

## **Statistical Surveys among Homeless People: Improving Methods for a Better Coverage**

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This presentation will be about French surveys on homelessness and how they have improved over time. We're speaking here of statistical surveys with interviews of homeless people themselves (as opposed to surveys interviewing service providers, for example).

### **Homeless surveys in France and their origin**

#### **Difficulties of statistical surveys among the homeless**

These surveys present several difficulties which are now well known:

- it is necessary (but difficult) to select a precise definition of homelessness. Such a definition has to address two issues: 1. What is the housing situation (or group of housing situations) which will be considered as a homeless situation: street, shelter, squat, accommodation by family or friends, hotel room...; and 2. What is the time reference: is it the usual situation, or the situation the night before the interview, or a situation in which the persons found themselves at least once in a given period of time, etc.
- there are no sampling frames such as addresses or administrative files (a common problem for many hard-to-reach populations);
- many homeless people are not easily distinguished from housed people, part of the homeless population is very mobile, and more generally the population is very heterogeneous (age, sex, country of origin...);
- there are ethical issues and field difficulties.

#### **Examples in the USA**

In the USA, several homelessness surveys have been designed and implemented, starting from the early 1980s. The French surveys were inspired by several US point-in-time surveys which can be seen as examples of indirect sampling and, more precisely, of time-location sampling (TLS), since they were based on surveys of service users. These examples include:

- In 1984, a survey by the Rand Corporation (Burnam and Koegel, 1988), the *Los Angeles Skid Row Study*;
- In 1987, a survey by the Urban Institute (Burt and Cohen, 1988, 1989) on homelessness in cities of 100,000 inhabitants or more;
- In 1991, a survey by the Research triangle Institute (RTI; Dennis and Iachan, 1993) in Washington DC metropolitan area;
- In 1996, a national survey by the Census Bureau (National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients or NSHAPC; Burt *et al.*, 2001).

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## **In France : the INED homelessness surveys in the Paris region**

Based on the RTI/Urban Institute model, the French National Institute of Demographic Studies (INED) developed several surveys of the homeless in the Paris region, starting in 1995. All INED surveys used indirect sampling of the time-location type with weightings to account for differences in service use.

In 1995, INED conducted a survey of adult users of accommodation services and meal distributions in the city of Paris (SD1995) (Marpsat, Firdion, 2000). In 1998, the institute conducted a new survey of 16-24-year-old users of accommodation services, meal distributions and day drop-in centers in the Paris region (SD1998). Day centers are places where homeless people and other persons in economic difficulties can drink a coffee or eat sandwiches, take a shower, wash their clothes, meet with a social worker, etc.

## **The first national survey on homelessness in a European country: the INSEE 2001 survey**

In 2001, INSEE, the French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies, conducted the first national homelessness survey in Europe. SD2001 is a survey of users of accommodation services and meal distributions that took place over a one-month period. Homeless people were defined as having spent the night before the survey in accommodation services or in a place not meant for habitation (car, cellar, wood, cabin...), be it private or public, outside or inside. The sample comprised French-speaking users aged 18 or more in population centers of 20,000 inhabitants and above in metropolitan France.

In Europe, a survey of the same type was conducted in Spain in 2005.

After this national survey, INED conducted a survey of outreach services (SI2002) to study the limits of the service users' method for reaching people sleeping in places not meant for habitation. These “*sans-abri*” (this French term is close to “rough sleepers” in England, or “unsheltered homeless” in the US but also includes people who sleep in places not meant for habitation even if they are not visible, such as people sleeping in cellars) were not reached by the SD2001 survey if they did not use food distributions.

## **Sampling and weighting**

The SD2001 survey had a three-stage sample design: 80 population centers of 20,000 inhabitants or more were sampled first, followed by service sites, then services such as beds, meals, etc. (via the individuals served) (Brousse *et al.*, 2003, 2006; Ardilly and Le Blanc, 2001).

A total of 4,084 questionnaires were obtained in the sample, by more than 300 interviewers who made 1,036 visits to 846 places of accommodation or meal distribution.

