

National Survey on the Homeless Population in Brazil: giving a face to homelessness and formulating strategies and policies to address homelessness

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Abstract:

National Survey on the Homeless Population in Brazil was designed with the objective of quantifying and investigating the socioeconomic characteristics of homeless people, with the main focus on the formulation of public policies aimed at this population. The target population of the research was composed of people over 18 years-old living in the streets. The survey covered 71 Brazilian cities, including 23 capitals and other 48 cities with more than 300,000 citizens. As the text has shown, the results of the Survey have supported the development of the National Policy for the Homeless Population, providing many inputs for public policies in the income transfer area, as well as in the social assistance and health areas.

1. Background: from the massacre of the “Praça da Sé” to the National Survey on the Homeless Population

“On August 19, 2004 occurred a fact that will never be forgotten. An episode that became known as the Massacre of the “Praça da Sé”, where seven homeless people were brutally murdered for no reason that would justify such cowardice. The news ran the country causing great social unrest, but that was it. What could be drawn from this tragedy is the positive visibility to the large number of people living on the streets to fend for themselves without any support or protection. The Massacre of the “Praça da Sé” will always be remembered with great sadness by all of us, homeless and former homeless people, and is a milestone in our struggle for rights (...)”²

The history of the National Survey on the Homeless Population is intrinsically linked to the fight for the rights of homeless people of big cities. After the huge media coverage of the massacre at the “Praça da Sé”, the government turned its attention to this group, historically forgotten in Brazil. Until then, there were no federal public policies directed exclusively to this population, which was residually and precariously attended by some social policies³. Since 2004, there has been a confluence of actions directed to homeless people in Brazil:

- **Creation of the National Homeless Movement (2004):** this was the 1st time that the homeless population discussed their demands directly with the government and

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² NATIONAL HOMELESS MOVEMENT, 2009, p. 17.

³ GONELLI; CHAGAS, 2009, p. 223.

researchers, making the Movement a protagonist in the defense of rights for the homeless.

- **First National Meeting of the Homeless (2005):** strategies and recommendations for the formulation of public policies for this population were proposed. As a priority action, the Meeting highlighted the importance of studies to quantify and characterize the people on the streets, in order to guide the development and implementation of specific policies.
- **1st normative achievement for the homeless population (2005):** Article 23 of the Organic Law of Social Assistance was amended to add the service of assistance to homeless people (Law 11.258/2005).
- **Inter-Ministerial Working Group (2006):** coordinated by the Ministry of Social Development and composed of representatives from six other ministries, the National Homeless Movement and other institutions related to the theme, the scope was the development of public policy proposals for the homeless population, with cross-sectoral actions in the areas of social assistance, health, education, labor, justice, among others.

2. The National Survey

The initiative for the National Survey on the Homeless Population was a result of the demands of social movements, identified in the First National Meeting on Homeless Population, and the discussions of the Inter-Ministerial Working Group. On more than one occasion, the National Homeless Movement's representatives argued that a census survey would help to break the social invisibility of decades, thereby contributing to the recovery of a citizen condition, with access to basic health rights, education, social assistance, etc.

In this sense, the research was a collective construction, designed with the objective of quantifying and investigating the socioeconomic characteristics of homeless people, with the main focus on the formulation of public policies aimed at this population⁴. The target population of the research was composed of people over 18 years living in the streets⁵. The survey covered 71 Brazilian cities, including 23 capitals and other 48 cities with more than 300,000 citizens⁶. The research identified a contingent of 31,922 homeless adults in the studied municipalities, besides raising socioeconomic data of the respondents. Including the results of the counts carried out in all four capitals which were not involved in this research, we can say that in 2008 there was an amount of roughly 50 thousand homeless people⁷ in Brazil.

⁴ Through a cooperation agreement between the Ministry of Social Development and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Secretariat for Evaluation and Information Management (SAGI) launched a public selection process for the preparation of the National Survey on the Homeless Population, which was performed between 2007 and 2008 by the Meta Institute.

