

Methodology for observatories on extreme poverty.

Some evidences from a study on the homeless

Metodologia per osservatori sulla povertà estrema.

Evidenze di una ricerca empirica sui senza dimora

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Riassunto: La povertà estrema fa riferimento a dimensioni sociali e relazionali che si interagiscono con quella meramente economica. I senza dimora, ossia le persone che “dormono fuori”, sono poveri estremi, dei quali sono a repentaglio sia la sopravvivenza fisica, sia il ritorno ad una possibile condizione di normalità. In questa nota, si correlano gli strumenti metodologici applicabili nella realtà dei senza dimora con gli obiettivi di dimensionare e collocare sul territorio il fenomeno, di comprendere a fondo le cause remote della caduta in questa condizione e di descrivere l’efficacia dell’attività dei servizi di assistenza ed aiuto e, di riflesso, di ipotizzare una probabilità di ritorno alla normalità sociale. I dati analizzati riguardano i senza dimora e i servizi di assistenza e aiuto del Veneto nel 2005.

Keywords: Homelessness; Extreme poverty; Public services; Public policies; Service effectiveness; Observatory.

1. Extreme poverty and homelessness

Extreme poverty is a social category which is not simply the most severe level of economic deprivation: the extremely poor are hit by various dimensions of adverse fortune.

Let us start from the definitions. *Poverty* is a condition of people whose economic resources are below a certain standard. If it refers to income or wealth distribution of a parent population, a poor is “relative” to it. For instance, in Italy, the relative poverty line for families is yearly computed as a real number below which a family, with a given composition, is officially poor (Istat, 2002). This definition (referring to the *International Standard of Poverty Line*) was proposed by the European Council. The *relative poverty* differs according to regions and family classes (families by type and size, number of children, age of householder etc.).

Absolute poverty, instead, is statistically determined according to the minimum income necessary to provide a certain basket of goods and services for families. In Italy (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche sociali, 2003, 2004), this kind of poverty includes a lower proportion of the population than the relative one. Even if exceptions are possible, the relative poverty area contains the absolute one. Families that do not

possess enough money to buy essential items are considered poorer than those who float in a “grey zone” of economic difficulties¹.

Homelessness is an extreme and more specific category of poverty. For several aspects, it is the most depriving condition for an individual. A homeless is a person who does not possess economical and personal resources sufficient to provide an abode for him/her. As we shall see in Section 2, there is a variety of homeless categories, for instance some of them sleep in stable abode with precarious living standards and others possess enough resources for a possible proper dwelling. So, we prefer to define a homeless as “a person who sleeps out of home² and usually possesses much lower economic and personal resources than the general population”.

Hence, there is no one-to-one correspondence between the “sleeping out-of-home” condition and the economic deprivation, but the economic turmoil was the social ground upon which other personal failures acted.

Another general consideration is that homelessness is a personal, not a family condition, with few exceptions. It is possible for a whole family to live in the street, but it happens rarely. Usually, a person becomes a homeless when some traumatic events cut his/her ties with the family and the social system he/she belongs to. A homeless is a disaffiliated (Castel, 1996, 2003), he/she has no family, nor other affiliation ties.

In the following (Section 3), we will define rules for data collection and analysis of the homeless phenomenon in order to define how observational studies can improve the knowledge of the phenomenon and, moreover, design the services and policies against homelessness in an effective way (Section 2). The data which we will refer to were gathered in 2005 in the Veneto region (Italy) by interviewing a sample of people responsible of assistance and help structures and another of homeless persons (Fabbris, 2005). In Section 4, we will draw some final conclusions.

2. Why an observatory on the homeless?

An observatory on a particular social phenomenon is aimed at the double task of gathering and systematizing the information, and designing the assistance and help phases. Since in Italy the care of poverty competes to local authorities, observatories on homelessness are organized at the local level. For large towns, it is at the commune level, otherwise at the regional one.

