

## **Quantifying Homelessness: The Limitations of Official and Unofficial Statistics**

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This paper examines the difficulties involved in trying to quantify homelessness and the limitations of both official and unofficial homelessness statistics. The quantification of any social problem such as homelessness, logically begins with a definition yet there is considerable difficulty in defining a social issue which can mean different things to different people at different times and in different contexts (Hutson and Liddiard 1994: 26). Consequently, there is no universally accepted definition and "what constitutes 'homelessness' and how many people are homeless is a debate which has been running for thirty years or more" (Greve 1990: 28).

A number of commentators (see for example, Watson 1984, 1986, Blasi 1990, Hutson and Liddiard 1994) have conceived of homelessness as a continuum of housing situations ranging from life on the streets to people living in inadequate or insecure housing. However, while there is a general consensus that those without any form of shelter are homeless, as the definition is extended to encompass people with recognisable but less extreme housing problems - for example, those living in insecure or overcrowded accommodation - it becomes increasingly difficult to draw a distinction between homelessness and housing need. Thus, as Neale (1997: 48) contends, "homelessness is a highly ambiguous and intangible phenomenon which lies at one end of a spectrum of housing need" and is, "inseparable from other aspects of housing need".

Indeed, such are the difficulties involved in defining homelessness, that some commentators have cast doubt upon the practical utility of the term. Sophie Watson (1984: 70) for example writes, "my own view is that the concept of homelessness is not a useful one...the range of meanings attributed to the home and homelessness is both too vast and too complicated to have any explanatory or prescriptive use" while more recently it has been suggested that, "homelessness as currently conceptualised and defined, may not be a social category of relevance either to those experiencing it or to those trying to help them" (Nord and Luloff 1995: 464).

However, definitions are a paramount basis for action. As Neale (1997: 55) questions, "if policy cannot even define homelessness how can it hope to respond to it?" while Chamberlain and Mackenzie (1992: 274 & 283) point out that it is "difficult to urge governments to meet the needs of homeless people, if the parameters of the homeless population are unclear". In order for a problem to be addressed by policy makers there is a need to know how many people are affected with size playing a pivotal role in determining whether something is a problem or not. Statistical data thus assumes a fundamental importance in policy debates and is often crucial in any bid for funding. Indeed, Hutson and Liddiard (1994: 38) argue, "if they (campaigning agencies) cannot quantify the problem they cannot hope for resources".

Ultimately therefore there is a need to move beyond semantics and formulate a working definition of homelessness as the basis of attempts to assess the extent of the problem. Yet, as the following section highlights, this is far from being a straightforward task.

### Difficulties in Quantifying Homelessness

Definitions affect both the type and (subsequently) the level of homelessness identified such that, as Hoch (1987: 34) notes, "the nature and scale of homelessness may look differently depending on how tightly or loosely the definitional boundaries are drawn". This in turn influences the kind of measures and amount of resources committed to tackle the problem. Thus, far from being an academic exercise, the way in which homelessness is defined and quantified is very much a political process which reflects both value judgements concerning who, and who is not, deemed to be deserving of support and more material considerations in terms of the level of resources available to deal with the problem. Indeed, as Hutson and Liddiard (1994: 32) contend, "because different professionals have different definitions of homelessness, so they also produce different statistics. In this way, statistics can tell us more about the organisation collecting them than about the phenomena that are being measured".

Of fundamental importance are the aims and agenda of the defining body or organisation and the purpose for which homelessness is being identified. In particular, given the moral and/or statutory duty incumbent upon central and local government to tackle homelessness, it is not surprising that they adopt a fairly strict definition in order to minimise the problem with which they have to deal. Voluntary

agencies, without the ultimate responsibility for housing homeless households on the other hand, can afford to make a more generous assessment of the circumstances in which someone is deemed homeless. Indeed, given the importance of numbers in securing financial support, there may be something of an incentive for voluntary organisations competing for limited resources to adopt a wide a definition as possible in order to maximise the number of 'homeless' households identified and consequently the amount of funding they are likely to receive.

### The "Official" Homeless

Official homelessness statistics simply record the number of households statutorily accepted as homeless under the provisions of the 1985 and latterly, the 1996 Housing Acts. These statistics are widely considered to grossly under-estimate the extent of the problem. Not only do the figures only record those households who actually approach their local authority for assistance, but the way in which individual authorities interpret and implement the homelessness legislation is critical in determining the outcome of homeless applications and, related to this, the scale of the problem identified.

