Can We Compare Homelessness Across the Atlantic? A Comparative Study of Methods for Measuring Homelessness in North America and Europe[1]

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Abstract_ *Comprehensive responses to homelessness, often originating at the local level, are becoming more common throughout Canada, the United States and Europe. These ambitious programmes, many of which aim to end homelessness, have a firm commitment to measuring their success and to updating their actions in accordance with the trends and data gathered from homeless counts. As counts become more common, it is inevitable that they will be used not only to track changes within a particular city, but to compare the state of homelessness in different cities. This article asks the question: can we compare homelessness across the Atlantic? It compares the definitions of homelessness and the methodologies used to measure it in New York, Montréal, Brussels and Denmark, and argues that it is possible to compare the state of homelessness within North America and within Europe. Cross-Atlantic comparisons are more difficult but not impossible. Great attention must be paid to methodological and definitional differences that affect who is counted as homeless and who is not.*

Keywords_ *Point-in-Time Count; methodology; comparisons; definition; typology*

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Introduction

In March 2015, Montréal conducted its first ever Point-in-Time (PiT) Count of the homeless population. Using established methods tested in Canadian, American and some European cities, Montréal designed a homeless count comparable to those of other cities, but that was also tailored to the unique realities of the city. When results were released in July 2015, journalists and commentators began asking how the state of homelessness in Montréal compares with homelessness in other cities (Woodvine, 2015). Is such a comparison valid? If so, under what conditions can comparisons be made?

This article asks whether it is possible to compare the state of homelessness across the Atlantic Ocean. To answer this question, I compare homeless count methodologies and definitions of homelessness used in New York City, Montréal, Brussels and Denmark. I demonstrate that there has been a strong convergence of count methods in North America, but that the definitions used in Canada and the United States remain significantly different. The contrary is the case in Europe, where there is some evidence of convergence in the definition of homelessness, but considerable differences in terms of the methodologies used to measure homelessness. Differences in the definition of homelessness are relatively easy to reconcile, thanks to typology tools developed in Canada and Europe; methodological differences are, however, much more difficult to reconcile.

I conclude that it is possible to compare the state of homelessness in cities within North America and to some extent in cities within Europe; cross-Atlantic comparisons remain difficult but are in some cases possible. As this article explains, and as has been persuasively argued elsewhere (FEANTSA, 2011a; Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014), different methodologies and definitions of homelessness have important consequences on the final results of the effort to measure homelessness, primarily by influencing who is counted as homeless and who is not. Cross-national and cross-continental comparisons must take these factors into consideration when comparing the state of homelessness. In the interest of these comparisons, from which important lessons about policy and interventions can be learned, count organizers must be fully transparent about their methods and very detailed in their presentation of the final numbers.

This article begins with an introduction to homeless counts; specifically, as PiT Counts are becoming increasingly common in North America, the first section explains this particular methodology as well as its weaknesses. I then compare different definitions and typologies of homelessness in Canada, the United

States and Europe. Four cases – New York, Montréal, Brussels and Denmark[2] – are then presented to illustrate how methodological and definitional differences affect the overall comparability of the counts. Details regarding the count methodologies were gathered through a review of primary and secondary documents, as well as extensive participant observation in the development and implementation of Montréal's PiT Count and limited participant observation in New York City's 2015 PiT Count. The final section analyses the differences between methodologies and definitions, makes recommendations for how to improve comparability, and concludes.

The Point-in-Time Methodology

There are many ways of enumerating the homeless population; the Point-in-Time (PiT) methodology is becoming the favoured method in North America. Given its prevalence, this first section is a broad overview of the PiT methodology. The individual cases presented below demonstrate what a PiT Count looks like in practice in New York and Montréal, and further considers other methodologies, including the somewhat comparable approach in Brussels and the much different method used in Denmark.

Canada and the United States have officially adopted the PiT methodology at the national level, aligning their methodologies and greatly increasing comparability within and between the two countries. A PiT Count is an enumeration of street and sometimes sheltered homelessness at a particular point in time. Often referred to as a snapshot of homelessness, the PiT methodology is not perfect, but allows for an accurate estimation of mostly chronic homelessness and permits the public and policy-makers to monitor trends among this population over time. PiT Counts usually take place over a period of 4-6 hours on a single day and involve volunteers canvassing streets and shelters to enumerate the homeless population. Many PiT Counts also include a tally of the number of people staying in emergency shelters and other homeless services on the night of the count.

Some cities use a PiT Count as an opportunity to administer a survey and gather data about the homeless population, whereas others simply count the number of people sleeping outside, such as Los Angeles (The Times Editorial Board, 2015). All Canadian cities that do PiT Counts use some form of survey instrument. When used, surveys tend to be brief (around 15 questions), and often contain questions

[2] Denmark cannot, of course, be compared to the other cases, if only because the other three are cities. The approach described below is used in cities across Denmark, and results can be broken down into municipalities. I therefore speak both of Copenhagen and Denmark, as the local approach is the same as the national approach.

regarding housing history, demographic information and income. The survey is administered directly to homeless individuals (with their consent) either by volunteer enumerators or, in some cases where homeless resources are included, by staff. In general, resource staff will administer the survey to particularly sensitive populations, such those staying in shelters for people fleeing violence.

