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Using WhatsApp for a homeless count
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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

The study analyses how the use of instant messaging (WhatsApp) alongside other ICT tools is adequate to complement the count of homeless people in an area. In particular, it describes the methodology used in order to organize the first official count of homeless people in Girona (Catalonia, Spain). Given that this is the first count of individuals experiencing homelessness in the city, it is difficult to say that it is an improvement, but it could be suggested that the app might make the future counts more efficient. Both professional and volunteers and homeless people used WhatsApp to send information. A total of 283 homeless people were detected. Results show that the usage of this application optimized the results of the count. 36.1\% of the data were obtained online. Homeless people, who were reluctant to contact directly with the professional team, used WhatsApp to communicate with them, adding up to 19.4\% of the data obtained. Results show how communication between homeless people and health and mental health services can be potentially improved with this type of application.

\section*{Homelessness}

Homelessness is a complex concept which, generally speaking, refers to the situation of extreme social exclusion which certain people suffer and which leads to significant impediments to cover their most basic necessities, including access to housing (Fitzpatrick, 1998). Both general and individual reasons determine this situation. In the former, social and urbanity policies, carried out in a particular socio-political context and the possibilities to access housing among people in risk of social exclusion (FEANTSA, 2008) stand out. In the latter, the principal reasons are related to severe socio-economic deficiencies and scarcities, such as adversity, lacks, or maltreatment during infancy, and mental issues, including addictive behavior (Shelton, Taylor, Bonner, & van den Bree, 2009).

Homelessness has a negative impact on health, leading to a rapid physical, psychological, and social deterioration, often long term (Bravo, 2003). According to the fifth edition of \textit{Diagnostic and Statistics Manual of Mental Disorders}, homelessness plays a part in the genesis of mental disorders, and in the persistence of its symptomatology (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Several limitations appear when attempting to offer reliable numbers regarding homelessness (Baptista, Benjaminsen, Plesace, & Busch-Geertsema, 2012). First, the lack of agreement around the definition of homelessness. The different criteria, used in the conceptualization of the phenomenon, determine the results (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 2014), hence the differences in the rates of homelessness in the same surroundings. The traditional definition of individuals experiencing homelessness (IEH) is a person who, not having housing, lives rough or in accommodation for the IEH. The \textit{Spanish Statistics Office} (SSO) includes the people who, in the week before the gathering of the data, were users of accommodation for the homeless, located in towns with a population bigger than 20,000 inhabitants (SSO, 2012) and slept there at least once. Those, who did not have contact with professionals or accommodation for the IEH centers, were not included in the mentioned rates.

On the other hand, the European Federation of National Organisations working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) defines an IEH as a person who has no access to or cannot keep adequate housing adapted to their personal situation and which offers a stable framework for cohabitation, either for economic reasons, other social obstacles, or due to the difficulties in leading an independent lifestyle and dealing with the requirements of running a house. Thus, the lack of housing, life in the public space or in institutions, insecure, and inadequate housing are included in the definition (FEANTSA, 2008).

The amplitude of this last definition implies other difficulties to establish reliable data regarding the count of IEH, due to the exclusion and psycho-social deterioration. This happens, above all, with the people who (a) suffer a mental health issue; (b) do not wish to or cannot accept services; (c) sleep in illegally occupied...
housing or in peripheral settlements; (d) people in risk of losing their housing but who have not informed the services; (e) people admitted to health centers or social service centers and who do not have housing when given the all-clear; (f) people in penitentiary centers, etc. in conclusion the people whose presence is not so visible in the community (Agans et al., 2014). Moreover, there exists an uneven offer of housing resources with different access criteria according to the policies of each territory, and great geographical mobility (Kasnovitz, 2005). All these facts make clear the high risk that data undervalue homelessness.