⁵ Homeless population is a heterogeneous population group that has in common: the extreme poverty, broken or weakened family ties and the lack of regular conventional housing, and that uses public places and degraded areas as living space and livelihood, temporarily or permanently, as well as public hostel units for temporary overnight or as temporary housing (BRAZIL, 2009).

⁶ Brazilian capitals Sao Paulo, Belo Horizonte and Recife were not surveyed because they had recently conducted similar researches. Porto Alegre requested its exclusion from the research due to the fact that it was conducting a municipal study simultaneously to the research commissioned by the MDS.

⁷ According to Sposati (2009, p. 210), "It was identified that the homeless population reached almost 50 thousand inhabitants. This amount could be achieved when adding 31,922 people located in the streets by the national census with 13,915 registered by the census in the four cities. You can extend the total of 45,837 to about

The National Survey faced several challenges that required the development of specific strategies and methodologies. An initial problem was the lack of a fixed residence and the high mobility of this population within cities. Typically, the collection of census data is performed in domiciles, so the homeless were not included. How to collect data from a homeless population? Based on the previous experience of four cities administration that had done this population count, some criteria were defined for the location and identification of homeless people. Among the specificities of this identification, there was the need to conduct fieldwork in the evening, when generally these individuals are in the place they will remain for the night. The mobility of this population, including at nighttime, requires that the information collection is done within the shortest possible time in order to minimize double counting. To facilitate the approach, the entire data collection process was performed with the participation of social movements and organizations working with the homeless population⁸.

To define the methodology, workshops were held with researchers, social assistance managers, representatives of movements and associations connected to the cause. Finally, a pre-test of the data collection forms was applied in three capitals. The training of interviewers was done with the participation of representatives of the National Homeless Movement and other associations, which explained the habits, language, approach manners, codes of conduct and characteristics of this population. Another key activity was the mapping of places where the population would remain during the night, which had the support of representatives of movements and associations working with the homeless⁹.

The research collected basic data of all interviewees and conducted a more detailed research of 10% of the population¹⁰ about the main reasons to live on the street, forms of income, time spent on the street, education, family ties, access to social programs, possession of documentation, health and hygiene conditions, among others.

The National Survey team was composed of 55 coordinators, 269 supervisors and 926 interviewers, totaling 1,250 professionals. 147 homeless or former homeless people and 86 professionals working with this population supported the fieldwork. In total, 1,483 people worked in the data collection activities. A broad effort was needed in order to locate the various places where this population lived, including sidewalks, squares, marquees, bridges, alleys, roads, ports, underground galleries, tunnels, abandoned buildings, among others. The active participation of homeless, former homeless people and social educators contributed to the proper approach of interviewees and this resulted in a small rate of refusal to answer the questionnaire (13%).

Main Results of the National Survey

- 31,922 homeless adults, which is equivalent to 0.061% of the population of the municipalities surveyed.

50,000 homeless people considering that, out of these four cities, São Paulo released records from 2003 (...) and the censuses of Recife and Belo Horizonte were from 2005.”

⁸ VEIGA, 2009, p. 17.

⁹ SILVEIRA, 2009, p. 41.

¹⁰ The field survey was census (questionnaire with 19 questions) and sample (questionnaire with 62 questions). A sample of 10.4% of the universe was selected using systematic random sampling technique (BRAZIL, 2008).

- 82% of homeless people are men.
- 53% of the interviewees are between 25 and 44 years old¹¹.
- 67% of people declared their skin colour as brown or black (this proportion is much higher among the homeless population than in the general population in Brazil – 45% – at the time of the survey).
- 76% of interviewees have always lived in the city where they live now or in nearby municipalities, contradicting the myth that people on the street are from other states / regions.
- 71% work and perform some sort of remunerated activity¹². Only 16% of interviewees asked for money as the primary means of survival (this also goes against the common perception that homeless people are composed exclusively of "beggars").
- 53% earn between US\$ 11 and US\$ 45 per week¹³.
- 2% of interviewees said they were working with a formal contract.
- 25% of homeless people do not have an identification document, making it difficult to obtain formal employment, access to government services and programs.
- Most do not have access to government programs: 89% said they did not receive any benefit from the government. Among the received benefits, the following were highlighted: retirement (3%), Bolsa Família Program (2%) and the Continuous Welfare Benefit for the Elderly and Disabled (1%).
- 64% have not completed the 1st educational grade; 95% were not studying at the time of the survey.

