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CHARACTERISTICS AND NEEDS OF PEOPLE LIVING HOMELESS IN LEÓN (NICARAGUA); SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES WITH OTHER GROUPS IN SEVERE SOCIAL EXCLUSION.

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Abstract.

The study examines various aspects (e.g. socio-demographic characteristics, access to economic resources, social support, chronicity, access to new technologies) in a sample of homeless people living in León (Nicaragua) (n = 68). A questionnaire was used to collect the data. The results showed people experiencing homelessness in León (Nicaragua) have enormous social difficulty, with high levels of chronification. Despite the major cultural and developmental differences between Spain and Nicaragua, there are considerable similarities between people living homeless in the two countries, while there are significant differences compared to waste pickers in León (Nicaragua) regarding the same aspects.

Keywords: Homeless; Social exclusion; Poverty; Developing country; Central America; Nicaragua.

Introduction

Homelessness is considered a global phenomenon affecting groups living in poverty and social exclusion, in both the developed and developing worlds (Springer, 2000; Suarez, Berrios, Bonilla, & Vázquez, 2018). However, in the opinion of Busch-Geertsema, Culhane, & Fitzpatrick (2016), research and practical interventions on homelessness have tended to follow parallel paths in the Global South and Global North, using different methodologies and conceptual frameworks. This has restricted mutual learning between different regions in the world. Research on people living homeless in different contexts must be carried out to ascertain whether these people have similar characteristics and needs, despite living in very diverse contexts, in terms of culture and economic and social development (Vázquez, Berrios, Bonilla & Suarez, 2019a; Suarez et al., 2018). This could facilitate the development of prevention programs and the design of intervention mechanisms and support resources to foster processes of social inclusion, based on the knowledge gained in different contexts.

Most of the research focusing on people experiencing homelessness has been carried out in developed countries. According to Busch-Geertsema et al. (2016), in developing countries, international and local strategies to tackle 'homelessness' often neglect the street homeless in favour of more numerous and better-organized groups of people living in substandard housing. Their circumstances may be a 'staging post' towards higher-quality housing in their housing careers, despite the fact that they also live in severe poverty (Cross et al., 2010; Tipple & Speak, 2005). In developing countries, such as Nicaragua, information is available on groups living in severe social exclusion - such as waste pickers (Vázquez, Suarez & Berríos, in press). According to this information, in environments with low levels of economic and social development, people in extreme poverty and/or social exclusion are largely subject to processes involving chronification (a process by which poverty and social exclusion becomes chronic) and pseudoinheritance (inheritance that is pretended and not real) of poverty from parents to children (Vázquez, 2016, 2017; Guillén, Panadero, Rivas & Vázquez, 2015).

A comparison of the data collected for people living homeless in different cultural contexts with different levels of economic and social development, and between people living homeless and other groups suffering from severe social exclusion in similar cultural contexts with low levels of economic and social development, may help to provide a better understanding of some specific issues relating to those living homeless. These issues have been studied to a limited extent in developing countries. The research team undertook the work using similar methodologies, conceptual frameworks and instruments for gathering information with people living homeless in Madrid (Spain) (Panadero, Martín & Vázquez, 2018; Panadero & Vázquez, 2016; Vázquez, Panadero & Zúñiga, 2018, Vázquez, Panadero, Martín & Díaz-Pescador, 2015) and with groups in severe social exclusion in León (Nicaragua), including the city's waste pickers, who earn their livelihood from its rubbish dumps (Vázquez, 2016; 2017; Vázquez et al., in press). Conducting this research enables an examination of the characteristics and needs of the different groups, and shows the general similarities and differences between people experiencing homelessness in León and Madrid, and groups suffering from severe social exclusion in the city of León, such as waste pickers.

People experiencing homeless, not only live in extreme poverty, but also suffer from high levels of family and social disengagement, have great difficulty achieving social and employment reintegration, and experience significant health problems (Vázquez et al., 2018; Vázquez, Suarez, Berrios & Panadero, 2019b). In the opinion of various authors (Hatch & Dohrenwend, 2007; Panadero et al., 2018; Zugazaga, 2004) economic issues are not the only influential factors on the situation of people living homeless. For instance, problems in their social relationships, adverse

personal circumstances, poor education, difficulties in gaining access to employment, and the huge digital gap may have an impact on their becoming and remaining homeless.

Studies conducted in various cultural contexts using different methodologies, conceptual frameworks and definitions of who is "homeless" (e.g. Aubry, Klodawsky & Coulombe, 2012; Chile, Ministerio de Desarrollo Social, 2012; Leonori et al., 2000; Panadero & Vázquez, 2016; Puerto Rico, Departamento de la Familia, 2015; U.S. HUD, 2017) show that most people living homeless are males (between 60% and 90%), with a mean age of between 30 to 50. There are major differences in terms of the presence of homeless minors between the various contexts studied.