The data were weighted with the weight share method developed by Pierre Lavallée (1995, 2002) and Jean-Claude Deville (1999). This requires knowledge of how the services in the scope of the survey were used by the various individuals. In the case of SD2001, this was measured through the number of “links” to the service database in the week before the survey (i.e., how many times the interviewee had used one the services listed in the database). The following graph explains how the weightings of an individual are elaborated, based on the weightings of the services divided by the number of “links” to the database.

The following graph is given in Ardilly, Le Blanc(2001) as a fictitious sampling and weighting example.

## The weight share method

### Services

$w_1, \dots, w_{13}$

### Individuals

(weight sharing method)

$$W_1 = w_1$$

$$W_2 = 1/2 * (w_2 + w_8)$$

$$W_3 = w_{10}$$

$$W_6 = w_7$$

$$W_7 = 1/3 * w_9$$

#### Accommodation

1

2

3

4

5

#### Evening meal

6

7

8

9

#### Noon meal

10

11

12

13

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

A sampling example : The arrows represent the links between the services and the individuals. The shaded services were sampled. They point to shaded individuals. Dotted lines represent the links reported by individual 7, which were not used to include the individual in the sample.

**Source :** Ardilly, Le Blanc, 2001, "Sampling and weighting a survey of homeless persons : a French example", *Survey Methodology*, vol 27, n°1, 109-118.

## **The limits of the SD2001 survey**

The purpose of the SD2001 survey was to reach people who had spent the night before they were surveyed in an accommodation service or a place not meant for habitation. However, its real scope was the users of accommodation services and meal distributions. This means that meal distribution users who were housed either in their own accommodation or at a relative/friend's place, squatters, etc. were also surveyed; and that non-French speakers, homeless people in population centers of less than 20,000 inhabitants, and the homeless who sleep in a place not meant for habitation and use neither accommodation services nor meal distributions were all missed. This last population was studied through the 2002 INED survey on outreach services (SI2002) (Marpsat *et al.*, 2004).

## **The EMSA2009 survey in Toulouse: preparing the national SD2012 survey**

EMSA stands for "Enquête méthodologique sur les sans-abri" or methodological survey on the homeless who sleep in a place not meant for habitation. A result of the collaboration between INSEE and INED, the EMSA2009 survey had several purposes:

- in preparation for the SD2012 national survey, to check whether it is still valid to consider that most of the homeless sleeping in places not meant for habitation can be reached by surveying meal distributions;
- to elaborate a method to improve the survey coverage and/or study this coverage;
- and also to give some results at the local level, to the NGOs and other service providers who helped in implementing the method.

## **Method of the EMSA2009 survey**

EMSA2009 took place in services for the homeless, accommodation services excluded: day drop-in centers, night drop-in centers (called in French "*haltes de nuit*", that is, places where there are no beds but which are open during the night and offer some kind of shelter, sandwiches, etc.), meal distributions **including breakfast** (breakfast distributions were not included in the previous surveys of homeless people) and outreach services (*maraudes*). Service sites and dates were selected at random, then users. The data was weighted by the weight share method to obtain results in terms of persons and not of services (because of the differences in service use that we estimated via specific questions).

## **The contacts**

The interviewers made 1002 contacts for 519 questionnaires, hence achieving a response rate of 52% (by comparison, the 2004 survey on personal assets had a response rate of 73,6%, and the Labor Force survey a response rate of 81%). However this rate increases to 76% after excluding the contacts which could not be followed by a questionnaire because the person didn't speak French, or wasn't fit to answer, or had already answered the questionnaire.

When the data is weighted, the estimates give between 1,300 and 1,700 users, and from 260 to 280 users living in a place not meant for habitation in the city of Toulouse (Marpsat, Quaglia, 2010).

## Housing situation of users of non accommodation services in Toulouse

Housing situation	Usually (%)	The night before being surveyed (%)
<b>Sleeping in a place not meant for habitation</b>	19	18
<b>Sleeping in an accommodation service</b>	24	25
<b>In a squat</b>	7	7
<b>Accommodated by family/friends</b>	11	16
<b>In own dwelling (rented or owned)</b>	34	30
<b>Other situation*</b>	4	4
<b>Total</b>	100	100

Source : INSEE/INED, EMSA2009. Weighed data. N=515 questionnaires.

\*Other situation: for example, hospital, held by the police for questioning, etc.