Beginning in 2003, the American Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has required that local communities applying for Continuum of Care (CoC) homelessness funding provide an estimation of the number of homeless people living in their community. The PiT Count methodology was mentioned in the original 2004 HUD 'Guide to Counting Unsheltered Homeless People' as a possible way of doing this, but it was not the required methodology at the time (Abt Associates Inc., 2004). In 2014, HUD introduced a new Guide to replace the 2004 document entitled the 'Point-in-Time Count Methodology Guide'. As the title suggests, as of 2014 communities across the United States are required to use the PiT Count methodology. The preamble to the Guide notes, "HUD is requiring that all CoCs review this entire guide to ensure that their current PIT count practices meet all of HUD's PIT count minimum standards" (Abt Associates Inc., 2014, p.2). CoCs must conduct their counts at least every two years during the last week in January.

The Canadian federal government recently announced its commitment to developing and implementing a common PiT Count methodology to measure homelessness across Canada: "The Government of Canada is supporting the first homeless count coordinated among communities across Canada in 2016. A common PiT Count approach will be developed in consultation with communities that have experience using this method" (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015). The counts will not be mandatory, but the Government promises to provide *additional* funding to cities that wish to conduct a PiT Count.

The Homeless Hub (the Hub), Canada's largest homelessness research network, will be providing support to communities that are conducting a PiT Count for the first time. The Hub has proposed a detailed methodology guide to the federal government, which includes a common definition of homelessness (see below), mandatory questions to be included in a questionnaire and instructions on the methodology itself (Gaetz, 2015). This proposed methodology was piloted in seven cities in Alberta in the West of Canada in October 2015. The harmonization of methodologies in these seven cities allowed for a regional comparison of homelessness for the first time. Challenges still remain, however, regarding the definition of homelessness used within this province; Edmonton, the second largest city in Alberta, used a broader definition of homelessness than other cities (Turner, 2015b).

However, the final results of each count are presented in a way that allows for a comparison of each different 'category' of homelessness, such as unsheltered homelessness (see Table 1 below).

An important element of a PiT Count's design is the question of which areas of the city are canvassed on the night of the count. The proposed national methodology in Canada and the HUD Guide identify three main strategies for determining which parts of a city to canvass. In the first method – 'known locations' – community partners such as outreach workers or the police identify parts of the city where they know homeless people are usually found. Targeted zones are created based on this information. The second method is full coverage; this usually applies to the downtown core where there tends to be a high concentration of homelessness, but may apply to other parts of a city as well. Full coverage results in an entire neighbourhood or core being cut into similarly sized zones that are all canvassed by volunteers. Some small cities have enough volunteers to cover the entire city, such as Red Deer, Alberta (Turner, 2015a), but this is rare.

The final method for identifying the zones covered in a PiT Count is random sampling. This requires a detailed and labour-intensive division of the entire city into equally sized zones. Using information from community partners, every single zone in the city is classified as either 'high' or 'low' density in terms of its concentration of homelessness. All high-density zones are included in the count. Further, a sufficient number of the low-density zones are randomly selected and surveyed as well. Cities have the option of extrapolating from these randomly selected zones to the entire city from the low-density results, as is done in New York City (The Department of Homeless Services, 2006). As of 2015, Toronto is the only Canadian city that randomly samples (City of Toronto, 2013).

Finally, a small number of cities use 'decoys' as a statistical test of the overall validity of the count. They are people who are not homeless but have been placed randomly throughout the city along the paths that volunteers are expected to follow. Decoys are instructed to remain in one spot for the duration of the count (or until they are counted). This allows for an estimation of how many people have not been approached and counted by volunteers; based on the number of decoys found by volunteers on the night of the count, statistical adjustments can be made to the final numbers based (The Department of Homeless Services, 2006; Hopper *et al.*, 2008).

Limits

PiT Counts are always recognized as an under-estimation of the homeless population (City of Toronto 2013; Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014; Gaetz *et al.*, 2014; Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness, 2014; Latimer *et al.*, 2015; Turner, 2015a). One of the reasons for this is that rough sleepers may not be visible on the night of the count, such as those who live in squats or who are able to find a spot to sleep that is well out of the public's view (Hopper *et al.*, 2008). If they are not seen, they will simply not be included in the count.

Further, the PiT Count methodology results in the over-representation of the chronically homeless population and underestimates other forms of homelessness. Given the logic behind the PiT Count, the exact number of people who experience homelessness temporarily will be difficult to find using this methodology. The European Observatory on Homelessness explains why this is the case; "[a]s people with severe mental illness and problematic drug and alcohol use can experience homelessness more frequently or for longer periods, using a point-in-time approach means this group can be over-represented, simply because they use homelessness services more often or for longer than other groups of homeless people" (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014, p.31).