Bearing in mind these obstacles, and with the aim of creating more reliable data, counts on IEH are carried out periodically in cities worldwide. In these counts, community agents and volunteers, organized by specialized institutions, walk around the city in given days and times, carrying out a count of the IEH, including those sleeping in institutions. This methodology incorporates the knowledge of the territory of the streetwork specialists, as well as other IEH’s knowledge, which contributes to more rigorous figures, and follows the recommendations of the scientific community (Cloke, Milbourne, & Widdowfield, 2001).

This study analyzes the results of the first official count of IEH carried out in the city of Girona, in which instant messaging services, real-time geolocation applications, and on line social networks were used by professionals and IEH deploying mobile and landline devices. The main aim is to prove whether the use of certain Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) tools could avoid certain inherent difficulties to this type of counting activity, and could optimize work and improve their active participation.

## Method

### Participants

All the people of the city of Girona, defined in any of the European Typology on Homeless and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) category, are participants.

These categories correspond to living in or spending the night in any of the following situations: (a) the public space (b) IEH hostels, (c) women’s shelter accommodation or accommodation centers for immigrants, (d) accommodation with no legal sub-tenancy or under threat of eviction, (e) people living under threat of violence from partners or relatives without the possibility of changing their housing, (f) temporary structures, huts, or dwellings unfit for habitation, (g) overcrowded housing (FEANTSA, 2005).

### Procedure

Girona is located in north-west Spain. It has an area of 39.1 km² and 97,586 inhabitants according to the Catalonia Statistics Office (2016b). One sole specific shelter for IEH exists in the city, managed by a public–private consortium of the local council in agreement with entities related to the non-profit organizations working with IEH.

The shelter offers: (a) indefinite overnight stays for people receiving longer-term support due to homelessness and who are in mid-/long-term reinsertion processes (insertion center); (b) short-term night shelter, emergency attention, and reduction of damage associated to homelessness (low threshold center); (c) benefits aimed at covering basic necessities, such as food, hygiene, transport, access to Internet, telephone, cloakroom, and medication. As well as the technical, assistance, and managing staff, there is a group of volunteers offering leisure and free time activities, and an Outreach Streetwork Team (OST), formed by two professionals and a small group of volunteers, whose role is to intervene with the IEH both in the street and in certain types of unfit housing (e.g. huts or illegally occupied housing) who all work at the shelter. The OST have a high degree of knowledge of the IEH and their locations since they carry out their work on the street.

### Organization of the count of IEH

The team organizing the count was formed by the OST and members of other entities that work with IEH. The day chosen for the count was Wednesday 18 May 2016. It began at 8 pm coinciding with the closing of the food service at the shelter in order to avoid a double count as many IEH are users of the service. The end of the count was at midnight, in order to avoid disturbing the IEH because many are sleeping at that time.

The city was divided into 23 zones. The rural peripheral areas had a bigger extension, while others had a greater concentration of homelessness or a more complex typology, (such as severe mental disorders, significant relational difficulties, a criminal record for assault, or groups of intoxicated people). The IEH were informed of this activity between two to three weeks before it started. The local shelter social workers and the OST provided information to the IEH. Moreover, the snowball technique was used in order to circulate information among IEH. The regional media published the news some days before.

Two months prior to the count, the volunteers were gathered at universities, non-profit organizations, and health services. A total of 26 groups were organized, formed by between five and eight people, adding up to 192 volunteers. The volunteers were trained a week before at a training session in which the basic procedures were clearly explained. Any possible questions and doubts were dealt with. Furthermore, a written document was signed guaranteeing the confidentiality of the IEH.
Each of the teams was coordinated by a professional with the experience of attending IEH with relevant information about the identification of the IEH as part of their work is devoted to IEH and they know most of the IEH personally. The people with experience include the following: streetwork, mental health providers, or other specific services related to the population.