The breakdown of the respondents by their usual housing situations and their situations the night before the survey shows very few differences. However, there are exchanges between situations: even those who have their own housing may sometimes be housed by a friend (for example, in cases of domestic violence), and there are also recent changes, such as a recent loss of one's dwelling.

## Users by sex and age (%)

Age	Men	Women	Total
<b>Less than 25 years old</b>	8	9*	8
<b>25-34 y.o.</b>	19	16*	19
<b>35-54 y.o.</b>	61	55*	60
<b>55 y.o. or more</b>	12	20*	13
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100

Source : INSEE/INED, EMSA2009. Weighted data. N=515 questionnaires.

\*\* : fewer than 10 respondents in the sample ; \* : 10-19 respondents.

91% of the users of services (accommodation services excepted) are men and 9 % are women. These figures are close to those obtained in other French surveys for people in similar housing situations.

11% of the users report living with a partner, and 4% with one or several children, usually only one. Children are usually under 18. Around one-half of the adults who live with a child are also in a couple, and most live in a dwelling, either their own or that of friends, but there are also some homeless persons accommodated by service providers, and a few unsheltered homeless.

## Use of services on the week before the survey (% in column)

Housing situation the night before the survey	All services	Use of services			
		<i>Lunch and dinner</i>	<i>Breakfast</i>	<i>Day/night drop-in centers</i>	<i>Outreach services</i>
<b>Place not meant for habitation</b>	18	21	21	21	38
<b>Accommodation service</b>	25	24	21	33	30
<b>Squat</b>	7	8	4*	5*	8*
<b>Accommodated by family or friends</b>	16	13	24	18	6*
<b>Own housing</b>	30	30	26	18	10*
<b>Other, non response, doesn't know</b>	4	4	5*	5*	8*
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100	100	100

Source : INSEE/INED, EMSA2009. Weighted data. N=515 questionnaires.

\*\* : fewer than 10 respondents in the sample ; \* : 10-19 respondents.

If we wish to include a type of services in addition to those already surveyed in the SD2001 survey (namely accommodation services and food distributions), then we need services with a high percentage of clients who are unsheltered homeless (i.e. sleeping in places not meant for habitation, be they inside or outside, private or public), and not too many clients who are not homeless at all.

The proportion of unsheltered homeless is about the same (around 21%) in lunch and dinner facilities, in breakfast distributions and in day/night drop in centers. However, the number of people served is much higher in meal distributions, which means it is easier to build a large enough sample of unsheltered homeless.

The proportion of unsheltered homeless is higher in outreach services, but the total number of people contacted by outreach teams is low, and it is difficult to collect data when following an outreach team: surveys of the homeless contacted by outreach distribution have been conducted by the INED and are possible at the local level, but not at a national level. As for day/night drop-in centers, their percentage of homeless people sleeping in accommodation services (and more easily contacted there) is higher.

## Use of services on the week before the survey (% in line with multiple use)

Housing situation the night before the survey	Use of services			
	<i>Lunch and dinner</i>	<i>Breakfast</i>	<i>Day/night drop-in centers</i>	<i>Outreach services</i>
<b>Place not meant for habitation</b>	92	28	39	22
<b>Accommodation service</b>	81	21	47	13
<b>Squat</b>	91	13	24	12
<b>Accommodated by family or friends</b>	66	38	40	4
<b>Own housing</b>	82	22	20	3
<b>Other, non response, doesn't know</b>	96	36	48	23
<b>Total</b>	82	25	35	10

Source : INSEE/INED, EMSA2009. Weighted data. N=515 questionnaires.  
 \*\* : fewer than 10 respondents in the sample ; \* : 10-19 respondents.

Reading the data the other way round, we see that the week before they were interviewed, 82% of the service users had eaten a lunch or a dinner provided by an NGO or another support agency. This was also the case of 92% of the unsheltered homeless, which shows that most of the unsheltered homeless (who are service users) use lunch or dinner distributions. The next highest percentage, but much lower, is for drop-in centers, used by 39% of the unsheltered homeless.

## Where can the unsheltered homeless be surveyed?

The following statistics are to be understood as “during the week before they were interviewed” (there is no substantial difference if we replace “during the week” by “during the month”).

