Estimating Homelessness in Rural Areas

A Step-by-step Guide and Sourcebook of Information and Ideas

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[1] The organisations represented on the Management Committee were:
- Humber and Wolds Rural Community Council
- Countryside Agency
- North Lincolnshire Council
- Churches Together in All Lincolnshire
- Havelok Housing Association
- East Riding and Northern Lincolnshire Local Councils Association

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Foreword

Policy-makers formulate and solve social problems through observing, measuring and mapping the incidence of situations and experiences. If a problem is not observed and measured it will not attract the attention of policy or be the target of resources.

In recent years there have been a number of local studies of rural homelessness. Researchers have explored routes into homelessness in rural areas, attempted to profile the rural homeless population, service provision and utilisation, detailed rural homeless experiences and situations, and spotlighted strategic responses and the development of effective local approaches to tackling rural homelessness. What little effort there has been to quantify the rural homeless population, however, has tended to draw on official statistics, which are a notoriously unreliable measure of homelessness and particularly prone to underestimate the scale of homelessness in rural areas. Despite suspicion that homelessness is an increasing problem in rural areas, the incidence of homelessness in rural locations has therefore remained largely hidden, excusing the neglect of the issue by local and national policy-makers and service providers.[2]

This Guide details a method capable of more accurately revealing the scale of rural homelessness and rough sleeping. The hope is that the fresh insights gained through the application of this method will force questions to be asked about the relevance and adequacy of local service provision, the availability of temporary and permanent accommodation and the distribution of regional and national resources for tackling homelessness and rough sleeping.

The strengths of the method have been revealed through its application in North Lincolnshire, where evidence was provided that:

- the local authority could draw on to inform discussions with the ODPM, Government Office and the Housing Corporation about resource allocation and to assist them in meeting their obligation under the Homelessness Act 2002 to carry out a homelessness review (which should include analysis of current and likely future levels of homelessness in an authority's district) and to formulate and publish a homelessness strategy
- local homeless agencies and housing forums were able to use to raise awareness about homelessness in their district, to inform the development of new

[2] There have been some recent attempts to tackle this neglect and develop policy and practice. See, for example, the Countryside Agency reports:
- *Preventing Homelessness in Rural Areas: What Works - CA72 June 2002*
- *Support and Housing in the Countryside: Innovation and Choice - CA50/FL June 2002*

accommodation provision for groups vulnerable to homelessness and to campaign for a more secure income stream to support their activities

- the local planning authority and Rural Housing Enabler project could use to profile the scale of unmet needs in rural areas of the district and to foster greater support for efforts to facilitate the development of more social housing units in rural areas

Introduction

This brief introduction:

- identifies the target audience of the Guide
- establishes the purpose of this Guide
- summarises the insights to be provided through the application of the method outlined in the Guide
- outlines the structure of the Guide
- provides a brief history of the origins of the Guide and the method outlined

Who Should Use the Guide?

This Guide is intended to help rural and semi-rural local authorities, housing associations, rural housing enabler projects, homeless agencies and other statutory services (such as social services and the youth service) gain a more accurate insight into the nature and scale of homelessness in their district.

The method presented is designed to be implemented by officers, rather than specialist research staff, and to demand minimal resources. It is therefore ideal for local authorities and other agencies with minimal research capacity and limited resources to support research activities.

The Purpose of the Guide

The aim of the Guide is to help local authorities and other agencies develop a greater understanding of homeless within their area and thereby assist with the development of local homelessness strategies and ensure a closer match between the needs of homeless and roofless people and local service provision.

It is also hoped that evidence collected through the implementation of the method outlined in this Guide will provide local agencies with the necessary ammunition to challenge the neglect of rural homelessness within regional and national policy statements and directives and ensure that a share of the resources channelled toward tackling homelessness and rough sleeping find their way to rural locations.

What Help Can the Guide Provide?

This Guide explains in a detailed, yet accessible manner, how to estimate homelessness in rural areas. The benefits for local authorities and other local agencies of applying the approach outlined can be considerable and include:

- a more accurate estimate of the incidence of homelessness and rooflessness
- the identification of sub-groups of the local population disproportionally at risk of homelessness and most likely to benefit from preventative interventions
- appreciation of the relevance of service provision to the level and specifics of need among the local homeless population
- the identification of priorities for action relevant to the design and implementation of a local homeless strategy
- an evaluation through time of the effectiveness of the homeless strategy in limiting the incidence and duration of homelessness within their district

Structure of the Guide

The Guide is divided into two component parts:

- **a step-by-step guide** to the implementation of a new method for estimating rural homelessness, which has been proven and fined tuned through piloting

- **a sourcebook of information and ideas** about different data sources and methods for understanding and estimating rural homelessness, designed as an easy-to-use compendium of information and insights into the methods and data sources used in the step-by-step guide

The Origins of the Guide

This **step-by-step guide** to estimating homelessness and the supporting **sourcebook of information and ideas** are the outcome of a research project sponsored by the Countryside Agency, managed by the North Lincolnshire Rural Housing Enabler project and undertaken by a team from the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam University. The project brief required the development and piloting of a new method for estimating and understanding homelessness and rough sleeping in rural areas. Meeting these requirements involved the research team reviewing existing data sources and methods for understanding homelessness, evaluating the relevance and validity of these methods in rural areas and exploring alternative approaches to estimating hard-to-reach or hidden populations.

The outcome of this process was a new method designed to provide an efficient and effective way of generating a more accurate estimation of the homeless population in rural areas than provided by traditional data sources or counts. The method was piloted in North Lincolnshire in October 2001.

North Lincolnshire is a largely rural district lying on the south bank of the Humber estuary, which includes Scunthorpe and the market towns of Brigg and Barton-on-Humber and is bounded to the west by Doncaster, to the east by North-East Lincolnshire (centred around Grimsby) and to the south by the administrative county of Lincolnshire. A headcount of rough sleepers in 1998 had produced a zero estimate of rough sleeping in the district, which was accepted as the official count of rough sleeping by the then DTLR. Rough Sleeper Unit funding was not directed toward North Lincolnshire, local service provision for homeless people was limited and there was a dearth of emergency accommodation.

The application of the new method for estimating rural homelessness detailed in this Guide recorded 91 people as homeless in North Lincolnshire in October 2001. 21 of these 91 people were currently sleeping rough and 53 reported that they had slept rough for at least one night in the previous month. The count also provided fresh insights into the composition of the homeless population in the district (age, gender, ethnic origin, last home, current location), which challenged many of the assumptions on which policy and provision were currently founded[3].

These findings have proved a valuable new resource for local policy-makers and service providers, particularly in light of the new obligations placed on local authorities by the Homelessness Act 2002 to carry out a homelessness review for their district and to formulate and publish a homelessness strategy based on the results.

[3] A separate report - *Homelessness and Rough Sleeping in North Lincolnshire' (2002) by David Robinson and Kesia Reeve* (Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research, Sheffield Hallam University) - pulls together and presents a more detailed review of the various insights gained into homelessness and rough sleeping in North Lincolnshire through the application of the method detailed in this Guide.

A NEW METHOD FOR ESTIMATING HOMELESSNESS IN RURAL AREAS:

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO IMPLEMENTATION

Purpose of the Step-by-step Guide

- to provide a route-map that leads you through the implementation of a new method for counting homelessness in rural areas

Structure of the Step-by-step Guide

- the five key steps of the implementation process are explained, the choices open to you at each step along the way are highlighted, the decisions you will need to take are explained and the tasks you will need to perform are detailed
- the approach draws heavily on the ideas, resources and techniques detailed in the **Sourcebook of Ideas and Information**, which is presented in the second half of this publication and has been designed to complement the step-by-step guide. Signposts will direct you to the relevant section of the **Sourcebook** for further information

Introduction to the Method

- the method involves using a specially designed screening tool to count the number of homeless people in contact with selected services in your district. The count data is then cleaned and processed
- the outputs include a count of the stock of homelessness (number of people homeless at a particular time) and an estimate of the hidden homeless population
- the approach involves five key steps, which are summarised in the diagram on the following page

STEP 1

PIECING TOGETHER A PICTURE OF HOMELESSNESS

Guides you through available data sources/ information about homelessness at the local level. The aim is to establish what is and is not known about homelessness in your area, before you commit time and effort to undertaking a fresh count of the homeless population

STEP 2

INVOLVING LOCAL AGENCIES

Explains about the partnership that will have to formed to support the count exercise and the decisions to be taken before proceeding with the count

STEP 3

DESIGNING A SCREENING TOOL

Guides you through the process of designing a tool capable of counting homeless people, that is relevant to your requirements and the local context in which it is to be used

STEP 4

COUNTING HOMELESSNESS AND ROUGH SLEEPING

Details the implementation of the screening tool, warns you about potential pitfalls and offers advice about how to maximise the rigour and validity of the count

STEP 5

PROCESSING DATA AND GENERATING THE COUNT

Explains the key steps involved in cleaning the count data, eradicating double counting, profiling the counted population, and estimating the unknown or hidden population, using multiplier methods

Step 1
Piecing Together a Picture of Homelessness in Your Local Area

STEP 1 OBJECTIVES

- establish what is known about homelessness in the district, drawing on existing evidence
- review the relevance and limits of current understanding
- establish the need for more accurate information about the scale of homelessness in the local area

Introduction

Before committing time, effort and resources to undertaking a count of the homeless population, it is first necessary to establish what insights are already available about homelessness in the area, review the limits of current understanding and establish whether more detailed and accurate information about the scale of homelessness in the local area is required. Working through this section will help you clarify these issues and confirm whether the insights provided by the application of this method will prove useful to local homeless service providers and policy-makers.

Reviewing Available Evidence

Your review of available evidence could make use of the following data sources:

- official estimates of homelessness and rough sleeping
- temporary accommodation and service user records
- housing needs information and insights into populations at-risk of homelessness

(i) Official Measures

A sensible place to start piecing together a picture of homelessness in the local area is with official estimates. There are two officially recognised measures of homelessness at the local authority level:

- the homeless statistics record the number of households who have approached the local authority and been recognised as statutory homeless under the legislation
- headcounts of the rough sleeper population undertaken according to government guidance count the number of people bedded down in known rough sleeper haunts on a particular night

SIGNPOST

Official homeless statistics for every local authority district, which include information about use of bed and breakfast hotels by authorities to accommodate homeless people, are published on a quarterly basis by the ODPM, as part of the Housing Statistics series and can be obtained from **www.housing.odpm.gov.uk/statistics/**

Rough sleeper headcounts have been undertaken in many districts. To find out if a headcount has been undertaken in your district contact the local authority housing department. Information about rough sleeping in districts across England has also been reported to Parliament in Ministerial replies to written questions (see, for example, Armstrong, H. Hansard Written Answers 19 May 1999 pt 4 Column 357). Information about rough sleeping can also be obtained from the Government's Rough Sleepers Unit at **www.housing.odpm.gov.uk/information/index04.htm**

REMEMBER

- official homeless statistics present a limited picture of the scale of homelessness and are particularly insensitive to the situation in rural areas
- the approved headcount method of estimating rough sleeping underestimates the scale of the problem and often denies the existence of rough sleeping in rural areas

For further information about official measures of homelessness and their limitations in rural areas see Section 3 of the Sourcebook

(ii) Temporary Accommodation and Service User Records

A useful way of quickly establishing whether the official homeless statistics provide a realistic estimate of homelessness in your area is to review the service user records of temporary accommodation providers and homeless service providers:

- counting the number of people occupying temporary / emergency accommodation on a particular night can provide a useful proxy of single homelessness, a section of the homeless population that tend to be under-represented in official figures
- agencies working with homeless people (advice services, day centres, resettlement agencies etc.) often collect service user information, that details client accommodation situations, age, gender etc.

INSIGHTS FROM SERVICE USER RECORDS: Case Study Example

A total of 308 households were recognised as statutory homeless by North Lincolnshire Council in 1999/2000 and the DTLR has accepted a zero estimate of rough sleeping in the district. Analysis of homeless service records revealed apparent high levels of homelessness among groups traditionally neglected by official statistics (young people and single people):

- a young people's housing advice agency reported that 408 young homeless people were referred to the service in the financial year 1999/2000 and staff reported that they see at least one rough sleeper per week
- a resettlement service for single homeless people received 287 applications from homeless people in 2000. 105 of these applications were from people aged 18 to 25 years old. In total, service user records show that the service assisted 131 homeless people under the age of 25 during 2000. 39 (14 per cent) of their clients during 2000 were people sleeping rough, ten being classified as long term rough sleepers

These figures suggest that official measures are under estimating the scale of homelessness and rough sleeping.

