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INED'S 2002 SURVEY OF HOMELESS PEOPLE CONTACTED BY ITINERANT SERVICES

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ABSTRACT

This study describes the “survey of itinerant services” conducted by INED in 2002. It examines the coverage of the national survey of users of homeless assistance services, a survey conducted by INSEE in France in 2001. The goal is to develop a method of learning more about the most self-sufficient homeless people, who make little use of shelters or soup kitchens. To reach them, INED decided to follow the “itinerant services”, which unlike the “regular services” for the homeless, try to reach the homeless by visiting them where they live, mostly in public places.

KEYWORDS: Data Collection; Difficult-to-reach Populations; Field Work; Interviewer Training; Questionnaire Design; Weight Sharing Method.

1. INTRODUCTION

In January-February 2001, INSEE conducted a survey of 4,084 French-speaking users of shelters and soup kitchens in French agglomerations with a population of 20,000 or more (Brousse *et al.*, 2002a and 2002b). The method was based on American experiences (Burt *et al.*, 2001; Dennis and Iachan, 1993), developed by INED in surveys conducted in Paris in 1995 and 1998 (Marpsat and Firdion, 2000) and adapted for a national survey. The key point is that the respondents were homeless “in the narrow sense”, i.e., people who spend the night in shelters or a place not intended for human habitation, such as a public space. This “narrow” definition excludes certain difficult housing situations, such as those in which people stay with relatives or friends or live in overcrowded or unfit dwellings. On the other hand, the survey provides a representative sample of the homeless in the narrow sense, on condition that they speak French and visit a shelter or a soup kitchen at least once a week. Homeless people who do not use those services or do not speak French are not covered by the survey. Those who visit less often are underrepresented.

The survey described here is one of a series of studies conducted by INED in the winter of 2002 (Marpsat *et al.*, 2002) to determine whether homeless people in the narrow sense who were covered poorly or not at all by surveys of services of the type carried out by INSEE and INED are numerous and very different from survey respondents. These were exploratory studies and by no means comprehensive. One of the initial hypotheses was that people who do not use the services are very marginalized people who sleep in the street and live primarily on handouts. To find them, we relied on the itinerant services (except for food distribution services, which were already among the services surveyed by INSEE) that went out looking for the homeless. In the rest of this article, these itinerant services will be referred to as “roaming services”, and our study as a “roaming survey”. The survey excludes people who do not speak French; they are dealt with separately.

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2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Some notes on INSEE's 2001 survey

In its winter 2001 survey, INSEE selected individuals from among the service contacts by shelter and food services in connection with social assistance to the homeless. A multi-stage sample design was used. First, a number of agglomerations with a population of 20,000 or more were selected. Then survey days and services were selected from a frame consisting of lists that were compiled from various files of associations and institutions and fleshed out and updated by means of a telephone survey of the services. Lastly, individuals were selected from among the service contacts made by the selected services. The services were selected in proportion to their weekly capacity, then by implicit stratification, as the shelters were selected in proportion to the type of population served, then in descending order by size, and the food services were selected by size.

Weighting with the "weight sharing" method (Lavallée, 1995; Ardilly and Le Blanc, 2001) was used to convert service contacts to individuals.

2.2 Stages in the 2002 survey

After a preliminary stage of interviewing roaming service managers and accompanying various teams, the first stage of the survey involved selecting the cities, inventorying the itinerant services and collecting information about their operations (telephone survey), and selecting the services to be surveyed. The second stage included surveying the homeless, computing weights and analyzing data.

The actual pilot survey was conducted in February and March in three agglomerations (Paris, Nantes and Nice). It was carried out following two series of tests to improve the random selection procedures and the questionnaire content (December 2001 and January 2002). The collection procedures were continually evaluated during the survey. It was important to avoid disrupting the services' operations or altering their relationship with their homeless clients.

