

Susanne Gerull, 2018

1. systematische Lebenslagenuntersuchung wohnungsloser Menschen. Eine Studie der Alice Solomon Hochschule Berlin in Kooperation mit Evangelischer Bundesfachverband Existenzsicherung und Teilhabe (EBET e. V.) (Projektleitung Susanne Gerull, September 2018).

[1st Systematic Examination of the Life Situation of Homeless Persons. A Study of ASH Berlin in Cooperation with EBET e. V.].

Berlin: ASH Berlin/EBET e. V.

Introduction

In recent years, studies about homelessness in Germany have been carried out or have been initiated to better record the various forms of homelessness (e.g. homelessness, rooflessness) and other precarious forms of housing (Evers/Ruhstrat, 2015; current nation-wide study conducted by GISS 2017-2019). A frequent point of criticism of quantitative research about homelessness holds also for Germany – that quantitative research on homelessness does not accurately capture the life situations of homeless people, thus shortens phenomenon descriptions and restricts analyses to group comparisons, hypothesis testing and modelling. Susanne Gerull would like to close this void with the following study. The author called the project the first study in Germany to seize and evaluate the complex life situations of homeless people systematically. Therefore, the following questions will be addressed: How is the study to be assessed methodically, what results were achieved, and what can we learn from the study?

Method

The study is based on a written questionnaire and includes a representative sample of 1,153 homeless adults who are looking for and receiving aid in the nationwide charitable institutions providing assistance to homeless persons, the social welfare organization of the Protestant churches in Germany (Diakonie).

To measure the complexity of homelessness, the life situation approach was used. This concept is based on works of Gerhard Weisser (1989/1956) and considers the multi-dimensional nature of various areas of life in their interaction. Thus enables a holistic representation of the life situation of persons. From the authors point of view, the description and analysis of life situations reveals existing and missing scope for action and provides hints for changes and further development of homeless assistance.

For the description of the life situations, an index (life situation index) was formed. A number of procedures were carried out for the creation of the life situation index. The forming and operationalization of the various dimensions were tested by a qualitative preliminary study, including homeless people as well as professionals.

The index is composed of six selected life situation dimensions: material situation, gainful employment, housing, health, security as well as participation and social networks. To operationalize the index, an “objectifiable” variable as well as a “subjective” variable was used to measure each of the six mentioned dimensions. In total, the index consists of 12 variables. The validity and reliability were also tested to ensure the quality of the index. The index enables the classification of individuals into five life situations, ranging from very good to very bad.

Results

The results show that 28% of the persons questioned are in a below-average (bad/very bad) life situation, while 19.7% are in an above-average (very good, good) life situation and 52.2% are in an average life situation.

The subjective assessments deviate from the objective data. Compared to the results from the objective data, the subjective assessments are more negative. The respondents are subjectively more encumbered than the objectifiable data indicates. According to subjective estimates, 40.9% are in a bad or very bad life situation, while objective data show 25.1% with two below average life situations.

The empirical analysis highlights the importance of the actual living and housing situation, the satisfaction with housing, the feeling of security as well as the access to medical care as the main factors impacting the life situation. From the point of Gerull, these aspects represent the existential and ontological security of the homeless person and cannot be compensated with other things.

People who live on the street or in similarly precarious living and housing situations were identified as the most vulnerable group: statistical analysis shows that almost 2/3 of them are in below-average life situations and almost 1/4 even believe that their life situation will get worse within the next 12 months.

The analysis shows that citizens of other EU member states, are in a more strained life situation: almost 2/5 are in a below-average life situation.

Women can also be identified as a vulnerable group. Their life situation overall is slightly better than the life situation of men; however, they are more dissatisfied with their life situation in almost all life situation areas. The author rightly points out that women often live in hidden and forced relationships. They are not fully represented in this study since they often do not seek professional help.

There are differences between age groups both in the subjective assessment of life situation and in the extent of deprivation, and long-term homeless persons (1 year and longer), when viewed as a whole, are not in as bad a situation as persons who have been homeless for a medium-term period. The author explains that this is due to their adaptation efforts, which have also been identified through the collected subjective data.