REMEMBER

- the availability of temporary accommodation and homeless service user records is limited in rural areas by the relative dearth of specialist provision for homeless people in many rural districts
- temporary accommodation providers and homeless agencies are under no obligation to provide service user information
- data from different agencies must be examined separately to avoid double counting and given that different definitions of homelessness and different ways of counting might be employed by different agencies

For further information about temporary accommodation and service user surveys see Section 4 of the Sourcebook

(iii) Housing Needs Surveys, Landlord Waiting List Data and Populations At-Risk

There are a number of data sources likely to be available in your district that, although unable to cast any light on the size of the homeless population, will help you understand the nature of homelessness in your district:

- **Housing Needs Surveys -** the majority of local authorities have commissioned housing needs surveys, which shed light on the households in greatest housing need within the district and might contain evidence of hidden homelessness (multiple households sharing accommodation). It might also be possible to inform the design of proposed surveys and sensitise them to the situations and experiences of homeless people (a traditional failing of housing needs surveys)
- **Landlord Waiting List Data-** the demand for social housing can be taken as a proxy of local housing need, the assumption being that people unable to secure a position in the private housing market will approach their local authority or a housing association for assistance
- **At-Risk Groups -** certain groups in society are known to be at greater risk of homelessness. Establishing the presence and exploring the situations and experiences of these groups and the availability of relevant support will provide some insight into the possible incidence of homelessness among these groups. Groups known to be at greater risk of homelessness include young people and people who have spent time in an institution (local authority care home, young offenders institute and prison), people who have served in the armed forces and people with mental and physical health problems

SIGNPOST: Getting Hold of Data

Housing Needs Surveys

- contact the local authority housing department to find about any housing needs surveys undertaken in your area. Remember to ask about both general needs surveys and surveys of specific groups (such as young people and the BME population)

Landlord Waiting List Data

- the local authority should have detailed information about applications for housing. Contact the housing department to find out what information is available - general information is sometimes available on the local authorities web-site. The local authority should also hold some basic information about housing association activity in the area, otherwise you will need to contact each association individually

At-Risk Groups

- agencies working with at-risk client groups (social services, youth service, probation, leaving care teams, drugs support teams, mental health services etc.) will be able (and are usually more than willing) to provide anecdotal insights, if not hard data, about homelessness among these groups

REMEMBER

These data sources can shed light on the situations and experiences of homeless people in the district but cannot provide any useful estimate of the size of the homeless population:

- housing needs survey methods do not set out to measure homelessness are often insensitive to homeless situations
- agencies working with at-risk groups do not tend to systematically collect information about the housing situations and incidence of homelessness among clients. Talking to officers about client experiences can, however, often provide useful insights into the experience of at-risk groups

For further information about the relevance and limits of different data sources see Section 4 in the Sourcebook

LANDLORD WAITING LIST DATA: A Warning

Landlord waiting list data is often employed as proxy of local need. However, it is difficult to drawn any definitive conclusions from waiting list data:

- many people in severe housing need or who are homeless are not applying to the council or housing associations for help
- some people applying are not in housing need but are submitting an application as insurance against problems securing alternative accommodation
- people will not bother applying if they believe there is no chance of being housed
- people in rural areas have been found to be less likely to approach their local authority for help
- waiting list data is infrequently updated and can contain lapsed applications
- some groups have been excluded from council and housing association waiting lists

For further information about the pros and cons of waiting list data see Section 4 in the Sourcebook

The Need for More Accurate Information

Official measures of homelessness (homeless statistics and rough sleeper headcounts) under-estimate the homeless population. This fact is not in dispute. The question needing to be answered is whether official measures grossly under-estimate homelessness in your district, perhaps even to the extent of denying the very existence of the problem.

Evidence suggests that official measures of homelessness are particularly insensitive to the situation in rural areas (see Section 3 in the **Sourcebook**). Does the evidence available in your district support this conclusion? Answering the following questions will help you decide:

Question: *Do the homeless statistics suggest a relatively low incidence of homelessness compared to surrounding districts?*

- differing interpretations of the homelessness legislation can result in neighbouring districts reporting very different levels of homelessness. The official rate of homeless per 1000 households is a useful measure that allows variations between districts to be explored, and can be easily calculated based on the quarterly homeless returns published by the ODPM

Question: *What do alternative data sources tell you about the incidence of homelessness?*

- alternative data sources, such as service user records, can cast light on the incidence of homelessness among groups that tend not to represented in official figures, such as single people and young people. Does the apparent incidence of homelessness among these groups suggest that official figures are grossly under-representing the local homeless population?

Question: *What do alternative data sources and anecdotal evidence tell you about the incidence of rough sleeping?*

- rough sleeper headcounts have tended to report zero estimates of rough sleeping in rural and semi-rural areas. Anecdotal insights and service user records will cast light on the accuracy of this zero count

Question: *What does previous research tell you about local housing needs and homelessness in the area?*

- housing needs surveys can provide insights into hidden households living with another household and in urgent need of separate accommodation. Research might also have been undertaken into the housing situations of particular sections of the population, such as young people. Does this research point to levels of need and an incidence of homelessness above and beyond the impression given by official statistics?

Question: *Are at-risk groups present in the local population?*

- what are their situations and circumstances and is adequate provision available? Service providers working with known at-risk groups will be able to provide anecdotal evidence about the housing problems encountered by their clients and their experience of homelessness. An estimation of the numbers of people falling into different at-risk groups, viewed alongside current understanding about the vulnerability of these groups to homelessness and rough sleeping (see, for example, the reports of the Rough Sleepers Unit), can provide an indication of the likely profile of the homeless population in your area

Question: *Does the need for housing appear to outstrip demand?*

- local authorities will have some idea about the balance between demand and supply in the area, drawing on evidence such as their own waiting list data and information about void levels and empty homes. Homelessness is likely to be more common in situations where affordable and accessible housing is in short supply

Question: *What accommodation, support and resettlement services are available in the district for people in housing crisis?*

- services to help prevent people becoming homelessness (family mediation, money advice and debt management, welfare rights advice, tenancy support etc.), support services for groups at greatest risk of homelessness, emergency accommodation and resettlement services can all help to limit the incidence of homelessness and rough sleeping in an area. The absence of these service will likely result in a higher incidence of homelessness than would otherwise be the case

The case study below illustrates how the relevance and accuracy of current estimates of the local homeless population can be critically evaluated by working through these questions, allowing you to determine the need for more accurate information about the scale of the problem in your district.

THE NEED FOR MORE ACCURATE INFORMATION: Case Study Example

A total of 308 households were recognised as statutory homeless by North Lincolnshire Council in 1999/2000 and the DTLR has accepted a zero estimate of rough sleeping in the district.

1) Do the homeless statistics suggest a relatively low incidence of homelessness compared to surrounding districts?
They provide a mixed picture. The official homelessness rate in the district is 5 per 1000 households. The rate in the neighbouring district (NE Lincolnshire) is 6 per 1000 households, which is the regional average. However, the rate in nearby Doncaster is 1.3 per 1000 households.

2) What do alternative data sources tell you about the incidence of homelessness?
Service user records indicate hundreds of young people and single people, who are likely not to be included in the official figures, are becoming homeless in the district each year.

3) What do alternative data sources and anecdotal evidence tell you about the incidence of rough sleeping?
Service providers reported regularly seeing people sleeping rough. A resettlement service reported that 39 clients during 200 were sleeping rough and 10 were long term rough sleepers.

4) What does previous research tell you about local housing needs and homelessness in the area

The local housing needs survey reported 158 hidden homeless households. A small scale needs surveys in deep rural areas of the district reported extreme need among young people. Research into sleeping rough in Scunthorpe identified only 3 people sleeping rough on a long-term basis but estimated up to 100 people in the town with no fixed abode.

5) Are at-risk groups present in the local population?

Social services reported that all young people who had left care in recent years were known to currently be accommodated. No information was uncovered about ex-service personnel. Difficulties were encountered contacting local drug support agencies, although anecdotal evidence from homeless services suggested that a proportion of clients had drug use problems. A resettlement service reported severe housing needs among ex-offenders recently released from local prisons.

6) Does the need for housing appear to outstrip demand?

The consensus appeared to be yes, particularly in deeper rural areas of the district, outside Scunthorpe. Problems were also reported for young people entering social rented accommodation, the suggestion being that the council and housing associations were excluding on the basis of age. It was also argued that limited support is available for young people taking on a tenancy for the first time.

7) What accommodation, support and resettlement services are available in the district for people in housing crisis?

The district had no emergency accommodation provision. Other services targeted at the needs of homeless people were limited, the only specialist provision being a resettlement service for young homeless people, a day centre and a resettlement service for single homeless people. All three services were located in Scunthorpe.

On the basis of this assessment it seemed reasonable to conclude that official figures appeared to be under-estimating the scale of homelessness in the district and that there was an urgent need for greater understanding about the scale and nature of the problem to assist the development of more targeted service provision to help prevent and alleviate homelessness.

HANDY HINT: Holding an 'Understanding Homelessness' Workshop Event

The collection of anecdotal evidence and insights into homeless situations and experiences can be well served by holding a workshop event to which relevant agencies and individuals are invited. Participants might include:

- the local authority housing, social service and youth service departments
- housing associations active in the area
- the Rural Community Council and Rural Housing Enabler Project
- District and Parish Councillors
- homeless agencies and housing advice and support providers
- agencies working with known at-risk groups (probation, Connexions, drug support agencies, mental health agencies, schools and colleges etc.)

As well as allowing experiences, views and opinions about homelessness in the district to be explored, the workshop event could also provide an ideal opportunity to start developing the partnership which will need to be in place to support the count of the homeless population and to react to the findings.

Step 2
Involving Local Agencies

STEP 2 OBJECTIVES

- secure the commitment of local agencies to the count exercise and the co-operation of relevant agencies to assist with the count

Introduction

The count exercise involves local agencies implementing a specially designed screening tool capable of collecting basic information about the current accommodation situations of service users and allowing a judgement to be made about whether or not they are homeless or sleeping rough. The success of the method is therefore dependent upon the co-operation and commitment of local agencies. Working through this section will help you develop and formalise the necessary partnership arrangements.

Identifying and Securing the Involvement of Potential Partners

You need to be aware of local service provision targeting and utilised by local homeless people before you can start thinking about which agencies might participate in the count. To this end, ask yourself these basic questions:

- which agencies are providing targeted provision for homeless people in the district?
- which other agencies are likely to see relatively large numbers of homeless people?
- which agencies are working with known at-risk groups?

If you work in the area, your local knowledge should help you answer these questions. Do not, however, assume that you know all the answers. Contact agencies who work with homeless people. Ask them about service use among the homeless people they work with - where do people go for advice, support, food, accommodation etc. Contact services working with at-risk groups. Ask them about the experiences and service use of their clients. Many of these questions should have been asked during Step 1, when you were piecing together a picture of homelessness in the district, and might have been explored at the workshop event held with local services working with homeless people.

Table 1 Agencies Targeting and Utilised by Homeless People

Homeless Services	Other Services Approached by Homeless People	Services Working With Known At-risk Groups
• temporary/emergency accommodation • refuge accommodation • day centres • housing resettlement services • advice services • food services and soup runs • Shelter support line	• health care centres and hospital A&E departments • local authority housing department • local authority local offices • housing associations • local community groups • advice centres (e.g. CAB) • Benefits Agency • student welfare officers • churches and religious groups	• Connexions (young people) • probation (ex-offenders and former prison inmates) • Women's' Aid (women fleeing violence) • social services and leaving care teams (care leavers) • youth service • mental health care teams and voluntary sector groups (e.g. MIND) • drug support agencies (people with drug and alcohol use problems)

THE IMPORTANCE OF INVOLVING A WIDE RANGE OF AGENCIES

The relative dearth of targeted services for homeless people in rural areas demands that a much wider range of agencies are involved in the count than if you were undertaking a similar count exercise in a town or city.

Homeless people in rural areas have to devise survival strategies that are less reliant on targeted services than their urban counterparts. As well as being more reliant on family and friends, they are therefore likely to utilise a wider range of statutory, voluntary and community sector services to satisfy their material needs and secure the help and assistance they require.

Having drawn up a list of relevant agencies in your district, answering a series of practical questions will help you draw up a list of the agencies that you might want to participate:

Question: *Which agencies will be able or can realistically be expected to participate?*

- the count involves front-line staff screening as many clients as possible during an agreed period. Some agencies cannot be reasonably expected to commit to such an exercise. In some cases implementing the screening tool might undermine the fragile relationship between officer and client, which might be based on anonymity and confidentiality. Other services might only see one or two homeless people a week and it would therefore be unreasonable to expect them to screen every client for the sake of capturing the details of only a handful of homeless people. Other services, in contrast, might already employ their own client screening tool which might be adapted or supplemented to provide the count data

Question: *Which areas of the district are different agencies actively working in?*

- it is important not to rely on services located in one area of the district, such as the major town or administrative centre. You might decide to include some agencies specifically because they work in areas of the district neglected by other service providers

Question: *Will the involvement of some agencies compromise the design and content of the screening tool?*

- all agencies will bring to the count exercise their own priorities, objectives and biases. For example, homeless agencies may push for a broad definition of homelessness, while the local authority housing department might want or feel obliged to work with the more restrictive, official definition (for further information about definitions of homelessness see Section 1 of the **Sourcebook**). The involvement of both agencies might not, therefore be possible and the decision might be taken, for example, not to involve the housing department in the counting exercise, although they should be involved in discussion regarding emergent findings

It is important to involve as many relevant agencies (in regular contact and working with homeless people) as possible, to maximise coverage of the count and provide the overlaps necessary for generating multipliers to estimate the hidden population. The involvement of relevant agencies should not be taken for granted. You are asking them to commit time, effort and resources to the count. They will therefore need, at very least, to:

- know how the count will proceed - staff will need to judge the likely impact of participating in the count on workloads and the delivery of core duties before committing to help. They must also be aware of the logic behind the study and the objectives of the count exercise
- be able to inform the process - drawing on frontline expertise working with homeless and vulnerable people in the district, agency staff are well placed to advise about the practicalities of the exercise and raise ethical concerns. Involvement in the design process also gives agency staff a degree of ownership, which can foster commitment to the exercise
- be informed about the information that will be produced and how it will be disseminated and used

DEVELOPING A RESEARCH PARTNERSHIP: Case Study Example

Step 1 of the method involved contacting all relevant agencies likely to be working with homeless people in North Lincolnshire. All were asked about the service they provided, their work with homeless people, how many homeless clients they saw (typical week and year) and to report any anecdotal insights into the experiences of homeless people in the district. Further insights were gained into agency activities through the workshop event, described in Step 1. The count team were therefore aware of most of the agencies working with homeless people in North Lincolnshire, although additional agencies were identified right up to the count exercise being undertaken. Following the workshop exercise all decisions regarding the count (design, implementation and analysis) were taken in partnership with participating agencies. many of these agencies were subsequently involved in the dissemination of findings

Most agencies were keen to be involved in the count - only one agency refused. The involvement of another agency was secured but proved impractical, although they were involved in a separate count undertaken as a control exercise (discussed in Step 4). The result was the involvement of the following agencies:

Agency	Unique Contribution
Day Centre Resettlement Service for Young People run by youth service Resettlement service for single people and ex-offenders	• the only services in the district targeted at the needs of homeless people • all three services were located in Scunthorpe
Connexions Officers	• in contact with vulnerable young people across the district
Housing association A	• emergency accommodation for women escaping violence and people with mental health problems located in Scunthorpe
Housing association B	• main association (stock size) in the district (office in Scunthorpe)
Local authority housing department neighbourhood offices	key destination for people searching for accommodation across the district
Local authority neighbourhood offices	• first stop for council services located in neighbourhoods across the district

All services targeted at homeless people were involved, along with the main providers of accommodation to people in need (there was no emergency accommodation in the district). Services working across the whole district were also included. There were some obvious weaknesses, however. For example, it proved impossible to involve the local drug support agency.

