

The research program « **Social Integration of the Homeless: Attitudes, Prejudices, and Collective Action** » is part of the Belgian Federal Science Policy's multi-year research program examining current problems related to social cohesion.

The program of research on the social integration of the homeless comprises a series of projects exploring the following topics:

- A review of existing research literature;
- Perceptions of and attitudes toward homeless people;
- The homeless in the daily Belgian press;
- Estimation of the prevalence of different forms of precarious housing;
- The perceptions and the lives of street people;
- The mental health of the homeless.

Detailed summaries of these topics are presented below.

Review of European research on the homeless from the last 30 years.

Research on the homeless in Europe did not start to develop until about ten years ago. Although there were very few publications on this subject before 1995, since then the body of published research has grown exponentially.

Searching the PsychLit and MedLine databases, we identified 172 publications examining psychological, social, or other health-related problems of the homeless in Europe. Many of these studies were carried out in the United Kingdom (42%) and in France (17%), and the majority were done by university researchers (44%) or by people who work in the field (40%). When we examined the funding sources for these studies, we found that most of the time the research was funded by governments and only rarely by large funding agencies (7%), although such agencies are generally the basic means for funding research. This suggests that research on the homeless in Europe is most often a story of applied research and of the proxy management of data and suggestions for public policy.

Existing research has often been carried out by public and private organizations, using qualitative methods, often with few (or no) control or comparison measures: An appropriate control measure was noted in only 18% of the studies. Moreover, a significant number of these studies were published in organizational reports or monographs that are not widely available.

Next, we analysed the topics covered by the various articles. Several of the studies attempted to evaluate the prevalence of homelessness in Europe. These studies all faced several methodological complications related to the many forms of homelessness and to the difficulties of approaching this specific population. In this regard, defining and conceptualising homelessness is both important and very difficult. Among the studies utilizing samples from the homeless population, the majority of these samples are based on convenience rather than on an a priori theoretical definition. Some studies therefore undertook the task of describing this homeless population in an attempt to partially address

the definition problem. Generally, these studies indicate that homelessness affects more men than women, and that it affects people who have very little education and who for the most part are unemployed and live alone. These studies also note that family problems often play a part in the life history of homeless people. Several studies focused particularly on certain subgroups of the homeless, such as young people or women.

A number of studies concentrated on the physical and mental health of the homeless. Some of these studies showed that many homeless people become ill in the course of a year but that they pay little attention to their physical health (researchers find, for example, few somatoform disorders) and they do not use the free health services to which they have access. Several studies also show that the homeless present more mental problems than do the general population. The homeless present highly elevated rates of substance abuse and dependence, depression, and anxiety disorders. In a great majority of cases, these problems seem to have preceded the onset of homelessness. Very little systematic research has addressed the question of the causes of homelessness. The majority of European researchers conclude that homelessness results from a complex interaction among several factors, including socio-economic and financial factors, as well as personal vulnerabilities (loss of social support, disruption of the social network, mental or physical illness, and one or more serious life events). A number of studies have also observed differences between homeless men and women with respect to their attribution of the causes of their homelessness, such that men emphasize negative events, related to financial conditions, whereas women focus on relationship problems.

Many publications centered on societal responses to the problem of homelessness, including examinations of the market for housing for the poor in different countries, examinations of the types of services offered to the homeless, analyses of rehabilitation programs for the homeless, and descriptions of mental health programs developed for the homeless and of the development of specific rating scales for the homeless population.

Finally, certain researchers were interested in the ethical and methodological problems raised by studies of the homeless. From an ethical point of view, one must pay attention to the fact that the majority of the homeless are psychologically vulnerable individuals and that to conduct interviews with them may make them relive past or present painful experiences. From a methodological point of view, four recommendations can be offered: (1) With respect to the definition of homelessness, the criteria of inclusion and exclusion should be clearly mentioned, along with the procedure used to recruit participants (in particular, the place and the population targeted at that place). (2) The portion of the sample corresponding to the literal definition of homelessness should be analysed separately. (3) Appropriate control groups should be included in the research plan. (4) Data collection should be planned so as to determine whether a given phenomenon appears before, during, or after the onset of homelessness.

Perceptions of and attitudes toward homeless people.

