# SOCIAL AND SPATIAL DIMENSION OF HOMELESSNESS IN BUCHAREST

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**Abstract.** Homelessness constitutes a European concern in poverty alleviating strategies. Romania exemplifies a complex of structural and individual factors that generate homelessness. The study aims to identify homeless social and spatial characteristics in Bucharest through residents' perception. The research involved 500 questionnaires conducted among Bucharest inhabitants. Questions focused on the homeless social and demographic features, the problems they confront and on space attributes that intervene in homelessness localization. Main findings confirm other studies and reveal that men (54%) predominate among people that live on the streets in Bucharest. Familial conflicts, doubled by poverty, poor professional qualification and structural employment issues, represent major homelessness factors. Policies and local community's actions require improvement differentiated on homelessness dynamic and development directions.

*Keywords: homelessness demography, homelessness territorial distribution, urban poverty*

## 1. Introduction

Poverty represents a multidimensional phenomenon with a complex typology. Homelessness expresses extreme poverty particularly in urban areas (Vranken, 2004) and defines a state of multiple deprivations (Dewilde, 2008) that derive from a dwelling's absence. The housing type represents a criterion that delineates the affected group among the whole population and includes people that live on the streets, in shelters, in other institutions (orphanages, hospitals, healthcare centers, prisons), or only live in inadequate or insecure conditions (FEANTSA, 2006).

Former studies (Rukmana, 2008; Gwadz *et al*., 2009; Cheng, Yang, 2010; Iwata, 2010) directly investigate the homeless and take into account group age, gender, health status or a homeless factor, as a dependent variable to explain differences in homelessness social characteristics, spatial distribution and poverty governance. Research to date needs to investigate also the normal population's approach on homelessness.

With this work we aim to assess social characteristics and homelessness' territorial prevalence in Bucharest through residents' perception. The study findings add to previous studies homeless data that complete present information and statistics on homelessness in Bucharest.

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## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study area

Poverty and inequalities increased after the socialist period and the transition processes (Ceccato and Lukyte, 2011) correlated with the present social and economic context within the financial crisis resulted in homelessness expansion (Dima and Manu, 2006). Bucharest stands as the concentration urban area of this poverty phenomenon in Romania. Government and NGO's reports identified around 5000 homeless people in Bucharest and 15000 persons living on the streets in Romania (Dima and Manu, 2006).

Former research studies evidence that men, aged between 31 and 60 years old and secondary school graduates, represent the major homeless group in Bucharest (Badea and Constantin, 2002; Cărăboi, 2011; Paraschiv, 2012). The homeless live in improvised shelters, inside the city's underground canals and in the interior of apartment buildings (Greenberg and Crossney, 2007). Main homelessness factors include familial conflicts and former living in orphanages (Cărăboi, 2011), while poor professional qualification limits early possibilities to get out of extreme poverty. The homeless in Bucharest gain money through temporary jobs, occasional work, material selling or by begging (Cărăboi, 2011; Paraschiv, 2012).

### 2.2. Homelessness characteristics perception

Homelessness social and spatial characteristics in Bucharest were assessed through residents' perception. 500 questionnaires were conducted during August - November 2011 and September - November 2012 among inhabitants that live in 22 areas in Bucharest (Figure 1) where ARAS NGO (Cărăboi, 2011) identified homelessness presence.
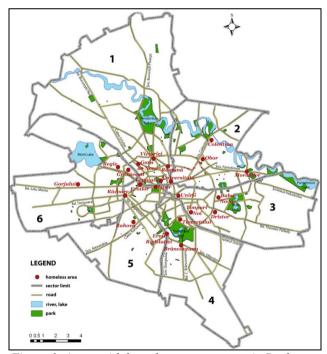


*Figure 1: Areas with homelessness presence in Bucharest*

The questionnaire was applied to a simple random sampling basis and was developed applying the face-to-face interviewing method. Inhabitants answered to closed-ended questions, with a single or multiple response. The questionnaire focused on social and demographic homeless characteristics, but it informed also about homelessness spatial distribution (Table 1). Collected data was analyzed through descriptive statistics, such as frequency transformed to percentage rate.