In general, people in homeless situation have few social relationships and limited social support (Vázquez, Panadero & Zúñiga, 2017). Studies of people living homeless in various cultural contexts have shown a large portion of them have never been married, and the percentage of those divorced or separated is also high. Furthermore, relatively few people experiencing homelessness reported having a partner when the interview took place (e.g. Chile, Ministerio de Desarrollo Social, 2012; Leonori et al., 2000; Panadero & Vázquez, 2016; Puerto Rico, Departamento de la Familia, 2015). However, the number of people living homeless who report having friends is relatively high (e.g. Chile, Ministerio de Desarrollo Social, 2012; Panadero & Vázquez, 2016), although the social and partner relationships of people in a homeless situation are often limited to people who are in a similar situation of social exclusion, when they are not living homeless themselves.

A large portion of people living homeless report having a family (e.g. Chile, Ministerio de Desarrollo Social, 2012; Panadero & Vázquez, 2016). Despite stereotypes to the contrary (Vázquez et al., 2017) Bates and Toro (1999) point out that most people living homeless are in regular contact with their family, although they usually say they're dissatisfied with their relationship with them. Moreover, other studies (e.g. Chile, Ministerio de Desarrollo Social, 2012; Vázquez et al., 2017; Panadero & Vázquez, 2016) report that people experiencing homelessness have limited contact with their family, and the social support their families give them is insufficient. In the opinion of Bates and Toro (1999), a homeless person's contact with their family is not always positive.

Meadows-Oliver (2005) points out that people in a homeless situation feel estranged from sources of support, and as such many of them report feelings of loneliness or abandonment (Rokach, 2005). People living homeless with serious illnesses, disabilities or addiction problems may have a limited general functional capacity, which would increase their needs for care and lead to greater dependence on other people (Parker, 2010). The low levels of social and family support available to people experiencing homelessness (Hwang et al., 2010) hinder their access to the care they require, increasing their likelihood of becoming homeless, of experiencing a "revolving door" in and out of homelessness, and of this homelessness becoming chronic (Roca, Panadero, Rodríguez, Martín & Vázquez, 2019). According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) definition, a chronically homeless individual is someone who has experienced homelessness for a year or longer, or who has experienced at least four episodes of homelessness in the last three years -the total period must be at least 12 months (U.S. HUD, 2015). According to this definition, many people in different cultural contexts can be considered chronically homeless (e.g. Aubry et al., 2012; Chile, Ministerio de Desarrollo Social, 2012; Leonori et al., 2000; Roca et al., 2019; Puerto Rico, Departamento de la Familia, 2015; U.S. HUD, 2017).

Various studies have shown the educational level of people living homeless is lower than that of the general population (e.g. Aubry et al., 2012; Chile, Ministerio de Desarrollo Social,

2012; Leonori et al., 2000; Panadero & Vázquez, 2016; Puerto Rico, Departamento de la Familia, 2015; Rokach, 2005), although some have reported having an university-level education (Aubry et al., 2012; Chile, Ministerio de Desarrollo Social, 2012; Panadero & Vázquez, 2016; Puerto Rico, Departamento de la Familia, 2015). Among the multiple problems these people have to face are those associated with difficulties in entering the labour market and access to basic economic resources (Guillén et al., 2015; Panadero, et al., 2018). Various studies report that in developed countries, the main source of income for people living homeless is usually some type of government assistance. In Spain, for example, 30% report receiving benefits, pensions, and other financial aids (INE, 2012; Vázquez & Panadero, 2016). Although, people in a homeless situation have largely worked throughout their lives (Leonori et al., 2000; Panadero & Vázquez, 2016), unemployment is one of the main problems they face (Vázquez et al., 2017, 2018).

In more developed countries, assistance services meet a significant part of homeless people's needs, thus fewer people in a homeless situation engage in any sort of labour (Aubry et al., 2012; Leonori et al., 2000; Panadero & Vázquez, 2016). However, the lower the level of a the country's development, the narrower the range of programs and mechanisms available to people living homeless, to the point where these programs are practically non-existent (Vázquez et al., 2019a). In countries with lower levels of development, the main source of income for people experiencing homelessness tends to be begging, and to a lesser extent, aid provided by friends, acquaintances, and non-governmental organizations. Moreover, in environments with lower development levels, engaging in informal work is a major source of income for a significant percentage of people living homeless (Chile, Ministerio de Desarrollo Social, 2012).