Type of service	Users of this type of service	Users of this type of service and not of lunch/dinner facilities	Users of this type of service only
<b>Lunch/dinner (as in SD2001)</b>	92	-	38*
<b>Breakfast</b>	28	4**	0
<b>Day/night drop-in center</b>	39	4**	0
<b>Outreach services</b>	22	5*	3**

Source : INSEE/INED, EMSA2009. Weighted data. N=515 questionnaires.  
 \*\* : fewer than 10 respondents in the sample ; \* : 10-19 respondents.

92% of homeless people who spent the night before they were interviewed in a place not meant for habitation (street, cellar, park, car...) use lunch and/or dinner services. 38% use none of the other types of services surveyed (breakfast distributions, outreach services, drop-

in centers). If these results could be extrapolated to the rest of metropolitan France, it would mean that the coverage of this subpopulation of homeless people was quite good.

However, these results depend to some extent on the specificities of services in Toulouse (for financial and administrative reasons it was not possible to conduct the survey in more than one city):

- the NGOs and the municipal social services work very closely and inform the homeless so that they can use the different resources as much as possible;
- the social restaurant "Le Grand Ramier" is at the same place as a day drop-in center, a service providing addresses, and is located close to other service sites on the same island, which may explain why lunch and dinner meals are used by the largest share of the unsheltered homeless who can take advantage of this proximity of services.

It would seem that outreach services are the best choice of service to add to the SD2012 survey, because they have the highest share of unsheltered homeless who do not make use of lunch and/or dinner facilities; however, the difference with respect to breakfast distributions and drop-in centers is small and, as said before, conducting such a survey at the national level is impossible. Drop-in centers seem the next best choice, but day centers are difficult to survey since people do not stay in them for a precise length of time (as opposed to meal distributions where they are present at specific times of day, and accommodation services or night drop-in shelters where they usually spend most of the night).

To sum up these arguments:

On the negative side, if we introduce more types of services in the homeless surveys, the weights will have a larger range since the number of service uses during one week will be in a wider bracket than between 1 and  $3 \times 7 = 21$ ; the questionnaire will be longer since there will be questions on the use of the new service(s), so the interviewees will be more reluctant to answer it;

On the positive side, we will have a better coverage of the homeless who sleep in a place not meant for habitation.

And how should we choose the added services ? Breakfast distributions and day centers are used by a rather small percentage of unsheltered homeless (around one person in five), but by many homeless people living in shelters or other accommodation services (who could more easily be surveyed there) and also housed people; outreach services contact a larger proportion of unsheltered homeless people (around two in five) but most of them can also be found in food distributions, and it is difficult to survey outreach services, especially at the national level.

It was decided that if we were to add one type of service, it should rather be breakfast facilities which are easier to survey than outreach services or day drop-in centers; besides, the question "have you had breakfast in an NGO or another support service" is less ambiguous than "have you spent time in a day drop-in center" because a day drop-in center is not easy to define. Some day drop-in centers are specialized and may be not perceived as such, for example by drug users: a young man interviewed in a center for harm reduction and exchange of syringes told us he had never entered a day drop-in center.

A test was conducted before any decision was taken.

### **So what's new in 2012 ?**

First, the coverage of the unsheltered homeless should be improved thanks to the following decisions:



- we included breakfast distributions in our sample frame, as well as “*Plans très grand froid*” which accommodate people in gymnasia or other exceptional places opened for the unsheltered homeless when the weather is very cold, and night drop-in centers (*haltes de nuit*) without beds; *Plans très grand froid* were also oversampled;
- outside food distributions were oversampled.

The coverage of non French speakers was improved by using a self-administered survey (4 pages) in 14 languages. Of course, the issue wasn't completely resolved because all possible languages were not covered, some languages are more oral than written, some people may have difficulty reading, and people from some cultures may be unfamiliar with the concept of form-filling.

The quantitative survey was followed by in-depth interviews to gain a better understanding of some results, for example the trajectories into homelessness of people taken into care during their youth (this is the case of one homeless person in four, and more than one in three among homeless youth aged 18-24).

### **Coverage studies in 2012-2013**

Three main investigations are planned or have already been implemented:

- a coverage survey based on outreach services but only in a number of large cities and not at the national level (same as in 2002);
- a coverage survey of towns with under 20,000 inhabitants;
- in-depth interviews of people living in marginal housing situations (cabins, tents, etc.), including in rural areas.

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