 80 thousand (calculated on the basis persons making use of voluntary associations and state services). The most recent estimate of 'no abode' by the Commission (s-night survey) was of 17,000 persons in the country. While these differences are the result of different methods of measurement they also reflect different definitions of the homeless.

Even for extreme situations of homelessness (rooflessness), inclusion among homeless is uncertain. This is because the figures identified are in reality social figures, just as the *senza dimora* is a social figure. Consequently for example, foreigners living in shacks, abandoned buildings and ruins may be left out of the count as most do not fit the typical, conventional description of the no abode (this has been supported by the fact that separate facilities and legislation has been provided for immigrants). In the same way gypsies are generally not considered as being of no abode, even when they are living in shacks or tents. Informal

settlements have often been (so far) “out of” or separate from estimates of no abode/roofless. Similarly those with specific origins or histories may be excluded from the count and from the analysis of forms of housing exclusion and homelessness, particularly if the conditions of exclusion seem temporary. For example evicted families unable to gain access to other housing with their own means are excluded from the definition.

Situations of rooflessness and extreme housing exclusion which do not involve the no abode are relatively widespread. Some indications (which definitely underestimate the dimensions of the phenomenon) come from investigations that regard the population in general such as census figures and periodical surveys by ISTAT (National statistics office) - the Survey of Household Consumption and Multipurpose Survey of Italian Households and the Bank of Italy - Survey of the Finances of Italian Households.

The 2001 census found ‘other types’ of accommodation in addition to housing occupied by residents and non-residents and unoccupied accommodation. These were defined as “accommodation not classifiable as housing in which, at the time of the census, one or more persons habitually or temporarily lived. Examples include: tents, caravans, campers, containers, shacks, sheds, cabins, caves; deposits, garages, lofts, basements; accommodation contained in constructions that are not buildings” [ISTAT 2001]. These are situations which do not easily regard the ‘no abode’.

At the date of the census, 21<sup>st</sup> October 2001, a total of 26,525,873 housing units and 22,500 other types of accommodation unit were counted. Housing units increased by 6.0 percent compared to 1991. The other types of accommodation increased by 8.4%: the increase touches points close to 200 percent in Central Italy where some families are still living in provisional accommodation after the 1997 earthquake.

The same order of magnitude was recorded by the Survey of Household Consumption 2001, 0.1% of households (0.4% of poor households) were living in “improper accommodation” in 2001 (shacks, caves, containers and other precarious accommodation), approximately 21,500 households.

## **7. Alternatives in the broadening**

The “broadening” of the definition occurs in the figures given on the basis of the type of accommodation. In reality, if it is recognised that the polarisation of meanings is intrinsic to the homelessness issue, it must be assumed that the broadening can be developed in two directions: along the housing axis and along the (extreme) poverty/ social marginalisation axis. The new debate on poverty provides a number of arguments in favour of an extensive approach to homelessness. At the same time the debate illustrates the difficulties in developing an extensive approach and provides arguments to challenge the option in favour of the extension along the housing axis.

The housing criteria is that most commonly used to broaden the definition when it is a question of identifying the homeless and constructing systems for classifying the homeless. Reasoning in terms of accommodation in this case seems obvious. The (strictly) homeless become a type of housing accommodation, located along a continuum of types of accommodation which extends from the strictly homeless to varying degrees of housing exclusion and marginal housing. In this case it is usually assumed, even if it is not conceptually necessary, that there is a continuity between homelessness, housing exclusion, bad housing and housing needs etc.; and the notion of risk or similar notions are employed to connect the different “circles”.

The ETHOS classification proposed by FEANTSA constitutes an example of broadening the notion of homelessness along this axis.

“At one extreme [on the ‘continuum of homelessness’], a ‘homeless’ person is defined solely with reference to the absence of shelter in the technical sense; this is obviously the most restrictive definition. At the other extreme, researchers propose a broad and inclusive definition [...]. According to this definition, a ‘homeless’ person is not

only someone without a domicile who lives on the street or in a shelter, but can equally be someone without access to shelter meeting the basic criteria considered essential for health and human and social development.

“A typology is advanced which includes different situations of “homelessness and housing exclusion”, going from strict/literal homelessness to various forms of inadequate/insecure housing: roofless: living in a public space, stay in a night shelter; houseless: homeless hostel/temporary accommodation, women’s shelter/refuge, accommodation for asylum seekers and immigrants, institutional release; insecure housing: specialist supported accommodation, no tenancy, eviction orders, violence; inadequate housing: temporary structure, unfit housing, extreme overcrowding” [Edgar, Meert, Doherty 2004].