Table 1: Homelessness assessment questionnaire

| Question | Answers |
|---|---|
| Homelessness presence in the neighbourhood | 1. Yes / 2. No / 3. Don't know |
| Homelessness number | - |
| Homelessness age | 1. 0-10 years old / 2. 11-18 years old / 3. 19-30 years old / 4. 31-60 years old / 5. Over 60 years old / 6. Don't know |
| Homelessness gender | 1. Women / 2. Men / 3. In equal proportions / 4. Don't know |
| Motivation for homelessness presence in the neighbourhood | 1. High traffic area / 2. Commercial area / 3. Sheltering opportunities / 4. Don't know |
| Homelessness presence at city level | 1. Markets / 2. Railway stations / 3. Church, cemetery / 4. Parks / 5. City centre / 6. Periphery / 7. Everywhere / 8. Don't know |
| Homelessness problems | 1. Poor health / 2. Poor diet / 3. Substance dependencies / 4. Family absence / 5. Insecurity / 6. All of them / 7. Don't know |
| Residents' gender | 1. Male / 2. Female |
| Residents' age | 1. 18-35 years old / 2. 36-65 years old / 3. Over 65 years old |
| Residents' level of education | 1. Primary school / 2. Middle school / 3. Vocational school / 4. High school / 5. Post-secondary school / 6. University degree / 7. Postgraduate degree |
| Residents' monthly income | 1. Less than 1000 lei (220 Euro) / 2. 1000-2000 lei (220-445 Euro) / 3. 2001-3000 lei (445-665 Euro) / 4. Over 3000 lei (665 Euro) |

Respondents were predominantly females, aged between 18 and 35 years old, with University degree and a medium to low income (Table 2).

Table 2: Respondents' socio-demographic characteristics

| Gender | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Male | | Female | |
| 32% | | 68% | |
| **Age (years old)** | | | |
| 18-35 | | 36-65 | > 65 |
| 64% | | 29% | 7% |
| **Education** | | | |
| High school | University degree | Postgraduate | Other situation |
| 16% | 46% | 31% | 7% |
| **Income (lei/euro)** | | | |
| <1000/ <220 | 1000-2000/ 220-445 | 2000-3000/ 445-665 | >3000/>665 |
| 17% | 39% | 23% | 21% |

### 3. Results

The survey conducted among Bucharest residents disclosed that homeless concentration areas are Gara de Nord, Grozavesti and Morarilor where the inhabitants observed the presence of more than 10 homeless people (Table 3). Despite this good perception, the residents tend to mention less homeless people than officially registered in NGO's studies (Cărăboi, 2011), as for 77% of the homeless areas included in the analysis. In 55% of locations, the inhabitants observed between 5 and 10 homeless people in their neighbourhood. Only in Tineretului and Baba Novac areas Bucharest residents identify an accurate number of the homeless.

Official data (Cărăboi, 2011) show that in Gara de Nord area gather a double number of homeless people compared to other areas – Obor, Eroilor, Dristor – where the homeless present themselves also as numerous. The homeless locate everywhere in Bucharest, especially in central and pericentral areas of the city.

Table 3: Homeless demographic size

| | Homeless area | Homeless number | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | Present study | Other studies (Cărăboi, 2011) |
| 1. | Gara de Nord | >10 | 96 |
| 2. | Universitate | 3 | 28 |
| 3. | Unirii | 5-10 | 21 |
| 4. | Tineretului | 5-10 | 7 |
| 5. | Rahova | 2 | 18 |
| 6. | Dristor | 5-10 | 43 |
| 7. | Baba Novac | 5-10 | 11 |
| 8. | Eroii Revolutiei | 5-10 | 21 |
| 9. | Obor | 5-10 | 56 |
| 10. | Victoriei | 5-10 | 25 |
| 11. | Cismigiu | 5-10 | 18 |
| 12. | Colentina | 5-10 | 29 |
| 13. | Grozavesti | >10 | 27 |
| 14. | Regie | 4 | 14 |
| 15. | Romana | 5-10 | 16 |
| 16. | Timpuri Noi | 4 | 12 |
| 17. | Brancoveanu | 5-10 | 16 |
| 18. | Gorjului | 3 | 6 |
| 19. | Eroilor | 1 | 45 |
| 20. | Razoare | 5-10 | 31 |
| 21. | Izvor | 3 | 16 |
| 22. | Morarilor | >10 | 31 |

The homeless in Bucharest are predominantly men, as estimated by more than half of the respondents, and they are aged between 31 and 60 years old (Table 4). One third of the inhabitants mentioned also that males and females found themselves in the same number in their neighbourhood. An important proportion of young adults live on the streets and the number of homeless children indicated by the residents constitutes a concern.

Table 4: Homeless characteristics

| Gender | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Male | Female | Equal proportions | Don't know | | |
| 54% | 6% | 31% | 9% | | |
| Age (years old) | | | | | |
| 0-10 | 11-18 | 19-30 | 31-60 | over 60 | Don't know |
| 5% | 3% | 24% | 47% | 9% | 11% |

Homeless people face substance dependencies, as recognized by 42% of the residents, poor health (40% of all answers) and poor diet (observed by 38% of the respondents). More than one third of the Bucharest residents (38%) appreciated that the homeless suffer multiple direct problems. Family absence (25% of the people questioned) and insecurity (15% of the total) add to principal homeless mentioned problems.