Each team was distributed in one of the areas. Three additional teams participated: two covering two of the most geographically extensive rural areas, whose access is specially complicated, and the other additional team, named Team Zero, centralized and coordinated communication through ICT applications. The aim of the teams was, once their area was clearly delimited, to go through the streets, squares or other open spaces and entrance halls, car parks, under staircases or other areas susceptible to be a refuge for IEH. The teams were urged not to enter occupied houses in order to avoid risks. They had to count the IEH and gather information which could be obtained at first hand, such as gender, area, origin of the individual (Indigenous vs. Immigrant or Family Descent from Migration -IFDI), if possible, by conversing with them and asking them about their IEH condition.

**Implications of ICT**

Instant messaging application, WhatsApp, was the main ICT tool chosen for the planning and design of this action. Two types of groups of WhatsApp users were formed before the beginning of the count. The first group featured the 26 coordinators of the teams who carried out the counts. The aim was to deal with any possible questions or doubts which may arise in certain situations and which require immediate response (i.e. a double count of an itinerant IEH, gathering volunteers who speak foreign languages). The second type of group was formed among the teams of volunteers who created their own groups in order to deal with aspects related to their zone in the event of possible separation, as there exist considerably large rural areas which required the subdivision of the team in order to cover it adequately.

An analysis of the necessities four weeks before the count detected the IEH’s reluctance to allow volunteers to visit their occupied houses, afraid of any possible consequences, such as eviction on the grounds of illegal occupation. Several IEH lived in all the houses, and there was at least one person owning a telephone with Internet connection. Therefore, a count of all the IEH, who were occupying houses illegally and had a mobile phone and Internet access, was carried out in virtue of the possibility of communication with the Zero Team. The member of OST selected an IEH guide/mentor in each house after ensuring that they had WhatsApp. Then they were urged to send at a given time the data of the total number of IEH in every house concerning gender and nationality. Every guide/mentor was given a written document with the instructions to follow. Tests were carried out the week before the count, and IEH were guaranteed maximum confidentiality about the data. The messages, which the Zero Team received, were checked exclusively by the main investigator of this paper, who codified the gender and precedence of the IEH without revealing their identity and the location of the house in which they lived. The other investigators had access to this data via an SPSS file in which each subject was given a numeric code.

The list of occupied houses of the OST database was contrasted with the area of citizen proximity of the Local Police so as to optimize information. The OST and the Local Police work coordinately in issues which concern the community. The Local Police patrol the streets regularly gathering highly valuable information regarding the IEH and their location. The Local Police were of great help in the process of verifying that no occupied house was left uncounted.

Two real-time geolocation applications, linked to the Smartphones of the coordinators of the 26 teams, were used: Glympse – Share GPS and Google +. For the latter, a new profile for those who did not have one was created, with the aim of supporting the teams and optimizing specific location and delimiting each area, so as to avoid any possible zone overlapping. Additionally, two IEH collaborated with the organization team, as well as several people with a good command of the predominant IFDI languages, i.e. Arabic, Berber, Romanian, and Russian. These volunteers were accessible through the mentioned applications in case their presence as cultural mediators was required in any of the zones in the city.

**Coordination among services**

The OST informed all the institutions that could provide data of the IEH according to ETHOS classification weeks before the count. Thus, different agents of the field of social work and education, in hospitals, psychiatry emergency centers, A&E in hospitals, religious services, mid-/long-stay socio-sanitary centers, police offices, penitentiary centers, centers for the attention of women who were victims of domestic violence, therapeutic communities, and owners of private economic pensions were invited to partake in the count and were asked to provide a report on the chosen day of the count or the following morning. These institutions were told to count and send the total number of IEH, their gender, and their condition of Indigenous/IFDI. No special written form was provided to them, as it was not considered necessary on the grounds of the simplicity of the data. Conversely, there was great emphasis on the meaning of the concept of homelessness according to the definition of the FEANTSA, and
the services that required it were given a printed document with the definition. Several means of contact were readily available for this purpose: mobile phone number and e-mail address among others.

**Design and measures**

Transversal and observational study. Tests were carried out with the use of contingency tables in order to determine whether there existed differences concerning gender, origin, or surroundings in which the IEH spent the night at the time of the count.

