Longitudinal Study of the Homeless Population in Valencia

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> **Abstract_** *This Research Note presents the results of a longitudinal study of people experiencing homelessness in Valencia. The use of longitudinal studies in researching people experiencing homelessness are relatively rare in the European context and improving knowledge on homelessness service providers effectiveness in the European context should be a priority. The research is focused on the trajectory of a sample of Housing-Led programme users two years after leaving the programme. The study aims to identify which factors either facilitated or impeded people in exiting homelessness. Following Pleace's theoretical framework, the findings of the study confirm that both formal and informal support are two of the main factors that contribute to exiting homelessness. Finally, detailed information regarding the methodology used for the longitudinal study will be provided in order to be replicated by service providers wishing to provide evidence-based practices.*

> **Keywords_** *Homelessness, risk factors, longitudinal study, Housing-Led, effectiveness, housing stability*

Introduction

The Spanish National Comprehensive Homelessness Strategy 2015-2020 (ENI-PSH) was approved in 2015, making it the second southern-European country to adopt a National Strategy (Baptista, 2016). Among the strategic lines to eradicate homelessness, ENI-PSH highlights the role of Housing-Led approaches (strategic line 6 and strategic line 7) and the importance of improving knowledge, information exchange, and evaluation (strategic line 13). The success of Housing-Led

approaches in Europe has been widely discussed (Pleace and Bretherton, 2013), and the importance of improving knowledge on homelessness and homelessness programmes' evaluation in the European, and specifically in Spain, context is the focus of this research note.

This necessity of improving knowledge on homelessness in the European context has been highlighted over the years by Philippot et al. (2007) and Toro (2007), and more recently, Pleace (2016). Improving the knowledge of homelessness in Europe would lead to the application of more adequate policies, not necessary relying upon mostly American findings. Longitudinal studies of homelessness are scarce (Klodawsky et al., 2009), and specifically within the Spanish context are rare (Panadero et al., 2021). The evaluation of the Habitat Programme (Bernard and Yuncal, 2016), with n=62 for 12 months, or the longitudinal study of women experiencing homelessness in Madrid (Galvan, 2018), with n=138 for 12 months, are some examples. Longitudinal studies are considered crucial because of their capacity to provide essential information by identifying pathways in and out of homelessness (Benjaminsen et al., 2005). They have been also recommended in order to evaluate the housing situation of migrant populations (Hernandez and Pascual, 2013) and pointed as useful to identify risks and factors triggering homelessness (Basque Country Homeless Strategy 2018-2021).

Cross-sectional research methods, on the other hand, continue to be widely used as one of the main tools of homelessness analysis, despite the long-standing identification of the limitations of this methodology for understanding homelessness. Cross-sectional research is criticised for using biased data samples such as point-in time surveys (Shinn and Khadduri, 2020), and for contributing to the myth of the elevated rate of people experiencing homelessness who are mentally ill and/or have elevated rates of substance use than the general public (O'Sullivan, 2020).

This study aims to provide a longitudinal methodology in order to test evidence-based practices of homeless service providers. The study uses Pleace's theoretical framework by highlighting three factors that, if missing, increase the risk of homelessness. These factors are personal capacity, informal support, and formal support. Personal capacity could be understood as the combination of personal factors (education, health, resilience, personal history, etc.) that define yourself as a person and condition your capacity to fend for yourself. Informal support could be represented by family, friends, or partners that, in the case of basic necessity, could temporarily help a person. Finally, the formal support is the economic, health, housing, or welfare structures in a certain society that could support a person in case of crisis. These formal support structures vary from country to country, and specifically in Spain, from region to region.

This longitudinal study tries to identify and track the evolution of two of these factors, informal support and formal support, in a group of 30 individuals who accessed a Housing-Led programme in Valencia. During the interviews we keep track of the informal supports by tracking their social network of friends, family, and partners providing support to the person. As for the formal support, it will be identified as the income coming from government welfare programmes. During the longitudinal study, we identify changes in these two factors and observe the variation in the housing stability of people.