Step 3
Designing a Screening Tool

STEP 3 OBJECTIVES

The design of a screening tool which is:

- practical and easy to implement
- meets with the approval of participating agencies
- capable of collecting information about people's accommodation situations, allowing a judgement to be made about whether they are homeless, sleeping rough or neither
- able to collect case specific information, allowing double counting to be eradicated during analysis

Introduction

Central to the count exercise is the screening tool, which has to be capable of collecting information about the current accommodation situation and personal details of service users, while being easy to understand and quick to administer. Working through this section will help you appreciate these demands and guide you through the design process.

Designing the Screening Tool: Methodological Concerns

There are two key methodological concerns to consider when designing your screening tool:

- what definition of homelessness are you going to employ
- what do you want to know about the homeless population

(i) Defining Homelessness

Before you can count the number of homeless people, you need to be clear about what homelessness is. Is homelessness the same as rooflessness? If homelessness is no home, how do you define home? Is homelessness a material or experiential situation? Your answers to these questions will have major implications for the quantification of homelessness, analysis of causes and policy recommendations.

SIGNPOST

Section 1 of the Sourcebook details the four key approaches to defining homelessness - official definitions, commonsense definitions, experiential definitions and working definitions.

Each definition has its strengths and weaknesses, but working definitions would appear to be most relevant to our count exercise. Working definitions define homelessness with reference to different accommodation situations, located along a home-to-homelessness continuum. Their strength lies in the fact that, by focusing on accommodation situations, they allow a clear line to be drawn between being homeless and not being homeless, whilst recognising a wider range of people as homeless than official definitions and acknowledging the centrality of physical security to most people's experience of homelessness. The challenge is deciding where to draw this line.

Figure1 Where to Draw the Line? Accommodation Situations along the Home-To-Homelessness Continuum

SIGNPOST

Insecure ⟷ *Secure*

Roofless	Direct Access Hostel	B&B	Long Stay Hostel	Supptd Accom	Short-hold Tenant	Long Lseholder	Mortgaged Owner	Outright Owner

Where to draw the line between the situations recognised as homelessness and those not must be determined in consultation with agencies involved in and supporting the count. Different agencies employ very different definitions of homelessness. The local authority homeless person units, for example, will employ a very restrictive definition, reflecting the groups they have a statutory responsibility to assist under the homeless legislation. Voluntary sector groups, in contrast, will employ much wider definitions, that might recognise homelessness as an experience, rather than a material situation (see Section 1 of the **Sourcebook** for an explanation). These differences will have to be resolved during the design of your screening tool. A useful way of focusing minds is reminding people of the need to agree a definition that allows homeless people to be identified by asking a series of simple questions on the screening tool.

HANDY HINT: Using Scenario Building to Help Define Homelessness

Working though a series of case histories and situations and asking officers from participating agencies to explain if and why they consider different people in different scenarios to be homeless and roofless can be a useful technique for kick-starting discussion about different definitions of homelessness. Differing opinions and conflicting views about what constitutes homelessness can be highlighted and the challenge of agreeing a shared definition clarified.

Scenario building can also help when designing the interview schedule. Try comparing officer interpretations of whether people in different situations are homeless or not, with the conclusion that would be drawn by employing the screening tool. Are people being counted as homeless, even though the consensus among officer is that their situation does not constitute homelessness, according to the adopted definition? Alternatively, are people not being recognised as homeless by the screening tool, even though the consensus among officers is that they are homeless? The objective should be to ensure minimal disagreement between screening tool and officer interpretations of various homeless scenarios.

For further information about limiting false counting see the discussion about Enumeration in Section 5 of the Sourcebook

HANDY HINT: Piloting to Test Question Design

Piloting can be used to ensure the validity and accuracy of the screening tool. In particular, comparing the conclusions drawn through implementation of the screening tool with insights and conclusions drawn through more intensive interviewing with a small sample of clients, will allow the rigour and validity of the data collected by the screening tool to be established. Piloting might be used to:

- limit false counting - for example, limiting the number of people classified as homeless who are not (according to your adopted definition) and the number of people counted as not homeless who are (according to your adopted definition)
- test the ability of the screening tool to collect profile data about respondents (age, gender, ethnic origin), information about experience of sleeping rough, reasons for becoming homeless etc.

Having agreed a definition of homelessness, the next challenge is to formulate a question or series of questions capable of establishing whether a service user is homeless according to your definition.

DEFINING AND DETERMINING HOMELESSNESS: Case Study Example

The agencies involved in implementing the method in North Lincolnshire agreed a definition of homelessness as the lack of secure accommodation. Insecure accommodation situations were defined as:

- sleeping on a friend's or relative's floor or sofa
- living in a vacant property (squatting)
- staying in a bed and breakfast hotel
- living in hostel accommodation
- living as a guest in someone else's home, where you could be asked to leave immediately at any moment
- in the process of being evicted from your home
- experiencing and trying to escape violence at home

Sleeping rough was defined as living without a roof over your head or without basic services, such as running water.

These definitions were developed through consultation with agencies involved in the count. Officers drew on their knowledge of the experiences and situations of local homeless people to comment on the relevance of the definition and to suggest what questions should be asked to establish whether a service user is homeless or roofless.

Establishing whether or not service users were homeless and whether they were sleeping rough therefore involved asking two simple questions:

Q1. At the moment, are you roofless or sleeping rough at one of the following? *(Please read out and tick the appropriate box)*

On the street	❑	In a bus shelter	❑
In a doorway/stairwell	❑	In a bus or railway station	❑
In out buildings/barn/garage	❑	In a park	❑
In a building or caravan without services, such as running water	❑	Other roofless situation (please specify) ____________________	
In a car	❑	Not sleeping rough/roofless	❑

Q2. IF NOT ROOFLESS At the moment are you homeless or living in one of the following insecure housing situations? *(Please read out and tick the relevant box)*

Friends' or relatives floor sofa	❑	Being evicted from your home	❑
Vacant property/squatting	❑	Need to escape violence	❑
Bed and breakfast hotel	❑	Other homeless situation (please specify) ________________	
Hostel	❑		
A guest in someone else's home	❑	Not homeless or roofless	❑

'Other' categories were included to ensure that respondents were not excluded because they were living in situations that the schedule design did not anticipate.

(ii) What do You Want to Know?

The design of the screening tool involves a compromise between what you would like to know (as much as possible) and how much information you can realistically collect through the screening exercise (little more than the basics).

Essential information that you must collect includes:

- information about the respondent's current accommodation situation - are they homeless, sleeping rough, neither?
- basic profile data about the respondent (age, gender, ethnic origin, household type)
- case identifier information to prevent double counting - for example, date of birth, initials, mothers maiden name, place of birth (for further information about the dangers of double counting see Enumeration in Section 5 of the **Sourcebook**)

CASE IDENTIFIER INFORMATION

Case identifier information is vital to allow:

- the identification of the overlap between different samples, allowing the generation of an estimation of the hidden population (see Step 5)
- the eradication of double counting to maximise the accuracy of the count of the known population

Ethical considerations demand that the collection of case identifying information should maintain the confidentiality of all respondents. Useful identifiers therefore include initials, mothers maiden name, date of birth, place of birth etc.

Additional information that it might prove reasonable to try and collect includes:

- experience of sleeping rough - recognising that many homeless people sleep rough on an intermittent basis
- last home/secure accommodation, when left and where currently living - allowing the origins and movement of homelessness to be tracked
- main reason for leaving home - allowing the triggers of rural homelessness to be identified

Other issues that would be interesting to know about, but which it might prove impractical to explore, because of the resulting length of the screening tool and the sensitivity of the issues raised, include:

- membership of at-risk groups - care leavers, ex-offenders, ex-service personnel, people with drug use problems, people with mental and physical health problems and illnesses
- housing requirements, aspirations and preferences - what accommodation do homeless people want and in what locations
- service support - what is available and what is needed to prevent and alleviate homelessness
- homeless accommodation careers - tracing survival strategies and the role played by different service and accommodation providers

Set against these information requirements are practical concerns, such as :

- the length of the screening tool and time take to implement - what can reasonably be expected of frontline officers? The screening tool should not be so long as to put officers and respondents off repeat completion
- the focus of the screening tool questions about some issues and experiences (for example, drug use) will prove too sensitive to discuss or are unlikely to elicit honest and open responses
- the relevance of the screening tool - are officers likely to continue asking all questions and rigorously implementing the screening tool if questions are irrelevant to the situations and experiences of most respondents?

Striking the right balance between information requirements and practical limitations is often a case of trial and error. Piloting of the screening tool can assist the design process and ensure the relevance of the design to the context in which it will be implemented and of the questions asked to the situations and experiences of homeless people. At very least, you should discuss the content and structure of the screening tool with frontline officers who will be responsible for implementation.

HANDY HINTS: Practical Considerations During Screening Tool Design

- *a useful rule of thumb is to limit the screening tool to two sides of A4.* The task of completing the screening tool can therefore appear less daunting and handling the tool (storage, returning, etc.) is less troublesome. Experience suggests that limiting the demands placed on frontline officers and respondents increases the likelihood of full participation, maximises rigour during implementation and increases the validity of the data
- *remember the objectives of the count exercise* - to estimate the size of the homeless population and provide basic profile information. Do not get distracted by (valid) concerns which are beyond the remit of a count exercise (service requirements, process of becoming homeless, accommodation wants and needs). Other research projects should address these issues
- *make the wording of the screening tool as simple and straight forward as possible*. Take nothing for granted and explain everything. If you are unfamiliar with local dialect or slang work with local officers to ensure the wording is locally relevant

REMEMBER

It is important to be clear about what you are counting:

- counting the **stock** involves counting the number of households or individuals homeless at a particular time. The approach detailed in this step-by-step guide is designed to count the stock of homelessness
- counting the **flow** involves counting people who became homeless and/or ceased being homeless during a particular time period. The screening tool could include a question (When did you leave your last home/secure accommodation?) which would allow the flow of people becoming homeless to be estimated. Official homeless statistics measure the flow of homelessness
- counting the **incidence** refers to the frequency or occurrence of homelessness among a population during a particular time period. The incidence of homelessness could be estimated through a general needs survey, if all respondents are asked a question about whether they have been homeless during a particular time period (last year, last five years, during their lifetime etc.)

For further information about ways of counting and the use and application of each see Section 2 of the Sourcebook

SCREENING TOOL DESIGN: Case Study Example

The screening tool developed and implemented in North Lincolnshire had to be able to determine:

- whether respondents were homeless, roofless or neither
- whether respondents were from and/or currently living in a rural part of the district (outside Scunthorpe)
- the profile of the homeless population (participating agencies were particularly interested in the issue of youth homelessness)
- case identifier information, to allow the eradication of double counting

Consultation with agencies involved in the count raised a series of other issues that they were interested to know more about:

- the experience of sleeping rough
- the process of becoming homeless
- the prevalence of drug use among homeless people
- accommodation preferences and aspirations, including locational preferences

The consensus opinion among participating agencies, following a number of redraftings of the screening tool, was that:

- it was reasonable to ask a few simple questions that could shed light on the experience of sleeping rough among respondents
- it was reasonable to ask people the main reason why they left their last home, but more detailed information about the factors underlying the loss of secure accommodation could not be explored
- questions about drug use were unlikely to elicit a frank response and could raise problems for respondents and officers
- information about accommodation wants and needs should be collected through other means
- the screening tool should be no more than two sides of A4
- the screening tool should contain a service identifier, allowing a profile of the homeless people visiting different services to be generated and the movement of homeless people between services to be tracked

The screening tool was designed to be implemented by frontline officers.