Another group that is not fully included in a PiT Count is the 'hidden homeless'. Only a small minority of the homeless population is chronically homeless in North America and Southern and Eastern EU Member States (Benjaminsen and Andrade, 2014; Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014; Latimer *et al.*, 2015). Research has shown that women and youth experience homelessness differently and are under-represented in the chronic, street-involved homeless population (see, for example, Benjaminsen and Juul, 2009; City of Toronto, 2013; Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014; Gaetz *et al.*, 2014; Greater Vancouver Regional Steering Committee on Homelessness, 2014; Turner, 2015a; b). These same sources note that these populations tend to be more hidden by couch surfing, sleeping in cars or exchanging sex for shelter. It is important to note that PiT Counts are best able to measure visible street homelessness, but they are poorly equipped to measure these more hidden forms of homelessness (Gaetz, 2015).

In Europe, PiT Counts are not nearly as common as they are in North America; as will be outlined below, Belgium is one of the few EU Member States to use a methodology that is similar to the PiT Count methodology. Indeed, a variety of methodologies are used to collect data on the homeless population across Europe (FEANTSA, 2011a). Scandinavian countries, as will be explained in greater detail below, rely on data collected through surveys that have been completed on behalf of homeless people by service providers. An exhaustive review of all the methodologies used in Europe is beyond the scope of this article; for a comprehensive review of statistical data on homelessness in EU Member States see Busch-Geertsema *et al.* (2014).

Definitions of Homelessness

While an understanding of methodological differences is a crucial first step to making an informed comparison of the state of homelessness in different cities and countries, the other fundamental question that must be addressed is the following: what is the definition of homelessness that is being used? In other words, who, exactly, is the homeless count counting?

Great strides have been made in Europe and North America to develop common definitions and typologies of homelessness. HUD has developed a typology of homelessness to use in PiT Counts but does not have an official conceptual definition of homelessness. In Canada, the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness, formerly the Canadian Homelessness Research Network (CHRN), has developed both a definition and typology of homelessness. While this definition is not the official definition of the federal government, it is likely that the federal government will adopt it shortly as a framework for future federally funded homeless counts (Turner, 2015a). FEANTSA has also developed a typology: the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS).

By way of introduction to the definitions and typologies, Table 1 is a comparison of the European, Canadian and American typologies of homelessness. The typologies present a spectrum of housing exclusion, ranging from rough sleeping to other less extreme forms of housing instability, such as over-crowding. Each typology is broken down into conceptual as well as operational categories. Looking down the vertical lines of the table, different shades of grey indicate which operational categories are in the same conceptual category. For example, ETHOS is comprised of four conceptual categories: roofless; houseless; insecure; and inadequate. These four conceptual categories are broken into 13 operational categories ranging from people living rough to people living in extreme over-crowding. The darkest grey boxes indicate the conceptual category ‘roofless’, which includes the operational categories for people who live and sleep rough as well as people in emergency accommodation.

The horizontal lines show how different operational categories compare across the three typologies. For example, all three typologies begin in the same place, with people living rough or on the streets, but not all typologies include people living in emergency accommodation for immigrants. The typologies are not perfectly aligned, though the table demonstrates that there are important similarities between the Canadian and European typologies throughout the table. As we move along the spectrum to the right, however, there are more differences and, in the American case, significant gaps. Immediately preceding the table is a detailed list of the operational categories in each typology.

ETHOS Operational Categories

1. People living rough
2. People living in emergency accommodation
3. People in accommodation for homeless people
4. People in a women's shelter
5. People in accommodation for immigrants
6. People due to be released from institutions
7. People receiving longer-term support due to homelessness
8. People living in insecure accommodation
9. People living under threat of eviction
10. People living under threat of violence
11. People living in temporary/non-conventional structures
12. People living in unfit housing
13. People living in extreme over-crowding

CHRN Operational Categories

1. People living in public or private spaces without consent or contract
2. People living in places not intended for human habitation

2.1 Emergency overnight shelters for people who are homeless
2.2 Shelters for individuals/families affected by domestic violence
2.3 Emergency shelters for people fleeing natural disasters
3.1 Interim housing for people who are homeless
3.2 People living temporarily with others
3.3 People accessing short-term, temporary rental accommodations
3.4 People in institutional care who lack permanent housing
3.5 Accommodation/reception centres for recently arrived immigrants and refugees
4.1 People at imminent risk of homelessness
4.2 Individuals and families who are precariously housed

HUD Operational Categories

1.1 Has a primary night-time residence that is a public or private place not meant for human habitation

1.2 Is living in a public or privately operated shelter designated to provide temporary living arrangements (including congregate shelters, transitional housing and hotels and motels paid for by charitable organizations or by federal, state and local government programmes)

1.3 Is exiting an institution where (s)he has resided for 90 days or less and who resided in an emergency shelter or place not meant for human habitation immediately before entering that institution

2.1 An individual or family who will immediately lose their primary night-time residence – provided the residence will be lost within 14 days, no subsequent residence has been identified and the individual or family lacks the resources or support networks needed to obtain other permanent housing

3.1 Unaccompanied youth under 25, or families with children and youth, who do not otherwise quality as homeless under this definition but who: are defined as homeless under the other listed federal statues; have not had a lease, ownership interest or occupancy agreement in permanent housing during the 60 days prior to the homeless assistance application; have experienced persistent instability as measured by two moves or more during the preceding 60 days and can be expected to continue in such status for an extended period of time due to special needs or barriers