Under the 1996 Housing Act a person is homeless if s/he has no accommodation available in the UK or elsewhere which is reasonable for him/her to continue to occupy. However, while legislation, lays down certain criteria regarding the circumstances in which a household is considered homeless and the nature of the local authority's duty toward them<sup>1</sup>, determining homelessness and the duty owed is far from being a straightforward objective process, depending as it does upon the interpretation of terms (such as reasonable, vulnerable and intentional) which are themselves ambiguous and contestable. For example, in determining whether it is, or would have been, reasonable for a person to continue to occupy accommodation, a local authority *may* choose to consider the criteria

<sup>1</sup> Under the terms of the 1996 Housing Act, local authorities are statutorily obliged to provide sufficient assistance to enable households in priority need (families with children, pregnant women, or someone who is "vulnerable" as a result of old age, mental or physical disability or other special reason) to obtain suitable private accommodation in the district, or, if this is not available, to secure accommodation for at least two years. For households not in a priority need group, or those considered intentionally homeless, the authority is only required to provide advice and assistance to help them find their own accommodation.

posited in the 1996 Department of the Environment<sup>2</sup> Code of Guidance - namely: physical conditions, overcrowding, type of accommodation, violence or threats of violence from persons not associated with the applicant and security of tenure - but is under no compulsion to do so. Given such room for manoeuvre, it is perhaps not surprising that studies (for example, Evans and Duncan 1988, Lambert *et al.*, Hoggart 1995) have found considerable differences between local authorities in both the number, and the proportion, of applicants accepted as homeless. Indeed, in 1995/6 while 40% of households making a homelessness application were accepted as homeless, the proportion of applicants accepted ranged from fewer than a fifth in some authorities to more than three-fifths in others (Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy 1997). Such variation highlights once again, the contested nature of the concept of homelessness and suggests that whether or not a household is accepted as homeless is as much dependent on where they apply from as on their housing circumstances. In this way, the number and proportion of applicants accepted as homeless can be seen to be as much, if not more, a reflection of council resources, attitudes and procedures than an indication of the extent of the problem<sup>3</sup>.

While the figures cited in discussions of homelessness and featured in the national press tend to refer to the number of households *accepted* as homeless and in priority need, local authority returns to the Department of the Environment also provide details of homeless *applications*. However, these statistics also provide only an inadequate measure of the scale of the homelessness problem. Lack of awareness of legal rights, media images which predominantly portray homelessness as living on the streets or in emergency or other forms of temporary accommodation and a reluctance to undergo the humiliation often associated with making a homeless enquiry may deter many people in unsatisfactory accommodation from presenting or even seeing themselves as homeless. In addition, since local authorities have a statutory duty to rehouse the homeless, councils have an incentive both to deny self-expressions of homelessness and to discourage homeless enquiries (Hoggart 1995: 60) through for example,

<sup>2</sup> Now the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions (DETR)

<sup>3</sup> For example, authorities with a greater availability of property, particularly those experiencing difficulty in letting certain parts of their stock can afford to take a more 'generous' interpretation of the Housing Act and be less restrictive about which households are accepted as homeless, than local authorities with long waiting lists and a very limited supply of accommodation available to let.

lack of (or perhaps as importantly *perceived* lack of) responsiveness to enquiries, restricted opening hours of homeless person's units and the rehousing of homeless households in temporary accommodation or in some of the least desirable parts of their housing stock. In addition, it seems unlikely that single people and other households who do not evidently fall into a priority need category, will approach the local authority if they know that, even if they are accepted as homeless, the council is only statutorily obliged to offer advice and assistance and has no duty to provide them with accommodation.

As a result, official enquiry statistics - although perhaps a better indication of the number of households experiencing homelessness than acceptance statistics, still severely under-estimate the scale of the problem. Indeed, it would appear that official homelessness figures - whether related to enquiries or acceptances - reveal more about the way housing departments define and record homelessness than they do about the extent of the problem. Thus, as Hoggart (1995: 67) contends, "irrespective of 'real' levels of homelessness, what official statistics record is the willingness of councils to investigate and respond to housing insufficiency, in a highly subjective decision environment".

Quite clearly then, homelessness "goes beyond the legal definitions and stipulations" (Webb 1994: 28) and a household can be homeless even if not officially accepted as such for statistical purposes. Yet, following the 1996 Housing Act, the official statistics seem set to provide an even less accurate indication of the extent of homelessness.