Study Objective

This longitudinal study examines the housing trajectories of people two years after leaving the homeless Housing-Led programme of St. John of God Valencia. The study reviews the housing, employment, economic, and informal support of people at three points in time, the moment when they access the programme, the moment when they leave the programme, and two years later. The study aims to understand the temporal dimension of homelessness in Valencia, being transitional, episodic, or chronic (Nooe and Patterson, 2010) and tries to identify factors that could facilitate or impede people´s ability to achieve housing stability. These factors will be related with the ones highlighted as increasing the risk of homelessness if lacking: that is, access to informal support, access to formal support, and personal capacity (Pleace, 2016). In this longitudinal study, we aim to improve the understanding of the housing trajectories of people experiencing homelessness in Valencia. By understanding the mechanisms used to exit homelessness, more successful strategies using Housing-Led programs could be designed.

Housing-Led Programme Service Provision

The longitudinal study is developed among participants of the Housing-Led programme of St. John of God Valencia. St. John of God is a private, non-profit institution dedicated to providing comprehensive care for people experiencing homelessness. The Housing-Led programme has 53 single rooms distributed across 17 shared apartments scattered around the city of Valencia. Fifteen of the apartments are dedicated to men and two are dedicated to women. Users can access the service free of charge through the Roofless Assistance Center (CAST) of the Valencia City Council. The nature of the service provided is a client-centred case management approach providing housing, substance use disorders treatment, assistance in accessing government benefits, connection to the public structure of health, and access to training and employment. The Housing-Led programme of

St. John of God Valencia assisted 83 people during 2019. Among them, 30 people left the programme during 2019. The sample of this study consist of the 30 service users that left the programme in 2019.

Method

In order to clearly define the residential status of the study group, the FEANTSA definition of homelessness was adopted. FEANTSA developed the European typology of homelessness and residential exclusion (ETHOS), classifying people experiencing homelessness according to their residential situation as roofless, houseless, with insecure housing to inadequate housing. The group participating in this study correspond to people who were living on the street (operational category 1) and accessed the Housing-Led programme of Saint John of God Valencia.

Study sample

The sample consisted of 30 adults experiencing homelessness:

- 26 were men (87%)

- 4 were women (13%)

- Average age: 48 years old

- 22 were Spanish (73%)

- 8 were non-Spanish (26%)

- 47% with current addictions

- 45% with current mental health pathologies

- 44 days as the average time homeless

The sample (n=30) seem to have similar characteristics to the total number of people assisted in the Housing-Led programme during 2019 (n=83) in term of age, gender, origin, and addictions; they were slightly higher in terms of mental health pathologies (45% vs 25%).

	Sample	Programme service users 2019
Number of people	30	83
Average age	48	47
% Men	87%	88%
% Foreigners	26%	27%
% Addictions	47%	41%
% Mental health	45%	25%

Of the original 30 people, 21 (68%) were able to be contacted and interviewed two years later.

- 19 were men (90%)

- 2 were women (10%)

- Average age: 50 years old

- 14 were Spanish (67%)

- 7 were non-Spanish (33%)

- 47% present with current addictions

- 52% present with current mental health pathologies

- 20 days as the average time homeless

Follow-up respondents (n=21) seem to have similar characteristics to the original sample (n=30) in terms of age, gender, and addictions; and slightly different in terms of mental health pathologies (45% vs 52%) and origin (73% vs 67% Spanish). The response rate (68%) has been comparable to other longitudinal studies developed internationally, 62% for a period of 24 months (Klodawsky et al., 2009) and in Spain, 62% after a period of 12 months (Galvan, 2018). The sample size is clearly small (n=30) conditioned by the total number of people participating in the Saint St. John of God Valencia Housing-Led programme in 2019. Despite the study not being necessarily large in scale or as robust as would be ideal, it could be useful based on the few longitudinal studies in Spain and the fact that none have been done in Valencia.

Measures

This longitudinal study compares the data gathered during three points in time:

T0. At the arrival to the Housing-Led programme, 45-minute interviews were developed by the team of social workers at Saint John of God Valencia. For these interviews, the social-work team used the 'first interview' checklist tool of the Saint St. John of God Valencia case management software.