4.1 Any individual or family who is fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence, has no other residence and lacks the resources or support networks to obtain other permanent housing

Table 1: Typologies of Homelessness

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">Europe (ETHOS)</th><th colspan="3">Canada (CHRN)</th><th colspan="2">US (HUD)</th></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">1.Roofless</td><td>1</td><td>1. Unsheltered</td><td>1.1</td><td>1.2</td><td rowspan="3">1. Literally homeless</td><td>1.1</td></tr>
<tr><td>2</td><td>2. Emergency sheltered</td><td>2.1</td><td>2.3</td><td rowspan="2">1.2</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="5">2. Houseless</td><td>3</td><td>3. Provisionally accommodated</td><td>3.1</td><td>3.3</td></tr>
<tr><td>4</td><td>2. Emergency sheltered</td><td colspan="2">2.2</td><td>4. Fleeing domestic violence</td><td>4.1</td></tr>
<tr><td>5</td><td rowspan="2">3. Provisionally accommodated</td><td colspan="2">3.5</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>6</td><td colspan="2">3.4</td><td>1. Literally homeless</td><td>1.3</td></tr>
<tr><td>7</td><td colspan="3"></td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">3. Insecure</td><td>8</td><td>3. Provisionally accommodated</td><td colspan="2">3.2</td><td>3. Other status</td><td>3.1</td></tr>
<tr><td>9</td><td rowspan="5">4. At risk of homelessness</td><td colspan="2" rowspan="2">4.1</td><td>2. Imminent risk</td><td>2.1</td></tr>
<tr><td>10</td><td colspan="2" rowspan="4"></td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">4. Inadequate</td><td>11</td><td colspan="2"></td></tr>
<tr><td>12</td><td colspan="2">4.2</td></tr>
<tr><td>13</td><td colspan="2">4.1</td></tr>
</table>

Definitions and Typologies

The definition of homelessness used in ETHOS is as follows:

> There are three domains which constitute a 'home', the absence of which can be taken to delineate homelessness. Having a home can be understood as: having an adequate dwelling (or space) over which a person and his/her family can exercise exclusive possession (*physical domain*); being able to maintain privacy and enjoy relations (*social domain*) and having a legal title to occupation (*legal domain*) (FEANTSA, 2007).

This definition emphasizes the importance of a place of residence by placing it at the centre of the definition. It is important to note that the word *housing* is not used in the European definition; rather, the definition uses the word 'home',[3] a broader and more subjective word. Home is unpacked into three domains: physical, social and legal. Compared to the Canadian definition (see below), the most significant difference between these two understandings of residence is the social domain.

The ETHOS typology contains four overarching conceptual categories of homelessness: roofless; houseless; insecure; and inadequate. These four conceptual categories are broken into 13 operational categories, ranging from 'people living rough' to 'people living in extreme over-crowing' (FEANTSA, 2007).

Tellingly, ETHOS is available in 25 languages; FEANTSA hopes that this definition will be adopted and used across Europe so as to facilitate the accurate comparison of homelessness in EU Member States. Indeed, ETHOS is intended to provide for "a common 'language' for transnational exchanges on homelessness… it is used for different purposes – as a framework for debate, for data collection purposes, for policy purposes, monitoring purposes, and in the media" (FEANTSA, 2011b). The typology is useful even if it is not explicitly used in the data-gathering exercises (as is often the case), as it can be applied to research and homeless counts after they are completed. This allows for a detailed breakdown and comparison of homelessness across countries. The European Observatory on Homelessness recently did this in its 2014 update to statistics on homelessness across Europe (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014).

The Canadian Homelessness Research Network (CHRN) definition is increasingly used in homelessness plans and research across Canada (Gaetz *et al.*, 2014; Turner, 2015a; Latimer *et al.*, 2015). According to the CHRN:

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[3] Even in the French version of the definition, the English word 'home' is often noted in quotation marks beside the word *logement*.

> Homelessness describes the situation of an individual or family without stable, permanent, appropriate housing, or the immediate prospect, means and ability of acquiring it. It is the result of systemic or societal barriers, a lack of affordable and appropriate housing, the individual/household's financial, mental, cognitive, behavioural or physical challenges, and/or racism and discrimination. Most people do not choose to be homeless, and the experience is generally negative, unpleasant, stressful and distressing (CHRN, 2012).

This definition revolves entirely around housing: stable and appropriate, *permanent* housing. The emphasis on permanence makes the definition relatively broad by including people who do not have rights to their housing, such as people who are living in rooming houses without a lease or couch surfers. The importance of privacy and a space for social relations, a part of the ETHOS definition, is not a part of the Canadian understanding of housing.

The Canadian definition of homelessness includes a four-part typology: unsheltered homeless; sheltered homeless; provisionally accommodated; and at risk of homelessness. These conceptual categories are broken into 12 operational categories ranging from rough sleepers to people who are at imminent risk of becoming homeless. The top of the spectrum is very detailed and precise, whereas the 'at risk' end of the spectrum is relatively vague and, as a result, can be more difficult to operationalize. Overall, this typology is very similar to ETHOS, though it is less detailed towards the 'at risk' end of the spectrum.