The result was a 13 question screening tool:

Questions 1 to 3 established whether a person should be included in the count (whether they were homeless or sleeping rough)
Questions 3, 4 and 5 established whether the respondent sleeps rough on a regular basis
Questions 8 to 12 provided case specific information, which allowed double counting to be eradicated and provided profile data
Question 13 asked about the respondent's main reason for leaving their last home

SCREENING TOOL DESIGN: Case Study Example

Today's Date ______________ Agency Code: ______________

We would be grateful if you would answer a few questions to help us find out how many people have serious housing problems and are roofless and homeless in North Lincolnshire.

Even if you have answered these questions before, we would be grateful if you could help us by going through them again.

Q1. At the moment, are you roofless or sleeping rough at one of the following? *(Please read out and tick the appropriate box)*

On the street	❑	In a bus shelter	❑
In a doorway/stairwell	❑	In a bus or railway station	❑
In out buildings/barn/garage	❑	In a park	❑
In a building or caravan without services, such as running water	❑	Other roofless situation (please specify) _________________________	
In a car	❑	Not sleeping rough/roofless	❑

IF CURRENTLY ROOFLESS PLEASE GO STRAIGHT TO QUESTION 3

Q2. IF NOT ROOFLESS At the moment are you homeless or living in one of the following insecure housing situations? *(Please read out and tick the relevant box)*

Friends' or relatives floor sofa	❑	Being evicted from your home	❑
Vacant property/squatting	❑	Need to escape violence	❑
Bed and breakfast hotel	❑	Other homeless situation (please specify)	
Hostel	❑	_________________________	
A guest in someone else's home	❑	Not homeless or roofless	❑

Q3. In total, how many nights have you slept rough in the last month? *(Please tick the appropriate box - if the respondent is uncertain please prompt using the categories below*

None	❑
1 or 2 nights	❑
3 or 7 nights	❑
8 or 14 nights	❑
more than 14 nights	❑

IF RESPONDENT *IS NOT HOMELESS*, IS *NOT CURRENTLY ROOFLESS* AND HAS *NOT BEEN ROOFLESS IN THE LAST MONTH* (ANSWERED NO TO QUESTIONS 1, 2 AND 3) THE INTERVIEW IS COMPLETED

Q4. What is the longest single period of time you have slept rough in the last month? *(Please read out and tick one of the following)*

None ❑
1 or 2 nights ❑
3 or 7 nights ❑
8 or 14 nights ❑
more than 14 nights ❑

Q5. What will your accommodation situation be over the next few days? *(Please read out and tick the appropriate box)*

Definitely roofless/sleeping rough ❑

Probably roofless/sleeping rough ❑

Probably homeless/living in insecure accommodation (see question 4) ❑

Probably in secure accommodation (for example, a tenancy of your own) ❑

Q6. Where was your last home/last secure accommodation? *(This might have been when living with parents or renting/owing a flat or house)*

Name of Village/Town ______________

Q7. Where are you currently living?

Name of Village/Town ______________

Q8. What is your date of birth? Day _____ Month _____ Year _____

Q9. Where were you born?

Name of Village/Town ______________

Q10. Initials (*Please record first forename and surname initials*) __________

Q11. Gender

Male ❑ Female ❑

Q12. What is your ethnic group? *(Please read out and tick one of the following)*

White British	❑	Pakistani	❑
White Irish	❑	Black Caribbean	❑
White Other	❑	Black African	❑
Mixed Heritage	❑	Other	❑
Indian	❑	Chinese	❑
Bangladeshi	❑	Other	❑

Q13. What was the main reason why you left your last home? *(Please read out and tick relevant box)*

Evicted by landlord	❑	Other relatives or friends no longer willing to accommodate	❑
Tenancy expired and not renewed	❑	Other relatives or friends no longer able to accommodate	❑
End of relationship with partner	❑	Failure to keep up mortgage payments/repossession	❑
Parents/Guardian no longer willing to accommodate	❑	Escaping violence at home	❑
Parent/Guardian no longer able to accommodate	❑	Other reasons *(please specify)* ______________________	

Step 4
Undertaking the Count

STEP 4 OBJECTIVES

- agree the timing and duration of the count
- ensure the rigour and validity of the count
- collect the count data

Introduction

This Step involves collecting the count data. First, however, you need to decide on the timing and duration of the count and operationalise a series of initiatives to ensure the rigour and validity of the count data.

Timing and Duration of the Count

The homeless population fluctuates through the year. Homeless agencies often report being far more busy during the winter months and especially during the Christmas period. In contrast, in seaside towns, for example, the homeless population can be higher during the summer months. It is important to consider these fluctuations when deciding when to undertake your count.

If the intention is to only carry out a single count, a sensible approach is to count the population when it is at its highest; it serves political and campaigning purposes well to highlight the worst case scenario. A more insightful approach, however, is to undertake at least two counts, allowing population high and low points to be highlighted and fluctuations in the demand for service provision understood.

Determining the duration of the count involves resolving tensions between practical and methodological priorities:

- the methodological preference is for a longer count, perhaps over a number of months, which allows fluctuations in the population size to be taken into account, infrequent services users to be counted and more accurate weekly and monthly averages produced
- the practical pressure is for a shorter count *(two weeks or a month)*, which asks less of service providers and their front line staff and is therefore more likely to succeed in collecting quality data throughout the duration of the count

DECIDING WHEN TO COUNT: Case Study Example

The service user records of homeless agencies can provide a useful insight into fluctuations in the homeless population. It should be remembered, however, that service use can fluctuate for reasons other than an increase in the homeless population - the onset of cold weather, for example, can result in a sudden increase in the number of people seeking emergency accommodation or resettlement advice. Local authority homeless statistics can also provide insights into seasonal fluctuations in the homeless population, although the same safety warnings apply.

It was agreed in North Lincolnshire that, given that there were only plans for a single count to be undertaken, it would make sense to count the population when it was thought to be largest (participating agencies were keen to counter the assumption that homelessness and rough sleeping was not a problem in the area and estimating the population when it was at its largest served this purpose well).

Analysis of homeless agency service user records revealed a peak in service use during October, with a second peak immediately after the Christmas. Given this evidence, and bearing in mind practical considerations, it was decided to undertake the count during the calendar month of October.

HOW LONG TO COUNT FOR? Case Study Example

The agencies involved in the North Lincolnshire count had very different views about how long the count should go on for. Agencies already collecting service user data, which in some instances involved asking clients similar questions to those in the screening tool, were happy to implement the screening tool as an ongoing exercise (an option that can be explored to ensure the consistency of data collected on an ongoing basis by homeless agencies). Experience from other similar counts, however, suggests that returns will dwindle and some agencies will drop-out of the count if it proceeds over a number of months.Other agencies were also reluctant to commit to the count exercise for more than a week or two.

It was finally agreed that the count exercise would take place during the calendar month of October. In the event, some agencies were only able to commit to the exercise for two weeks, limiting the validity of the count.

Key Principles of the Count

Ensuring rigour and securing the validity of the data demands that the data collected by different agencies and individuals is comparable, response rates are high and there are a high proportion of overlaps. There are at least six key principles that should be closely followed by all involved in the count exercise to ensure these demands are met:

1. ***As far as possible, all service users should be asked to respond to the screening tool, even if they say that they have already answered the questions previously***

- the generation of a multiplier to estimate the size of the hidden population is dependent upon double counting
- the respondent's situation might have changed since they last answered the questions. For example, they may have since become homeless or roofless
- the respondent might not have answered all the questions last time they were questioned

2. ***It is important to ask all the screening tool questions, even if the interviewer thinks they known the answer***

- the respondent's situation might have changed since the last meeting
- the respondent might reveal something that the interviewer is unaware of

3. ***Interviewers should stick to the wording of the questions and prompts***

- data collected by different agencies and officers must be comparable to ensure the validity of the count

4. ***Case identifier information must always be collected***

- the case identifier information is vital to allow the eradication of double counting and to determine the overlap that generates the multiplier
- a case cannot be included in the count without case identifier information

5. ***It is important for officers and agencies to maintain commitment throughout the duration of the count***

- experience suggests that respondents and officers implementing the screening tool can loose enthusiasm, resulting in a decline in the quality and quantity of data collected and the scale of homelessness being underestimated

6. ***Always record the date of the interview***

- the date of the interview can allow the count to be broken down into weekly totals, for example. Recording the date can also allow the movement of homeless people between agencies and different accommodation situations to be tracked during the duration of the count

SCREENING TOOL IMPLEMENTATION: The Benefits of Using Frontline Officers

Benefits of officer implementation compared to self completion include:

- questions can be asked in a consistent manner (assuming officers have been briefed and issued with guidance about implementation)
- officers can answer respondents' queries about the count and resolve confusions about the meaning of questions
- screening tools can be completed to an agreed standard and format
- respondents are not excluded because of literacy problems
- respondents do not exclude themselves because they assume their situation is not relevant to the count

Benefits of officer implementation compared to the appointment of a research team include:

- officers are in regular contact with homeless people
- officers have a working relationship and have built up trust with clients
- officers have experience of working with vulnerable groups
- using officers is resource efficient, compared to the costs of placing a researcher in every relevant agency for the duration of the count

Priming and Supporting Frontline Officers

The success of the count exercise is dependent on the co-operation of frontline officers in participating agencies. They will be responsible for persuading clients to take part, asking the screening tool questions and completing the screening tool. It is therefore important that frontline officers are committed to the count. However, overloaded with work, many officers will consider the screening tool yet another form to fill in, yet another demand on their time.

Before the count exercise begins you will need to secure the commitment and co-operation of front line officers. They will need to:

- be convinced that the count is a worthwhile and valuable exercise - they will need to know about the count's objectives, why it is being undertaken, what is involved, the likely outputs and the use to which they might be put
- understand what they are being asked to do and why their involvement is important
- be armed with the necessary knowledge to inform respondents about what is involved, why their participation is requested, what will happen to the data and how their confidentiality is guaranteed

Officers will also need to appreciate the importance of maintaining the rigour and ensuring the validity of the data that is collected, through the application of the principles of implementation outlined above. The logic underpinning the screening tool design and approach will need to be explained, as officers familiar with normal survey designs might be confused, for example, by the necessity to collect information from the same individual on more than one occasion.

Techniques that you might employ for securing the commitment of officers responsible for implementing the screening tool, briefing them about the principles involved and supporting them during the count are detailed in the table below.

Table 2 Briefing and Supporting Frontline Officers Involved in the Count

Event	Responsibility	Function	Practicalities
Staff Team Meeting	Management staff in participating agencies	• explain to staff why the agency is involved/what it has to gain • listen and respond to officer concerns	• staff commitment is likely to be easier to secure and stronger if they have been involved in ongoing discussions about the count and the design and implementation of the screening tool
Staff Briefing	Survey Team	• explain the background to the count and the need for more accurate information about homelessness • clarify the role of frontline officers in delivering the count and the workload implications • signal the importance of protecting the rigour and validity of the count • explain the principles of the count	• best undertaken as a face-to-face discussion with staff who will be implementing the screening tool. Do not expect management staff to convey this information to front-line officers
Guidance Note	Survey Team	• state and explain the key principles to be considered when using the screening tool • explain the structure and content of the screening tool (why particular questions are being asked etc.) • provide some background information about the count • provide contact information so that officers can get in touch with the survey team if and when problems arise	• produce a short, two sided, easy to read guide that can be circulated to all staff likely to be involved in the count
Ongoing Support	Survey Team	• answer queries and resolve problems as they emerge • monitor performance during the count and liaise to resolve any problems with screening tool completion	• provide a help line number on which a member of the survey team is contactable • regularly collect and review completed screening tools

UNDERTAKING THE COUNT: Some Practical Tips

- produce the screening tools for each agency on different coloured paper, allowing them to be easily identified and managed when completed and returned
- collect completed screening tools in person to minimise the risk of them going astray. Alternatively, provide stamp addressed envelopes for their return
- arrange for a designated officer to be the contact point in each agency and to be responsible for receiving the screening tools, distributing them among staff and collecting and returning completed screening tools
- request the regular submission of completed screening tools, allowing you to identify and resolve problems with their completion sooner rather than later
- visit each of the agencies implementing the tool during the count, to review their approach and to try and ensure that the key principles are being observed, wherever practically possible

REMEMBER: A Lesson from the Case Study

Do not assume, just because you have briefed officers and provided a guidance note, that they will follow the key principles of implementation. Officers in one of the participating agencies in the North Lincolnshire count failed to return a single screening tool, despite working with vulnerable young people who were reported to often be homeless. When asked why they had no completed returns, officers reported that they refer all clients who are homeless to specialist agency, which was participating in the count, and had therefore assumed that these clients would be screened by this other agency. This was despite the principles of the count being discussed with agency management, articulated to staff during a presentation at a staff away day and clearly stated in a guidance note that was sent out with the screening tools. Staff had been asked to screen all clients during the period of the count, regardless of whether they thought the client was homeless or not and regardless of whether they thought the client had been or would be screened at another agency.

This problem could have been identified and remedied earlier if more regular contact had been maintained with the agency. This was difficult, however, as the contact officer was on vacation during the period of the count exercise!

Step 5
Processing the Data and Generating the Count

STEP 5 OBJECTIVES

- clean the data and eradicate double counting
- profile the counted population
- estimate the uncounted or hidden population

Introduction

Having designed, implemented and collected the completed screening tools, the final task is to process the data and generate a count of the local homeless population. This Step guides you through this process and the related tasks of tidying or cleaning the data, eradicating double counting, profiling the counted population and estimating the hidden population.