It appears a priori that the attitudes of the general population with respect to homeless people are relatively ambivalent. On the one hand, the population can show proof of great generosity in this regard, but, on the other hand, they have reacted equally with occasionally virulent repulsion. We conducted an opinion survey within the Belgian population to allow us to verify if the different perceptions described above could be explained by the ambivalence of these attitudes and to identify the perceptions to which one must attend if one wants to influence these attitudes. We were also closely interested in a particular subgroup of the population, those social workers who have professional contact with the homeless.

This survey had three objectives: (1) to describe the attitudes and perceptions of the Belgian population toward homeless people, (2) to compare the attitudes and perceptions of social workers with those of the general population, (3) and to examine the role of various factors in the prediction of people's reactions to the homeless. The survey was carried out with two groups of people. The first group consisted of a random sample of 530 adults living in Belgium, to which we refer as the "general population." This sample appears relatively representative of the overall Belgian population with respect to gender, age stratification, nationality, education level, socio-professional status, and home ownership. This part of the survey was carried out by telephone, with calls placed to both "fixed" telephones (51.5%) and mobile telephones (48.5%). The study's second group, to which we will refer as the "social workers," consisted of 319 people who work either professionally or as volunteers with homeless people. The survey of social workers was carried out using questionnaires sent via post.

The majority of the questions we asked were identical across both groups. These questions relate to the problem of homelessness, the characteristics of homeless people, the causes to which survey participants attribute the situation of homeless people, the way that participants think about homeless people, participants' emotional reactions toward homeless people, and the assistance that participants would be ready to give homeless people.

Some questions were specific to the investigation conducted among the general population. These questions relate to the frequency of contact and personal interactions with homeless people. Likewise, other questions were specific to the investigation conducted among social workers. These questions related to the degree of involvement with homeless people within the framework of their profession and also assessed their professional satisfaction.

The overall image that emerges from the results is that of a concerned public that has relatively positive perceptions and attitudes toward homeless people. Even if the overall trends are generally similar, one nevertheless notices a number of differences between the responses of the general public and those of the social workers. A great number of these differences are consistent with the choice of profession made by the social worker, who prove themselves to be more involved and more positive. In addition, these results suggest that the general population could be better informed about the situation of the homeless, notably with respect to the notion that homelessness is often much more temporary than many people estimate.

The second objective of the studies presented here was to understand better how perceptions and attitudes with respect to homeless people are structured. A theoretical model was proposed, postulating that causal attributions for homelessness are associated with the way one perceives the homeless, with emotional reactions toward them, and with planned behavior. This model was largely confirmed by the data. The more a person holds the homeless responsible for their situation, the more he or she will have a negative perception of them, the less he or she will have positive emotional reactions toward them, and the less he or she will consider it useful to act on their behalf. On the other hand, the more a person estimates that the situation of the homeless is due to circumstances which are out of their control, the more he or she will have a positive perception of the homeless people, the more he or she will have positive emotional reactions toward them, and the more he or she will express support for the rights of homeless people. One can also note that the more a person perceives the homeless as potentially dangerous, the more he or she will react avoidantly toward them and the more he or she will be restrictive toward their rights. Moreover, “approach” reactions with respect to homeless people are positively related to a propensity to help them, and reactions of compassion are positively related to defense of the rights of the homeless. These results suggest that making people reflect upon the reasons that a person may find him- or herself homeless may be a strategy for influencing people’s reactions toward the homeless.

The homeless in the daily Belgian press.

One way to approach the perceptions of the homeless in public opinion is through analysis of the daily written press. One advantage of this method with respect to the opinion survey described in the preceding section is that this analysis allows us to look back in time. The objectives of this work were not only to explore the attitudes and perceptions of the Belgian population with respect to the homeless, but also to examine the possible evolution of these attitudes and perceptions. To this end, we undertook a content analysis of the daily Belgian press relative to homelessness across the last 25 years.

To select articles from the daily press, we initially created a list of 15 keywords related to homelessness. Then we searched for articles that included any of these keywords in their titles. This search consisted of a systematic examination of the contents of 4 daily Belgian newspapers over the last 25 years: *Le Soir*, *La Libre Belgique*, *La Dernière Heure* et *De Standaard*. This procedure yielded a total of 1007 articles dealing more or less closely with the topic, with the great majority of articles coming from *Le Soir* (753). In view of the number of articles yielded by the search, a random subsample of 5 articles per each three-year period was selected (44 from *Le Soir*, 22 from *La Dernière Hour*, and 20 from *La Libre Belgique*), for a total of 86 articles. This subsample of the francophone articles was systematically analysed using content analysis software, evaluating the articles’ level of emotionality, aggressiveness, and general emotional tone as revealed by the terms used in the articles.