HUD does not have a definition of homelessness. Rather, there are four categories in its typology: literally homeless; at imminent risk of homelessness; homeless under other federal statutes; and fleeing/attempting to flee domestic violence (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2015). The four categories are broken into six operational categories. Though HUD does not have a conceptual definition of homelessness, it does pay significant attention to chronic homelessness, which it defines as "someone who has experienced homelessness for a year or longer, or who has experienced a least four episodes of homelessness in the last three years and has a disability" (Department of Housing and Urban Development 2013; National Alliance to End Homelessness 2015).

The conceptual categories do not all line up when they are compared side-by-side in Table 1. The CHRN is the only typology to make a conceptual distinction between people who are living rough (outdoors) and people who are living or staying in emergency accommodation. It is not clear that this conceptual differentiation makes a significant difference to homeless counts, as operational categories can still be compared against one another.

More important than these conceptual differences, however, is the patchiness of the HUD typology, particularly when compared to ETHOS. The conceptualization of homelessness is much narrower in the United States than it is in Canada or Europe, with important groups of people who experience extreme housing instability being completely overlooked. Indeed, hidden homeless people, such as couch surfers or people who exchange sex for shelter, remain completely hidden. The HUD typology is not just narrow; it is also highly specific. For most operational categories, more than one requirement must be met in order for the person to be considered homeless. This is particularly the case in the middle of the spectrum, where individuals must completely exhaust their personal network of support before being considered homeless.

These definitions and typologies are used in many homeless counts; in Canada, for example, Montréal's recent homeless count used the CHRN definition and typology of homelessness (Latimer *et al.*, 2015). The CHRN definition and typology have also been fully integrated into the recent counts in seven Albertan cities (Turner, 2015a; b). Though increasingly common, the CHRN definition has not yet been fully adopted by cities such as Toronto and Vancouver that have been conducting counts for a long time. Like ETHOS, it is still useful in such cities, however, as it can be applied to counts and data after the fact to make a breakdown of the numbers comparable, notably in terms of sheltered and unsheltered homelessness.

As the above has demonstrated, definitions and typologies of homelessness are different across Europe and North America. The content of the three typologies reviewed above is similar, notably towards the top of the table. The conceptual categories tend to be more inclusive in ETHOS than they are in the CHRN typology; indeed, the broadest typology of homelessness is ETHOS and the most limited is the typology advanced by HUD (CHRN is more comparable to ETHOS than it is to HUD). The differences between the typologies, such as the operational categories that are or are not included, have important consequences – notably for who is counted in homeless counts and who is targeted for intervention by government policy (a full analysis of the latter is beyond the scope of this paper).

The following section presents details of the methodologies used in New York, Montréal, Brussels and Denmark. These case studies show how these methodologies translate into actual counts and allow for a comparison between the common PiT Count methodology (and the different forms it can take) and a much different methodology: the service-provider approach used in Denmark. This section concludes that great attention must be paid to the details of the methodology before comparisons between and even within countries can be made. Indeed, even counts that look very similar on the surface, such as those in New York and Montréal, must still be compared with caution.

New York

The City of New York has been conducting annual street homeless counts since 2003. The count takes place on streets and in subway stations every year at the end of January.[4] Volunteers begin the count at 12: 15am and must finish by 4: 00am. Decoys are sent to some of the zones that are covered by the volunteers. The city uses the known locations and random sampling methods, making it one of the most sophisticated counts in the USA.

The city extrapolates from the number of people found in the randomly selected low-zones to the rest of the city, and makes a further adjustment based on the number of decoys who were found. As a result, around 50 percent of the final result comes from this random sampling. For example, in 2006, the final number of unsheltered homeless people in Brooklyn was 778. Volunteers canvassed all of the 116 high-zones as well as 91 randomly selected low-zones (out of a total of 1,605 low-zones). In the 207 zones that were covered, 90 unsheltered homeless individuals were 'actually counted': 54 in the high zones and 36 in the low-zones (The Department of Homeless Services, 2006).

Extrapolating from the number of people actually counted in the low-zones, the city concluded that throughout the 1,605 total low-zones in Brooklyn, there were approximately 635 unsheltered homeless people. A further 85 people were added to the count based on the quality assurance adjustment (decoys) to give a total of 720 unsheltered homeless people in the low-zones in Brooklyn. The 54 people found in the high-zones were all included in the final Brooklyn count, and an additional four were added based on calculations relating to the decoys for a grand Brooklyn total of 778. The 2006 report is the only one to present the detailed breakdown of the numbers in this way.

Volunteers in New York are instructed to approach everyone they meet on the streets and ask the screening question: "Do you have some place that you consider your home or a place where you live?" If the person is identified as homeless, there is a very brief questionnaire to administer, including questions regarding veteran status and ethnicity (white, black, Hispanic, Asian/Indian/Pacific Islander/Unsure/Other).

New York City's count is explicitly a 'street' count; the hidden homeless are not included and the sheltered homeless are counted through a difference process. Of the three PiT Count methodologies reviewed here, the New York methodology is the most sophisticated but the definition is the most narrow. This methodology is not, however, as elaborate as Denmark's service-provider approach, reviewed below.