Cleaning the Data and Eradicating Double Counting

Before the count can be generated you will need to clean the dataset and eradicate double counting. Cleaning the dataset will involve removing incomplete and invalid cases. For example:

- cases where the respondent is not homeless or roofless
- cases where vital information is missing - what exactly constitutes vital information is up to you. Not knowing whether a respondent is sleeping rough, because the relevant question was not completed, might not be reason enough to exclude a case, if they are known to be homeless
- cases where sufficient case identifier information is not available to allow double counting to be eradicated

Eradicating double counting will involve comparing case identifier information for all completed screening tools to ensure that no person is represented more than once in the count.

ERADICATING DOUBLE COUNTING: Case Study Example

Three pieces of information were initially used to identify possible instances of double counting during analysis of the North Lincolnshire count:

- date of birth
- place of birth
- initials

Cases where there was a match between responses to all three of these questions were accepted as instances of double counting (or multiple counting if there were three or more cases relating to the same individual).

Cases where there was a match between responses to any two of these three questions were explored as possible instances of double counting. This involved examining profile data (gender, last home, ethnic origin) to establish whether multiple cases referred to the same individual. If the profile data was found to match only one of these cases was subsequently included in the dataset.

Once instances of double counting were identified, it had to be decided which cases to include in the count and which to remove. For consistency sake, information collected when a respondent was first surveyed was included, although the pragmatic decision was taken in some instances to include information from the second time they appeared in the count, particularly if their situation had deteriorated and they had become roofless, for example.

Having cleaned the data and eradicated double counting, the management and analysis of the data might be assisted by entering it into a statistical analysis package (such as Access or SPSS), which will allow you to quickly and easily explore the data set and profile different segments of the counted population.

Profiling the Counted Population

How you profile the counted population will depend upon the information you have collected and the particular objectives of your count. The North Lincolnshire screening tool (see Step 3) allowed the generation of the following headline figures for the district during October 2001:

- the number of people recorded as sleeping rough, and their roofless situations
- the experience of sleeping rough among respondents in the previous month (total number of nights, longest single period, expectation of sleeping rough in next few days)

- the number of people recorded as homeless and living in insecure accommodation (not currently sleeping rough), and their homeless situations
- the location of respondents' last home, respondents' responses being recategorised into urban (Scunthorpe), rural (outside Scunthorpe) and outside North Lincolnshire
- the current location of homeless and roofless respondents, responses also being recategorised into urban (Scunthorpe), rural (outside Scunthorpe) and outside North Lincolnshire
- the number of people with a rural connection (last home or currently homeless in a rural area of the district i.e. outside Scunthorpe)
- main reason for leaving last home/secure accommodation
- age, gender and ethnic origin
- homeless and roofless seeking assistance in North Lincolnshire but living outside the district (these cases were not included in subsequent analysis of the dataset)

Profiles of different segments of the homeless and roofless population were then generated, in response to the interests, concerns and needs of different agencies within the district:

- people currently sleeping rough
- people currently in insecure accommodation situations
- homeless and roofless young people
- homeless and roofless women
- homeless and roofless men
- homeless and roofless in rural areas of the district
- homeless and roofless in Scunthorpe
- service utilisation by homeless people

Estimating the Hidden Population

Implementation of the screening tool provides a count of the known homeless population in your district (individuals or households who can be identified as homeless). This count can then be used to provide an estimate of the unknown or hidden homeless population (the people who are not in regular contact with service providers and remain hidden from surveys of the homeless population).

There are various methods that can be used to supplement population counts and provide an estimate of the hidden population. Section 6 in the **Sourcebook** details three such approaches. The method best suited to application in tandem with our count exercise are contact-recontact techniques.

Contact-recontact (CR) methods can provide an estimation of the unobserved or 'hidden' homeless population through reference to the number of overlaps (or the incidence of double counting) between counts of the known homeless population provided by the different agencies. CR methods are, in their basic form, easy to action and cost effective.

USING CONTACT-RECONTACT METHODS: A Practical Example

In their simplest form, CR methods would involve the use of two samples or lists. One list might be by the total count provided by homeless agencies, the other the count provided by other services that homeless people utilise (see Step 2). For example:

- homeless agencies provide a count of 90 homeless and roofless people, through implementation of the screening tool
- other services that homeless people utilise provide a count of 60 homeless and roofless people, though implementation of the screening tool
- 40 of the 60 homeless and roofless people counted by other services also appear in the count provided by homeless agencies, providing an overlap of 60/40 or 1.5
- the estimate of the homeless and roofless population is therefore 90x1.5 = 135

The same approach could be employed to estimate sub-sections of the homeless population, such as the roofless population and the number of people living in different accommodation situations.

A more advanced form of CR estimation involves the use of three or more data sources and statistical analysis to generate the estimate (see the note on log linear analysis in Section 6 of the **Sourcebook**).

For further information and technical details about contact-recontact and other multiplier methods (including practical limitations and methodological weaknesses) see Section 6 in the Sourcebook

SIGNPOST

For a more technical review of the application of contact-recontact methods and statistical applications for increasing the validity of estimations see:

- Shaw, I., Bloor, M. and Roberts, S. Without Shelter: *Estimating Rooflessness in Scotland*. Edinburgh: Scottish Office Central Research Unit.
- Shaw, I, Bloor, Cormack, R. and Williamson, H. (1996) Estimating the prevalence: the illustration of mark-recapture methods in the study of homelessness. *Social Policy and Administration*, 30, 1, 65-85
- Hay, G. (1998) Estimating the prevalence of substance misuse. In Bloor, M. and Wood, F. (eds.) *Addictions and Problem Drug Use: Issues in Behaviour, Policy and Practice*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

REMEMBER

The opportunities for generating overlaps tend to be more limited in rural areas. The dearth of targeted provision for homeless people in rural areas, the dispersed nature of the homeless population and their reliance on a wide variety of agencies for support and assistance can result in most overlaps being within agencies (i.e. people revisiting the same agency) rather than between agencies (i.e. people visiting different agencies).

Limited overlap between agencies will invalidate the use of contact-recontact methods.

The outputs of the count exercise therefore include:

- a count of the known homeless population in contact with key agencies during a specific time period
- a profile of different segments of this homeless population, their situations, experiences of sleeping rough, last home, reasons for becoming homeless and current accommodation
- an estimate of the hidden homeless population, allowing a projection of the total homeless population in the area

More specifically, and of particular use when planning the delivery of local services, the count provides:

- evidence with which to assess the relevance and adequacy of service provision for homeless people in the local area, including emergency accommodation
- insights into the sub-sections of the population at greatest risk of homelessness, which should therefore be the focus of efforts to prevent homelessness
- evidence about why people become homeless, that can be used to inform the development of the local strategy to prevent homelessness
- the geographical incidence of homelessness within the district - where people are living when they become homeless, where they live when they are homeless and, therefore, where services are required and new accommodation opportunities need to be provided

Finally, evidence produced through the implementation of the method summarised in this Guide challenges the denial of rural homelessness and rough sleeping as a significant problem and the long-term neglect of rural homelessness in national, regional and local policy.

OUTPUTS FROM THE COUNT: Case Study Example

The findings of the North Lincolnshire count were summarised in a short findings document and detailed in a more substantial report. The report highlighted:

- existing evidence and understanding of homelessness in the district
- provided headline figures and detailed breakdowns of the count data
- reviewed the insights into the situations and experiences of homeless people gained through discussions with service providers during development and implementation of the screening tool and through a small number of interviews with homeless people, which were undertaken to supplement the anecdotal evidence of service providers

The report also made recommendations based on the research findings:

- rooflessness - raised questions about the dearth of emergency accommodation
- homeless services - argued for an urgent audit of service provision for homeless people, given the level of need indicated by the count
- preventing homelessness - pointed to issues requiring the attention of the local homelessness strategy (e.g. scale of homeless among young people in the district)
- affordable and accessible housing - identified as fundamental to the scale of homelessness in the district
- understanding homelessness - the need for improved methods for regularly reviewing homelessness in the district, to help understand need and review the impact of preventative measures

A report was officially launched at a seminar event, to which a wide range of local agencies and media were invited. The report findings were presented and representatives from four key interests (the local authority, local housing associations, the Rural Housing Enabler project and local homeless agencies) explained how they were intending to respond to the findings.

THE IMPACT OF THE COUNT: Case Study Example

The main impact of the count, following the dissemination of the findings, has been to raise the profile of the previously hidden issue of homelessness and rough sleeping.

Various agencies and interests have also been able to utilise the survey evidence to sensitise their activities and campaign for a greater share of available resources:

- the local authority, rather than taking a defensive position, has welcomed the findings and committed to using them to inform strategy development, to assist with meeting their new obligation to prevent and alleviate homelessness and to campaign for resources at the regional and national level
- homeless services have welcomed the count as providing valuable ammunition in their fight to raise the profile of homelessness and the needs of homeless people in the district and to secure a more reliable funding stream to support (and expand) their activities
- the Rural Housing Enabler project is using evidence about homelessness and rough sleeping in rural areas of the district to support efforts to facilitate the development of new social housing units

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ESTIMATING HOMELESSNESS IN RURAL AREAS:

A SOURCEBOOK OF INFORMATION AND IDEAS

Purpose of the Sourcebook

This Sourcebook of ideas and techniques is intended as a compendium of advice and information to:

- support the application of the new method for estimating homelessness in rural areas
- clarify and resolve the technicalities and challenges associated with estimating and understanding homelessness and rough sleeping in rural areas

Structure of the Sourcebook

The first two sections of the Sourcebook focus on key issues that you will need to consider before embarking on a count of the homeless population:

- **Defining Homelessness** explores different definitions of homelessness
- **Ways of Counting** looks at different counts of the homeless population and the implications of adopting different approaches

The remaining sections spotlight various resources and techniques that might help you to piece together a more accurate picture of homelessness in rural areas:

- **Official Measures** looks at the strengths and weaknesses of the two key sources of official information about homelessness - local authority homeless statistics and rough sleeper headcounts
- **Other Data Sources** reviews what insights might be gained into the scale and nature of homelessness in your local area from alternative data sources
- **Survey Techniques** explores two very different approaches to counting the homeless population, which involve primary research
- **Estimating the Unknown** reviews different approaches to generating an estimate of the homeless population, using multiplier techniques

Section 1: Defining Homelessness

KEY POINTS
- there is no universally accepted definition of homelessness
- defining homelessness is a political, as well as a methodological, decision
- there are four principal definitions: official or legal definitions, commonsense definitions, experiential definitions and working definitions
- working definitions have their weaknesses but provide a definition which is of practical use to researchers and policy-makers. As such, they are likely to prove most useful definition when attempting to estimate rural homelessness

Aims of This Section

This section looks at the complicated issue of how to define homelessness. Working through this section will help you agree a definition of homelessness and rough sleeping. The four key approaches to defining homelessness are revealed and the pros and cons of each discussed.

Introduction

There is no universally recognised and accepted definition of homelessness and a debate has long been waged about who or what situations should be recognised as 'homeless'. The consequences of adopting different definitions should not be underestimated. Different definitions can lead to dramatically different estimations of the homeless population and make very different demands on policy, resource allocation and service delivery. Defining homelessness is therefore a political, as well as a methodological, decision.

There are four key approaches to defining homelessness:

- official definitions
- commonsense definitions
- experiential definitions
- working definitions

THE OFFICIAL DEFINITION

The official definition of homelessness is a legal definition rooted in the homelessness legislation and defines the people who, upon presenting their problem to a local authority housing department, have defined rights, as contained in the Housing Act 1996.

The Official Definition of Homelessness

Under Section 175 of the Housing Act 1996, reasserted by the Homelessness Act 2002, a person is homeless if they:

- have no accommodation available for occupation in the UK or elsewhere
- they are unable to access their home
- have a moveable home and there is nowhere to place it and live in it legally
- it is not reasonable for them to live there
- they will be homeless within 28 days
- they have someone living in their home who has been violent to them

Pros

- broader than rooflessness - recognises that people can be homeless but not roofless
- universally recognised - the definition used by all local authorities and central government in official homelessness statistics

Cons

- subjectivity - lack of clarity demands that subjective decisions are made about whether or not a person is homeless. Differing interpretations could result in a different population being defined and counted every time the definition is applied (witness the variable interpretation of the definition by local authorities when carrying out their duties under the homelessness legislation)
- exclusivity - people living in insecure housing situations might not be counted as homeless, even though commonsense would suggest that they are currently homeless (e.g. people living in long-stay hostel accommodation could be interpreted as having a place to live)
- homelessness as no housing - ignores the physical and emotional insecurity of homelessness, which people can experience in all sorts of accommodation situations

COMMONSENSE DEFINITIONS

Commonsense definitions regard homelessness as a housing issue, or rather, a lack of housing issue. Homelessness is related to the lack of the physical security and well-being provided by secure accommodation. The focus is on situations and circumstances that are assumed to provide security, rather than whether or not people feel that they have the physical and emotional security that they associate with home.

