IT COULD BE YOU
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
MEDIA COVERAGE OF
HOMELESSNESS

Tools and recommendations for the media

Promoted by:

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INTRODUCTION

The general population is still largely unaware of the circumstances in which homeless people live and it is often the case that when people speak or write about them, stereotypes are reproduced that perpetuate their stigmatisation. We are faced with a complex issue that is affected by many factors. Furthermore, as a result of the economic crisis, there are unfortunately more and more highly-educated people that find themselves in this situation who had never experienced a similar situation in their lives.

The media contributes to building the image that citizens have of these people. It plays a key role in giving an accurate image of these men and women so that they avoid an exclusionary vision based on prejudice and ignorance.

That is why the XAPSLL Network of Services for the Homeless, established in Barcelona in 2005 to deal with this phenomenon with maximum collaboration between public and private organisations, has drawn up a series of recommendations for the media coverage of a problem that requires special attention by the media professionals. The Information Council of Catalonia [CIC] advised XAPSLL during this work.

The last point in this document is a terminology glossary for the media coverage of this situation, which is entitled with the highly significant motto: “Podrías ser tú” or “It could be you”.

4 | MEDIA COVERAGE OF HOMELESSNESS
At present, the Catalan word “sensellarisme” or “homelessness” is rarely used in the media, while it is very popular in society at large. This obstacle may stop journalists and political representatives, for whom this guide is intended in particular, from standardising its use. We have to take into account that the introduction of neologisms in colloquial speech does not depend on their acceptance in standard dictionaries. Instead, it depends on the extensive use made of them by the people. Society is always a few steps ahead of the academics in language-related matters.

As a result, and considering that most media have strict style guides in relation to vocabulary, TERMCAT was consulted to check the Catalan term “sensellarisme” or “homelessness” and its possible acceptance prior to writing this guide. The answer was as follows: “We consider that the Catalan noun “sensellarisme” or “homelessness” is appropriate, formed from “sense llar” or “homeless”, a masculine and feminine noun with the following meaning: ‘A person that does not have the minimum housing conditions to enable them to live with dignity’. [01/09/2015]

Therefore, there should be no problem for journalists to incorporate this word in a progressive and natural way, without being strident about it or using a loudspeaker. At the start, it may sound strange but with time, its use will spread gradually throughout society. This would then help to marginalise certain words which, as indicated in this guide, only serve to stereotype people and behaviours and increase prejudices. Taking into account that some newspapers and magazines in Catalonia are published in both Spanish and Catalan and that automatic translation tools are used, it is recommended to use the noun “sindhgarismo”, also “homelessness”, in Spanish.
RECOMMENDATIONS

1. TREAT HOMELESSNESS AS A MULTI-CAUSAL PHENOMENON AND NOT FOCUS THE INFORMATION ONLY ON THE HOMELESS PEOPLE

When providing information about homelessness, it needs to be remembered that this is a multi-causal phenomenon and it is not a good idea to focus the information only on the homeless people themselves. Homelessness is caused by many different shortcomings, whether they are related to the social/family unit, partnerships, work, finances, housing, health, formal and legal status, etc.

Homeless people can address relationship and personal causes thanks to the support services provided by organisations, but they are not able to deal with structural, institutional or legal status problems. These people may make efforts to improve their education, gain personal independence, overcome addictions and come to terms with themselves, but they cannot act on the other areas (structural, institutional and legal framework), which become an insurmountable and limiting block to achieving their individual potentials.

The stigma of alcoholism and substance abuse fades into the background when it is observed that, due to the economic crisis and social conflicts generating migration, there has been an increase in the number of homeless people in most of Europe. In this regard, it needs to be pointed out that while homeless people tended to have a low academic and professional level some years ago, nowadays the number of highly-qualified people in this situation has increased.

2. AVOID BLAMING THE HOMELESS PEOPLE AS ANYBODY COULD END UP IN THIS SITUATION

The fragility of many links in society nowadays means that any of us could find ourselves in this situation if different factors come together under specific conditions.

The following short questionnaire may help us to see that the line that separates the life of people who have a home and that of people who don’t have a home is actually finer than we think.

Answer the following questions honestly:

- Have you ever been dismissed from a job?
- Would you be on your own if you had to face a difficult situation?
- Have you ever been overdrawn on your current account?
- Have you ever had a health problem that meant that you could not finish a work or life project?