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4 Due to extreme weather conditions at the end of January 2015, the count was rescheduled for February 9, 2015.

Montréal

Montréal conducted its first PiT Count at the end of March 2015. The count surveyed streets, shelters, transitional housing services, some restaurants, metro stations and day centres; the street and shelter count took place on March 24, 2015 between 8:00pm[5] and midnight. A further two-day count of hidden homelessness took place in day centres and soup kitchens from 8: 00am – 6: 00pm on March 25 and 26.

The PiT methodology for the street and shelter count on the 24th was a combination of known locations and full coverage of a broadly defined downtown core. Random sampling was not used. Almost all emergency shelters, including those for women and for families affected by violence, participated in the sheltered homeless count. All homeless-serving day centres were asked to participate in the count of the hidden homeless population on the 25th and 26th, and the majority agreed to participate.

Over 1,000 volunteers were involved in the count. They were instructed to ask screening questions to everyone they saw on the street or, for those who were in shelters or day services during the two-day hidden homelessness count, present in the resource during the count. Screening questions were designed to capture the hidden homeless population, such as people living without a lease in a rooming house. A two-page questionnaire (available in English and in French) was administered to homeless people who were admissible and who consented to participate; the questionnaire contained questions pertaining to housing history and demographic information, as well as sources of income.

Shelters either internally administered the survey (which was most commonly done in the case of shelters for women or people fleeing violence) or welcomed teams of volunteers to administer the survey. Participation in the survey was voluntary for shelter users, but shelters also provided information regarding their total occupancy on the night of the count, including their approximate age, gender and ethnicity, as well as the number of people they had to turn away (refusals). The count used 50 decoys as a quality assurance mechanism.

The count included rough sleepers but also people with no fixed address or people who listed a shelter as their address in hospitals, prisons, and alcohol and drug rehabilitation centres. A significant effort was also made to contact rehabilitation centres that were not located within Montréal, but where people from Montréal are known to go. These services provided information regarding the number of people with no fixed address, but from Montréal, who were with them on March 24th. These services were included in the count because community members see them as an

5 A small number of teams surveying in shelters started much earlier at the request of shelter operators.

extension of Montréal's homeless serving system. It was not possible to administer the questionnaire in these institutions; this portion of the street count was therefore strictly an enumeration.

The definition of homelessness used in the Montréal count followed the CHRN typology of homelessness and was much broader than is the norm[6] in the Canadian context as it also included hidden homelessness. In the final report, there is a very detailed breakdown of the results for the different types of homelessness. This allows for a comparison of particular types of homelessness across different cities without being affected by the inclusion of hidden homelessness.

Brussels

Homeless counts have been taking place in Brussels every two years since 2008. The count takes place over one hour between 11: 00pm and midnight in October. The count is a street count; shelters and resources are not included in the count itself. Reports of the count, written in French, do not reference the PiT methodology, but the methodology is in fact very similar. The 2010 report, for example, says that the streets were canvassed through a "one night blitz" (La Strada, 2011, p.8) and further notes that it is a "snapshot, at a moment in time" (My translation; La Strada, 2011, p.10).

The zones that are canvassed by volunteers are selected based on community expertise regarding the parts of the city where homeless people are known to sleep: in essence, the known locations approach. Services such as shelters and long-term housing for formerly homeless people are also included in the count. There is no questionnaire administered on the night of the count; rather, teams of surveyors are given a tally sheet to fill out. This tally sheet asks surveyors to mark down the exact location of the person, the time the person was found, the person's sex and approximate age. The final report by La Strada makes explicit reference to the ETHOS typology, noting that the count in Brussels includes 6 of the 13 operational categories of homelessness.

The week before the count there is a pre-survey with rough-sleepers that involves a questionnaire that is administered to approximately 90 people. The pre-survey is intended to complement the count by gathering demographic information from a small subset of the homeless population. The survey includes a small amount of demographic information (age and sex) but focuses mostly on where the person usually sleeps. For example, there is a map of the city of Brussels and the person is asked to identify the neighbourhood where he or she usually sleeps.

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6 Edmonton, a mid-sized Canadian city in Alberta, also measures hidden homelessness in this way.

Denmark

There have been bi-annual national homeless counts across Denmark since 2007. The counts take place over the course of one week, as they do in other Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Norway. In addition to the count week in Denmark, homelessness has been tracked though a national client registration system since 1999. Some observers consider Denmark to have the most sophisticated and detailed information about its homeless population in Europe (Busch-Geertsema *et al.,* 2014).

Rather than gathering data through the PiT methodology, local actors, including service providers and government social service offices, are asked to fill out a two-page questionnaire for each homeless person they are in contact with or for each person they are aware of who is homeless during the week of the count. Local actors include emergency shelters, of course, but also include job centres and drop-in cafés (Benjaminsen and Juul, 2009). The emphasis is therefore not just on emergency shelters and the approach allows the counts also to capture hidden, episodic and transitional homelessness. A challenge of this methodology can be ensuring the participation of local service providers, though it has recently been reported that "the data are generally of high quality and there is a high response rate from local services, especially from important services, including shelters and municipal social centres" (Busch-Geertsema *et al.*, 2014, p.32).