Commonsense Definitions of Homelessness

Commonsense definitions are based on the belief that a person is homeless if they lack the right of access to their own secure and minimally adequate housing space (Bramley, 1988)

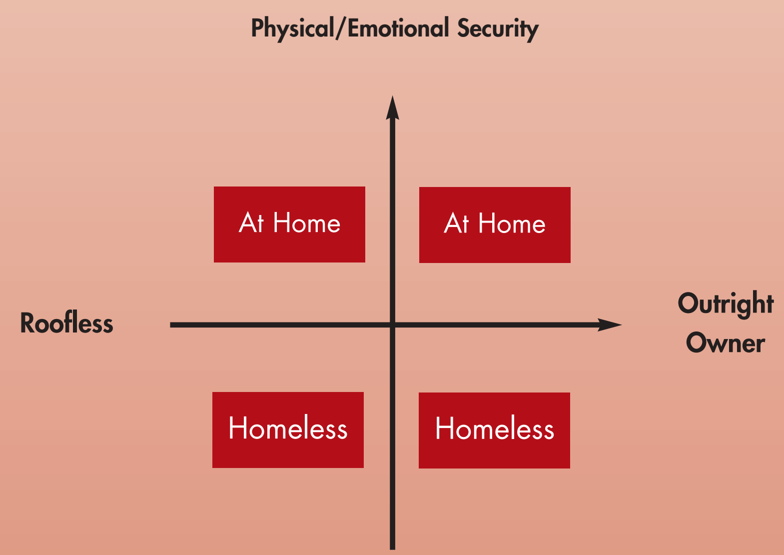
Pros	Cons
• physical security - recognise the importance of physical security, in the form of secure accommodation, to most people's experience of being at 'home' (i.e. not being homeless) • inclusivity - recognise a wider range of situations as homeless than official definition • practicality - define a clear issue - lack of adequate accommodation - for policy and provision to address	• subjectivity - differing interpretations of what constitutes a 'secure' and 'minimally adequate' housing space could result in a different population being defined and counted every time the definition is applied, limiting comparability between counts • homelessness as no housing - ignores the physical and emotional insecurity of homelessness, which people can experience in all sorts of accommodation situations • producer-defined - fail to take account of people's own assessment of their situation and whether or not they feel that it constitutes being homeless

EXPERIENTIAL DEFINITIONS

Experiential or emotional definitions argue that situations or circumstances are not defining characteristics of homelessness or homeless people. They criticise commonsense and official definitions for failing to recognise that home is a place rich in emotions and feelings of well being and security and accuse them of reducing a cause of human misery to a technical and legal problem of housing supply (Somerville, 1992).

Experiential Definitions of Homelessness

Experiential definitions argue that homelessness is an experience centred around people's own emotions and feelings related to, but not defined by, the circumstances and situations in which they live. A person is homeless if they do not have the physical and emotional security of home that they want and need.



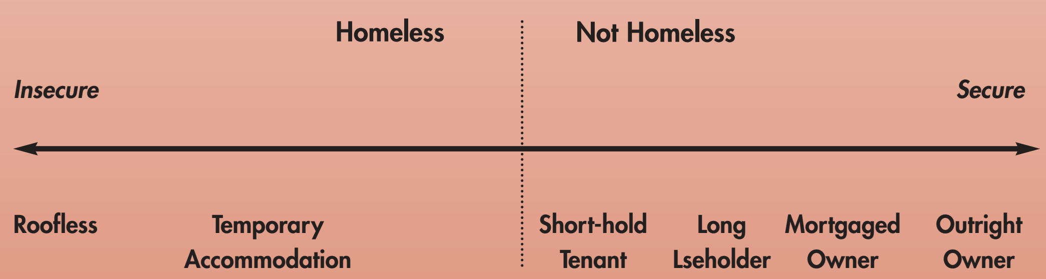
Pros	Cons
• the experience of homelessness - recognises the physical and emotional insecurity that is central to the homeless experience, regardless of accommodation situation • self-defined - allows people to make their own assessment of their situation and whether or not it constitutes being homeless • human condition - focuses attention on the situations and experiences of homeless people	• no one definition - if homelessness is defined by experience rather than physical situation, there are as many definitions of homelessness as there are homeless people • practicality - experiential definitions are of little practical use when attempting to measure or estimate the size of the homeless population

WORKING DEFINITIONS

Experiential definitions are of little practical use when attempting to count the homeless population. Necessity therefore demands the development of a working definition of homelessness. When employing a working definition it is important to be clear and open about which situations and people are and are not being recognised as homelessness.

Working Definitions of Homelessness

Working definitions tend to define homelessness with reference to different accommodation situations, located along a home-to-homelessness continuum. For example, homelessness might be equated with sleeping rough and living in temporary accommodation (short and long stay hostels, lodging houses, bed and breakfast 'hotels', short stay supported accommodation and sharing with family and friends). Home, meanwhile, might be equated with rented or owner-occupied accommodation, where an individual or their partner is the mortgage holder or tenant or is living with a parent or guardian out of choice.



Pros

- clarity - allow a clear line to be drawn between people who are and are not defined as homeless
- practicality - focus on accommodation situations ensures the definition can be easily understood and implemented
- realism - recognise the fact that some people experiencing homeless will inevitably be excluded
- physical security - recognise the importance of physical security, in the form of secure accommodation, to most people's experience of being at 'home'
- inclusivity - recognise a wider range of situations as homeless than official definitions
- homelessness as no housing - can be extended to recognise situations in which people are likely to experience the physical and emotional insecurity of homelessness (e.g. experiencing violence in the home)

Cons

- the experience of homelessness - focus on situation and circumstance rather than the physical and emotional insecurity of being homeless
- political influence - the line between what are defined as at home and homeless situations can be drawn to suit political priorities and policy concerns
- producer-defined - fail to take account of people's own assessment of their situation and whether or not it constitutes being homeless

Section 2: Counting Homelessness

KEY POINTS

- measures of the homeless population can count the stock, flow or incidence
- it is important to always be clear about what is being counted
- each way of counting provides different insights that can be used to assist policy development and service provision in different ways

Aims of This Section

This brief section looks at different ways of counting the homeless population and explores what is being measured by the different approaches to counting. Working through this section will ensure that you are aware of alternative approaches to counting and able to determine which approach best suits your needs.

Introduction

When counting homelessness it is important to be clear about what is being measured - is it the stock, flow or incidence?

- the **stock** refers to the number of households or individuals recognised as homeless at a particular point in time
- the **flow** refers to the number of people who became or ceased to be homeless during a particular time-frame
- the **incidence** refers to the frequency or occurrence of homelessness among a population during a particular time-frame

Estimates of the homeless population that fail to acknowledge what is being counted - the stock, flow or incidence - can give a very misleading impression. For example, the official homeless statistics in England are often interpreted as providing an estimate of the scale or **stock** of homelessness in districts across the country. However, official statistics, based on local authority returns and produced by the DTLR on a quarterly basis, actually record the **flow** of homelessness - number of households recognised as having *become* homeless during a three month period.

Table 3 Different Ways of Counting the Homeless Population: Definitions, Uses and Applications

Count	Definition	Uses	Application	Example
Stock	• households or individuals homeless at a particular time	• can provide an indication of the need for homeless services, resettlement provision and secure accommodation	• demands the application of techniques for counting the size of the current homeless population at a particular point in time	• service user surveys, which estimate the homeless population on the basis of service user records from homeless service providers, provide a stock-count estimate of the homeless population • rough sleeper headcounts provide a stock-count estimate of the rough sleeper population
Flow	• households or individuals who became and/or ceased to be homeless during a particular period	• can provide useful information against which to measure the success or otherwise of efforts to prevent homelessness. Flow information can also assist when planning the delivery of services to help people recently made homeless who, for example, might require emergency accommodation	• demands a survey approach capable of capturing information about the number of people becoming or ceasing to be homeless • technical difficulties capturing information about people as they become homeless	• the official homeless statistics are a flow-count of the people becoming homeless (approaching the local authority and being recognised as statutory homeless) during a period of time
Incidence	• frequency of occurrence of homelessness among a population during a particular period	• by definition, provide larger estimates than counts of the flow or stock of homelessness. Information about the incidence of homelessness is therefore often used to good effect when attempting to grab attention and campaign for resources	• demands either a survey of the wider population, to ascertain how many people experienced homelessness during a particular period, or longitudinal survey methods that collect stock-count information over a period of time	• the Survey of English Housing asks respondents a question about experience of homelessness in the previous 10 years

Section 3: Official Measures

KEY POINTS

- two sources of data typically inform official estimates of homelessness - homeless statistics based on local authority actions under the homelessness legislation and headcounts of the rough sleeper population
- official homeless statistics present a limited picture of the scale of homelessness and are particularly insensitive to the situation in rural areas
- the headcount method of estimating rough sleeping dramatically underestimates the scale of rough sleeping and is particularly insensitive to the situation in rural areas

Aims of This Section

This section reviews the strengths and weaknesses of the two sources of data that inform official counts of the homeless population in England. Working through this section will provide an appreciation of the limits of official estimates of the homeless population and the particular issues that make these methods insensitive to the scale of homelessness in rural locations.

Introduction

It is difficult to state with any certainty or precision how many homeless people there are in any particular district, region or across the whole country. The best that can be hoped for are estimates and there are two sources of data that typically inform official estimates of homelessness in England:

- the returns that local authorities are required to complete under the homelessness legislation
- headcounts of the rough sleeper population

THE HOMELESS STATISTICS

Every local authority in England completes a quarterly return, called the P1E, detailing the households dealt with under the homelessness provisions of the 1985 and 1996 Housing Act and the Homelessness Act 2002. The P1E is submitted to the ODPM, which collates and publishes homeless data on a quarterly basis.

Approach

The homeless statistics refer to 'decisions taken' and reflect the outcomes of a bureaucratic process involving applicants and local authorities. To be recorded in the statutory homeless statistics, it is necessary for households to:

- express a 'felt need' to the local authority, namely that they are homeless or threatened with homeless (Fitzpatrick et al., 2000) and
- for local authority officers, acting under the homeless legislation and informed by the Code of Guidance and local policy, to determine whether an applicant is 'homeless' (see Section 1.1), 'unintentionally' homeless and is in 'priority need' and therefore eligible for housing

Pros	Cons	Limits in Rural Areas
• time-series data is available for every local authority district in England • data available about reason for becoming homeless/ leaving last home	• only count people who express a 'felt need', present as homeless to the local authority, pursue their application and are recognised as statutory homeless • some homeless people choose not to approach the council because of uncertainty about how to do so or the expectation that their application will be unsuccessful (Robinson, 1998) • many homeless people are excluded from the statutory definition of homelessness • the interpretation of the legislation varies between authorities, evidence suggesting that applicants to rural authorities are less likely to be recognised as homeless • data refers to households not individuals • limited information available about the composition of the homeless population (age, gender, ethnic origin) • refer to the flow of homeless people (recognised as becoming homeless during a particular period), not the total homeless population	• homeless people in rural areas are thought to be less likely to approach their local authority for help (Pleace et al., 1997; Streich, 2000) • homeless people in rural areas are thought to often migrate to towns and cities and present themselves as homeless to urban authorities (Lockwood, 1996; Centrepoint Eden Valley, 1998) • rural authorities have been found to accept a lower proportion of homeless applications than urban authorities (Pleace et al., 1997) • Metropolitan and London authorities appear more likely to accept single people as homeless (Pleace et al., 1997) • there is evidence of an unwillingness among homeless people in rural areas to recognise that they are homeless i.e. express a felt need and approach the council for help (Cloke et al., 2000)

ROUGH SLEEPER COUNTS

The typical approach to counting the number of people sleeping rough is to undertake a head count, involving a team of enumerators visiting known rough sleeping haunts on a particular night and recording the number of people found to be 'bedded down'.

According to the then Minister for Housing, undertaking a night time head count is "*the most reliable method of establishing the number of people sleeping rough*" (Nick Raynsford, 1999) and in 2001 the Head of the Rough Sleepers Unit claimed that the headcount method represents the "*most robust, consistent method of checking the rough sleeping population*" (Casey, 2001). It is therefore on the basis of rough sleeping counts that the government has identified the locations to receive targeted funding from the Rough Sleepers Unit.

Approach

To ensure the comparability of counts, and thereby provide a degree of transparency in the allocation of targeted funding, the government has issued strict guidance regarding rough sleeper counts, which includes a definition of rough sleeping as:

"*people sleeping or bedded down in the open air (such as on the streets, or in doorways, parks or bus shelters); people in buildings or other places not designed for habitation (such as barns, sheds, car parks, cars, derelict boats, stations or 'bashes'). This definition does not include people in hostels or shelters, people in campsites or other sites used for recreational purposes, squatters, travellers, people who were there earlier or are known to sleep rough on other occasions, but who are not there at the time of the count, people wandering around and sleeping sites without occupants*". (DETR, 1996).

Pros	Cons	Limits in Rural Areas
• comparable data available for many local authorities	• restrictive definition of rough sleeping • practical difficulties of undertaking a head count • only provide a one night snapshot of the situation • under representation of vulnerable groups who adopt strategies of invisibility (women, minority ethnic people etc.) • resource intensive exercise, demanding detailed knowledge of rough sleeping patterns	• homeless people often engage in tactics of invisibility in rural settings, keeping out of the public eye for fear of victimisation • practical problems caused by the dispersed location of possible rough sleeping haunts in rural locations (caravans, outbuildings, barns etc.)

Section 4: Other Data Sources

KEY POINTS

- various data sources can highlight the experiences and situations of the local homeless population and indicate whether official statistics are underestimating the scale of the problem. They are not able, however, to provide any useful estimates of the homeless population in rural districts
- homeless service user records can provide an indication of whether and to what extent official statistics might be underestimating the scale of homelessness in the local area. Temporary accommodation surveys can provide information about single people, who often do not appear in official statistics, but are of limited relevance in rural areas because of the dearth of emergency accommodation
- housing needs surveys and landlord waiting list data can provide general impressions of local need and housing crisis

Aims of This Section

There are many data sources that can provide useful insights into the incidence and experience of homelessness. This section gives some examples of the data sources you might explore to supplement official figures and piece together an understanding of homelessness in your district.