### **Homelessness Statistics and the Impact of the 1996 Housing Act**

Since 1977 local housing authorities have been statutorily obliged to help homeless people, either directly through the provision of accommodation or more indirectly by offering advice and assistance. Although at the time of its introduction, advocates of the 1977 Housing (Homeless Persons) Act - under which these requirements passed into law - hoped for a gradual extension of its remit to statutorily provide for all homeless people rather than only those in priority need, in practice the Act has been interpreted in the narrowest possible terms and the subsequent twenty years has, if anything seen a toughening up of the homelessness legislation. This has been demonstrated most recently and most clearly in the 1996 Housing Act which abolished

priority for homeless households on the waiting list for a council property and removed the duty on local authorities to provide permanent accommodation for these households in response to the, unfounded, belief that homeless people were 'jumping the housing queue'<sup>4</sup>.

Although the Act primarily altered the way in which local authorities discharged their duties to homeless households rather than changing definitions of homelessness, in order to avoid being restricted to allocating only temporary, two-year tenancies to homeless households, many authorities revised their allocations policies (in particular, altering points schemes to take greater account of factors commonly associated with homelessness such as insecurity of tenure) to enable these households to be rehoused from the housing register rather than via the homelessness route.

Consequently, regardless of whether there has been any change and, in particular a fall, in the number of households in 'homeless' situations, the Act is likely to result in a fall in the number of households recorded as 'homeless' in the official figures as more and more households - who formally would have been rehoused as homeless - are rehoused directly from the housing register.

In addition, changes to the P1(E) form - completed quarterly by local authorities and the main source of the DETR's homelessness statistics - in the light of the 1996 Housing Act mean that authorities are no longer required to provide details of the number of homeless applications or enquiries (individual authorities may of course continue to keep such records for internal monitoring purposes but there is no requirement upon them to do so) such that the official homelessness statistics now only provide information relating to those cases assessed under the homelessness provisions of the 1996 Act. It is therefore no longer possible to turn to enquiries and applications as a better, albeit still limited, indication of the scale of the homelessness problem. Furthermore, the enumeration of assessments rather than applications is likely to reinforce the tendency of official figures to under-estimate the extent of homelessness with both academic research (for example, Lidstone 1994, O'Callaghan *et al.* 1996) and

<sup>4</sup> Although following the election of a Labour Government in May 1997 this priority was effectively restored through secondary legislation which required local authorities to add homeless people in priority need as a new category of people to whom preference must be given in the allocation of council tenancies through the housing register, homeless households continue to be ineligible for permanent accommodation.

anecdotal evidence suggesting that a significant proportion of applicants do not pursue their application to a conclusion, but drop out at some stage in the assessment process.

This highlights the impact of policy and practice on the number of households identified as homeless in the official homelessness statistics. Indeed, the latest figures available at the time of writing show that, in the first half of 1997 (following implementation of the 1996 Act in the January of that year), the number of decisions on applications for housing under the homelessness provisions of the 1985 and 1996 Housing Acts, was 7% below the corresponding quarters of 1996, while acceptances of households eligible for assistance, unintentionally homeless and in priority need were some 10% lower (DETR 1997).

It is reassuring that Housing Minister, Hilary Armstrong in comments following the publication of these statutory homelessness statistics, while welcoming the drop in the homelessness figures, expressed a concern that this fall, "may be in part due to changes in legislation introduced by the previous administration, deterring people in genuine need from looking for help from local authorities". However, beyond a commitment "to monitor the homelessness statistics closely", she offered no indication that the Labour Government intends to revise the information recorded in the official homelessness figures or to seek to establish the number of homeless households beyond those statutorily defined as such. As a result, it seems that under this government as under the last, there will be a continuing situation in which only some homeless count in the homelessness count with a large body of homeless people effectively excluded from the official statistics (Figure One).

The official statistics exclude:

- homeless households who do not approach the local authority for assistance
- homeless households who do not pursue an application for rehousing
- homeless households not considered 'eligible' for assistance under the 1996 Act
- homeless households deemed intentionally homeless
- homeless households considered able to secure their own accommodation in the private sector
- homeless households not assessed as being in priority need.