Observatories on homelessness may help services and researchers to define

- *the quantitative relevance of the phenomenon*. The phenomenon is absolutely insignificant as a percent of the overall population, at least in the region we are dealing with. The statistical paucity does not mean social irrelevance; in fact, every homeless person is to be attended by the services and statistically enumerated. In the Veneto region, the prevalence of the phenomenon is about 1 out of 4000 residents (see Section 3.1);

¹ In Italy, in 1999, the proportion of absolutely poor families was 4.8%, that of relatively poor ones was 11.9% (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche sociali, 2003). It should be noticed that there are, too, other definitions of poverty based on the subjective perception of persons who are not able to guarantee a minimum living standard to themselves and their family.

² According to this definition, the homeless people have nothing to do with those “of no fixed abode”, since the latter ones possess an abode, but it varies.

- *the territorial distribution of the homeless people.* In Italy, assistance and help services for the homeless are organized primarily by large communes and most of the homeless gravitate towards large cities where services are offered. Accurate statistics about the territorial spread of the phenomenon may be used for regional fund sharing among local authorities (Section 3.1);
- *what causes people to fall in such an extreme condition.* This kind of knowledge is relevant for promoting policies to prevent homelessness. Besides, the homelessness generating mechanism is so complex to be represented and so difficult to be anticipated that social operators – even if they will never admit it – believe that it is a no-return condition. In Section 3.2, we categorize the homeless and it will be evident that homelessness is a multifaceted phenomenon from the etiological viewpoint. Homelessness is the last step of a concurrent series of social and familial negative events, all of which may be singly irrelevant but are disruptive in interaction;
- *whether the assistance and help services obtain their institutional targets.* Indeed, the poor expect the public and private services to alleviate their contingent situation. This is the task of the so-called first-impact assistance services. But there are higher level assistance services whose task is that of recovering the homeless (and other marginal people) to a decent life. Nevertheless, several persons sleeping in the street prefer assistance services to deliver them pocket money, instead of services in nature (clothes, warm baths, food at bishop's revenue, and so on). Hence, the engagement of public services for recovering marginal people to normal life is not an easy task.

3. Which information can we get from direct surveys?

The information that can be useful for an observatory on the homeless is now discussed. Knowledge needs are partitioned into three main areas: the width and territorial spread of the phenomenon (Section 3.1), the cause-and-effect relationships between the individual problems and the fall in an extreme poverty condition (Section 3.2), and the evaluation of assistance services interventions and policies of local authorities appointed for fighting the poverty and homelessness (Section 3.3).

3.1 Width and spatial distribution of the homeless phenomenon

There is no complete list of the homeless people, either national or regional. The services themselves do not keep record of individuals who take advantage of their activities. They operate on a front-desk basis: whoever comes to the desk is helped. Just the economic interventions (i.e. the sums delivered directly to the homeless persons) are recorded, but those who get meals, baths and dresses are not. Hence, no complete list of the homeless is available at the services. Even if the databases of all services would exist and be merged, still the illegal people and those who are discouraged to ask for assistance and help would not be listed in it.

We can use a multiplicity of sources, disaggregated at the commune level, to estimate the number of homeless people. Informative sources can be the following:

- a direct survey on guests of religious and public lodging-houses and another on street sleeping people. The former survey is relatively easy to be carried out provided the operators' interest for the research purposes is spurred. The survey could also be exhaustive and, according to the research aims, it could be carried out without directly contacting the guests. The latter survey, on street sleeping people, is difficult, dangerous and ethically debatable to be performed because interviews are carried out in the night and the homeless are often overwhelmed with substances. If the aim is to count them, the survey can be realized by squads of two-three interviewers who count people while they sleep. The basic procedure could be as follows.
 - Firstly, let us define an area frame for enumeration purposes. Area sampling design (Kish, 1965) for a city is a partition of its surface into small elementary areas, where each unit is a bounded territory that can be enumerated by an interviewer squad. Small areas can be completely enumerated.
 - The defined areas may either be sampled or fully enumerated. In the case of sampling the selection probability assigned to a small area is conveniently proportional to the expected number of homeless persons in the area. The areas where they are maximally concentrated may be selected with certainty.
 - People enumerated within an area (no matter if the areas were sampled or not) can be interviewed for content research purposes. The interview can be administered through a semi-structured questionnaire. Sampling within an area requires, in any case, the complete listing of the homeless present in the area. This should be done simultaneously in all sampled areas to avoid double listing.
 - The interview can be administered to the homeless who are able to respond. There are severe problems of language and sobriety for street interviewing.