T1. At the moment people left the Housing-Led programme, 30 to 45 minute interviews were developed by the team of social workers at Saint John of God Valencia. For this interview, the social work team used the 'case closure' checklist tool of the Saint St. John of God Valencia case management software.

T2. After leaving the programme (24 months after), 30 to 45 minute interviews by phone or face to face were developed by the research team. They used a reduced format of the 'EPSH- Personas' tool, the survey for homeless populations developed in 2005 by the INE and the Basque Statistics Office (EUSTAT).

Through these interviews, it has been possible to track living situations, employment situations, income level, and networks of informal support. Interviews explored the extent to which employment and formal and informal support contributed to a successful exit from homelessness and to assess the relationship between housing stability and income.

Tools

The three tools used in this longitudinal study during the three points in time are:

A. First interview checklist tool of St. John of God Valencia case management software

A social worker runs the first interview within the first three days upon the service user's arrival to the programme. The semi-structured interview contains the following topics:

- Arrival date (date)

- Civil status (Single, married, divorced, widower)

- Nº of children

- Informal support networks (friends, partner, family, neighbours, nobody)

- Level of studies (Elementary, High School, Vocational Training, University)

- Profession

- Self-perceived health (without/episodic/chronic health problems)

- Is the health problem properly diagnosed?

- Disability (Yes/No)

    – Degree of disability

- Addictions (Yes/No)

    – Type (Alcohol/Cocaine/Amphetamine/Heroine/Cannabis/Methadone/ Gambling)

    – Currently under treatment (Yes/No)

- Mental health disorders (Yes/No)

    – Type

  – Is the mental health disorder properly diagnosed (Yes/No)

  – Currently under treatment (Yes/No)

- Last accommodation: (street, apartment, shared apartment, hotel, social resource, prison, hospital)

  – If street, for how many days (days)

- Employment status (employed/unemployed/disability/retired)

- Income status (no income/job salary/unemployment benefits/family or friends' support/government benefits)

- Income in Euro

- Support request (Housing/rehab/employment/health/administrative assistance)

B. Case closure check list tool of St. John of God Valencia case management software

A social worker runs the case closure interview once the service user announces their departure. The semi-structured interview of closure contains the following topics:

- Date of departure (date)

- Reason for departure (employment and housing solution/income and housing solution/ abandonment/referral to social service/hospital admission/entering prison/expelled)

- Employment status (employed/unemployed/disability/retired)

- Income status (no income/job salary/unemployment benefits/family or friends' support/government benefits)

- Income in Euro

- Housing status (street, apartment, shared apartment, hotel, social resource, prison, hospital)

- Are intervention goals achieved (Yes/No)

C. EPSH-Personas

The EPSH-Personas tool is a 136 question survey developed in 2005 by the INE and the Basque Statistics Office (EUSTAT) in order to identify the sociodemographic profile, living conditions, and difficulties of access to accommodation for the homeless population. This research adapted the survey, reducing it to 23 questions. The resulting survey contains the following topics:

- Currently living in Valencia (Yes/No)

- Housing status (street, apartment, shared apartment, hotel, social resource, prison, hospital)

- Are you currently living in an apartment (Yes/No)

- Housing rental contract (Yes/No)

- In the last two years since you left SJD, have you ever had to live on the streets? (Yes/No)

- Are you currently living on the street (Yes/No)

    – If street, for how long (days)

    – If street, since when have you lived on the street (date)

    – If street, last accommodation (apartment, shared apartment, hotel, social resource, prison, hospital)

- Reason for losing last accommodation (eviction/rental contract finished/job lost/ hospitalisation/moved cities/incarceration/unable to pay rent/problems with landlord or community)

- Employment status (employed/unemployed/disability/retired)

- Employment contract (Yes/No)

    – If unemployed, why you don′t have a job: (health/age/lack of training/no job offers for his profile/not allowed to work/currently in job search)

- Income status (no income/job salary/unemployment benefits/family or friends' support/government benefits)

- Is your income enough for covering your basic needs (Yes/No)

- For the last two years, did you have any debt (Yes/No)

    – If yes, with (bank or government/family/friends/gambling)

- Health status (very good/good/average/bad/very bad)

- Currently under treatment (Yes/No)