A previous attempt at classification by Feantsa used a similar notion to that of risk, by using the label (situations) “threatened with” homelessness to indicate insecure and inadequate housing. This development reveals how terminology of the risk and “threatened” type (commonly adopted in some countries), and terminology of the marginal housing (or housing exclusion) type can overlap and confuse.

While on the one hand the passage from “threatened” to the more cautious label of “marginal housing”, properly recognises that insecure and inadequate housing do not constitute in themselves situations of risk, on the other hand it does not give the reasons for the inclusion of bad/marginal housing in a homelessness classification scheme, but suggests, however, a continuity between these different housing situations. That the situations are different and that extension of the definition in this direction may be a problem is perhaps indicated by the fact that the definition of the field is of the “additive” type: “homelessness and housing exclusion” (Feantsa). The Insee definition and classification is similar: “homelessness and housing deprivation” (Insee).

The Cnis, Eurostat and Insee definitions/classifications are also developed, with however differing degrees of breadth, along the housing axis: a “classification of all housing situations, including literal homelessness” (Cnis), “a working definition of housing deprivation” (Eurostat), a “classification of housing conditions” (Insee).

The justifications most commonly given for these types of broadening use the relations of continuity between the different situations and suggest an interest which lies within a housing treatment of the question, the classification operation being performed in the housing policy area (the classification “is based neither on the causes of deprivation of housing, nor on a description of the behaviour of the homeless, but instead on the criteria usually used to describe housing conditions” [Brousse 2004, 46].

“There is not a homeless/non homeless dichotomy, but a continuum of housing needs” [Williams, quoted in Brousse 2004].

“This definition has the advantage of integrating easily with standard housing classifications, thereby facilitating cross-cutting comparisons between similar situations using one or other of the criteria”. “The advantage of a classification of this kind is that it highlights the boundaries between housing deprivation and very similar housing situations” [Brousse 2004, 46].

“It was decided to develop a set of classifications that described the full range of housing situations, from the most conventional and most stable, to the least secure and least habitable” (p. 2). Besides reasons such as avoiding stigmatisation and creation of a ‘statistical ghetto’, this has several advantages, in particular it enables to observe and analyse the moves between ‘housing’ and ‘non housing’ and to analyse the housing supply accessible to disadvantaged people” [Clanché 2000].

The other criteria, which goes in the direction of the poverty/social exclusion axis, seems equally obvious if the point of departure from which the extension of the definition begins, the roofless, is considered. They are to a large extent the figures of social exclusion. Broadening the definition in this direction consists of taking into consideration the processes that generate homelessness or which result in histories of homelessness. The procedure is in a certain sense the opposite of that used in the classifications mentioned above which assume that “a good definition should focus on the phenomenon of homelessness but avoid any reference to the reasons for it” [BAWO, cited by Brousse 2004, 41]. The fact remains that it is only by introducing these “social” elements, these references to the dynamics of poverty, that it is possible to address critical problems in the study of homelessness, which may also be important for defining homelessness: the processes which make it possible to distinguish

“normal” from “pathological” homelessness, occasional from recurring or long term homelessness, etc. [Tosi, Torri 2004].

The “extension” in this direction includes everything that is able to explain poverty. Housing factors become one of the possible explanatory dimensions together with others indicated in studies on poverty. And understanding how the two dimensions, housing and poverty/vulnerability, interrelate becomes a critical point.

The role of the poverty/social exclusion axis – or the relationship between the two types of factors – seems to become clearly important when interpretation and not just classification objectives are pursued. Nevertheless the implications of the dualism also have an effect on classification as can be seen from the limitations of classification systems constructed strictly on the basis of housing conditions.

However obvious the criteria of type of accommodation may seem for classifying the homeless, application of the method presents problem as soon as the classification is extended beyond strictly homeless conditions and notions of risk are brought into play with the idea of continuity between homelessness and housing poverty. Classifications constructed on the basis of housing criteria may resort to “social” elements which render spurious or at least attenuate the rigour of keeping to a strictly housing criteria: for example when specific groups are indicated: immigrants, travellers...; or when the conditions of suffering evoked take account of social relationships such as “living under threat of violence from partner or family” [Feantsa]. As has been observed, “being threatened by domestic violence” may increase the probability of becoming homeless, but domestic violence is not a housing variable” [Marpsat 2005].