3. Outcomes of the National Survey

The research created an objective and detailed picture of the homeless population in Brazil, contributing to the formulation of specific strategies and policies, more adherent to the reality experienced by this group. With access to more information about the social conditions, characteristics of these people, this research could help create strategies for reducing prejudice by society. Deconstructing the myth that homeless people are “people who come from far away, do nothing, are only asking for money” is a key step to give to these people the dignity and rights of Brazilian citizens.

After the research, several actions were promoted aimed at homeless people. In 2009, article 60 of Decree-Law 3.688/1941 was revoked, which considered begging a misdemeanor, subject to imprisonment of 15 days to 3 months¹⁴. Afterwards, Decree 7.053/2009 established the

¹¹ Only people with 18 years of age or more were interviewed.

¹² Of these activities, we highlight: recyclable materials collector (27.5%), car washers (14.1%), construction workers (6.3%), cleaning (4.2%) and porter / stevedore (3.1%).

¹³ Reference: US dollar exchange rate in Brazil in January 2008.

¹⁴ Law 11.983/2009 revoked the Decree-Law above.

National Policy for the Homeless Population, which seeks to guarantee various rights to this segment, especially:

- Ensure broad, simplified and secure access to public health policies, education, social security, social assistance, housing, security, culture, sports, leisure, work and income;
- Provide access for homeless people to social security benefits, social assistance and income transfer programs;
- Implement specialized reference centers for assistance for homeless populations, under the Special Protection of the Unified Social Assistance System.

The results of the National Survey were also used to improve the **Unified Registry for Social Programs**, a strategic tool for mapping and identifying low-income families¹⁵ living in Brazil. Besides the Bolsa Família Program, more than twenty social programs select beneficiaries on the basis of information contained in the Unified Registry¹⁶. In 2009, the **Supplementary Form 2**, exclusively directed to homeless people, was finalized for conducting interviews for the Unified Registry. The National Survey supported the elaboration of the questions of the Supplementary Form 2, as well as its use in the interviewees' training activities, with a specific class in order to explain the differentiated registration process and educate participants on this matter. Some examples of specific questions for homeless people in the Unified Registry:

Where do you usually sleep?

- 1 - Street - How many times a week?
- 2 - Public hostel - How many times a week?
- 3 - Private house - How many times a week?
- 4 - Others - How many times in the week?

What are the main reasons for you to live in the street?

- 1- Loss of housing
- 2 - Threat / violence
- 3 - Problems with family
- 4 - Alcoholism / drugs
- 5 - Unemployment
- 6 - Work
- 7 - Health treatment
- 8 - Preference / own option
- 9 - Other

How long have you lived in the street?

- 1- Up to six months.
- 2 - Between six months and a year.
- 3 - Between one and two years.
- 4 - Between two and five years.

¹⁵ Low-income families are those that survive on a monthly income of up to one half of a minimum wage per capita or on a total of three minimum wages per family.

¹⁶ In January 2019, there were more than 23 million low-income families in the Unified Registry, which corresponds to over 74 million people registered (around 35% of the total population of Brazil).