People experiencing homelessness, especially chronically, are likely to have been in contact with multiple service providers. To avoid double counting, service providers include personal information such as initials and birthdates, as well as a client number if possible. Questionnaires are then compared and cross-referenced so that doubles can be removed.

The Danish count is broad in its definition and includes not just the roofless category of homelessness but the hidden types of homelessness as well. It makes explicit reference to ETHOS and includes rough sleepers, users of emergency night shelters, hostel users, people sleeping in hotels due to homelessness, people staying temporarily with family and friends, people in transitional housing, institutional releases from prisons, and institutional releases from hospitals/treatment centres (Benjaminsen and Juul, 2009). Of the methodologies reviewed here, the definition used in the Danish count is but also captures the most broad and the methodology is the most elaborate.

Discussion

As the above has demonstrated, there is a strong convergence of the methodology used to count the homeless population in North America; Canada and the USA have both officially adopted the PiT Count methodology. There will still be differences between cities, such as the use of random sampling, which should be considered in any comparisons, but the overall logic and structure of North American counts are very similar. The definitions of homelessness used in the two countries are significantly different, however, with Canada using a broader definition of homelessness while the American definition is much more targeted and narrow. These differences should not affect the comparability of the results, however, as the types of homelessness that are included in the counts can be broken into operational categories and compared. In other words, the final results of Canadian and American counts cannot always be directly compared, but comparisons of the different types of homelessness can be easily compared thanks to the typology. In a similar way, ETHOS has helped to render counts across Europe more comparable by allowing for a comparison of specific types of homelessness; some counts, including the two reviewed here, make explicit reference to ETHOS. The methodologies used, however, remain very different and make accurate comparisons problematic.

North America

Careful attention must be paid to differences when comparing North American cities, even when they use the PiT methodology. As a comparison of Montréal and New York illustrates, the way in which the zones are selected, the definition of who is considered homeless, and how the data is ultimately presented are the most important considerations for any comparison of North American cities. For example, as noted above, approximately 50 percent of the final number of homeless people in New York comes from the extrapolation of randomly sampled zones. This causes two complications. First, it suggests that other cities that do not randomly sample are potentially missing a significant number of people who are homeless and sleeping outside, making their overall number much smaller than it should be. Perhaps there is a much higher than normal distribution of homelessness throughout the entire city of New York than there is in other cities. In other words, if Montréal did random sampling, it does not necessarily follow that this would result in a twofold increase in its final number. But without using the same method, there is no way of knowing for sure.

The second complication is that not all cities use the data from the randomly sampled zones in the same way. New York extrapolates from the randomly selected zones, but not all cities do. Toronto is the only Canadian city to use random sampling; in 2006 and 2009, the city adjusted the final number by

extrapolating from the randomly selected zones. The city abandoned this practice in 2013 after further consultation indicated that it was not necessary or appropriate (City of Toronto, 2006; 2009; 2013). The data from New York and Toronto, though using the exact same method of random sampling, are treated differently in the analysis; this different treatment must at least be acknowledged in any comparison, as the final number in New York will be higher than it is in Toronto as a result of this extrapolation.

To be prudent, therefore, counts must report where people were counted and why zones were canvassed in the first place. The 2006 breakdown in New York is an excellent example of this detailed reporting and should be reinstituted immediately and provided, if possible, for past counts as well. The City of Toronto was consistently detailed in its reporting of the 2006, 2009 and 2013 counts, as was Montréal in 2015. If the breakdown of count results is detailed and complete, the homeless count in New York can effectively be compared to those conducted in other North American cities.

At the time of writing, there also are important differences in terms of the timing of homeless counts in North America, particularly in Canada (HUD has mandated that counts take place in the last week of January). The time of year of a count is important, as weather affects homelessness and where people sleep; for example, some cold cities in Canada and the United States open extra shelter spaces in the winter to encourage people to sleep inside during especially cold months (The Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2012a; b). Since 2006, Toronto has conducted its count every three or four years in April. Montréal conducted its count at the end of March, whereas Calgary and other Albertan cities conducted their counts in October. Different seasons and different temperatures will likely change at least the number of people sleeping rough, due to cold Canadian winters. Over the course of the next few years, federal stipulations regarding PiT Counts should result in a convergence in terms of the timing of counts in cities across Canada. This will increase the comparability of cities within Canada and, if counts are to be conducted in January as internal reports suggest will be the case, with the United States as well.

Europe

The two European cases reviewed here, Brussels and Denmark, are in some respects aligned with the categories of homelessness that are included in their counts, though Denmark goes farther than Brussels by including hidden homelessness as well. The methodologies, however, are dramatically different; Brussels uses a limited PiT Count methodology (though it is supplemented with a pre-count survey), whereas Denmark uses an elaborate and rigorous service-provider approach.

The Danish methodology has a number of strengths over the traditional PiT Count, increasing the overall validity and accuracy of the final number. First, the Danish approach takes advantage of the existing knowledge of front line service providers who see and work every day with people who are experiencing homelessness. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many people feel stigmatized when they identify themselves as homeless, or they might even feel threatened (as is often the case for women and young people). As a result, in North American PiT Counts, many people might not define or identify themselves as homeless; the service-provider methodology avoids this complication by conducting the count in a discreet and anonymous way.