The largest problems concern the continuity/borderlines between homelessness and bad/marginal housing. Different situations included in the classifications, many of those defined as “insecure” and “inadequate”, are either not risk situations, or are already homelessness.

“Can all ‘housing problems’ be identified as ‘risks of homelessness’? If risk is taken in the sense of a situation in which the probability to become homeless is higher, the answer is certainly no. On the one hand, only a fraction of marginal housing situations result in homelessness. On the other hand, and though further studies should be made on the last dwelling of homeless people, to know from what kind of housing situation they came, a majority of homeless people were previously tenants or owner-occupiers of flats or houses [Marpsat 2005].

The point is that it is not possible to say whether a situation is at risk from the housing dimensions alone. Some situations of inadequate or insecure housing may not constitute, as such, a risk of homelessness: no more than does general poverty, regardless of the type of accommodation, while others (for instance, illegal building in Italy) may be more than a risk. If it is then considered that some “situations or characteristics could be identified as linked to a higher probability of homelessness”, it seems clear that the factors that determine risk must be sought in the interaction between various factors (identifiable at micro or structural level) that constitute the processes/risk of exclusion. For example:

“Some housing situations can lead to a high risk of homelessness, such as being housed by family or friends”; “living in a place where the local housing market is characterized by very few inexpensive dwellings leads to a higher risk of homelessness for all people who are either unemployed or with a precarious, part-time or low paid job. The confronting of a very tight housing market and a job market where precariousness is frequent are the main factors of homelessness”; “to have to leave rapidly the place where one lives, such as in the case of domestic violence [...] to have characteristics which can be discriminated against by landlords, such as coming from a foreign country” [Marpsat 2005].

Briefly, if the extension is along the housing axis of the definition of homelessness, it is difficult to establish under what circumstances there is greater risk of homelessness. There are not sufficient elements to hypothesise relationships between housing difficulties (temporary

or permanent?) and other types of problem. The risk of literally losing housing accommodation seems to depend on a variety of different circumstances. As can be seen, the difficulties are those typically resulting from the multidimensional character of exclusion processes. The multidimensional character involves the impossibility of isolating a specific risk, housing risk for example, and instead makes it necessary to consider the conditions, in the presence of other factors under which a specific risk factor really constitutes a risk; and for what outcomes of deprivation (housing or other) the risk manifests.

The problems, however, which result from the multidimensional character also make it difficult to adopt a notion of risk along the lines of “social” explanations of homelessness, and possibly to try a classification on this basis. There are difficulties here such as the difficulty in telling how risks of impoverishment or marginalisation are connected with the condition of homelessness - in its different meanings. On the one hand economic poverty does not always coincide with housing exclusion and persons who are in some way socially marginalised do not always see this exclusion reflected in housing deprivation.

On the other hand it is difficult to say how the dynamics of poverty and social marginalisation, which may have very different origins, may constitute risk of homelessness or break out into forms of extreme marginalisation of the ‘no abode’ type, unless the idea of a drift, of natural progression downwards of marginalisation processes is assumed [Tosi, Torri 2004]. People made more fragile by job insecurity, the loosening of family ties and more precarious welfare support hardly experience all these conditions at the same time. Few become of ‘no abode’ in the strict sense of the word as the result of these general dynamics. It is more probable that many individuals or families experience transitory difficulties passing through economic, family and housing problems in “one go” which combine together and reach a “critical mass” at particular points in life or in the presence of unforeseeable events which bring weaknesses to the surface. The forms of deprivation and hardship, of lesser or greater duration, which result from it are observable not so much as a result of specific processes of the accumulation of disadvantages determined from the start, so much as rather being an expression of the predominant ways in which people are included in society and the different ways in which these combine with individual characteristics, with life contexts and with institutions which structure the restrictions and opportunities available to each of us.

## **8. Definitions and social constructions**

It has often been observed in the debate on homelessness, that the reference to a common condition of housing, the lack of a home, is not enough to produce a solid concept and runs the risk of unifying heterogeneous problems and situations without due cause. On the other hand the field of homelessness would not exist without this reference and if the figures of social exclusion were thought of without the home dimension actually being important in the construction of the problem. This characterisation invites us to consider the problem as one of social construction. The same indication is given by the dualism of the notion: all considerations that are oriented on just one dimension run the risk of being reductive, even if they are possible for specific operations. It is interesting, however, to understand what the implications of choosing one dimension over another are in terms of the treatment of the problem and of the construction of policies. Just as the broadening of the definitions discussed in this paper is a subject that has a completely different effect if questions are asked about the practical implications of adopting narrow as opposed to broad definitions.