Although difficulties in accessing and using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) do not seem to play a decisive role in people becoming and remaining homeless (Vázquez et al., 2015), problems related to access to these technologies can be a limiting factor to their processes of social inclusion when combined with other circumstances. A common stereotype is that people in a homeless situation do not have access to ICTs (Eyrich-Garg, 2010), and when they can access them, they lack the skills to use them properly. However, Vázquez et al. (2015) report that people living homeless have access to new ICTs, especially mobile phones, which have become the most widespread technology in recent years. Smartphones offer a connection to others without the physical constraints of landlines and, therefore, make communication more feasible for homeless individuals. People in a homeless situation possess and use smartphones to increase their sense of safety, responsibility (employment, personal business, and sobriety or “clean time”), and social connectedness (Eyrich-Garg, 2010).

As noted by Tipple and Speak (2005), in some developing countries the state of homelessness removes people from benefiting from rights that others enjoy. Those living on the streets are the very ones least likely to have their housing needs addressed and the most likely to be considered illegal. Provide objective data on the characteristics and needs of people living homeless in developing countries can help raise public awareness and awareness of the need to support this people (Suarez et al., 2018). Also, in developing countries it is necessary to promote the development of public policies that have an impact on preventing the main causes of people sliding into homelessness, and on promoting the development of intervention programs aimed at the homeless in order to help them overcome their situation or, at least, improve their quality of life (Vázquez et al., 2019a). Here the role of social work is essential.

Nicaragua, with an estimated population of 5.5 million inhabitants, is one of the countries with the lowest levels of development in Latin America (UNDP, 2015). 8.5% of Nicaragua's population lives on less than 1.25 dollars a day, and 42.5% live below the national poverty line

(UNDP, 2015). Nicaragua is recognized as having a collectivist culture -where belonging to a few groups, the individual's commitment to their group, group harmony and cohesion are all encouraged; and where the family is considered the primary social safety net (Guillén et al., 2015; Vázquez, 2016; Vázquez et al., 2019b). León, the country's second-most important city after the capital, has a population of approximately 185,000 inhabitants. It's estimated more than half the city's inhabitants live below the poverty line, and that there are major pockets of population living in extreme poverty (Guillén et al., 2015; Vázquez, 2016, 2017; Vázquez et al., in press). In León, people in a homeless situation make up one of the most socially excluded groups (Suarez et al., 2018), and data on their characteristics, circumstances, and needs are scarce. This lack of information has great negative consequences, including a lack of social awareness of this group's situation, an absence of institutional care provisions for them, and a total lack of public policies, intervention programs, and care mechanisms for the homeless (Suarez et al., 2018).

The main objective of the article is to provide information on the characteristics and needs of an understudied group: people living homeless in Leon (Nicaragua). In order to contextualize the information provided by interviewees in León (Nicaragua), the data obtained is compared to the information gathered with waste pickers in León (Nicaragua) - another group in a social exclusion situation, and with people living homeless in Madrid (Spain) - a group under similar circumstances but in a different cultural setting. Both studies were conducted using similar instruments, methodologies, and conceptual frameworks.

Method

This study was carried out in the city of León (Nicaragua) with a sample composed of people who according to the "Global Homelessness Framework" (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2016) met the criterion of belonging to "Category 1" (People without accommodation), "Subcategory 1 (a)" (People sleeping in the streets or in other open spaces).

The participants were located based on information obtained with a point-in-time count of homeless people in León (Suarez et al., 2018). To identify which areas to locate the people living homeless, we solicited input from a variety of sources during the design phase of the study, such as previously or currently homeless individuals, non-governmental organizations, police, municipality employees, human services departments, business associations, and other community groups. The city of León has an extremely warm tropical climate throughout the year, alternating between rainy season (May to October) and dry season (November to April). During the rainy months, people living homeless tend to look for sheltered places, which hinders their visibility. Therefore, the research was conducted during the dry season.

Participation in the study was requested of all the people living homeless who did not exhibit a severe cognitive deterioration due to serious mental health problems and/or abuse of psychoactive substances. Homeless individuals who at the PIT contact consumption of alcohol or other psychoactive substances were excessive and impaired their participation were contacted at a later date, up to three different occasions. In some cases, the potential participants exhibited a high and sustained consumption of alcohol or inhaled glue, therefore making it impossible to interview them (Vázquez et al., 2019b).

Sixty-eight (68) people in a homeless situation were contacted (56 men and 12 women), and 41 consented and was able to be interviewed. Twenty-seven (27) of the people living homeless located (24 men and 3 women) could not be interviewed because they were suffering from severe cognitive problems (40.7%), excessive alcohol consumption (29.6%), excessive

consumption of inhaled glue (25.9%) or for other reasons (3.7%). Some characteristics of the people in a homeless situation interviewed and not interviewed are listed in Table 1:

Table 1. Reported and estimated characteristics of the people living homeless contacted in León (Nicaragua)