Count the number of “Yes” answers.

The higher the number of “Yes” answers, the higher the probability that you understand how people feel who have lost everything, even their own home and roof over their head.
The coverage of homelessness in the media has to avoid blame because, as indicated above, this phenomenon has multiple causes and could affect anybody. Trying to blame the homeless people themselves is ignoring the reality of this situation and just means looking to find blame where there isn’t any. As we all know, nobody has full control over their life and the risks of falling into a fragile situation have increased. We have to address this reality with total awareness of the two-way social and personal aspect that this involves.

3 TREAT THE HOMELESS AS PROPER HUMAN BEINGS
Homeless people are, above all, people. That is the best way to portray them and reflects their worth as human beings. They are people with feelings, who have or have had life projects and dreams, people with skills and difficulties, people with values, challenges and fears, people who have an opinion, who know what they want and what they don’t want, and especially, people with rights.

Media professionals have narrative, literary and graphic resources to underline this reality and to focus the problem in such a way that it avoids stigmatisation and blame, helping to create a community that feels responsible for all its members instead of something more suited to the society of the spectacle and entertainment.

4 EMPHASISE THE POSITIVE ASPECTS INSTEAD OF ONLY POINTING OUT WHAT THEY DO NOT HAVE
Emphasising the positive aspects and terms will also contribute to a more positive coverage of homelessness.

Unfortunately, often the reference to these people gives priority to what they don’t have (shelter or a home) instead of what they do have or what they are fighting for or desire, such as a house or a flat. For example, we never refer to people suffering from a serious illness or define the reality of wealthy people as a “rich situation”.

Even though it is true that it is difficult to define these people in a positive sense due to the situation that they are in, all media have to find the way to do so, using graphic, literary or narrative resources.

5 HELP TO DISPEL FALSE MYTHS ABOUT THE HOMELESS
There are many preconceived ideas and stereotypes about homeless people which, by simplifying a complex reality which links together many different causes, mean that citizens cannot see them as they really are.

This is the list of false myths that the media have to help to fight against:

“They have chosen to be homeless”
This view is transmitted when we focus the communication on homeless people who refuse a service or a public resource, without taking other factors into consideration, such as the way that the Government intervenes before and during the process, or the conflict or disparity of interests and needs of the people affected compared to the reality.

“They don’t want to work”
Many homeless people have worked, would like to work and even do work.
In the latter case, some are victims of exploitation or they work in the underground economy. There are resources that the Government and private entities offer to these people to improve their employability in an increasingly demanding labour market. This is a long process that requires a lot of effort by the people, the professionals and the Government. However, just because somebody wants to work and has sufficient skills to do so does not always mean that they get a job.

“The solution to homelessness is shelters…”
The solution to homelessness is access to affordable housing, a sufficient income and social support when necessary. Shelters, on the other hand, form part of a model that is in regression. The most socially advanced countries are replacing this type of accommodation with social housing and long-term support.

“...and they don’t want to go to them.”
Shelters do not often respond to the needs and desires of the person in question. Socially, they are seen by part of society —the part that is not excluded— as a totally feasible alternative, and the social conscience takes on a conformist and reassuring attitude.

It still has to be understood that homeless people have the right to decent housing, to have their own home, just like any member of society, irrespective of their resources. When a person is taken off the street, they are not visible any more, and therefore they no longer challenge society. Conversely, it is when a process is started for them to assume their own independence, which is not free of challenges, that empathy and solidarity from society is most necessary.

“At least they have what the people give them”
People who have lived in the street obviously appreciate citizen solidarity, but a medium- and long-term outlook shows progressive deterioration of the personal situation.
In this sense, it has been proven that life in the street reduces life expectancy by twenty years on average.

“The solution depends on the charity and solidarity of the people”

It is essential to tackle the situation by addressing the person’s own rights, rather than depending on charity and solidarity. While it is not possible to force somebody off the street for rights issues, neither should anybody be deprived of the basic rights that can often only be accessed if they agree to join a social programme (housing, work, food, etc.). In practice, the support service on the streets has to be careful not to make value judgements on what the person should or should not do with what is given to them. This is where the person’s right to choose comes into effect and where the support of experts is required if necessary and possible.

“There are only homeless men”

It is true that according to statistics on the gender of people who sleep or spend the day in the street, as well as the people attended to in the XAPSSL services, they are mostly men (85%-90%).