The problem with this approach is that back-street people (foreigners, youngsters fled from home etc.) use to stay hidden and away from public offices. Hence, undercount is likely if we rely just on enumeration. In the Veneto region, with the help of squads of operators, who used to help daily the homeless with a frugal breakfast and tooth brushing, we enumerated people while they were sleeping and then sampled them systematically for direct interviewing. As a whole, 834 people were enumerated and 146 sampled for interview (Fabbris, 2005).

The people who sleep in the open air are scattered within the city, but are gregarious. They typically sleep close to the railway and bus stations, banks, parish churches and houses, abandoned houses, cars and firms, squares and gardens, under bridges and other roofed sites. By sleeping close to each other, they define a sort of "free zone" where they feel tolerated, at least during the night, and constitute a self-defense cluster. The "wild", non gregarious, population refers to the illegal or other elusive and transient groups of people (such as the *punk-with-beast* group) that are very difficult to enumerate. Anyway, it is a matter for methodological discussion if these groups pertain to our survey domain.

- Another source can be a key-witness survey on front-end operators of the public services. This type of data may be obtained with face to face interviews based on a semi-structured questionnaire. The key witnesses can report the number of homeless people attending their services and, in an aggregated form, also of their characteristics. The non-trivial methodological problem is that social workers are unable to extrapolate the homeless from the other users because activities are not nominally recorded.
- A third informative source is the municipal police documentation of the policemen's interventions for problems caused by the homeless. They control if there is any violation of urban regulations following citizens' calls. An interview to a representative of urban police may help defining the sites where the homeless use to sleep and quantifying, site by site, their number.

In the Veneto region, the merging of the various informative sources led to an estimate of 1211 homeless people, of which 514 used to sleep in a common lodging-house (Table 1). The number of people sleeping in the street in a commune was estimated as the maximum of the estimates of the two independent sources, our survey and the urban police documentation. The rationale is that if a person was enumerated by at least an informative source, it is to be listed. Though, it may be that people caused problems more than once in a commune in the reference year.

If just the sociological traits of the homeless are wanted, a survey on social workers who operate at the front-desk of poverty-specific services may be adequate to represent it.

Table 1: *Estimates of the number of homeless people present in the Veneto region in 2005, by commune, sleeping place and informative source (Source: Fabbris, 2005).*

<i>Commune</i>	<i>Lodging-house (direct survey)</i>	<i>Street</i>		<i>Total number homeless</i>
		<i>Direct survey</i>	<i>Urban police</i>	
Belluno	3	0	0	3
Padua	103	197	173-221	300
Rovigo	25	18	NR	43
Treviso	3	63	51-70	66
Venice	137	174	174	311
Verona	128	225	NR	353
Vicenza	115	20	13-18	135
<i>Veneto</i>	<i>514</i>	<i>697</i>	<i>=</i>	<i>1211</i>

3.2 Detection of what causes poverty and how to go back to normality

The only possibility for detecting the risk of poverty is a controlled observation of at least two groups, one composed of the homeless ("cases") and another of ("control") home living people. The two groups could be sampled from the two independent strata of cases and controls. If the following question is posed: *Is it useful to sampling even the "normal" population, given that the homeless are so a-normal?*, the answer depends on research purposes.

Let us suppose we want to define groups of people featuring severe risks of losing their homes. If we cluster-analyze the data collected on a sample of homeless people (Bragato, 2006), we realize that the typical tramp is present just in lodging-houses. Among the homeless, less than 1% above 64 year old sleeps in the street. Other clusters, sometimes termed the “new poverty”, are much more frequent in the street, instead. The largest of these groups in the Veneto region is composed of jobless immigrants. They are almost all young males, with precarious jobs or jobless at all, often illegal (without immigration documents), without any support from their far families, who fancy finding their fortune in Italy and refuse to go back to their country without it (Table 2).