## The 'Unofficial' Homeless

A number of different agencies (including Shelter, Centrepoint and Crisis) have attempted to assess the extent of this 'unofficial' homelessness<sup>5</sup> - namely those households who do not make a homeless application and/or fall outside the statutory definition of homelessness - but this is a task fraught with difficulties not least because, as noted above, homelessness is an ambiguous and contested term. There is no universally accepted definition of homelessness and whichever definition is adopted is likely to result, albeit perhaps by default, in certain 'types' of homelessness being excluded from consideration, becoming or remaining, in effect, 'concealed'. For example, defining homelessness in terms of rooflessness excludes those in temporary or emergency accommodation while extending the definition to include those in hostels still fails to consider those living in insecure and/or intolerable housing. Similarly, focusing on London and other major cities hides homelessness in non-metropolitan and rural areas, while a reliance on statutory definitions means that those not presenting as homeless or not accepted as being in priority need are in effect hidden (Webb 1994: 28).

However, even assuming that the circumstances in which a household is deemed homeless can be agreed upon, a more fundamental problem presents itself in terms of whether, or how far, non-statutory homelessness can be measured empirically. The failure of some households to present or disclose their actual homelessness, makes it difficult to gauge the extent of the problem in purely quantitative terms. Thus, even once a decision is reached on the form or forms of homelessness being measured, "because the problem of homelessness is largely concealed, it is essentially unquantifiable and any estimates of its scale can be neither proved nor disproved" (Hutson and Liddiard 1994: 41).

Measurement is further complicated by the essentially fluid nature of the homeless population with movement in and out of homelessness over time meaning that the size of the problem identified is at least partially a function of the time-scale over which it is measured. For example, the number of people sleeping on the streets on any one night is much lower than the number who experience such homelessness over the course of a month or a year. The area, as well

<sup>5</sup> For example, Shelter estimated there were some 1.7 million such 'unofficial' homeless households in England in 1992 (Burrows and Walentowicz 1992: 8).

as the time period over which homelessness is assessed, is also important with spatial differences in 'type' of area (urban, non-metropolitan, rural) and circumstances (with regard to levels of unemployment etc.) which are likely to affect the level (and form) of homelessness making it difficult to establish the number of homeless people in a particular area or region by extrapolating from local figures.

While there are undoubtedly - given the contested nature of the concept - considerable difficulties in assessing the extent of non-statutory homelessness in purely quantitative terms, this lack of hard data should not provide an excuse for ignoring the issue. Instead, it requires that "those in a position to achieve change examine the alternative forms of qualitative, and in some cases anecdotal, information presented to them and that they are wary of assuming a complete understanding of housing need based solely on the more visible indicators" (Webb 1994: 109).

## Conclusion

Statistical data continue to play a critical role in deciding whether something is a problem or not and what, if any, resources are required to tackle it. In terms of the current debate, not only does the reliance on numerical data to inform policy and determine the provision of resources overlook whether (or how far) it is possible to quantify homelessness, but it also accords such data with a degree of objectivity which belies the fact that homelessness statistics are social constructs rather than simply empirical measurements.

The type and extent of homelessness identified is heavily dependent upon the way in which the problem is defined, yet - as this paper has emphasised - homelessness is an ambiguous and contested concept such that defining the term makes for a contentious debate. There are a large number of definitions which could be adopted, the scope of which reflects by whom and for what purpose the term is being employed. Defining, and subsequently quantifying, homelessness is consequently very much a political process. With statutory agencies keen to restrict demands on limited resources perhaps seeking to depress figures and voluntary agencies, anxious to legitimise their existence at a time of increased competition for funds, perhaps seeking to inflate them, a substantial disparity exists between official and unofficial levels of homelessness.

Official figures are merely a record of the number of households accepted as homeless by local authorities. Not surprisingly, given the limited resources made available to deal with homelessness, the statutory definition excludes large sections of the population who are without a home (although not necessarily without a house). As a result, there are a substantial number of homeless households who simply do not appear in the official homelessness statistics. While attempts have been made to gauge the extent of this "unofficial" homelessness, difficulties in defining the circumstances in which a household is deemed to be homeless and accessing a population which is, almost by definition, "hidden", highlight the essentially problematic nature of trying to quantify homelessness and suggests that as with the official figures, unofficial homelessness statistics provide only an inadequate measure of the extent of homelessness in Britain today.

DON'T WORRY, IT'S JUST SOME NEW INITIATIVE  
TO REDUCE THE OFFICIAL HOMELESS  
STATISTICS



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