**Results**

**About the organization**

The count was postponed from the 18th to the 25th of May 2016 due to bad weather. WhatsApp was used as the main means of communication to inform people about the cancelation of the count and its new date. Approximately 30 minutes after the decision was taken, all participants, including users, had been informed about the cancellation of the event. A total of 158 volunteers participated in the count, as well as three professionals.

**Persons experiencing homeless count and living situation**

The count produced a total of 283 IEH in the city of Girona, a 0.29% of total population, and a rate of 290 IEH for every 100,000 inhabitants. 82% \((n = 232)\) were men and 18% \((n = 51)\) women. The percentage of indigenous people was 44.2 \((n = 125)\) and the percentage of IFDI 55.8 \((n = 158)\). No relation between gender and immigration was found \((X^2 = 1.9; df = 1; P = .11)\). Of the total of counted IEH, 62.4% \((n = 177)\) were roofless (in public shelters, illegally occupied housing, or living rough: on the street, in closed cash points, parks, porches, or other places sheltered from severe weather).

The data concerning ETHOS categories four and six were provided by 12 institutions, enabling the elaboration of the definite list of services specifying gender and origin. Penitentiary services only provided data of men \((7.7\% \text{ of total}, n = 22)\) and services of protection to women victims of domestic violence \((n = 13, 4.7\%)\).

The data of the different services distributed by ETHOS typology, institution, gender, and origin, are shown in Table 1.

The analysis of the categorical variables displayed significant differences between genders in relation to the different contexts where the IEH were found on the day of the count. In this view, more men were found in the street and more women in the shelter, specific centers for IEH and in social or health centers.

As regards origin, the illegally occupied houses were inhabited mainly by IFDI, contrarily to health and penitentiary centers, with a higher presence of indigenous people (Table 2).

**Discussion**

Despite the fact that this is not the first occasion in which smartphones have been used to improve enumeration and follow-up contact (Rice, Lee, & Taitt, 2011; Rice, Ray, & Kurzban, 2012), it is the first occasion in which an instant messaging service, WhatsApp, is used in order to maximize the efficiency of an official count of IEH. As well as WhatsApp, the OST has played a key role in the management of the count, because OST knows the territory and has a strong bond with the IEH. WhatsApp, in conjunction with geolocation applications and social network sites, has enabled the access to data provided directly by the IEH, minimizing the potential bias caused by
not including the IEH who are not visible to those volunteers who are not specialized in the count.

One of the main findings of this study is the perception differences of IEH according to the two given channels of transmission and information relative to the count (direct communication and virtual communication). The possibility of attending the houses in person met reluctance, despite originating from the OST team, which has certain bonds with the IEH which facilitates periodical visits during daily socio-educational and therapeutic practise. Conversely, the utilization of WhatsApp was rapidly accepted, enabling active participation and commitment on behalf of the IEH. Furthermore, it allowed the team to obtain highly relevant data. This fact is in agreement with the recent studies which highlight the potentialities of these new communicational means between IEH populations and professionals (Eyrich-Garg, 2011). In fact, some authors go one step further and suggest that the use of mobile devices as a means of communication between professionals, institutions, and individuals is more effective and efficient than other communication mechanisms (Rice et al., 2011).

This fact is highly logical and relevant in relation to the results obtained, since the use of Smartphones has become the only accepted channel of communication of the users as a condition to participate actively in the count. The confidentiality agreement reached between the IEH-occupying houses illegally and the professionals, alongside the attraction of using a mobile phone and the anonymity and immediacy of WhatsApp, seems to have been crucial in this process.