Another group is that of Italian youngsters abusing drugs and alcohol, refused by and refusing their families, who need daily money for substance provision and day by day add to their situation diseases, thefts, even to the detriment of other ill-starred people, and rage against the whole society.

Even the separated or divorced are much more frequent in the street than in houses. Fabbris (2005) found 25% (50% among Italians) of divorced/separated in the street and 21% (32% among Italians) in the common dormitories. But there is no wise statistician who would compare these figures with those of a control group to measure the risk of homelessness associated to divorce, since the family disruption is a consequence of a myriad of other causal events and divorce itself may follow, rather than precede, the fall.

Table 2: *Percent distribution of homeless people in the Veneto region in 2005, by gender, nationality and age and sleeping place (Source: Fabbris, 2005).*

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Common lodging-houses</i>		<i>In the street</i>		<i>Total (according to census)</i>
	<i>Service managers</i>	<i>Census</i>	<i>Service managers</i>	<i>Census</i>	
% Male	84.0	83.1	87.5	92.9	88.6
% Italy	44.5	65.2	42.9	24.2	42.2
Age till 44 y.	69.9	55.3	77.2	77.7	67.8
45-64	27.3	36.2	28.6	21.6	28.1
65 and over	2.8	8.5	4.2	0.6	4.1

Then, the definition of a control group for evaluating the characteristics at risk for homeless is a waste of effort. It may be more important to distinguish between people sleeping in common lodging-houses and those on the street soil. This way, we realize that people lodged in public dormitories are a softer category of the homeless than those who sleep in the open air. In lodging-houses we can meet the traditional tramp, sleeping there from ages, at the borderline with normal life (they dress decent charity dresses, take regular baths, some of them even marry within the common lodging-house and live there together). So, they are poor but live normally.

A peculiar category which is frequent in common lodging-houses is that of migrant women from Eastern European countries, who work regularly in Italy and save money for their family (common houses cost was 0.70 euro per night) which they daily contact through cellular phone.

Now let us suppose we want to understand *if homelessness is a chronic, no-return, condition*. Indeed, the length of out-of-home sleeping periods differentiates clusters of homeless (Martini *et al.*, 2006).

In Table 3 we describe the duration of the homeless condition of people surveyed in the Veneto region¹. The overall number of years of homelessness is 3.1 in the street and 3.5 in common lodging-houses². It is evident that the length of the homeless condition depends on the level of deprivation. It is longer for people in the common houses because the duration relates to the factor that caused them to stay out-of-home: mental diseases that made them unable to work, drug and alcohol addiction, flight from family problems. Length of duration is an irrelevant issue just for feminine full-time workers who migrated from Eastern Europe countries and are accommodated in cheap dormitories waiting to go back to their families.

Table 3: *Percent distribution and median of homeless people in the Veneto region in 2005, by duration of homelessness, sleeping place and nationality (Fabbris, 2005).*

Duration	Common lodging-houses			On the street		
	Italian	Foreign	Total	Italian	Foreign	Total
0-2 months	3.0	17.1	10.3	4.5	8.6	7.0
2 m's - 1 y.	15.2	34.3	25.0	22.7	31.4	28.1
1 – 5 years	42.4	20.0	30.9	36.4	42.9	40.4
5 – 10 years	18.2	20.0	19.1	18.2	11.4	14.0
10 – 30 years	12.1	8.6	10.3	13.6	5.7	8.8
More 30 y's	9.1	0.0	4.4	4.5	0.0	1.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
(n)	(33)	(35)	(68)	(22)	(35)	(57)
Median y's	4.6	1.5	3.5	4.3	2.6	3.1

Let us suppose, finally, we want to know *the characteristics of the homeless people candidate to go back to normality*. This is absolutely the major problem from the statistical viewpoint. There are no databases of the homeless for privacy, cost and practical (nomadism of the homeless) constraints. Hence, we are not able to predict how many people and which categories of the homeless are prone to raise up to social normality conditions. A follow-up study on some cohorts of homeless people at the regional level might inform on that and suggest policies that are effective. Nevertheless, the empirical realization of such a study is a methodological challenge.