The author concludes that the prevention of homelessness should be strengthened. If preventing homelessness is not successful, at least medium and longer homelessness should imperatively be avoided. On the basis of the results, the author demands the implementation of the right to housing. To this purpose, in the emergency assistance with housing, the political mandate of social work needs to be implemented more diligently than before. Finally, she emphasizes the importance of more participation of people affected by homelessness in all decision-making processes that impact their living situation.

Critique

There is no doubt that this study provides an important empirical contribution to quantitative homelessness research in Germany. The involvement of 1,153 respondents, the selection of the sample (matching, the pre-tests for the questionnaire), the execution of reliability tests for the internal consistency of the used scales, the validation of the life situation index, the analysis carried out (e.g. using main component analysis, bivariate correlations) etc. comply with methodological standards.

The involvement of those affected in the development of the questionnaire is particularly noteworthy and sophisticated. The completed questionnaire was translated into several languages in order to include people without sufficient knowledge of the German language.

Nevertheless, some methodological and contextual questions remain open:

A point of methodological criticism relates to the index that was used to describe life situations. Index formations are demanding in empirical social research and a lot of mistakes or biases can happen. In the present case, the question arises whether the so-called objective characteristics are of equal weight to the subjective characteristics and whether both variables and the values of these variables can be additively combined. The author herself notes that the distribution of the scores was not unproblematic, especially for the objectifiable data. It cannot be ruled out that differences between objective and subjective evaluation of life domains may have arisen because of operationalization of the variables and the index formation.

Another note refers to a number of variables used in this study. If one dimension for describing complex life domains (e.g. participation and social networks), consists of only one subjective and one objective variable, the significance of the results is limited.

Some comments refer to the so-called objective variables used in the questionnaire. What kind of objectivity is collected by the following question? "How good is your actual access to healthcare?". The example of women in forced partnerships illustrates how difficult evaluation and assignment is: Is it objectively always better, "without sublease to live with "friends/acquaintances" (answer category to the housing situation) than to live with "friends/acquaintances", on the street or a tent?

The level of social network was measured by the question "How many people do you currently have and who would support you with problems or help you in your everyday life?" Studies about social networks show that the social status of people

who are close to a homeless person is often very similar (Pichler/Wallace 2009). This kind of participation does not necessarily lead to overcoming homelessness and social integration.

In sum, it is not surprising that the reliability test identified two so-called questionable variables in the objectifiable data.

One remark refers to the theory used in this study. Advocates see in the approaches of the life situation a conceptual extension in order to represent homelessness comprehensively and directly. Critics accuse the life situation approach of a certain degree of arbitrariness with regard to describing the life situation of homelessness. In this study, the relevance of the dimensions and the selection of the variables are derived in cooperation with experts (homeless people and professionals), whereas a theoretical justification of the life domains is largely missing.

Finally, the importance of security as a central and existential basic need is very well understood and empirically justified by the study. However, the interpretation of the results may go too far if it confirms the implementation of a "Housing First Programme".

Conclusion

If one disregards the methodological difficulties that arise with the operationalization of the life situation concept and the use of a sum index, the study of Gerull is an enriching study for homelessness research in Germany, and for homeless people. People responsible for this study have done a commendable job.

This study shows that it is worthwhile for homeless research to involve homeless people and let them participate. The following study benefits from the fact that homeless people were involved as experts in the process of project planning and the implementation of the survey. They can support the survey not only as an "investigation unit" filling out a questionnaire. Selected homeless people also helped the research team to interpret the results. The close cooperation with the practice and those affected by homelessness was well thought out in the way the results are disseminated. In addition to the report, there is a summary in five different languages spoken by many of those homeless people as well as in barrier-free, accessible language.

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› Source**Website**

<https://www.ebet-ev.de/nachrichten-leser/erste-systematische-untersuchung-der-lebenslagen-wohnungsloser-menschen.html>

Study

https://www.ebet-ev.de/nachrichten-leser/erste-systematische-untersuchung-der-lebenslagen-wohnungsloser-menschen.html?file=files/EBET/Nachrichten/2018/ASH%20EBET_Lebenslagenuntersuchung_2018.pdf

Pichler, F. and C. Wallace, C. (2009) Social Capital and Social Class in Europe: The Role of Social Networks in Social Stratification, *European Sociological Review* 25(3) pp.319-332.