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## **HOMELESS PEOPLE IN NICARAGUA: A POINT-IN-TIME COUNT IN LEÓN.**

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**Abstract.**\_ This work analyses the difficulties encounter to determine who should be considered a homeless person in a developing country, and the result of a Point-In-Time (PIT) count of homeless people done in the city of Leon (185,000 inhabitants), Nicaragua. Throughout the PIT count 82 un-duplicated persons living homeless were tallied (76% male; 23% female), 11% were under age. Half of the homeless detected seemed to have problems related to mental health, alcohol and drugs, and/or wounds, dermatological or dental problems. 69% showed a bad physical appearance, 74% had poor personal hygiene, and 80% had the dirty or very dirty clothes.

**Key words.**\_ Homelessness; Social exclusion; Point-In-Time count; Developing country; Central America



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## **HOMELESS PEOPLE IN NICARAGUA: A POINT-IN-TIME COUNT IN LEÓN.**

Nicaragua, with an estimated population of 5.5 million inhabitants, is one of the countries in Latin America with the lowest levels of development (UNDP, 2015). 8.5% of Nicaragua's population lives on less than 1.25 dollars a day and 42.5% lives below the national poverty line (UNDP, 2015). Homeless people are one of the most marginalized groups in Nicaragua. In addition to living in extreme poverty, they suffer from a strong family and social disconnection, with great difficulties for their socio-labor reintegration, and significant physical and mental health problems (Vázquez, Panadero, & Zúñiga, 2017).

Unfortunately, scientific literature on the situation of homeless people in developing countries is virtually non-existent. In fact, until the year 2016 there was no definition of a “homeless person” suitable for the least developed countries, a circumstance that was addressed by the publication of the "Global Homelessness Framework" (Busch-Geertsema, Culhane, & Fitzpatrick, 2016), gathered in Table1.

Table 1. Global Homelessness Framework (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2016)

Category		Subcategory	
1	People without accommodation	1 (a)	People sleeping in the streets or in other open spaces (such as parks, railway embankments, under bridges, on pavement, on river banks, in forests, etc.)
		1 (b)	People sleeping in public roofed spaces or buildings not intended for human habitation (such as bus and railway stations, taxi ranks, derelict buildings, public buildings, etc.)
		1 (c)	People sleeping in their cars, rickshaws, open fishing boats and other forms of transport
		1 (d)	'Pavement dwellers' – individuals or households who live on the street in a regular spot, usually with some form of makeshift cover
2	People living in temporary or crisis accommodation	2 (a)	People staying in night shelters (where occupants have to renegotiate their accommodation nightly)
		2 (b)	People living in homeless hostels and other types of temporary accommodation for homeless people (where occupants have a designated bed or room)
		2 (c)	Women and children living in refuges for those fleeing domestic violence
		2 (d)	People living in camps provided for 'internally displaced people' i.e. those who have fled their homes as a result of armed conflict, natural or human-made disasters, human rights violations, development projects, etc. but have not crossed international borders
		2 (e)	People living in camps or reception centres/temporary accommodation for asylum seekers, refugees and other immigrants
3	People living in severely inadequate and/or insecure accommodation	3 (a)	People sharing with friends and relatives on a temporary basis
		3 (b)	People living under threat of violence
		3 (c)	People living in cheap hotels, bed and breakfasts and similar
		3 (d)	People squatting in conventional housing
		3 (e)	People living in conventional housing that is unfit for human habitation
		3 (f)	People living in trailers, caravans and tents
		3 (g)	People living in extremely overcrowded conditions
		3 (h)	People living in non-conventional buildings and temporary structures, including those living in slums/informal settlements

Nicaragua lacks data on numbers, characteristics, circumstances, and needs of people experiencing homelessness. This lack of information has very negative consequences; among them are the lack of social awareness, institutional attention, public policies received, as well as, intervention programs, and service facilities for people experiencing homelessness.

In order to achieve an initially approach to the reality of homeless people in Nicaragua, it was decided to make a Point-In-Time (PIT) count in the city of León. PIT counts are a measure of the number of homeless people on a specific day collecting basic information about their characteristics and needs.

León, the country's second most important city after the capital, has a population of approximately 185,000 inhabitants. Estimates suggest that more than half of León's inhabitants live below the poverty line, and that major population segments are living in

extreme poverty (Vázquez, 2016). The city of León, among other things, is characterized by having a very warm climate all year round - which allows to spend the night in the open -; a collectivist culture - with strong family and community ties-; political conditions condescending with illegal settlements of substandard housing - which tend to be legalized-; and a very weak health system, especially in terms of mental health and substance use care (Vázquez & Panadero, 2016).

The "Global Homelessness Framework" (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2016) was used to determine who would be included in the Homelessness PIT count. It was observed that due mainly to León's climatic characteristics "Subcategory 1 (a)" subsumed the remaining subcategories of "Category 1" (People without accommodation). The "Category 2" (People living in temporary or crisis accommodation) was not applicable, since León lacked night shelters, homeless hostels, and other types of temporary accommodation for homeless people, refuges for those fleeing domestic violence, camps or reception Centers / temporary accommodation. The "Category 3" (People living in severely inadequate and/or insecure accommodation) was not included in the PIT count, given that the cultural and political characteristics of León its inclusion would increase in an excessive way the number of people to count, including groups with very diverse characteristics, which would distort the conclusions reached. It was therefore decided that the study of "Category 3" would be the main subject of a future research.

The PIT count in León was held on the night of Tuesday, March 21, 2107, with the volunteer collaboration of third-year undergraduate students from the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN-León) Medical Program. After establishing well defined boundaries of the city sectors, volunteers in groups of three or four covered the assigned area in search of homeless people. Information was gathered from all the people who found themselves staying overnight in the city who qualified for Category 1 of the "Global Homelessness Framework". The objectives of the research were explained to the homeless persons who were awake and informed consent was asked in order to respond to a questionnaire.

Throughout the PIT count, 82 people were found homeless in León, of whom 47 were interviewed. 75.6% (62) were males, 23.2% (19) females, and in one case (1.2%) it was not possible to determine sex. 11.3% (5) were children, 16 and 17 years old. Data collected through observation indicate that 73.2% (60) were alone, 54.9% (45) had bags, bundles, and other belongings with them, 80.5% (66) had dirty or very dirty clothes, and 74.4% (61) presented poor or very poor personal hygiene. Likewise, 69.5% (57) showed a bad physical appearance, 42.7% (35) some wound, dermatological or dental problem, and 29.3% (24) some visible physical disability. Among the homeless people encountered, it was observed that 50% (41) of them exhibit symptoms that could be attributed to mental health problems, 48.8% (40) exhibit symptoms that could be associated to alcoholism problems, and 37.8 % (31) exhibit symptoms that could be associated with problems related to drug addiction.

Based on the knowledge of the characteristics and needs of the homeless people in León, it is hoped to be able to promote the development of public policies that will help prevent the main causes that lead to homelessness, as well as, the development of intervention programs aimed at those who are homeless in order to overcome their situation or, at least, improve their quality of life.

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