Characteristics	Reported	Estimated
	People living homeless interviewed (n = 41)	People living homeless not interviewed (n = 27)
Sex		
Men - Percentage (n)-	78.0% (32)	89.9% (24)
Women - Percentage (n)-	22.0% (9)	11.1% (3)
Age – Mean years (SD)-	45.9 (17.66)	40.9 (17.50)

The information was collected using a questionnaire administered to the respondents through a structured interview, which enabled possible problems associated with difficulties with reading and understanding to be circumvented. After each person living homeless was contacted on the street, the purpose of the research was explained to them, and were asked for their informed consent to conduct the interview and assured their anonymity would be respected at all times. If the person was unable to respond to the interview appropriately due to excessive consumption of psychoactive substances or other circumstances, a subsequent appointment was scheduled, or an attempt was made to contact him/her up to three occasions until it became apparent conducting the interview properly would be impossible. The database was developed and processed using the SPSS-22.0 for Windows, a statistical analysis and data management system. The data obtained was used to perform a descriptive analysis, which included information on people experiencing homelessness. The "Student-t test" for independent samples was used when making comparisons.

To contextualize the information provided by people living homeless in León (Nicaragua), data obtained is compared to the information gathered in two studies carried out in different cultural settings - León (Nicaragua) and Madrid (Spain)- using similar instruments and methodologies:

- In León (Nicaragua) the study was carried out with 99 waste pickers who earned their living from the rubbish dumps in León. This group is heavily stigmatized, and lived in extreme poverty. When the study was undertaken, the number of people making a living from picking rubbish in León was well defined, meaning that it was possible to interview all the collectors: ninety-two worked mainly in the metropolitan landfill dump and seven worked in the old city dump, which has become an illegal landfill.
- In Madrid (Spain), the study was carried out with a representative sample of people living homeless, consisting of 188 individuals who were 18 years of age or older, who had spent the night before the interview in a shelter for the homeless, on the street or other places not initially designed for sleeping, such as: abandoned buildings, basements or subway stations. The sample size was determined beforehand, based on the available data for the total number of homeless people in Madrid. A strategy for random sampling in the street and in all housing resources for homeless people the city of Madrid was designed.

Results

Forty-one (41) of the 68 people living homeless contacted in León (Nicaragua) responded to a questionnaire. Ninety-five-point one percent (39) of the interviewees were of Nicaraguan nationality, 2.4% (1) were Salvadoran and 2.4% (1) Mexican. All of them (41) considered themselves "mestizo" -mixed race. Nineteen-point five percent (8) of the interviewees were war veterans. The mean age of the ex-combatants was 61.7 years old ($SD = 12.59$) and among the non-veterans it was 42.1 years old ($SD = 16.65$) ($t=3.117$; $p= 0.003$). The people in a homeless situation interviewed had a mean of 1.5 children ($SD = 1.53$). The thirty-one-point seven percent (13) had no children, 29.3% (12) had only one-child, 19.5% (8) had 2 children, 9.8% (4) had 3 children and 9.8% (4) had 4 or more children. Two of the women who had children (7.2%) had them living with them, with 2 and 3 children respectively. The interviewees had been homeless for a mean of 13.6 years ($SD = 9.78$), and become homeless for the first time at a mean age of 23.8 years ($SD = 13.49$).

As shown in Table 2, the majority of the people living homeless interviewed in León were single. The separated people and the widowers in particular, had a mean age that was much higher than the single people. Although 30% of the interviewees had no education, relatively few of them were unable to read. The interviewees with no education had a high mean age. A relatively high percentage of the respondents (43.9%) had completed secondary or higher education. Those who had completed primary education were the youngest, while those who had completed a university education had a higher mean age. More than half of those interviewed had lived in a home owned by themselves or their family before becoming homeless. Those who had lived in a rented house before becoming homeless were the oldest, while those who lived in a rented room were the youngest. Most of the interviewees had experienced several homelessness episodes, while those who had only one homeless episode had the highest mean age. For the younger interviewees, the consumption of alcohol and drugs, the general employment situation, and personal problems were the main reasons they attributed to not being employed. The older group, however, attributed their unemployment to physical health problems or considering themselves too old to work. The main source of income for the interviewees was begging, followed by various types of labour. The interviewees engaged in criminal activities and prostitution to a marginal extent. During the month before the interview, the interviewees had obtained a mean of 1,998.05 *córdobas* ($SD = 2,222.97$) (approximately 63 USD) from all their reported sources of income.

As can be seen in Table 3, more than half of the interviewees reported having family and friends -who were mainly homeless, and a very low percentage of respondents reported having a partner. More than half the interviewees said they lived alone, although those who said they lived with friends were the youngest, and those who said they lived with their partner or with relatives were the oldest. Seventy-five percent said they felt largely alone or abandoned.