3. SURVEY CHARACTERISTICS

3.1 Selecting the cities

Seven of the agglomerations where the INSEE survey was conducted were selected for the telephone survey. The seven cities were chosen on the basis of the assumption that in agglomerations where many people use shelters or soup kitchens infrequently, there would also be (proportionately) many people who did not use them at all. In the INSEE survey, service use was measured by the number of "contacts" with the services; when a person had a small number of contacts, it meant that he or she had not used the shelter or meal services much in the week preceding the survey. This process resulted in the selection of the following seven agglomerations: Nice, Grenoble, Mulhouse, Paris, Rennes, Bordeaux, and Nantes.

Three of the seven were chosen purposively as locations for the pilot survey. They had to have both a large number of outings by field teams each week and a large number of contacts reported by the teams. The cities selected were Paris (including suburban areas), Nice and Nantes.

3.2 Inventory of itinerant services

A telephone inventory of itinerant services was carried out in the seven agglomerations. The aim was to identify all services that had roaming activities, as defined in the study, to collect information about their operations and obtain information needed for selection purposes.

In the telephone survey, more than 526 people were contacted, and 46 itinerant services were identified in the seven agglomerations. The information gathered in the survey showed that there was a wide variety of structures, sizes (and resources) and types of activities among the associations. The diversity of services made it necessary to adjust our survey methods.

3.3 Observation period

Prior to the initial testing, the managers of the itinerant services and members of the service teams were interviewed. Field observations were also carried out as the teams went about their activities. The purpose of these interviews and observations was for the survey team and the service workers to devise procedures that would not disrupt the services' operations, would be understandable and acceptable to everyone and would accommodate the various operating practices. In particular, acceptance by the respondents was important, so that our presence would not cause them to reject contact with the roaming service team.

While the terms "itinerant services" and "roaming" denote a way of contacting the homeless (travelling around, searching for them, and so on), it quickly became clear from our initial interviews with team managers that the various services had different goals and different practices.

By accompanying the teams (12 outings, mostly in the evening or late at night), we were able to work out how to contact the homeless and prepare a profile of the interviewees we would have to hire for the survey. We were also able to anticipate survey situations, develop methods of selecting and enumerating individuals, and adjust the field interviewing period to the survey's general context.

3.4 Selecting the services to be surveyed

The services to be surveyed were selected at random. The frame was the itinerant services file generated by the telephone inventory. The selection file was based on team outings. The services were selected with probability proportional to the number of persons contacted per week. In the Paris services, separate selection processes were carried out for the day teams and the night teams so that people contacted during both periods would be well represented. A total of 28 teams were selected from 20 different services.

After the services we were to accompany were identified, the survey days were selected purposively on the basis of the services' days of operation and the survey teams' availability. The survey was conducted with 25 teams from 18 different services.

3.5 Field operations

The three prerequisites that are essential to correct weighting of the sample are an accurate count of individuals contacted, a truly random selection of persons to be interviewed, and a list of weekly contacts with the itinerant services. Consequently, when the interviewees accompanied the selected itinerant services on a tour, they had to:

1. count the people present around the team, the individuals contacted, and so on;
2. use a random selection procedure in choosing the homeless people to interview;
3. complete the questionnaire if the person agrees to be interviewed, or find a replacement if the person is unable or refuses to be interviewed.

3.5.1 Counting the individuals contacted by the team

The count was performed by completing a “tracking sheet”. Each time the itinerant team stopped, the interviewer would make a note of four quantities: the number of people in the area who looked like homeless persons; the number of people actually contacted by the team; the number of people surveyed; and the number of people accompanying the team (in the case of services that offer to accompany the homeless to another location, such as a shelter).

After each contact, the interviewers used contact sheets to record the information they were able to collect about the people who were given the opportunity to take the survey and about the outcome of the contact.

3.5.2 Selection methods tested

A number of methods of selecting respondents were tested. It was difficult to find a random procedure that would provide a large enough number of completed questionnaires on each outing, could be used for all itinerant services and would provide enough guidance to ensure that the interviewer was not making the selection.

The procedure that was finally arrived at involved adjusting the selection method for the size of the team. In all cases, the goal was to obtain five completed questionnaires for each outing.

- Services that contacted enough people were accompanied by two interviewers, who alternated as “counter” and interviewer. One person was selected at each stop, and a replacement was selected if he or she was unable to respond.
- Very small services (services that contacted only a few persons on each outing) were accompanied by a single interviewer who would do both jobs. The interviewer was supposed to approach every person contacted, if possible.