It is noteworthy that the use of Internet and social networks among IEH is not too different from the use which general population make, especially among younger population (Guadagno, Muscanell, & Pollio, 2013). It appears that the use of ICT among IEH is rather common, benefitting from the free Wi-Fi access points in the city. ICT should be undeniably included in the list of adequate resources to surmount some of the difficulties related to access to IEH and it must be used on the grounds of psychosocial and therapeutic following (Freedman, Lester, McNamara, Milby, & Schumacher, 2006; Rice et al., 2012). Additionally, the utilization of WhatsApp has enabled the transmission of information among institutions, in the cases in which the leaders of the mentioned services opted for the use of this means of communication, and has contributed enormously to the optimization of communication, expanding the possibilities of access to knowledge and its management, and, therefore, reducing some of the obstacles mentioned previously.

It must be pointed out that even though most of the count was carried out thanks to volunteers and did not involve extraordinary expenses, the use of smartphone is a resource with the potentiality of economizing this type of actions which are more expensive in the event of having to attend the different occupied homes in person.

The great transverse nature of the phenomenon leads to the improvement of coordination between the different entities which offer temporary services to the IEH, and which are indispensable when endeavoring to provide reliable data about homelessness (Arza, 2008). Bearing in mind the fact that IEH can benefit from different public and private institutions, in different governmental departments and even different administrations, it seems inevitable to generate new communication environments which are more direct in order to transmit real-time information.

Regarding the results of the count, the rate in the city of Girona is three times higher than the Catalan rate, and four times higher than the Spanish rate, if compared with the last official report (SSO, 2012). It must be noted that the definition of homelessness was extended in 2005, including occupied houses, hostels or short stay institutions, and charities (different from the ETHOS categorization as individuals in health or penitentiary centers were not included (Arza, 2008). The data published regarding this

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Living situation</th>
<th>ETHOS*</th>
<th>Men n (%)</th>
<th>Women n (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Outreach/Streetwork</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>34 (11.9)</td>
<td>23 (8.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelter</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23 (8.1)</td>
<td>17 (6.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleep center for homeless</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14 (4.9)</td>
<td>8 (2.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term houses for homeless</td>
<td>11, 12</td>
<td>34 (11.9)</td>
<td>16 (5.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegally occupied houses and temporary structures</td>
<td></td>
<td>7 (2.5)</td>
<td>1 (0.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hostel</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 (0.4)</td>
<td>4 (1.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General hospital, psychiatric services, therapeutic communities for drug addicts</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4 (1.4)</td>
<td>19 (6.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penitentiary center</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14 (4.9)</td>
<td>8 (2.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergency accommodation for women who suffered abuse or violence</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*ETHOS operational categories: A. Roofless: (1) People living rough, (2) People in emergency accommodation. B. Houseless: (3) People in accommodation for the homeless, (4) People in 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, C. Insecure Accommodation: (8) People living in insecure accommodation, (9) People living under threat of eviction, (10) People living under threat of violence, D. Inadequate Accommodation: (11) People living in temporary/Non-conventional structures, (12) People living in unfit housing, (13) People living in extreme over-crowding.

*Indigenous.
The phenomenon was three years before this change of conceptualization and no other official estimate has been carried out since then.

The situation described explains the reason behind the fact that the official Spanish homelessness rate in 2012 was notably lower than other countries, such as Germany or France, despite the rise in evictions and the demand for emergency accommodation, as a consequence of the world economic crisis, initiated in 2008 (Sales, 2015). Housing was especially affected by economic recession and its impact in Spain was remarkably superior to that of the mentioned countries. Other socio-economic indicators, such as the rise of poverty and unemployment rate or minimal benefits aimed at aiding the most vulnerable sector of population, covering their most basic necessities (Alaya, 2012), reflected this fact. These factors are directly related to homelessness; however, the data are not taken into consideration with the SSO methodology of count of IEH, with which objective data are substantially underrated (Sales, 2015).