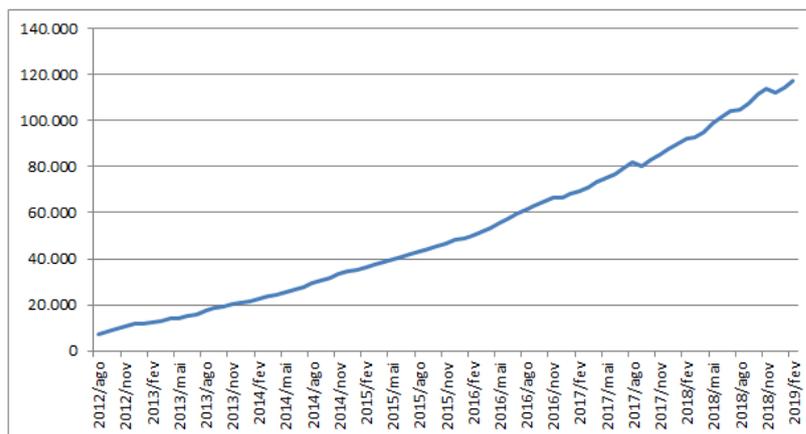
- 5 - Between five and ten years.
- 6 - More than ten years.

What do you do to earn money?

- 1 - Bricklayer
- 2 - Car guard
- 3 - Stevedore
- 4 - Collector of recyclable material
- 5 - General services / cleaning / other
- 6 - Ask for money
- 7 - Sales
- 8 - Other
- 9 - Did not respond

In the last seven years, the number of homeless families included in the Unified Registry has increased about sixteen times: from 7,368 families in August/2012 to 117,327 families in February/2019 (Graphic 1). It is important to highlight that 98% of homeless families in the Unified Registry are single-person¹⁷.

Graphic 1 - Homeless families in the Unified Registry – 2012 to 2019



Source: Social Information Matrix, SAGI.

After more than ten years, the results of the National Survey are reflected in the homeless people data in the Unified Registry¹⁸: 89% are male, 87% sleep on the streets or in Public Hostels, 67% are brown or black. According to the Unified Registry, the main reasons to live on the street are: problems with family (27%), unemployment (23%), problems with alcohol or other drugs (19%), loss of housing (13%).

Bolsa Família Program is the largest conditional cash transfer program in Brazil, attending more than 14 million families in poverty and extreme poverty¹⁹ in April/2019. The Brazilian Federal Government makes monthly transfers of financial resources to beneficiary families, which, in

¹⁷ The Unified Registry has as the basic unit of reference the family, being allowed the possibility of single-person households, that is, composed of only one person.

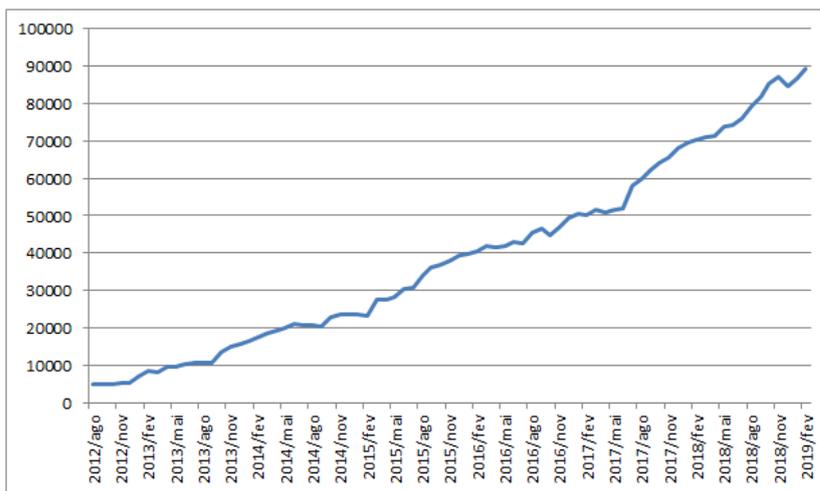
¹⁸ FRUTUOSO, 2018.

