Developing a global framework for conceptualising and measuring homelessness

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ABSTRACT

Homelessness has long been recognised as a global phenomenon, affecting poorer populations in both the developed and developing worlds. However, acute housing need has often struggled to achieve the same level of priority at an international level as the satisfaction of other basic needs, such as for food, water, healthcare and education. In this paper we present a broad-based Global Homelessness Framework as a means of providing a 'frame of reference' for cross-national engagement in this field, but recommend that concerted international action focuses on a relatively narrow definition of homelessness encompassing people without any form of accommodation (the 'unsheltered' group who are sleeping rough or in places not intended for human habitation) and those living in temporary or crisis accommodation specifically provided for homeless people. We demonstrate that current data is insufficient to generate a comprehensive and defensible worldwide 'count' of homeless people, and set out proposals to facilitate moves towards more reliable homelessness estimates at local, national and global levels. At the same time, however, we argue that at least some meaningful trend data is already available for large parts of the Global North, and for some countries and cities in the Global South, so that it would be both feasible and valuable to systematically track these 'directions of travel' over time.

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1. Introduction

Homelessness has long been recognised as a global phenomenon, affecting poorer populations in both the developed and developing worlds (Springer, 2000; UN Habitat, 2000). However, research and practice interventions on homelessness have tended to proceed down parallel paths in the Global South and Global North, involving discrete networks of key players, separate conceptual frameworks, and different methodologies. This separation in intellectual and policy effort has inhibited the progress of mutual learning between different world regions on homelessness. Moreover, and notwithstanding important developments, such as discussions of homelessness at Habitat I and II, and the establishment of the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) in 1989, acute housing need and homelessness have often struggled to achieve the same level of priority at

an international level as the satisfaction of other basic needs, such as for food, water, healthcare and education.

It is within this context that the charity Depaul International has recently partnered with DePaul University in Chicago to establish the Institute of Global Homelessness (IGH).[1] IGH seeks to serve as a central hub to help support international efforts to address homelessness, guided by policy- and practice-focussed research. One key aim of IGH is to build the 'infrastructure' required for key stakeholders across the globe to communicate effectively about the nature, causes and impacts of homelessness in their world regions, and to share promising approaches and interventions that may be transferable beyond their original sites.

This paper presents the first steps in building this infrastructure by attempting to develop both a 'common language' around homelessness and an agreed means of measuring the scale of homelessness and trends, in order to aid assessments as to whether policy and practice interventions are succeeding. It is divided into three principal sections. The first section sets out our proposed

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conceptual framework for defining and understanding homelessness at global level. The second section reviews the current state of statistical knowledge on the scale of homelessness across the world. The third section looks to the future, proposing a menu of methods that may be used to estimate homelessness, particularly unsheltered homelessness, as a means of progressing towards an overall global measurement and monitoring framework in this field.

2. Conceptualising homelessness at global level

Our first (ambitious) aim was to develop a conceptualisation of homelessness that could be considered internationally meaningful, with resonance in the Global South as well as the Global North. This conceptualisation is intended to provide a common language and reference point to frame exchanges on the topic of homelessness within and across world regions. It also needs to provide a robust basis for the development of a global estimate of the number of people affected by homelessness, and trends in the scale of this phenomenon.

In developing the conceptual framework underpinning this work, we drew upon a wide range of sources, including the 'European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion' (ETHOS), developed by FEANTSA and the European Observatory on Homelessness (EOH) (Edgar & Meert, 2006; Edgar, Harrison, Watson, & Busch-Geertsema, 2007), and critiques of this typology (Amore, 2013; Amore, Baker, & Howden-Chapman, 2011). The sustained programme of comparative work undertaken by Graham Tipple and Suzanne Speak on homelessness in the developing world (e.g. UN Habitat, 2000; Tipple & Speak, 2005, 2006, 2009; Speak, 2013), together with papers on homelessness definitions in specific developing world contexts (e.g. Cross, Seager, Erasmus, Ward, & O'Donovan, 2010; Kok, Cross, & Roux, 2010), were also key resources. Without wishing to underplay the very significant challenges presented by our attempt to grasp the nature of homelessness on a global basis, of which much more below, it is perhaps worth noting at this point that there was more by way of conceptual continuity across these very different world regions than one might have expected.