A total of 106 questionnaires were completed. However, 10 of them were ruled out-of-scope because the teams had not gone roaming on the survey day, but had instead responded to requests by homeless persons who approached them. This left us with 96 valid questionnaires, 71 of which were from Paris and its suburban area.

3.6 The questionnaire

The survey questionnaire was divided into four parts: (1) socio-demographic characteristics; (2) use of itinerant services (essential for sample weighting); (3) use of shelter and meal services and housing situation (essential in order to determine whether the homeless contacted by the itinerant services were using services surveyed by INSEE in 2001, and if so, how frequently); (4) income and use of other services. At the end of the questionnaire, there is a page for interviewer comments on the interview conditions.

3.7 Calculation of weights

The method used to compute the survey weights is an adaptation of the weight sharing technique used to calculate the weights in the INSEE survey (Lavallée, 1995; Ardilly and Le Blanc, 2001). It takes into account the method of selecting the services accompanied by the interviewers, the method of selecting respondents in the field, and the frequency with which the respondents were contacted by the roaming services. The weights were calculated for an average day.

Difficulties arose because the homeless people contacted were not always accurate in reporting how frequently they were visited by roaming services. This was due to both memory and identification problems, as people sometimes mistook other homeless assistance services for roaming services (normally, teams that came to them). The farther back in the past the visits were, the worse the reporting difficulties.

To overcome these problems, we made various assumptions and established different weights depending on the reference period (the previous day or the 24 hours preceding the interview) and the eligibility of the services reported.

4. SOME RESULTS

4.1 Contacts between homeless people and itinerant services

The 46 services identified in the seven agglomerations had a wide variety of human and vehicular resources, ranging from a single person covering the streets of a neighbourhood on foot to teams of six people criss-crossing the city or agglomeration in pickup trucks or buses. Although all teams noted that they talked with and listened to the homeless, their activities were equally varied, often depending on the resources available to them. For example, while some teams simply gave the homeless coffee or some other hot drink, others offered to transport them to a shelter, health care unit or assistance centre. However, most offered various other services, such as first aid, sandwiches, blankets, clothing, meal coupons, etc. The number of persons contacted ranged between 5 to 10 for some teams and 50 to 100 for others.

4.2 Persons contacted by the services

A total of 84 men and 12 women were interviewed during the survey period (February and March 2002). Of the 96 people, 17 reported that they never used the services, and 79 had used one or more services at least once in their lives. Of the 79 users, 63 had had contact with a service in the month preceding the survey, and 51 in the week before the survey. Various reasons were given for not using shelters, but the main ones were lack of security (18 persons), lack of cleanliness (21), and a preference for living in the street rather than in shelters (19).

5. METHODOLOGICAL SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Where can we contact people who make little or no use of shelters and soup kitchens?

On the assumption that some homeless people might be able to get by without using the services because they receive money from sources such as wages, the minimum welfare payment (*Revenu Minimum d'Insertion*), the adult disability allowance (*Allocation Adulte Handicapé*) or a pension, one stage in this survey involved meeting with the managers of housing services, hospital emergencies and medical services for people with no insurance. These interviews revealed that such services are also used by people who are staying with someone else and are therefore out-of-scope (the target population being people who are sleeping in a place that is not for human habitation), and that homeless people did not visit the services regularly enough to permit the construction of a sample of people who do not use shelter and meal services and who receive benefits or mail on a regular basis. This kind of approach would not be worthwhile because it would result in only a small increase in coverage relative to the number of people to be surveyed.

In conducting the above-described survey of people contacted by itinerant services, we found that breakfast service, which had previously rarely been seen among the daytime services, was used by 49 respondents. Since a number of roaming services transport homeless people to services that provide breakfast, we might consider expanding the "meal/shelter" sample to include this type of service in order to improve coverage of infrequent users, though this would still not reach those who never use the services. The number of people not covered is so small that it may make more sense to give up trying to survey them in a representative way and instead attempt to find out more about them by means of interviews or observation.

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