These analyses demonstrate that the media's interest in homelessness varied over the course of the last 25 years. The findings suggest that Belgian public opinion was more sensitized to the phenomenon of homelessness just before the International Year of Homelessness (1987), and since then has fluctuated at the mercy of current events. Nevertheless, the tone that emerges from the analysed articles is for the most part neutral. The primary concern of journalists seems to have been to inform rather than to upset or aim for the sensational: They focused on the situation of the homeless, on the causes of the phenomenon, and on solutions which should be implemented, especially by public authorities. Homeless people are not presented in a negative or menacing way before the public. On the contrary, these articles arouse compassion for destitute people rather than exclusion or distrust. This attitude of neutral benevolence remains quite constant across the time period of the analysis, as do the types of themes addressed in the articles.

In conclusion, as far as the written press partially reflects the attitudes of the public toward the homeless, one can say that these attitudes have not changed profoundly in recent years and that they approximate benevolent neutrality. One can also make the assumption that the observations and conclusions described in the preceding paragraphs can be prudently generalized across the last two decades.

Estimating the prevalence of different forms of precarious housing.

One of the major needs of researchers on the homeless and of designers of social policies toward them is to evaluate the prevalence of homelessness in as precise and objective a manner as is possible. This raises the question of the best method of making such an estimation. The methods generally used in Europe are principally based on estimates of the number of people who visit centers and other places offering aid to the homeless (Rea, 2001). These methods suffer from a number of weaknesses and offer estimates that are not reliable. Indeed, such centers often register their users in an anonymous way, and the users very often attend multiple centers. It is therefore impossible to take a reliable individualized count. Moreover, these methods take into account only those people who use centers for the homeless. Some homeless people probably do not use, or only rarely use, these centers and therefore are not counted in these estimations.

Another possible approach is to evaluate the number of people who, at one time or another in their lives, have faced difficulties with housing. This approach relates to the proportion of the population who have experienced extreme insecurity of housing in the course of their lives, and it offers a better perspective on the true extent of the problem. One of the more reliable methods using this approach is to carry out a telephone survey of a random sample of the population of the region under study and to ask participants about any difficult experiences related to housing that they are currently facing or have confronted in the past (e.g., Manrique & Toro, 1995). This was one of the purposes of our telephone survey.

The results of our survey reveal that more than 10% of the Belgian population have experienced serious housing difficulties at one time or another. Close to 6% have been homeless in the strict sense at least one time in their lives. This prevalence rate is high, and it attests to the fact that precariousness of housing is an important and worrying social phenomenon. Nevertheless, this result is doubtless an underestimation, because it does not take into account people who do not have access to a telephone (who are probably in large part in a precarious situation, including, for example, prisoners, clandestine immigrants, people in psychiatric institutes, etc.), minors, or the proportion of the population who will find themselves homeless in the future (Toro, 200). It appears therefore that a significant number of Belgians will be homeless at one time or another in their lives.

Episodes of homelessness often occur at the beginning of adulthood. It is principally a phenomenon among males, particularly involving among those with few qualifications. This picture of homelessness is in agreement with the findings of different studies of homelessness carried out in Europe. In the majority of cases, such homelessness is a transitory event, lasting a few days or a few months. Services providing lodging to the homeless were used relatively infrequently by the participants in this survey. The results indicate that limiting one's focus to people who use services providing lodging to the homeless offers an incomplete conceptualization of the problems of homelessness. The majority of the people reporting an episode of homelessness seem to have relied upon the resources of friends and family or preferred to manage by themselves rather than to use overnight shelters for the homeless. Even if it is likely that other types of social services were used by the majority of these people, one can nevertheless conclude that workers in social services intended for the homeless come into contact with only a portion of the people who find themselves homeless. These findings emphasize the high stakes involved in efforts to prevent homelessness. Finally, the comparison of the results of this survey with similar studies conducted in other Western countries indicate that, with respect to the prevalence of homelessness, Belgium is located near the average among European countries. These results show a lower prevalence in Europe than in the United States, confirming findings from our review of existing research literature. However, there is one notorious exception: The situation in the United Kingdom now seems even more alarming than that in the United States, but it is yet to become an issue, because the relevant findings are only preliminary.