¹⁹ For Bolsa Família Program, the concepts are defined as follows:

- Poverty: per capita income bellow circa US\$ 44
- Extreme poverty: per capita income bellow circa US\$ 22 (Reference: April/2019)

turn, fulfill commitments in the areas of health and education²⁰. In the last seven years, the number of homeless families in the Bolsa Família Program has increased more than eighteen times: from 4,789 families in August/2012 to 89,485 families in February/2019 (Graphic 2). Nowadays, 76% of the homeless people included in the Unified Registry receive benefits from the Bolsa Família Program²¹.

Graphic 2 - Homeless families in the Bolsa Família Program – 2012 to 2019



Source: Social Information Matrix, SAGI.

Specialized Social Assistance services are provided for homeless people, such as social approach and hosting services. Between 2011 and 2017, the number of **Specialized Centers for the Homeless Populations (Pop Centers)** more than doubled: from 90 to 227 units. Since the registration of homeless families in the Unified Registry is done in conjunction with the Social Assistance area in the municipalities, it is possible to relate the expansion of Pop Centers to the higher number of registered families²²: in the last four years, Pop Centers have included in the Unified Registry around one thousand families per month, on average. In December/2018, social service in Pop Centers attended almost 30 thousand homeless people (Graphic 3). Of these, 49% were drug users, 29% were migrants and 6% had mental disorders.

Graphic 3- Monthly service to homeless people in Pop Centers – 2014 to 2018

²⁰ The commitments in the healthcare area are:
 - Vaccination, monitoring the growth of children under seven years of age
 - Women between 14 and 44 years old who are pregnant or nursing must undergo prenatal care and monitor the health of the baby
 In education:
 - Children and adolescents (aged 6 to 15 years): monthly minimum attendance of 85%
 - Students (aged 16 to 17 years): monthly minimum attendance of at least 75%

²¹ Some homeless people in the Unified Registry have too high income to receive benefits from the Bolsa Família Program.

²² BRASIL, 2014.



Source: Monthly Registry of Attendance of the Unified Social Assistance System.

Homeless population in Brazil also accesses the **Continuous Welfare Benefit for the Elderly and Disabled**, a benefit that ensures a monthly transfer of one minimum wage for people aged 65 or over, and for people of any age with disabilities who can prove that they have no means of supporting themselves or being supported by their families²³. To be eligible for the benefit, it is not necessary for a person to have contributed to the Social Security system. According to the Unified Registry, in February 2019 there were almost 7 thousand homeless people receiving the benefit.

In 2011, the Ministry of Health started the operation of the **Street Health Post**, in order to deal with different problems and health needs of the homeless population. The Street Health Posts are composed of professionals from various fields (doctors, psychologists, social workers, etc.). The activities of these teams are performed on-site, in an itinerant manner, including active searching and assistance to alcohol, crack and other drugs users. The most frequent health problems among the homeless population are:

- Chronic diseases
- Consumption and addiction of alcohol and drugs
- Oral health
- Tuberculosis
- AIDS
- High risk pregnancy
- Foot problems

The main causes of hospitalization are:

- Use of psychoactive substances (alcohol, crack and other drugs),
- Respiratory problems
- External causes (accidents and violence).

According to the Ministry of Health, 144 Street Health Posts are already operating in Brazil²⁴, and the homeless population can access the Brazilian National Health System without proof of residence, an old request of the Homeless Movement.

²³ In order to qualify for the benefit the applicant must prove that his or her monthly family income is under $\frac{1}{4}$ of the minimum wage.

²⁴ Reference: August/2017.

4. Final Considerations

As the text has shown, the Survey has supported the development of the National Policy for the Homeless Population in Brazil, providing many inputs for public policies in the income transfer area, as well as in the social assistance and health areas: 144 Street Health Posts, 227 Pop Centers, 7 thousand homeless people in the Continuous Welfare Benefit for the Elderly and Disabled, 89 thousand in the Bolsa Família Program, 117 thousand in the Unified Registry. We know there is still much more to improve. Today, so that the massacre in “Praça da Sé” is not forgotten nor repeated, August 19th was established as the National Day of the Fight for the Homeless.

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