Drawing across this literature, we settled on the following as the core concept lying at the heart of our proposed global definition of homelessness: 'Lacking access to minimally adequate housing'

More specifically, following the lead of Amore (2013, p.228), we understand homelessness as "living in severely inadequate housing due to a lack of access to minimally adequate housing" [emphasis in original]. This parallels the 'enforced lack' criterion now widely accepted in concepts of poverty and material deprivation (e.g. Lansley & Mack, 2015), and reflects our view that homelessness should be conceived of as 'severe housing deprivation' (see also Springer, 2000).

In other words, homelessness denotes a standard of housing that falls significantly short of the relevant adequacy threshold in one or more domains. The following three 'domains of home' – a refined version of the ETHOS conceptual domains (Edgar & Meert, 2006) – seem to us the appropriate ones within which to evaluate adequacy (see also UN Habitat, 2009, wherein the 'adequacy' of housing is assessed in broadly similar terms).

First, the **security domain** is a multi-dimensional domain that relates to "the extent to which households can make a home and stay there for reasonable periods if they wish to do so, provided they meet their legal obligations" (e.g. Hulse, Milligan, & Easthope, 2011). This includes both *de jure* security of tenure (having legal title to occupy) and *de facto* security of tenure (which relates to the practical likelihood of eviction). As in the ETHOS conceptualisation, *exclusive occupation* (i.e. the power to exclude others) is also a vital

feature of the security domain. But in addition, we would consider the *affordability* of housing as highly relevant to this domain, as inability to meet rental or mortgage costs is a key cause of housing insecurity.

Second, the **physical domain** pertains to having an adequate dwelling which meets the household's needs in terms of both the *quality* of the accommodation (durability, protection from the weather, provision of basic amenities, freedom from infestation and pollutants, and safety of one's self and one's possessions from external threats) and *quantity* of accommodation (not severely overcrowded).

Third, the **social domain** refers to opportunities to enjoy *social relations* in the home, as are culturally appropriate in the relevant community, and also the scope afforded for *privacy*. This domain further pertains to safety from *internal threats* (i.e. from other occupants) to both the person and their possessions.

Proceeding from this conceptual model, we envisage an operationalised Global Homelessness Framework containing three broad categories of people who may be considered homeless (see Table 1 below).

'**People without accommodation**', as captured in Category 1 above, refers to those sleeping in places not intended for human habitation, such as the streets, public roofed spaces or various forms of transport, who are variously referred to as 'roofless', 'living/sleeping rough', 'street homeless', or 'unsheltered' in countries around the globe. This group is excluded from all three domains of home, having no legal title to occupy any form of physically adequate accommodation, within which they can carry on normal social relations or achieve an acceptable degree of privacy.

An important sub-category of people without accommodation in the Global South are 'pavement dwellers' (Subcategory 1(d)) who live on the street in a regular spot, usually with some form of makeshift cover (Tipple & Speak, 2006; Wardhaugh, 2012). A pavement dweller's 'patch' may only be marked out by a mat or cardboard box, but in many cases tarpaulin sheets or other scavenged materials provide some form of rudimentary shelter. They may form small communities, but these are distinguishable from slum/informal settlements, typically located on the urban periphery, in being found in scattered sites in the city centre, and offering their occupants little scope to attain the sort of *de facto* security of tenure that would allow them to 'consolidate' and improve their dwelling (Tipple & Speak, 2009).

There is also a distinction to be drawn between street homeless adults (most of whom are men), and street children (mostly boys, and smaller in number than homeless adult males, but a group who have garnered a great deal of research and policy attention (UN Habitat, 2000; Kok et al., 2010)). With regard to the latter group, it is children 'of' the street (who sleep in public places) rather than children 'on' the street (who work on the streets but return to a family to sleep) who are most relevant to considerations of homelessness (Jones & Thomas de Benitez, 2012; Lam & Cheng, 2012; van Blerk, 2012). Pavement dwellers, on the other hand, commonly include entire households or families living together on the streets (Tipple & Speak, 2006; 2009).

People living in temporary or crisis accommodation, as denoted by Category 2 in Table 1, pertains to those living in accommodation formally provided by public or charitable bodies to cater for those who are unable to secure a dwelling for themselves. This includes night shelters, homeless hostels, and women's refuges, as well as camps, reception centres and similar provided for internally displaced people, asylum seekers, refugees and other migrants. In practice, people may live in this ostensibly 'temporary' provision for very extended periods of time. The physical conditions in such accommodation may be adequate (though this is far