Regarding the use of communication technologies, only 2.4% (1) of the homeless persons interviewed had a mobile phone, reported using a computer, and had an e-mail address, while 7.3% (3) said they used the Internet, and 4.9% (2) used some sort of social network site. Of the 97.6% (40) interviewees who did not have a mobile phone, 50% (20) said they would like to have one, and of the 95.1% (39) of the people who did not use a computer, 22.5% (9) said they would like to use one. Meanwhile, of the 92.7% (38) of the interviewees who did not use the Internet, 28.9% (11) knew what the Internet was and 21.1% (7) said they would like to use it. The 97.6% (40) respondents who did not have an e-mail address, 17.5% (7) knew what an e-mail was and said they would like to use it. Finally, of the 92.7% (38) respondents who did not use social

networks sites, 12.8% (5) knew what social networks sites were and 7.3% (3) said they would like to use them.

Table 2. Socio-demographic characteristics, academic background, place of residence prior to being homeless, number of times homeless, their perception of developments in their own situation, reasons to which they attribute their lack of formal employment, and main sources of funds among people in a homeless situation interviewed in León (Nicaragua).

	% (n)	Age Mean years (SD)
Marital status		
Single	82.9% (34)	43.1 (16.24)
Separated or divorced	12.2% (5)	57.5 (19.70)
Widow/er	4.9% (2)	64.5 (36.06)
Completed education		
None (illiterate)	22.0% (9)	47.6 (21.37)
None (literate)	7.3% (3)	74.0 (10.39)
Primary education	26.8% (11)	38.9 (19.81)
Secondary education	39.1% (16)	43.9 (12.28)
Higher university studies	4.8% (2)	51.5 (18.40)
Place where they lived before becoming homeless for the first time		
In their own house (theirs or their family's)	55.0% (22)	46.1 (17.37)
In a rented house	12.5% (5)	54.0 (18.76)
In a rented room	10.0% (4)	31.7 (22.01)
In a house or room provided free of charge	15.0% (6)	46.8 (19.97)
Somewhere else	7.4 (3)	48.3 (1.41)
Number of times they have been homeless in their life		
Once	25.6% (10)	61.4 (18.09)
2 to 5 times	59.0% (23)	38.2 (13.74)
More than 5 times	15.4% (6)	50.0 (16.15)
Main reasons they attribute for not having a job		
Physical health problems	36.6% (15)	52.2 (13.59)
Consumption of alcohol and other substances	31.7% (13)	39.1 (12.33)
General employment situation	31.7% (13)	43.0 (15.19)
Being too old to work	26.8% (11)	64.0 (12.0)
Personal problems	24.4% (10)	36.9 (12.42)
Source of economic resources		
Begging	80.5% (33)	47.3 (18.34)
Salary/work (formal and/or informal)	43.9% (18)	39.8 (14.45)
Prostitution	2.4% (1)	28.0 (---)
Criminal activities	2.4% (1)	17.0 (---)
Other activities	7.3% (3)	43.7 (12.74)

Table 3. Social support for people living homeless interviewed in León (Nicaragua).

	% (n)	Age Mean years (SD)
Do they have...?		
Partner	4.9% (2)	56.0 (8.48)
Family	51.2% (21)	47.0 (19.02)
Friends with a home	17.1% (7)	50.4 (20.37)
Homeless friends	58.5% (24)	40.8 (16.59)
Who they live with at present		
Alone	56.1% (23)	49.3 (18.10)
With friends	31.7% (13)	37.2 (13.74)
With partner	4.9% (2)	56.0 (8.48)
With relatives	7.3% (3)	62.5 (24.75)
The extent to which he/she feels alone or abandoned		
Not at all	7.5% (3)	36.0 (23.30)
Not much	17.5% (7)	52.1 (20.24)
Quite a lot	20.0% (8)	49.2 (11.65)
A lot	55.0% (22)	43.7 (18.43)

Discussion and conclusions

The fight against extreme poverty and social exclusion is a priority and an unavoidable obligation for every society, regardless of its level of economic and social development. The fact people continue to live in extreme poverty and social exclusion, lacking material resources enabling them to meet their most basic needs and unable to access the life opportunities that define social citizenship, is a problem that affects all societies to varying degrees (Vázquez & Panadero, 2016). These issues, which are far from being resolved in developed countries, are a particular concern in developing countries, where the precarious conditions experienced by those living in situations of poverty and exclusion are especially acute (Vázquez, 2017). Most of the people living in extreme poverty and social exclusion grew up in poor families, and have been poor all their lives. This situation is particularly acute among people born in environments of extreme poverty and social exclusion, who have a greater tendency towards their situation becoming chronic, and a propensity for this situation be transmitted from generation to generation, giving rise to a pseudo-hereditary process of poverty and exclusion (Vázquez & Panadero, 2016).