Introduction

This section explores five potential data sources that can provide useful insights into the homeless population in your local area:

- temporary accommodation surveys
- housing needs surveys
- local authority and housing association waiting list data
- homeless service user records
- information about known at-risk groups

TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION SURVEYS

Temporary accommodation surveys involve counting the bed spaces available to homeless people in hostels and night shelters and then either counting the number of users on a particular night or calculating the average occupancy rate for each establishment (Fitzpatrick et al., 2000).

Uses

Estimates of the population using temporary accommodation services, such as hostels, night shelters, refuges and bed and breakfast accommodation, have been compiled and presented as proxy measures of single homelessness and used to supplement official statistics, which tend to underestimate the scale of homelessness among single people

Practical Considerations

If providers already collect basic occupancy information temporary accommodation surveys demand limited resources, beyond securing the co-operation and gaining entry to provider records. Time and effort will have to spent securing agreement and either access to occupancy data or persuading the accommodation provider to count the number of occupied beds on a particular night

Pros

- estimates a section of the homeless population neglected by official statistics and rough sleeper counts

Cons

- the extent of the count is limited by the temporary accommodation provision in the area
- evidence suggests that many homeless people are unlikely or unwilling to use temporary accommodation (e.g. young people and minority ethnic groups)

Limits in Rural Areas

- the relative dearth of temporary accommodation in rural areas (such as night shelters, short and long stay hostels) limits the relevance and applicability of this method
- the limited provision of specialist services forces reliance on informal support networks and different accommodation situations, including, for example, friends floors, caravans, holiday homes and out buildings

Approach

- identify local temporary accommodation providers, the accommodation they provide (short or long stay, direct access etc.) and target client group
- brief providers about count objectives, gain confidence, secure co-operation
- ascertain the number of bed spaces provided and quality/availability of occupancy data. Not all providers will have this information readily available; some will be able to provide detailed information about age, gender, ethnic origin, last home etc, while others will be able to say little beyond the number of residents at a particular point in time
- collect and collate information from accommodation providers about service use on a particular night or average occupancy rates over a set period

HOUSING NEEDS SURVEYS

The majority of local authorities have carried out local housing needs surveys. Traditionally, housing needs assessments seek to measure shortfalls or deficits from some normative, producer or politician defined, standard through large scale surveys.

Uses

Can indicate the groups in greatest housing need and at risk of homelessness and provide information about multiple households that are living together (hidden homelessness)

Practical Considerations

Limited resource implications, if existing survey evidence is available. Sensitising a proposed survey to the situations and experiences of homeless people could involve the application of a more labour intensive and resource hungry approach

Pros

- data readily available in most districts
- can highlight sub-sections of the population that are in greatest housing need (and likely to be at risk of homelessness) and hidden homeless households
- can provide an estimate of the incidence of homelessness (if respondents were asked about previous homeless experiences)

Cons

- housing needs survey methods often exclude people sleeping rough, living in temporary accommodation or sharing with friends or relatives (e.g. temporary accommodation dwellings often not surveyed, interviews only conducted with 'head' of household)
- data not comparable between districts, as the definitions/methods/techniques used vary
- focus on mainstream needs can result in the neglect of shifting aspirations, variable needs within different sections of society and newly emerging needs
- only provide a snapshot of housing needs at a particular point in time

Limits in Rural Areas

- traditional survey methods have often failed to uncover housing need in rural areas e.g. too few people from rural areas included to allow reliable conclusions to be drawn
- tendency to ignore the particular social and economic concerns (such as job opportunities, transport links, family ties etc.) that inform housing needs in rural areas

Approach

- contact the local authority and establish whether a local housing needs survey has been undertaken in recent years and whether specific needs surveys, for example, focusing on young people or the BME population, have been carried out or are planned
- ascertain what evidence was collected about severe housing need and homelessness - look at a copy of the questionnaire and find out about the sample of households surveyed
- negotiate access to the relevant information or, even better, the data set itself
- alternatively, if a general or specific housing needs surveys is to be undertaken, work to ensure that the survey is sensitive to people who are homeless in rural areas

LANDLORD WAITING LIST RECORDS

Local authority and housing association application records (or waiting list data) are often employed as a proxy measure of housing need and local demand, the assumption being that people unable to secure or maintain a position in the private sector who are in housing need will apply to the local authority for housing.

Uses

Can provide general impressions about housing needs among different segments of the population

Practical Considerations

Landlords are under no obligation to analyse and make available information about applications for housing. Even if application records are made available, it is difficult to decipher any specific insights from waiting list data

Pros

- data about applicant's current housing situations can provide insights into homelessness
- the profile of applicants can be analysed, allowing the representation of various sections of the local population to be identified (household size, age, gender, ethnicity etc.)

Cons

- landlords are under no obligation to make information publicly available
- it is possible, if not likely, that some people apply for council and housing association housing as insurance against potential problems securing alternative accommodation, rather than as a response to severe housing need
- evidence suggests that some people in severe housing need, including homeless people, do not approach the local authority for housing
- infrequent updating can result in lapsed applications remaining on the list
- different housing providers collect different information about applicants and store it in different formats
- some groups are excluded from local authority and housing association waiting lists

Limits in Rural Areas

- evidence suggests that people in severe housing need in rural areas are less likely to approach the council for assistance than their urban counterparts

Approach

- ascertain the availability and content of applicant data - for example, review the application form to ascertain what information is collected
- establish if data is available regarding applications from different groups (age, gender, households type etc.), living in different accommodation situations (temporary accommodation, sharing with family and friends)
- if the relevant data is not readily available, explore whether the landlord is able and willing to run-off the relevant data for you or willing to provide the data set so you can undertake the analysis yourself (while remembering data protection and ethnical concerns)

SERVICE USER RECORDS

The service user records of statutory and voluntary sector agencies offer a potentially rich source of information about the number of people threatened with or experiencing homelessness in an area. Agencies working specifically with people who are in housing need or homeless often collate service user records that provide age specific data about housing experiences and homelessness.

Uses

Can provide a useful indication of the scale of homelessness within an area, beyond the limited insight provided by official statistics. Can be analysed in tandem with temporary accommodation records

Practical Considerations

The co-operation of service providers is essential. If providers already collect basic service user data, analysis requires only limited resources. Service user counts are a more resource hungry exercise if time and effort is required to manage the collection of service user data

Pros

- readily available and (usually) accessible information
- different service providers target and attract different client groups, allowing the experiences of different sections of the population to be spotlighted
- inclusion of people in different accommodation situations

Cons

- data from different agencies must be examined independently because of the risk of double counting and the lack of comparability, as different definitions of homelessness might be used
- availability of data is limited by the extent of service provision
- difficulties ascertaining the quality and rigour of data collection procedures

Limits in Rural Areas

- applicability limited in rural areas by the dearth of targeted service provision for homeless people

Approach

- identify services targeting homeless people (e.g. day centres, advice centres, the local authority homeless persons unit etc.) or likely to be used by groups known to be at greatest risk of homelessness (e.g. ex-prisoners, recent care leavers etc.)
- gain the confidence and secure the co-operation of service providers
- ascertain the quality and availability of service user data - not all services will collect information about the housing status of clients. Some will be able to provide detailed information about clients, others will be able to say little other than how many clients were seen during a particular period
- collect and collate information about service use over a specific period. Given the likelihood that many homeless people will use more than one service, data from each agency must be examined independently, unless double counting can be eradicated, through reference to case specific information

INSIGHTS INTO KNOWN AT-RISK GROUPS

Certain groups within society are known to be at far greater risk of homelessness. Establishing the presence of these groups within the local community and reviewing the extent and adequacy of provision to meet their needs can help appreciate the likely incidence of homelessness among these at-risk groups.

Uses

Useful background information regarding the likely composition of the homeless population can be provided, which can be used to sensitise the design of research techniques developed to estimate and understand the experiences of the local homeless population

Practical Considerations

Risk factors that have been associated with homelessness include:

- experience of living in local authority care as a child
- time spent in a prison or young offender institute
- mental and physical health problems
- service in the armed forces
- debt, including rent arrears
- alcohol and drug use problems

If information is not readily available from agencies working with these groups about client housing and homeless experiences, time and effort will have to spent collecting evidence e.g. through a postal survey or telephone or face-to-face discussions

Approach

Various service providers should be able to provide anecdotal insights and service user information about different at-risk groups. For example:

- social services and the local authority youth service should have figures regarding young people who have left care in recent years and be able to provide information about their current housing situations
- youth offending teams should be able to provide information about people who have recently spent time in young offender institutes
- the probation service will have data and should be able to provide anecdotal information about the housing and homeless experiences of people who have recently spent time in prison
- hospital social workers, homelessness case workers and voluntary sector groups providing advice, support and assistance to people with mental health problems (such as MIND), should be able to provide insights into the housing situations and homeless experiences of people with mental health problems, including people who have recently left residential care
- social services and local drug action agencies will be able to provide anecdotal information and, in some instances, service user information about the housing and homeless experiences of clients with alcohol and drug use problems
- local and national ex-service men and women's benevolent agencies (e.g. Sir Oswald Stall Foundation) will able to provide insights into the homeless experiences of ex-service personnel. Local army, RAF or navy bases might have some evidence about the problems that people encounter on discharge

Section 5: Survey Techniques

KEY POINTS

- enumeration can provide an effective and efficient method for estimating homelessness, although it can be a resource intensive exercise. Enumeration involves counting the homeless population in contact with service providers through the implementation of a screening tool that standardises the collection of basic information about clients and collects case identifier information allowing double counting to be eradicated
- network analysis provides a useful technique for counting relatively small populations not in contact with service providers. However, it is a resource intensive approach that demands the time and effort of a dedicated researcher

Aims of This Section

Traditional methods of counting homelessness are of limited use in rural areas, while available data sources are unlikely to provide anything other than contextual information and an indication about the scale of the problem. This section reviews two survey techniques that are capable of providing more accurate information about the scale of homelessness in rural areas. Working through this section will provide you with a working appreciation of these survey techniques.

Introduction

This section explores two sets of techniques that you might usefully employ to help estimate homelessness and rough sleeping in rural areas:

- enumeration
- network analysis

ENUMERATION

Enumeration is the method of estimating the prevalence of an attribute in a population by combining data from various sources and eliminating double counting caused by overlap between data sources. The simplest form of enumeration involves the collection of information through the implementation of a basic screening tool by agencies who come into contact with users who meet a specified case definition (e.g. homeless) during a specified time period.

Uses

A useful technique for counting the homeless and roofless population in contact with service providers, which is likely to include many people not counted in official statistics or roofless headcounts. Involves the implementation of a screening tool that standardises the collection of basic information about all residents or clients (age, gender, ethnic origin, last accommodation etc.) and collects case identifier information (initials, date of birth, mothers maiden name) to allow double counting to be eradicated. This screening tool can be implemented as an ongoing or time-limited exercise, depending upon provider preference and commitment and data requirements

Practical Considerations

- multi-source enumeration demands the commitment, co-operation and active involvement of service providers and their staff. The approach is doomed if this is not forthcoming
- a technically undemanding method that involves limited fieldwork, is effective in local studies and appropriate in rural locations
- enumeration can be a resource hungry activity, time and effort having to spent developing, agreeing and managing the implementation of a screening tool. However, these initial costs can reap long-term gains, further enumeration exercises being able to apply the existing screening tool and rely on the goodwill and co-operation of service providers, assuming the initial exercise proved effective and provided useful information for all concerned

Pros

- the use of a prospective system for data collection (e.g. service user survey), ensures standardised case definitions and reporting procedures
- the screening tool design can facilitate analysis of the composition of the homeless population (e.g. people sleeping rough, young people, women, older men etc.)
- data can used as a baseline for implementation of indirect methods that estimate the size of the unknown population who do not come into contact with agencies (see 4.2)

Cons

- availability of data is limited by the extent of service provision
- difficulties ensuring the reliability and validity of screening instruments
- difficulties guaranteeing the rigour of data collection procedures in participating agencies
- data quality concerns, especially as the collection of screening and identifier data may not be the highest priority for some agencies working with homeless and roofless people
- estimates are restricted to those people who visit an agency involved in the survey during the period of analysis
- point estimates (e.g. the number of people roofless at a particular time) are liable to underestimate a population and may underestimate the numbers belonging to particular sub-groups. For example, suppose younger people are roofless for a shorter period that older people. A snapshot cross-section of the roofless population will underestimate the total number of young people who become roofless over a period of time. It is also likely that particular sub-groups (such as women and minority ethnic people) will prove less accessible to census or snapshot survey methods than others. Period estimations (counting the number of people roofless over a period of time), however, are more difficult and more costly to carry out

Limits in Rural Areas

- applicability limited in rural areas because of the dearth of service provision for homeless people