- Do you usually consume drugs (Yes/No)

- Do you have any mental health disease (Yes/No)

- Legal status (documented/undocumented/pending)

- Informal support network (friends/family/partner/neighbours)

Procedures

The data acquisition was developed between January 2021 and May 2021 (six months). The study was divided in three parts:

1. Preparatory phase: Stored data collection and design of the interview tool

2. Interviews: Development of the interviews and data gathering

3. Analysis: Analysis of data and development of conclusions

For the purpose of the study, only people who left the Housing-Led programme during 2019 were considered. Thirty cases were identified and data from the first two interviews were anonymised and extracted from the St. John of God Valencia case management database and contrasted with the social work team to ensure data reliability. Once the interview tool (EPSH-Personas) was identified and adapted, a phone contact with the 30 cases were done by the team of social workers requesting to have an interview. From the 30 cases, 21 were able to be contacted and nine were not reachable. No one rejected the interview. With the cases that were able to be contacted, a phone call or a face-to-face interview was scheduled, and the research team conducted a 20 to 45 minute interview.

Results

The results regarding the evolution on living situation, employment situation, income level, and network of informal support are summarised in Table 1. The average time that people stayed in the Housing-Led programme (T1-T0) was 310 days.
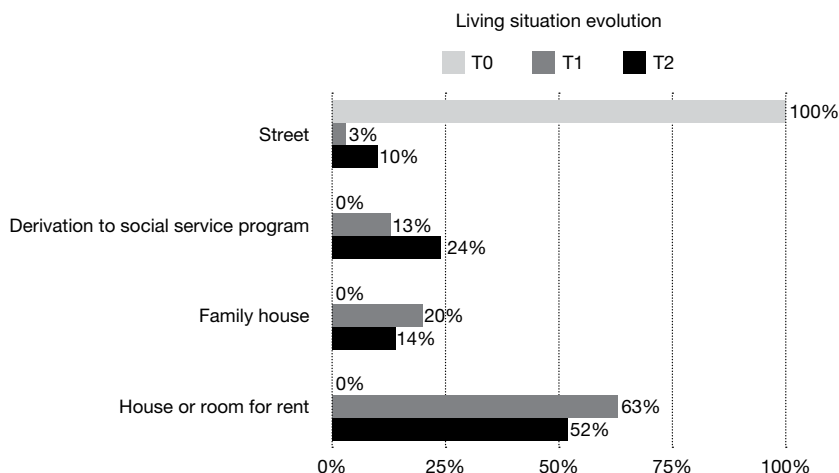
Table 1. Summary of Living situation, Employment situation, Income level, and Network of informal support at three points in time, T0, T1 and T2

	Entrance program T0 N=30	Exit program T1=0 N=30	Two years later T2=24 N=21
% People not roofless	0%	97%	90%
% People working	17%	20%	16%
% People with any source of income	27%	77%	95%
Average monthly income	107€	415€	553€
Informal support network	50%	NA	81%

Living situation

Regarding living situation, as Table 1 indicates, all respondents were roofless when they accessed the programme. When they left the programme, only 3% were roofless, and two years later, this was 10%. Figure 1 shows the detailed living situation of people at T0, T1, and T2.

Figure 1. Detailed living situation of people entering the programme (T0), leaving (T1) and 2 years later (T2)

Living situation evolution

T0   T1   T2

- Street: 3%, 10%, 100%
- Derivation to social service program: 0%, 13%, 24%
- Family house: 0%, 20%, 14%
- House or room for rent: 0%, 63%, 52%

(0% — 25% — 50% — 75% — 100%)

Employment situation

Regarding employment situations, only 17% of people accessing the Housing-Led programme were working on their arrival. As Table 1 highlights, and despite having access to an employment promotion programme, this percentage did not change dramatically (only 3% increase at T1) during the stay in the programme. The percentage decreased 4% after two years.