Little is known about people living homeless in developing countries, and this lack of information has very negative consequences. These include the lack of social awareness of these group's situation, the absence of institutional care they receive, the lack of public policies, intervention programs, and care mechanisms for homeless people (Suarez et al., 2018; Vázquez et al., 2019a). Having reliable information about the characteristics and needs of these people is a critical component for progressive policy development since this information makes it easier to obtain financial resources, and target these resources towards various strategies aimed at alleviating the problem (Vázquez et al., 2019a). The structural socio-economic situation of Nicaragua, with scarce resources and large pockets of people living in poverty, leads to institutional support not reaching the most disadvantaged groups or in situations of social exclusion (Vázquez & Panadero, 2016). Unfortunately, in the city of León there's a complete lack of services providing care for people living homeless, despite the fact they are a group with

serious physical and mental health problems, whose situation is to a large extent chronic, and who are socially isolated with little likelihood of overcoming their situation without any help (Vázquez et al., 2019a).

In the city of León (Nicaragua) the number of people living homeless is relatively low (Suarez et al., 2018; Vázquez et al., 2019a), although those who are homeless have experienced a very high level of deterioration and very stressful life events (Vázquez et al., 2019b). Experiencing social difficulty in culturally collectivist countries, with low levels of economic and social development, and with limited and unstable social care mechanisms, means the deterioration of social networks, and in particular family networks, is an important factor of vulnerability in situations involving social exclusion. In these contexts, reversing processes of social exclusion without family or institutional support is a very difficult task, and leads to homelessness becoming chronic for many people (Vázquez, 2017; Vázquez et al., in press).

To contextualize the information provided by people living homeless in León, the data obtained in this study is compared to the information gathered in similar studies carried out with waste pickers in the city of León - a group subject to severe social exclusion, and with people living homeless in Madrid (Spain). When making these comparisons, we found that despite the substantial differences of a cultural nature and in terms of economic and social development between Nicaragua and Spain, there are major similarities between people living homeless in the two countries (e.g. gender, age, number of children, marital status, education, social support, feelings of loneliness and abandonment). Meanwhile, there are important differences between people living homeless and waste pickers in the city of León, where both groups are subject to severe social exclusion. The percentage of women in a homeless situation was similar in León (18%) and Madrid (16%), with the people living homeless in the two cities having a very similar mean age (46 years old in León vs. 47.6 years old in Madrid) (Panadero & Vázquez, 2016), which was older than that of the waste pickers in León (32.4 years old) (Vázquez et al., in press). Furthermore, the homeless people interviewed in León had relatively fewer children, with a mean of 1.5 children; 32% were childless. This figure was similar to the one reported by people living homeless in Madrid with a mean of 1.2 children and 42% without children (Panadero & Vázquez, 2016). In contrast to the figure for waste pickers in the city of León, despite their lower mean age (32.4 years old) of they had a mean of 2.8 children while 13% did not have children (Panadero & Vázquez, 2016). People experiencing homelessness, with high mean ages, had relatively fewer children in León and Madrid. This relatively limited number of children may be the result of the dislocation of people living homeless, and their difficulty in maintaining relationships. Only two women among the homeless interviewees in León had children who lived with them. The presence of children in the streets, including both children accompanied by their mothers and unaccompanied adolescents -of whom a large proportion are consumers of inhaled glue (Vázquez et al., 2019a), is an important problem that needs to be addressed in the city of León. In fact, the relatively few children in this situation means that specific aid programs for this group could be implemented at a relatively affordable cost.

Thirty percent of the interviewees in León said that they had no education -an issue that was particularly prominent among the older interviewees, and 22% of them were unable to read. People living homeless in León had a higher level of education than waste pickers in the same city, of whom 35% were unable to read, and 83% had not completed primary education (Vázquez, 2016, 2017). Forty-four percent of the people living homeless interviewed in León had completed secondary or higher education, whereas 63% of the people living homeless in Madrid

(Panadero & Vázquez, 2016). A higher level academic background does not appear to be a relevant factor protecting people from becoming and remaining homeless, in either Nicaragua or Spain. Higher levels of education do not appear to be able to offset the combination of multiple factors – including experiencing many serious stressful life events, psychoactive substance abuse, physical and mental health problems, or the loss of social networks (Panadero et al., 2018; Roca et al., 2019; Vázquez et al., 2019b), that lead to people becoming and remaining homeless.

The vast majority of the older homeless interviewees in Nicaragua were veterans of the war in their country, which ended in the late 1980s. Unfortunately, in Nicaragua there's no information on the effect participating in war may have had on the mental health of those involved, or on its possible influences in people becoming and remaining homeless, although various studies carried out with war veterans in the United States emphasise the great importance of these circumstances (U.S. HUD, 2017).