Approach

- identify relevant agencies accommodating and servicing the homeless population. These could include hostels and bed and breakfast hotels, day centres, resettlement services, the local authority homeless persons unit, advice centres and specialist services working with populations known to be at greatest risk of homelessness (drug work agencies, mental health services, youth services, probation etc.)
- gain the confidence and secure the commitment of agencies to participate in the enumeration exercise. Homeless services are often over-stretched and under-resourced and will need to be persuaded that the survey is going to be of some use and value to them and their service objectives
- working in co-operation with participating agencies develop a service user screening tool that standardises the collection of basic information about all clients (current housing status, age, gender, ethnic origin, last accommodation etc.) and case identifier information (initials, date of birth, mothers maiden name etc.) to allow double counting to be eradicated. A more simple screening tool could be implemented as an ongoing exercise. Agreement will have to be reached regarding definitions of homelessness and rough sleeping
- clean the data (e.g. eradicate double counting) and provide headline figures and profiles of sub-groups (age, gender etc.) of the homeless population identified by the survey. Analysis might highlight the total number of different people identified as homeless and sleeping rough by service providers during a particular period and the average number of people resident in temporary accommodation on any particular night. Case identifier information could be used to track the movement of people between different service providers

Enumeration: Some Handy Hints

Multi-source enumeration

- estimations are improved by undertaking multi-source enumeration, which involves obtaining the co-operation of as many agencies as possible. Multi-source enumeration demands that techniques are employed to avoid double counting and the consequent overestimation of the target population; homeless estimates are thought to be about 40 per cent too high for a single week period if they are not unduplicated (Shaw et al., 1996). It is also vital that a valid and reliable screening instrument is used to ensure that the different data sources are counting the same population

Limiting false counting

- all screening instruments can produce false positives (persons invalidly classed as roofless, for example) and false negatives (people invalidly defined as not roofless). This problem can be limited by ensuring a clear definition of the target population (see Section 3). Additionally, the use of a threshold score might be used to determine whether or not a respondent belongs to the target population. The threshold score is arrived at by employing a series of questions and defining a number of positive responses as determining that the respondent is homeless, for example. Increasing and decreasing the threshold score will effect the likelihood of false positives and negatives

Avoiding double counting

- avoiding double counting involves obtaining enough information from each data source to identify each individual case (Hay, 1998). Initials, sex and date of birth are often used as case identifiers, allowing duplicate cases, present in more than one data source, to be identified and the prevalence count adjusted accordingly, while maintaining client confidentiality

NETWORK ANALYSIS AND SNOWBALLING TECHNIQUES

Network analysis involves direct contact with small samples of the target population who provide information on their peers. This approach typically involves a fieldworker with extensive local knowledge and contacts selecting a known member of the target population (homeless or roofless) and then 'snowballing' into support and friendship networks by means of a referral chain, the homeless person or rough sleeper identifying other homeless people/rough sleepers.

Uses

A useful technique for counting homeless and roofless people not in contact with service providers and not counted in official statistics and headcounts of the roofless population

Practical Considerations

- network analysis is a time consuming and, therefore, resource hungry process, particularly if the target population is relatively large. Therefore best used when researching small populations for local studies
- the process demands the dedicated time of an experienced researcher, with qualitative data collection skills

Pros

- if applied to studies of smaller populations, such as rough sleepers in rural locations, a useful procedure that can be tied in with the collection of in-depth, qualitative data
- can provide the basis for multiplier techniques, explored in Section 5

Cons

- time consuming and resource hungry procedure
- application difficult if target population large - best suited to small, local studies
- reliant on skills of the interviewer to gain the confidence and persuade respondents to talk about friends and associates
- results will be context specific and not necessarily comparable between counts

Limits in Rural Areas

Reliant on the friendship and support networks of homeless people, which are likely to be less extensive in rural areas, where homeless people are less visible, are known to be less open about their situation and are more geographically isolated

Approach

- skilled qualitative researcher with knowledge about the situations and experiences of homeless people in the local context makes direct contact with a small number of homeless people
- having gained their confidence, homeless people are interviewed and asked to identify and, if possible, put the interviewer in contact with other homeless/roofless people
- this process is repeated and a chain of contacted homeless people is generated
- contacts are collated in the same way as multi-source enumeration, care being taken to eradicate double counting

Section 6: Estimating the Unknown

KEY POINTS

- multiplier methods and multi-variate indicator models can be used to provide rough indications as to the hidden homeless population in an area. However, the data required to allow estimations of homelessness in rural areas to be generated using multiplier and multi-variate indicator models is often unavailable
- contact-recontact methods, involving a combination of enumeration techniques and multiplier methods does appear to offer a viable approach for counting the known homeless population in rural areas and estimating the unknown or hidden population

Aims of This Section

This section presents an overview of various methods that can be used to supplement counts of the known homeless population (individuals or households who can be identified as homeless) by estimating the unknown or hidden homeless population (the people who remain hidden from surveys of the homeless population).

Introduction

This section outlines three different methods that you might employ to estimate the unknown or hidden homeless population in your local area:

- multiplier methods
- multi-variate indicator models
- contact-recontact methods

MULTIPLIER METHODS

Multiplier methods combine information on the size of a known population with information drawn from elsewhere to generate a multiplier which is then applied to provide an estimate of the total population. Multiplier methods can be based on existing information or estimates generated through primary data collection.

Uses

A simple method for estimating the population not counted in existing data sets or by a survey

Practical Considerations

- if existing data sources provide relevant information and allow the estimation of the unknown population using multiplier methods, then the approach is resource efficient, technically undemanding and relatively quick
- if existing data about the homeless population provides an inadequate basis for applying multiplier methods then the approach can only be employed alongside primary research

Pros

- resource efficient, assuming relevant data exists to allow the generation of the multiplier
- technically undemanding and quick delivery of findings

Cons

- the limits of existing data about homelessness and rough sleeping will often demand primary research to allow the generation of a multiplier
- methodological concerns regarding the validity and reliability of multipliers

Limits in Rural Areas

- limited data is available regarding homelessness and rough sleeping in rural locations, meaning that primary research is often necessary in order the generate a multiplier

Approach

- **multiplying from existing data** - for example, multiplier methods have been used to generate estimates of the prevalence of substance misuse, based on official figures, which indicate a death rate among drug injectors of between one and two per cent p.a. By taking the upper limit of this estimate (two per cent), the number of drug related deaths during a year in an area can be multiplied by the inverse of this proportion (50) to provide an estimate of the number of injectors in that area
- **multiplying from a survey of the target population** - this approach involves studying a specific sample of the target population, for example, through snowballing techniques. Information on the proportion of the sample in contact with services can be combined with data from service agencies to generate a multiplier
- **multiplying from a survey of the general population** - a survey can establish the incidence of homelessness within a sample of the local population, thereby providing a multiplier which can then be applied to the whole population of the area. A key problem with this technique, however, is that a very large sample is required to identify less common behaviour patterns or experiences

MULTIVARIATE INDICATOR MODEL

The multivariate indicator model involves the extrapolation of information from areas where accurate estimates are available onto areas where no estimates are available.

Uses

Potentially, a quick and easy way of generating a rough estimate or indication of local homelessness, based on research evidence undertaken in other locations

Practical Considerations

- relevant information has to be available from other areas to allow estimates to be extrapolated. Currently, little information is available about the scale of homelessness from which to generate such estimates
- estimates are dependent on the accuracy of other data sources and are founded on a series of assumptions regarding similarities between the local situation and the situation in other areas. Estimates should therefore only be taken as a rough guide to what the situation might be locally

Pros

- resource efficient method capable of providing a rough indication of the likely scale of homelessness in the local area
- technically undemanding and quick delivery of findings

Cons

- applicability limited by the availability of relevant data from which to extrapolate an estimate
- difficulties of establishing the validity of assumptions on which the extrapolation is based, other than undertaking primary research (e.g. enumeration)

Limits in Rural Areas

- dearth of relevant data to draw from other areas and on which to base an estimate

Approach

- Yanetta et al. (1999), for example, took the estimates of the proportion of homeless people who had slept rough from five earlier studies, which were similar in approach and definitions used, and related these to the number of statutorily recognised homeless households in each of the five districts where the research was undertaken. Extrapolating from this statistical relationship the number of people sleeping rough in other local authority districts and across of whole of Scotland were estimated

CONTACT-RECONTACT ESTIMATIONS

Contact-recontact (CR) population estimations involve the calculation of the size of the 'hidden' (or unobserved) population of the group being studied with reference to the numbers of 'matches' or overlaps between lists of partial samples of the population (Shaw et al., 1996). In their simplest for, CR methods use two samples or lists. For example:

- a sample of the homeless population is counted and case identifier information obtained;
- a second sample is taken later and counted and the number of people who were counted in the first sample noted;
- 90 were counted the first time. 40 were counted the second time, 10 of whom had previously been counted. The overlap of 10 homeless people provides a multiplier of 4 (40/10) leading to a population estimate of 360 (4 x 90).

Uses

In its simplest application, CR provides estimates of the size of a hidden population by observing the number of overlapping individuals found in two lists. For example, the number of homeless people who have contacted an agency divided by the overlap with contacts to a different agency would provide the multiplier (Shaw et al., 1996). Multipliers might also be produced through network analysis, the ratio of previously unknown people contacted through snowballing techniques being used to estimate the total population

Practical Considerations

- a cost effective and economical method if existing information collection systems can be used. However, if required data is not available, CR methods will require that an enumeration exercise is undertaken, and therefore become a more resource hungry exercise
- CR methods can be extended over time to produce trend data
- the calculation of confidence levels for estimates can provide firmer grounding for service planning decisions, although this can be a technically complex process

Pros

- resource efficient
- can produce trend data
- use of screening instruments allows application of a consistent definition of target population (homeless, roofless, rural etc.)
- estimates of different sub-populations can be produced if information is collected regarding, for example, age, gender, ethnicity etc.
- effective in local studies and appropriate in rural locations

Cons

- limited availability of necessary data, demanding reliance on enumeration techniques
- difficulties ensuring the reliability and validity of screening instruments
- difficulties guaranteeing the rigour of data collection procedures in participating agencies
- data quality concerns, especially as the collection of screening and identifier data may not be the highest priority for some agencies working with homeless and roofless people
- estimates are restricted to those people who visit an agency involved in the survey during the period of analysis
- assumes that the target population is in a state of stasis (no inflow or outflow)
- assumes each person has an equal chance of being contacted
- demands statistical expertise

Limits in Rural Areas

- limited availability of relevant data and difficulties of enumeration given the dearth of service providers to participate in count exercise

Approach

In summary, the CR approach to estimating rural homelessness would involve the following steps:

- ascertain the availability of relevant data and establish the need for an enumeration exercise
- identify relevant agencies accommodating and servicing the homeless population
- gain the confidence and secure the commitment of agencies to participate in the enumeration exercise
- working in co-operation with participating agencies develop a service user screening tool that standardises the collection of basic information about all clients (current housing status, age, gender, ethnic origin, last accommodation etc.) and case identifier information (initials, date of birth, mothers maiden name etc.) to allow double counting to be eradicated
- clean the data (e.g. eradicate double counting) and generate the multiplier through analysis of the overlap between different agencies or types of agencies (e.g. data from accommodation providers might be compared with data from other service providers)

Practical and technical issues that will need to be borne in mind include:

- exploring the technical feasibility of the approach in your area - for example, what is the extent of cross-referral between participating agencies; can a common operational definition or definitions of rough sleeping by agreed; how can the likelihood of invalid or unreliable false negatives and false positives, arising from imperfections and misuse of the screening instrument be limited?
- securing agency commitment and co-operation - a significant amount of time will need to be invested in securing agency commitment, consent and co-operation
- partnership working - survey instruments will have to be designed, in partnership, by agencies with expertise working with rough sleepers and researchers. The practical concerns for agencies of instigating a screening process should also not be under-estimated
- implementation and rigour - consideration will need to be given to agency referral rates, likely access/consent and the potential reliability of screening practices

USING CONTACT-RECONTACT METHODS TO ESTIMATE HOMELESSNESS: SOME PRACTICAL AND TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Shaw et al. (1996) provide some useful advice about using contact-recontact methods:

1. **Defining the population -** agree and enforce a definition of the study population to limit what could be a "serious and unmeasurable source of bias". Problems might arise if a definition extends beyond the definition employed by an agency. It is therefore important to engage all agencies in discussion about definitions and development of screening instruments.

2. **Sample Dependency -** agency counts must be independent of one another, but homeless people may use more than one service and therefore appear in more than one data source. It is also likely that some sections of the homeless people are more likely to approach services for help and therefore be over-represented in the count. If these differences in service use relate to an identifiable category (age, gender, class, ethnicity), the damaging effect can be offset by estimating the sub-population and limiting the bias, but if numbers become small, disaggregations becomes problematic. One way to reduce these difficulties is the development of long linear modelling techniques i.e. using more than two samples and modelling the degree of interdependence.

3. **Validity and reliability of data and screening instruments -** all screening instruments produce some false positives (persons invalidly included i.e. they are not homeless) and false negatives (invalidly excluded i.e. they are homeless). These problems often relate to the implementation of the screening instrument by participating agencies, which can be limited by use of a number of questions to ascertain whether a respondent is homeless, together with the use of a threshold score (see Section 4). Identifiers must be used to allow comparative analysis of agency data and to prevent double counting. At the same time, however, ethical considerations demand the confidentiality of service users is preserved. The solution is the use of unique identifiers, such as initials, age, gender, date of birth etc.

4. **Open populations -** problems arise when estimating the homeless and roofless population because the population will change between samples. If sampling takes place at two points in time, during the intervening period homeless people may have moved on, died, found secure accommodation etc. Attempts have been made to provide statistical models that attempts to take account of sequential sampling from populations subject to births, deaths, migration etc. but are otherwise homogeneous, but there relevance to the homeless population is questionable.

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