Our results leave in suspense the question of changes in the prevalence of homelessness over time, because we do not have longitudinal data that permits us to follow the evolution of such prevalence across time. However, other sources of information, such as changes in the rates of poverty or in income inequality, can provide useful indicators of the probable evolution of the problem of homelessness. By crossing several databases existent in Belgium, Gevers and Van Kerm (1998) concluded that over the course of the last 15 years rates of poverty have grown, inequalities in income have become more pronounced, and the trajectory for individuals has deteriorated (more people have fallen into poverty and few have recovered). In view of global trends in the distribution of wealth, one

may hypothesize that an increase in the number of people who experience housing problems or who find themselves homeless is highly probable.

The perceptions and the lives of street people.

We carried out a study that was designed to listen to the opinions of homeless people about their current situation and to retrace their life courses. For this study, a semi-structured interview covering 11 broad themes of the life of the homeless person (personal projects, current life conditions, types of income, etc.) was developed. The interviewed people were also invited to recount the course of life that led them to homelessness.

75 people attending centers for the homeless took part in this study. This sample was composed of two different population who “cohabit” in these centers: People who have no housing, who are homeless in the strict sense, and people who have a place to live, albeit often precarious, and are in search of social ties. The results obtained from these two populations were compared to those from long-term unemployed people who have housing and do not frequent centers for the homeless. In effect, it is a study of a population in social and financial jeopardy.

Part of the interview about people’s current life concerned their evaluation of accommodation centers for the homeless. The first point to note is that people who frequent such centers go there regularly because they find the centers responsive to their needs (to sleep, to eat, etc.). These people think that their participation in the organization of life in these structures is very minimal, even unwanted. On the whole, the conditions of access to the accommodation services and the methods of selecting persons for accommodation seem to be fairly appropriate. But expectations related to these subjects reveal themselves to be relatively contradictory, doubtless because of the heterogeneity of the people being surveyed: Some people denounced the injustice in the selection process, whereas others insist upon the constraints that lead to some people not being selected.

A second part of the interview addressed people’s personal projects. The homeless most frequently search for accommodations as their project, and the unemployed search for work and an improvement in their incomes. In the three top responses, the three groups equally emphasize the completion of specific personal projects and the attainment of emotional stability. The members of each of three groups apply themselves deeply to their projects and feel in large part capable of successfully completing them. All estimate that the completion of their project depends overall on conditions independent of themselves (money, adjustments in administrative status, intervention of social structures, etc.).

A series of questions was intended to evaluate the current life conditions of the people being surveyed. In a general way, the people in precarious housing offer a rather negative evaluation of their day. The difficulties they most often encounter involve their income, anxiety, depression, and physical health. The homeless have a more negative evaluation of their hygiene and less often eat enough to satisfy their hunger. With respect to food, the homeless more often face a nutritional imbalance. One must

also note that the people who frequent the accommodation centers clearly underestimate their bad health and that the proportion of the homeless who feel depressed is much greater than that among the socially precarious and the unemployed.

The results also highlight that among our respondents the onset of homelessness was relatively more recent than that of being precariously housed or unemployed. This is an indication of specific nature of homelessness and suggests a certain continuity among these different conditions.

If one compares the housing conditions, one can see that they are, overall, less favourable for the socially precarious than for the unemployed. However, for both groups, a significant number are housed in a precarious way by their friends or families. This observation highlights the serious risk that some of them will fall, sooner or later, into the category of homelessness.

During the interview, we also could observe that the three groups have the sense of being better perceived by those who share their condition and by social workers. Their families' opinion is noted as the least positive. Moreover, homeless people report having infrequent contact of inferior quality with their family or their children. But these people underscore the importance of their emotional and social ties, which are, according to them, the most effective comfort (more so than philosophical or religious support).

Analysis of the relations among the different variables being studied makes it possible to highlight a very coherent structure. At center of this structure, we find disruption—or maintenance—of social ties, most notably family ties. This variable seems to be of pivotal importance in the trajectory of homelessness. It is related to the perception that individuals have of themselves, to their mental health (anxiety, depression, alcohol, etc.), and to their housing situation.