The people living homeless in León had become homeless at an earlier age than their counterparts in Madrid; the interviewed in León had a mean age of 24, while those in Madrid had a mean age of 37 years. Their homelessness was more chronic; at León the mean was 14 years, in Madrid, 7 years (Roca et al., 2019). Likewise, the effect of the "revolving door to homelessness" among people living homeless in León is much greater than in Madrid. Fifty-nine percent of the interviewees in León had been homeless between 2 and 5 times, compared to 28% of the people living homeless in Madrid (Roca et al., 2019). In a collectivist culture such as Nicaragua's, where there is no institutional social safety net providing protection from adversity, the loss of family support at an early age seems to render to homelessness at an early age, and this situation tends to become chronic.

People living homeless in León reported having extremely poor social networks. Only half of those interviewed in León said they had a family (51%). This percentage was much lower than those living homeless in Madrid (86%) (Panadero et al., 2018) and waste pickers in León, of whom 100% reported having a family (Vázquez, 2017). This factor is particularly important in collectivist cultural contexts with low levels of economic and social development, where the family acts as the main social welfare network, given the limited and unstable support mechanisms implemented by governments and other institutions like non-governmental organizations. Furthermore, the percentage of the interviewees in León who reported having a partner (5%) was minimal, and was considerably lower than the percentage reported among people living homeless in Madrid (17%) (Panadero & Vázquez, 2016) and much lower than among the waste pickers of León (71%) (Vázquez, 2016; Vázquez et al., in press). The difficulty involved in establishing and maintaining partner relationships, an important source of support, appears to have affected the interviewees throughout their lives. Most of them reported that they were single (83%) or to a lesser extent, separated or divorced (12%). The difficulty with establishing and maintaining partner relationships seems to have been a more widespread problem for people living homeless in León than among people living homeless in Madrid, where 53% were single and 41% were separated or divorced (Panadero & Vázquez, 2016).

At the time of the interview, more than half of the interviewees in León (56%) said they were living alone, although one third (32%), the youngest, said they were living with friends. In Madrid, the percentage of people in a homeless situation living alone was much higher (87%), and a much lower proportion (6.5%) reported living with friends. Nicaragua's collectivist culture appears to encourage people living homeless to form groups that meet their need to engage in social relationships, and this is especially true of the youngest. Nevertheless, a much larger percentage of people living homeless in León feel lonelier and more abandoned than their counterparts in Madrid (75% vs. 43%) (Panadero & Vázquez, 2016). As Nyamathi, Leake,

Keenan, and Gelberg (2000) point out, people in a homeless situation whose support included substance non-users presented better psychosocial profiles than those with little or no support. The social dislocation and the psychological deterioration experienced by people living homeless in León may be a major limitation on their establishment of robust social relationships, and this would have a highly negative impact on their homelessness becoming chronic. Therefore, it's important to establish spaces and activities facilitating the creation and development of quality social relationships. This issue is particularly important in collectivist cultures such as Nicaragua's.

The limited financial income of people living homeless in León (a monthly average of 2,000 *córdobas*, or approximately 60 USD) mainly came from begging, engaged in by the majority of the interviewees (80%), in contrast to Madrid, where only 12% of the people in a homeless situation reported begging (Panadero & Vázquez, 2016). Meanwhile, almost half (44%) of the interviewees in León engaged in some form of labour, while only 8.5% reported undertaking any type of work in Madrid (Panadero & Vázquez, 2016; Vázquez et al., 2017). Among people living homeless in Madrid, the main source of funds were government social welfare benefits (43%) (Panadero & Vázquez, 2016), which are non-existent in Nicaragua (Vázquez et al., 2019b). In both, León and Madrid, only a marginal percentage of the respondents reported engaging in criminal activities (2.4% vs. 2.1%) or prostitution (2.4% vs. 1.6%) (Panadero & Vázquez, 2016). In León, the younger interviewees attributed their lack of employment mainly to their consumption of alcohol or inhaled glue, the general employment situation, and to personal problems, while the older interviewees attributed it to being too old to work or to suffering from health problems. The situation of people living homeless in León could be substantially improved if they were given access to sheltered, employment programs, and/or to basic social welfare benefits for individuals able to engage in some type of labour.