On the other hand, when compared with other cities of similar characteristics, the count carried out on the 19th of April 2016 in Lleida, a city south-west of Girona with a population of 138 452 inhabitants (CSO, 2016c), Lleida has a rate of homelessness of 0.14% and 140.7 IEH per 100 000 inhabitants (Ajuntament de Lleida, 2016). On the 18th of May 2016, the city of Barcelona, with 1 640 555 inhabitants (CSO, 2016a), had 0.17% and 179.7 IEH per 100 000 inhabitants (Xarxa d’Atenció a les Persones Sense-Llar, 2016). These figures are significantly below the results obtained in Girona, as in the methodological approach, the people, who slept on the streets or in institutions specifically aimed at IEH, were included. The other ETHOS categories were not included therefore, they refer to a part of homelessness and not to the phenomenon of the description to which they are assigned.

As far as the prevalence differences found between genders go, the tendency to meaning reveals a higher presence of women in institutions. This may be due to, first, the inclusion of an institution devoted specifically to the protection of women. Nevertheless, it is worth considering the fact that the existence of this type of specific services for women is aimed at dealing with problems of domestic violence victims. Women experiencing homelessness are victims of assault and rape more frequently than men (Wenzel, Koegel, & Gelberg, 2000). This situation becomes more accentuated when women have no resource of protection and have to live on the street (D’Ercole & Struening, 1990). Thus, women are victims of a twofold

Table 2. Contingence tables data for categorized living situations and analyzed dependent variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Provenance</th>
<th>Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Streetwork</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>57 (24.6)</td>
<td>3 (5.9)</td>
<td>8.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelter and homeless specific attendance</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>23 (45.1)</td>
<td>2 (3.9)</td>
<td>3.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegal occupancy houses</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>50 (21.6)</td>
<td>8 (15.7)</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal and health services</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>17 (33.3)</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*IF = Immigrant or Family Descent from Migration, I = Indigenous.

Figure 1. Origin for received data.
marginalization, first for being women, and second for being IEH. It could even be considered threefold in the case of IFDI women, whose integration difficulties could exclude them from the health service unless their administrative situation is regulated. Some of the benefits or services which are crucial in the reinsertion process may fail to reach IFDI women, owing to the mentioned social health obstacles (Sánchez-Macías et al., 2016).

More IFDI people lived in illegally occupied houses, and fewer IFDI attended legal and health services, regardless of their gender. This fact could display a tendency to a different profile according to the origin of the people, which could be extended to the population of the analyzed context. The process that leads an IFDI person to become IEH is partly related to the migratory process in itself, contrarily to indigenous people (Järvinen, 2003). The potential risk of exclusion of the people without a regulated administrative situation, in conjunction with a lower presence of the family of origin and a need of cultural identification in the group of peers, could explain the tendency to the occupation of houses.

This study is not exempt of limitations. In the first place, in spite of the fact that IEH in occupied houses were prompted to send very specific data, a mechanism to evaluate the messages received with a qualitative methodology was not designed. A qualitative design of the messages received could be an issue to be investigated in the future. On the other hand, despite choosing a propitious day for the count, at a time of the year without extreme temperatures, or events such as festivities or sporting events which could condition the results, and a reasonable time which respected the rest of IEH, and possible risk situations related to intoxication caused by alcohol or other drugs, it is reasonable to think that to repeat the count at different times of the year could improve the results.

On the other hand, it is an important objective for many IEH to preserve anonymity, and although the teams had great knowledge of the territory and the subjects, it is likely that certain IEH were not detected and went unnoticed. In this sense, another limitation is the possible double count of a person who was counted going unnoticed. In this sense, another limitation is the possibility to access his/her own house due to being under domestic threat, have not been able to be included owing to the special difficulty encountered when trying to detect and count them.

In conclusion, the difficulties to access IEH population which the public services face are an important obstacle to offer reliable data. However, as has been proved, the direct implication of the intervention agents in open spaces provides an adequate vision of the objective context, totally necessary for such a task, as specialists recommend (Cloke et al., 2001). The specialized knowledge of the territory on behalf of the professionals, and the incorporation of tools of virtual communication are highly useful. It has facilitated contact between professionals and volunteers and has permitted a greater geographical control of the count. Moreover, it has enabled the gathering of a great number of data of IEH which could not have been gathered in other ways.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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