Bucharest residents identified that space characteristics correlate with homeless' decision to locate in a certain place. 42% of the respondents associated high traffic areas, areas that offer possibilities to shelter (mentioned by 41% of the respondents) and commercial areas (33% answers) with higher homeless presence at city level.

Urban spaces where the homeless predominate in Bucharest include railway stations, parks and markets (Table 5). The location criterion in relation to homelessness presence in certain areas appeared also in respondents' answers, but perception differences between city-centre and periphery present weak significance.

Table 5: Bucharest areas associated with homelessness

| Area type | Answers |
|---|---|
| Markets | 33% |
| Railway stations | 59% |
| Parks | 37% |
| Church, cemetery | 23% |
| City-centre | 22% |
| Periphery | 23% |
| Everywhere | 12% |
| Don't know | 9% |

## 4. Discussion

We found that residents' perception provides valuable information in homelessness' assessment. The study offers detail about: 1. the homeless' number, gender, problems; 2. homeless areas and location preferences. The method used to collect the data brings new insights on homelessness and the results provide to decision-makers the fundament to create and improve alleviating policies.

The main railway station – Gara de Nord – represents the concentration area of homelessness in Bucharest. Gara de Nord area implies some urban characteristics that attract the homeless: public space; high traffic area; commercial area. Homeless people access the area to find places to sleep (on the platform, in the waiting room, in unused train wagons), people that help them with money or food (the homeless beg, some NGOs come to offer them food) or materials that they can sell (paper, paperboard, cans from the dustbins). Gara de Nord offer also additional possibilities to shelter – the homeless are numerous inside the sewerage canals in the area or they gather on the green space around the main building (Gara de Nord

Park). Gara de Nord area represents the place where the others (police, guards, normal people) tolerate more the homeless' presence, although homeless people manifest drug traffic activities here.

Differences in homeless presence during a day influence residents' perception in the neighbourhood. Homeless people tend to travel from one place to another during the day to search occasional work (in markets especially) or materials to sell, and come back during the night to sleep in a certain place. Or, the homeless that live inside the canals get out mainly during the night, so that the other inhabitants rarely become aware of their presence.

Homelessness factors explain the homeless gender and age structure. Separation or divorce represent the principal familial conflicts that result in men who remain on the streets. Parents' death or major conflict with the parents conduct also to home evictions, both for males and females. Domestic violence generates mainly women (with children) homelessness. Homelessness in Bucharest increased and become visible after 1990 when numerous young adults and children abandoned the foster homes where they lived (O'Neill, 2010). So that three homeless generations formed on the streets since then (first homeless people gave birth to children). Other homeless children in Bucharest represent children forced to leave home (disordered families).

The homeless suffer from health problems and substance abuse (Cheng and Yang, 2010) that intervene in the reintegration process. Transmissible diseases (aids, tuberculosis) may affect the other residents' health and alcohol and drug dependency change the homeless behavior and the inhabitants perceive them as a possible danger. These health and behavioral problems tend to exclude the homeless from receiving social assistance – night shelters receive only healthy homeless people to avoid conflicts or disease to spread; authorities' or NGOs services function based on cooperation between the homeless and the employees.

Space characteristics that may satisfy the two major homeless needs – a place to sleep and food and money resources – influence homeless preferences to locate in certain areas. High traffic areas and commercial areas provide money, food and possibilities to find materials to sell. These area types predominate in central and pericentral Bucharest. The homeless shelter in parks or inside derelict houses (former nationalized houses) located in the central area, but homeless families prefer also derelict land somehow isolated inside the city (Lujerului abandoned railway) or found in the periphery (Vacareşti lake, Ferentari area).

The lack of a direct homeless assessment, trough interviews with the homeless, limits the study findings, and residents' perception lacks total accuracy, but results proved that collected data are comparable to other analysis conclusions. Future investigations need to concentrate on a direct homeless approach in order to assess and explore patterns in homelessness social and spatial dimensions.

Homelessness assessment stands as a necessity in poverty alleviation strategies and urban quality of life improvement. Social and demographic characteristics of the homeless help explain the context, the factors and the present homelessness situation, and show direction to follow in policy approaches. Homelessness spatial distribution contribute to identify the affected people location and to investigate homelessness presence effects on urban space.

## Conclusions

Extreme poverty constitutes a process that increases constantly under the post-socialist Romanian social and economic context. Urban extreme poverty manifest extended territorial distribution and visibility in Bucharest through homelessness localization. Homelessness assessment presents difficulties due to its complexity and internal structure. Homelessness dynamic in Bucharest show continuous growth in terms of territorial distribution, affected urban areas and effects on different population groups. Residents' perception on homelessness identifies specifics related to the homeless spread, dimension, localization, demography, factors – information required in homelessness alleviating actions and multidimensional approach. Homelessness challenges both authorities and local community to find punctual and general solutions to reduce structural and individual factors effects on individuals and social risk groups.

## Acknowledgements

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