Access to the use of ICTs among people living homeless in León is negligible. According to various authors (Eyrich-Garg, 2010; Thomas & Wyatt, 2000), the use of ICTs is the main factor in an individuals' inclusion/exclusion from employment and other services, especially among the most disadvantaged groups. Life on the margins of ICTs can create major difficulties in various areas, including: employment, training, relations and leisure. Unlike homeless people in Madrid, of whom 59% had a mobile phone (Vázquez et al., 2015), only one interviewee in León reported having a mobile phone, despite the massive use of these devices in Nicaragua, where simple terminals and basic connections are relatively accessible. Unfortunately, their complete lack of funds, a lifestyle in which keeping valuable possessions is difficult as a result of sleeping on the street, being exposed to theft, and requiring money to eat and consume substances, means that although half of the interviewees would like to have a mobile phone, they don't have access to these devices. Meanwhile, although between 30% and 40% of people living homeless in Madrid reported using a computer, accessing the Internet and having an e-mail address (Vázquez et al., 2015), only one interviewee in León reported using a computer and e-mail, and three said they had access to the Internet. In addition to being a result of their ignorance about this type of technology, the lack of use of computers and the Internet by people living homeless in León could be related to their limitations regarding literacy, 22% did not know how to read, their difficulties accessing these devices, as well as a lack of motivation to do so. Around 80% of those who did not use a computer or Internet said they had no interest in those technologies, largely because they didn't know what the benefits were, and because they lacked the social networks needed to communicate using ICTs.

One of the main limitations of this study was the inability to interview people living homeless with serious problems related to mental health and/or excessive consumption of alcohol

and/or drugs - primarily inhaled glue. Unfortunately, the main consumers of inhaled glue in Leon were the youngest homeless people (Suarez et al., 2018), from whom no relevant information could be obtained.

Recommendations

Ending the "pseudo-hereditary" of extreme poverty and preventing chronification among those suffering from social exclusion is a worldwide necessity and an ethical issue for which no expenses should be spared (Vázquez, 2016). The article points out the existence of multiple similarities in characteristics and needs of people living homeless throughout different international contexts, despite the existence of important differences in terms of culture, economic, and social development between countries. These similarities could facilitate the development of prevention programs, design intervention strategies, care services, and support resources to foster processes of inclusion based on the knowledge gained in different countries, transferring internationally "good practices" with the necessary adaptations depending on the cultural, economic, and social context.

The results obtained in this study indicate people living homeless in Nicaragua are in a particularly vulnerable situation. A comparative analysis of different issues with other groups in situations of social exclusion in their context, and with people in a homeless situation in different environments may be useful for developing public policies, prevention protocols, and care services and resources adapted to the characteristics and specific needs of homeless people. In order to improve the situation of people living homeless in Nicaragua, an appropriate course of action, at the very least, would be providing services for their most basic needs; implementing psychosocial and health street outreach strategies, as well as personalized support programs; eliminating barriers hindering and preventing their access to the standard care services and facilities; undertaking comprehensive care programs that include skills training and protected employment; and strengthening their family and community social networks. In this sense, the role of social work is fundamental, especially in street outreach tasks aimed at obtaining an individualized knowledge of the circumstances and needs of people living homeless, analyze the causes of the high "revolving door" to homelessness, provide support reducing barriers to access public services and social care resources, support family and community integration processes, and raise awareness among society and public administrations of the hard reality of the plight of homelessness.

In León (Nicaragua), the limited number of people experiencing homelessness in the city (Suarez et al., 2018; Vázquez et al., 2019a) would facilitate the implementation of personalised support programs at a relatively affordable cost. The most urgent questions aimed at preventing chronification among people experiencing homelessness and improving their quality of life include implementing street outreach strategies, with personalised support, focusing particularly on the most vulnerable individuals: e.g. mothers with dependent children, unaccompanied minors, women, senior citizens, people with severe mental illness, disabled people, people with serious physical illnesses. Among other issues, personalised support must facilitate the reduction or removal of the barriers people experiencing homelessness have to face to access public sector health and social care resources, and those provided by non-governmental organizations. These barriers include ignorance of the available resources, difficulties in engaging with administrative procedures, the stigma associated with homelessness they suffer, their poor state of hygiene, rejection by the resources' workers and users, and a lack of social skills when interacting with

professionals and providing or obtaining information. Implementing mechanisms designed to cover the most basic needs of people living homeless, such as water, food, clothing, medicines, hygiene, and the opportunity to wash their clothes is also very important. Similarly, undertaking comprehensive care programs would be highly positive, adapting experiences such as the "U-turns Program" carried out in South Africa (Collins, 2015) to the Nicaraguan context. This program consists of three phases: a) outreach with food, clothing, and referral to services for people living homeless; b) providing skills training and protected employment; and c) support for those who live and work independently. Also, as noted by Vázquez et al. (2015), new digital technologies are a new factor that must be taken into account in the overall process of helping disadvantaged individuals to change their lives for the better. In this regard, facilitating access to mobile telephones and the Internet, adapting technologies to their specific needs, showing them the various uses these technologies offer to generate interest and motivation, as well as proper usage of them, are important measures for reducing the digital divide affecting the people living homeless.

Likewise, in a culturally collectivist context such as Nicaragua's, it would be particularly important implementing programs aimed at restoring broken family and community ties, with support from government institutions and non-governmental organizations for families and communities in ministering to the needs of their relatives and neighbours in a homeless situation, and providing basic care for them.

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