3.3 Effectiveness of services' activities

Assistance and help services could keep records of their activities and, through these databases, try to define how effective their activities have been for the homeless. Services may be considered effective either if the homeless were recovered to normality or the toughness of their living conditions was mitigated. Either purpose can be pursued

¹ The question posed to the interviewed people was: "*Since how long are you sleeping out?*"

² We are aware that the length of the life span out of home is censored in a cross-sectional survey like the one we are concerned. Nevertheless, our purpose is not of estimating the full length, but to infer about relationships of different lengths.

if the administrative records could be merged at least at the regional level and analysed statistically. Of course, we cannot say that a service was effective if the needy person no longer attended it, given the territorial and from service-to-service migration tendency of the homeless. Moreover, most of the assistance structures are either private or realized in agreement with local authorities (Castellani, 2005).

A second possibility to assess the service quality is a survey on operators as key witnesses of the phenomenon. Front-end people in the services are accustomed to self evaluating and they may be able to estimate how many people and which categories of the homeless needed no more help because they returned back to normality.

Table 4: *Percentage of homeless people sleeping in common lodging-houses and in the street in the Veneto region in 2005, by sleeping site and nationality (Fabbris, 2005).*

	Common lodging-houses (n=83)	On the street (n=57)	Total (n=137)
<i>% asking for help (at least once)</i>	69.9	77.2	73.5
- Italian	82.5	81.2	82.0
- Foreign	58.1	73.0	65.0
<i>% to whom the service helped</i>	67.3	25.0	43.6

A third possibility could be to ask homeless people if the services they accessed were useful to them, and why. It was found – in agreement with Maslow’s (1954) general theory – that the poor accustomed to relatively better living conditions (for instance, those in the common lodging-houses), expect more from the services than those who live in worse conditions and consider any help value for survival. In the long run, not only more and more needy people are discouraged to use the services, but the received assistance diminishes progressively its relevance for them (Table 4).

Besides, if a researcher would evaluate the services impact in a longitudinal fashion, neither the follow-up nor case-control rationales are adequate. The latter one because of long waiting time required for the event to happen, the former because it is difficult to identify cases, i.e. people who raised to normality, while controls could be recruited among those who had lived as homeless a certain number of years or more.

Hence, the statistical analysis of the effectiveness of policies, according to a statistical unit approach, may be a second best after the key witness data collection approach on service operators.

4. Conclusions

The excursus on data collection methodologies targeted to the knowledge needs of a possible observatory on homelessness indicates what follows.

- The width and territorial spread of the homelessness phenomenon, either in a city or in a region, can be estimated through an area sampling design. The estimates can be corroborated with easy-to-get data from municipal police and other assistance services’ documents. Policemen insight skill of the urban distribution and relevance of the phenomenon can be helpful also for the definition of the area sampling frame.

- The possibility to detect what convolution of distress determined such a clear failure, as homeless, is unrealistic in a cause-and-effect prospect whatever controlled observation design is adopted. Nevertheless, based on a cluster analysis of multivariate data, the groups' profiles are so well defined that a more sophisticated methodology of analysis might not be worth the candle.
- The detection of the characteristics of non-chronic people in such a social distress as homelessness remains, instead, a methodological challenge for statisticians. They might benefit from statistical databases that could be set up by regional authorities for following up people assisted at least once by the public or convention-managed services.
- The services' activities effectiveness – which according to the most cogent definition is the mirror image of the purpose of recovering the homeless to a normal life, but could just be functional to the aim of mitigating the harshness of their living conditions – may be evaluated with methods that are familiar to the analyst of service quality analysis. In any case, the detection of the services' effectiveness implies the interviewing, as key witness of the service management and results, of the front-end operators and people with responsibilities for the assistance and help services.

Hence, the representation of the various facets of the homeless phenomenon requires both a multiplicity of (converging) informative sources and qualitative and quantitative data collection approaches.

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