By not just targeting shelters, but also day and employment centres, the count is able to account for people who experience homelessness in its various forms – not just chronic but also episodic and, importantly, hidden. PiT Counts tend to over-represent the chronically homeless simply because they spend more time in shelters or on the street. Further, by giving service providers a full week to fill out questionnaires for people experiencing homelessness, this approach allows them to capture more people – including, importantly, those who are experiencing homelessness for the first time – than the methodology used in Brussels, which takes place over one single hour. As a result of these methodological factors, the final number of people experiencing homelessness is likely larger than it would be if Danish cities such as Copenhagen did a strict PiT Count.

Brussels, using the PiT methodology, does not rely on such deep service-provider knowledge, though the participation of shelters results in an accurate estimation of the sheltered population. The street portion of the count, however, relies on the ability of volunteer canvassers to find people who are sleeping rough, and further requires that they do so in one hour. The zones are created based on the existing knowledge of community partners, but if a person has changed sleeping locations or is simply not in the spot when the team passes, he or she will not be included. The Danish approach avoids this common limitation of the PiT methodology.

In so far as services are involved, notably shelters and welcome halls, Copenhagen and Brussels are comparable. But for people sleeping rough and the hidden homeless, the methods are simply too different to allow for an accurate comparison. Denmark can, however, be easily compared with other Scandinavian countries who use the same service-oriented approach, and Brussels can be compared with other cities that do PiT Counts, both in Europe and across the Atlantic. For the purposes of comparability, the methodology is more important than the definition; as a result, the final numbers of homelessness in Brussels and Copenhagen are very difficult to compare.

Trans-Atlantic Comparisons

For the purposes of comparability, the methodology is more important than the definition. As a result, the final numbers of homeless people in Brussels and Copenhagen are very difficult to compare, whereas North American cities, which share a very similar methodology but not definition, can be more easily compared through post-count analysis.

Cities across North America and Europe, or even within the continents, will likely never agree on the question of who, exactly, is homeless. There is considerable trans-Atlantic agreement regarding the first few categories of homelessness, as Table 1 clearly shows. Beyond rough sleepers and those staying in emergency accommodation, however, there is disagreement. The typologies are tremendously useful in this sense. Cities do not need to agree on which categories to include; they just need to be rigorous and transparent in reporting the results of the count. Simply presenting one final result is as misleading for the general public as it is damaging for comparisons.

Having a common definition of homelessness, however, is not enough. For example, the definitions of homelessness in Denmark and Montréal were remarkably similar, in that both sought to enumerate the hidden homeless population. The service-provider method used in Denmark, however, is significantly different and much more effective than the PiT Count methodology used in Montréal. Because of deep methodological differences, comparisons of hidden homelessness are nearly impossible between these two cities. A comparison of different types of homelessness is easier; both cities canvassed emergency resources, for example, and have detailed quantitative and qualitative information regarding that population. Cross-Atlantic comparisons of specific populations, as Benjaminsen and Andrade (2014) have done for shelter users in the United States and Denmark, will be most fruitful.

It is unclear that other cities will move towards the Danish approach, strong though it is. Indeed, where there is convergence, it is towards the PiT methodology. There is a concern in North America, notably in Montréal, for the anonymity and privacy of people experiencing homelessness, and there is at time of writing no useful mechanism for sharing information about homeless individuals between services and government institutions. During the development of Montréal's PiT Count, service providers often expressed an unwillingness to give personal information to count organizers without the consent of the individuals experiencing homelessness. As PiT Counts become increasingly common, the Danish and Scandinavian model will likely become the outliers. For countries and cities that do use the PiT Count methodology, however, transatlantic comparisons will become more feasible. Attention will still need to be paid to the details of the methodology and the definition that is being used.

Conclusion

This article has presented and compared the definitions and typologies of homelessness used in Canada, the United States and Europe. It has further compared how homelessness is enumerated in New York City, Montréal, Brussels and Denmark. Where there are differences in the definition of homelessness, typologies can be used to render a breakdown of results comparable. As there is significant similarity at the top of Table 1 relating to sheltered and unsheltered homelessness, typologies for these categories can be used in different countries for the purposes of comparing results. For example, the ETHOS typology can be applied to the results of Montréal's homeless count and the CHRN definition can be applied to the results from Brussels.

Methodologies are much more difficult to align. Where methodologies are radically different, overall comparisons cannot reasonably be made. Differences in the details of these methodologies, such as using random sampling, can result in potentially significantly different final numbers, so attention must always be paid to the details. To help with comparability, reports that present the final results of the count must be clear about who exactly was counted, where the person was counted, and why. While this will not necessarily allow for an overall comparison of the results, it does allow for a comparison of different subsets of the homeless population.

Policy-makers and researchers can still be informed by tracking the results of methodologies that are not similar to their own; actors in Denmark might be interested to learn, for example, about trends that are discovered in other countries or cities that use the PiT Count. These cross-Atlantic comparisons are very valuable for policy-makers, as it can allow them to monitor trends and the effects of policies in different environments. It further allows for a larger pool of best practices from which to draw solutions.

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