Consensus over definitions is limited to the situations at the heart of the problem, that which corresponds in the Feantsa definition to roofless and houseless. From there onwards the breadth of the definition is a question that can only be properly understood if it is taken as a social construction one: asking about the advantages and disadvantages of one definition or the other, advantages and disadvantages that may be verified at the level of interpretation and

that of policy construction. This is as valid for the amount by which the definition is broadened as it is for the choice of the axis on which it is broadened.

If a constructivist viewpoint is not adopted it becomes difficult to understand how the same definition can be considered “too restrictive” by some and “too broad” by others (the Eurostat definition: Brousse 2004), and how the same situations can be considered homelessness by some, risk situations by others and yet again “situations that have nothing to do with homelessness” by others, and so on. Certainly there are differences in interpretation behind this: but the constructed character is evident if we consider how these differences correlate with national situations and with administrative and professional roles. There is various evidence for this which involves the breadth, the axis and whether or not recourse is made to the notion of risk.

Taking a few sentences at random from the Insee report [Brousse 2004]:

Where social housing is better developed, the definitions of homelessness seem to be broader... housing policy develops its own sphere of action through the definition of the homeless population (21).

In countries where the solution on offer is temporary accommodation rather than housing (France, Italy, Spain, etc.), people at risk of are not longer at risk when temporary accommodation has been offered to them [...]. Until they leave the marital home, women who are the victims of domestic violence are at risk of becoming homeless, but as soon as they have a place in a refuge, they are deemed to be temporary or permanent residents and not homeless” (40).

In the countries where the definition of homelessness is based on criteria associated with housing conditions, policy regarding the homeless is aimed less at providing immediate help and more at facilitating long-term access to accommodation [...][Where the homeless are dealt with by the Ministry of social Affairs [...] the definitions used are generally fairly narrow and imprecise. At best, the homeless are a special category of beneficiaries of social welfare (17-18).

Government administrations and small NGOs both make a distinction between asylum-seekers and the homeless, even though from the point of view of difficulties with access to housing, one may feel they are in similar situations. Public administrations and NGOs also share common ground in their tendency not to consider as homeless those for whom they do not meet to take responsibility, because they will be accommodated either informally by their families or friends etc. [...] or formally by institutions such as prisons or refugee centres (40)

[In the UK] those local authorities whose responsibility is to provide accommodation for the homeless adopt very restrictive definitions in order to minimise the scale of the problem they face. On the other hand, associations that are not under an obligation to house the homeless can allow themselves to use a broader definition (41).

Those specialising in the area of housing use broader categories (41). Organisations supporting the homeless tended to favour broader definitions, while government administrations and statisticians, particularly in the countries of Southern and Eastern Europe recommend more restrictive definitions (42).

Different national views reflect the specificity of homelessness in the various context, but much more differences between the policy framework, and the specificity of the (consolidated or possible) forms of treatment of the question. On the other hand – when it is re-defined within a specific national context – the “same” category changes its meaning.

The constructed character makes any classification/typology non-credible if considered on the level of empirical verification. No definition/classification may be shared on the basis of some “objective” basis, that is of the “reality” of the homeless condition. To classify, define and establish borderlines is useful work and understandable in the game of constructions.

To think in terms of constructions reduces the significance of many attempts at classification. The (few) objective reasons for undertaking (costly) attempts at classification are not independent of construction logic, quite apart from the apparent (modest) objectivity of the classification proposals.

Passing from a factual to a constructivist vision means shifting attention from the “objective” reasons for definitions and classifications to – among other things - the strategies and policy implications of the various definitions and classifications. For example “extending” the definitions plays the role of giving visibility to categories with the aim of including them in the problem that public policies will have to address. (The case of advocacy definitions is the clearest example). In this case affirming continuity/contiguity or relations of risk forms part of a rhetoric of communication rather than an argument based on the logic behind systematic definitions/classifications.

The category “homeless” makes the phenomenon visible, and constructs it as a problem that can be resolved by public intervention [Burt, cited in Brousse 2004, 39].

Advocacy definitions, designed to highlight population categories in need, particularly those in inadequate accommodation of whom little is known by government administrations, such as those living with members of their family or living in caravans or substandard accommodation [Brousse 2004, 41].

Existing (hidden) homelessness should be visible to policy makers. [...] beyond rough sleepers, [we need] to include insecure accommodation etc. [Edgar, Meert, Doherty 2004].

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