Income level

Regarding income, people without any kind of income get reduced from T0 (73%), to T1 (23%), to 5% (T2). As Table 1 indicates, the average monthly income experienced an increase from T0 to T1 of almost 400% (from €107 to €413); from T1 to T2 there was an increase of 100% (from €413 to €553). As seen in *Employment situation,* this increase seems not to be associated to changes in the employment status. Interviews at T1 and T2 show that most of the income improvement (47% at T1 and 68% at T2) is associated with welfare programmes, as can be observed in Figure 2. The first increase (T0=10% to T1=47%), accessing government benefits, could be associated

with the support of the social work team facilitating people with the necessary arrangements to apply to welfare programmes. The second increase (T1=47% to T2=68%) is less clear. It could be explained by the resolution of pending welfare programme requests, by an increase of respondents' capacity to access formal support structures, or being non-representative due to low sample size.

Figure 2. Detailed income source of people entering the programme (T0), leaving (T1) and 2 years later (T2)

Income source evolution
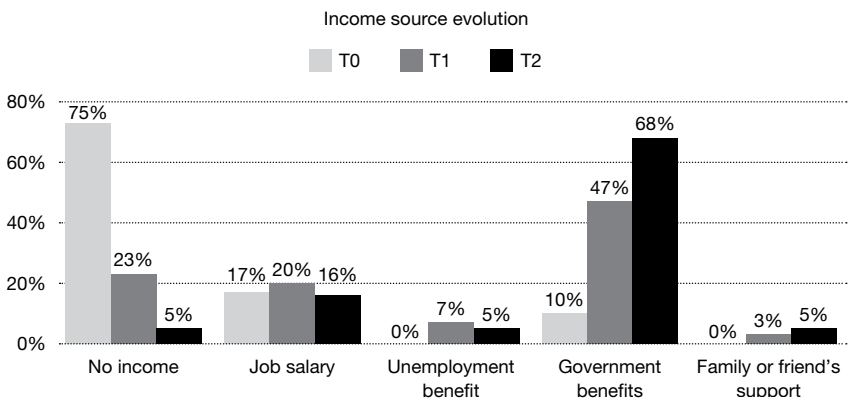
Network of informal support

As Table 1 indicates, 50% of people interviewed at T0 mentioned having a network of informal support. The percentage increases to 81% at T2. At T0 'family' is mentioned as the main source of support by 43% of respondents, but just 7% mention 'friends. At T2 'family' is mentioned by a similar percentage of 44%, but 'friends' increases to 60% and it appears in other sources such as 'partner' (6%), 'neighbours' (7%), and 'pets' (25%).

Limitations

Despite the positive results, the current study presents several limitations. The small sample is the main weakness, hindering the possibility to identify statistical correlations between employment, income level, support networks, and homeless status. The small sample also inhibits the possibility to identify and study specific subgroups within the sample. Finally, the participants in the study come from the same city and programme, and therefore the findings might not be easily extrapolated to other contexts.

Conclusions

This paper presents the results of a longitudinal study of people experiencing homelessness in Valencia. The research is focused on the trajectory of a sample of Housing-Led programme users two years after leaving the programme. Evidence of the longitudinal study appears to confirm the theory that increasing formal support (in this case access to income from welfare programmes) and informal support (in this case regenerating network of informal support) reduces the risk of homelessness (Pleace, 2016).

While access to the labour market seems not to be the main cause of income increase among the sample, income from welfare programmes show a significant increase during the participation in the Housing-Led programme. This finding seems to confirm the difficulties associated with the access of the homeless population to the labour market and the necessity to improve access to income support programmes (Zuvekas and Hill, 2000). Despite the relationship between welfare regime and homelessness being clear-cut, the low-income level achieved (compared to the Spanish minimum wage) and poor living conditions (shared apartments and lack of rental house contract), raises concerns about the effectivity of welfare programmes as a sufficient mechanism to place individuals in a "circuit of inclusion" (O'Sullivan, 2010).

Longitudinal studies to research homelessness are scarce and improving knowledge on homelessness programmes' effectiveness in the European context should be a priority (Baptista and Marlier, 2019). We acknowledge the impossibility to generalise the results of this study due to the limited sample. Nevertheless, we provide detailed information regarding the methodology used in order to encourage other service providers wishing to enhance the evidence base of their work. To date, there are few reports that attempt to compare programmes' effectiveness, an issue that would represent a major step forward in advancing a sound international response to homelessness.

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