Finally, the people who frequent centers for the homeless were asked to describe their course of life. Among the factors setting into motion or intervening in the situation of homelessness, we find that the familial factor was mentioned by almost all the people interviewed. It often concerns the origin of their life course: parental violence, placement in a center or foster family, family break-up, romantic break-up, etc. These different factors have important material consequences (loss of work and the consequent financial difficulties, inability to pay the rent which leads to loss of housing, etc.), familial consequences (romantic break-up, familial break-up, disruption in relationships with children), and, lastly, personal consequences (alcohol abuse, delinquency, depression, loneliness, social withdrawal, marginalization, health problems, etc.). The resultant situation is often a vicious circle, with one factor reinforcing another.

This study permitted us to highlight differences between the homeless and the socially precarious (that demonstrate a certain social heterogeneity among the people who frequent the centers), as well as a continuity between the condition of unemployment, social precariousness, and homelessness. In particular, the results show that a significant number of the socially precarious and the unemployed live in housing conditions that do not put them very far from the street.

The mental health of the homeless

Research on the mental health of the homeless is unanimous as far as the fact that the prevalence of mental problems is significantly higher among the homeless than among in the population in general. Research has also shown that these problems seems to begin before the person loses his or her housing. On the other hand, these studies show little agreement as to the nature of the mental difficulties problems suffered by the homeless. For this reason, we undertook a psycho-epidemiological study of 42 homeless Belgians. This study was intended to investigate, using a valid evaluation instrument, a broad range of disorders in a Belgian sample sufficiently large enough to establish reliable estimates of the prevalence of mental problems in that population. The instrument used in this study was the French adaptation of the MINI (Lecrubier, Weiller, Bonora, Amorin et Lépine, 1994). It consists of a semi-structured interview designed to detect the presence of psychiatric problems on Axis I of the DSM IV (APA, 1994). These results were compared with results obtained in a group of 74 men who took part in another study. However, this comparison was somewhat rough, in that only selected disorders included in the DSM were evaluated in this other study.

The study of the homeless confirmed the presence of a very significant prevalence of psychiatric difficulties in the homeless population. The most frequent difficulties include depression, generalized anxiety, and substance dependence or abuse (alcohol or other drugs). The prevalence of psychotic disorders, although affecting only 12% of the sample, is remarkable given that the prevalence of these disorders is particularly low in the general population (0.5 to 1%). In addition, no eating disorders or somatization disorders were found in this sample. This also confirms that the homeless seem very unconcerned about their bodies.

Psychiatric comorbidity is very important: For the entire sample, only seven homeless people (15%) presented no psychiatric disorders and six (13%) presented only one disorder. The rest presented at least 2 established psychiatric disorders.

Within the homeless sample, we did not identify characteristics related to a number of mental problems. However, our analyses related to more specific diagnoses yield more contrasting results. Indeed, homeless people presenting anxiety disorders other than generalized anxiety have a higher education level than the homeless who do not present anxiety disorders. Similarly, the former all had only one prior episode of homelessness, while the others had an average of 1.2 prior episodes. Age, national origin, and housing situation seemed unrelated to the presence of this disorder. The picture is rather different with respect to generalized anxiety. Generalized anxiety seems unrelated to age or to prior episodes of homelessness, but related to housing situation (those with generalized anxiety have tended to suffer a more precarious housing situation) and to education, but this time in the opposite direction. (Those with generalized anxiety tend to have completed less education than have the non-anxious.) Alcohol seems—weakly—related to the number of prior episodes of homelessness. In the same way, depression relates only to national origin and not to any other variable. People of African origin almost all present this disorder, although, among people of European origin, only 7 out of 24

received this diagnosis.

In conclusion, our study underlines the importance of mental health problems among the homeless. Concerning the design of services intended for the homeless, the prevalence of depression and the elevated suicide risk highlights the necessity of personalized assumption of responsibility. Moreover, social, administrative, and health services are presently separate and organized in an autonomous manner. The homeless must therefore necessarily turn to multiple services and, given the organization of these services, different intervening parties. For many homeless people, their mental health status makes such adaptability difficult and likely constitutes an obstacle in their path toward reintegration. Concerning the development of mental health policy particular to this population, it is misguided to wait for the homeless to consult with care providers in a spontaneous and regular fashion. It is necessary to put in place a specific mental health policy: one that is proactive (mental health professionals must go find the homeless where they are), personalized (arrange for a reference person for mental health issues who remains available over time), and integrated into social reality (address the development of homeless people's social networks).