However, according to other statistics, such as unsafe housing, inadequate housing or situations tackled by other types of programmes, the number of homeless women is increasing: mothers with children, victims of unreported gender-based violence, shantytownism, etc. Meanwhile, homeless women continue to be a phenomenon and research into their situation is being promoted by bodies and academics from the sector at an EU level.

“They are all alcoholics and drug addicts that brought it upon themselves”

Alcoholism and addictions are diseases and they have to be dealt with as such without making moral assessments and looking for people to blame, just like other mental disorders that are a taboo for a large part of society. With regard to this myth, there is the dilemma of what is the cause and what is the consequence: homelessness, or addictive or mental disorders. As already mentioned, it cannot be denied, however, that the causes of homelessness are diverse.

The stigma of alcoholism and substance abuse fades into the background when it is observed that, due to the economic crisis and social conflicts generating migration, there has been an increase in homelessness in most of Europe.

“They dirty the city and create public order problems”

Statements like this are made from the point of view of people that have what is considered to be necessary for a dignified life. It is more worthwhile to focus our efforts on understanding that they exist and suffer other realities, or on what we can do to prevent them and how we can care for or improve the society that we live in.

Living in the street means not having the spaces that a home provides: from having a coat stand to hang up our winter coat to having a private space for intimate relations. These people have no choice other than to carry out the activities that people usually do in the privacy of their own home out
in the public space, at the risk of being sanctioned.

From the outset, it is necessary to deal with conflicts in the public space, taking into account the rights of all citizens, both those excluded and not excluded, without pinpointing them on a minority. The movement of people in any town or city creates bothersome uses of public spaces.

**6 AVOID IMAGES THAT REPRODUCE STEREOTYPES AND SAFEGUARD THE RIGHT TO PRIVACY**

Images are fundamental in today’s world where the visual dimension plays a dominant role. As a result, it is necessary to be very careful when using images of homeless people. It should be ensured that the images chosen do not contribute to reproducing stereotypes, do not invade their privacy and try to offer a wider vision of the reality of homeless people or those at risk of social exclusion. It is also considered to be a positive change to avoid using the same images on file to illustrate the news of these collectives.

Besides speaking about vulnerable collectives, Organic Law 1/1982, of 5 May, on the Civil Protection of the Right to Honour, Personal and Family Privacy, and Self-Image, and Article 18.1 of the Spanish Constitution specify that everybody has the fundamental right to preserve their image and privacy. As a result, we should always ask for authorisation to take a photograph or a video beforehand, but also that we wish to reproduce the photo to publish it. It needs to be specified that as taking a photo, reproducing it and publishing it are three different acts, express authorisation has to be requested for each of the three actions.

**7 LET THE HOMELESS SPEAK UP BECAUSE THEY ARE THE REAL EXPERTS ON THIS SITUATION AND HAVE THE RIGHT TO EXPLAIN THEIR EXPERIENCES**

An inclusive approach to the situation of homeless people and this issue requires a great deal of composure. The media can contribute to making people think, to think to act, and to act to make things change.

A substantial element for any inclusive approach is to let the homeless people themselves explain their situation. Homeless people are the real experts on their own lives and they are the best people to explain all the details that this entails and, this way, help to put us in their shoes. They have the right to explain their own experiences.

**8 CONTRAST SOURCES AND LET THE EXPERTS SPEAK**

The main function of the media is to provide information, and the sources are essential for this task as they serve to check, consult, determine, verify and find the information. Professional ethics indicates that we must use good sources of information in order to provide reliable information.

**9 AVOID BEING PATRONISING AND SYMPATHETIC**

The issue of homeless people is complex and calls upon society as a whole: it has been proven that life in the street reduces life expectancy by twenty years on average. Only an attentive, inclusive and informed look at all the factors in play can help to give correct coverage of this phenomenon, which forms part of the problems that affect society as a whole.
Patronising and sympathetic approaches do not help to address a social issue that does not respond easily to this type of approach. A sensationalist approach or step toward the society of the spectacle which puts all the emphasis on one part of the story of these people and forgets other factors that should be taken into account does not help either.

As we said at the start, the media plays a decisive role when creating the image of homeless people in the minds of the public. The maturity and professionalism of journalists are key to achieving a more integrated society that has a more accurate vision of this reality.

**10 USE THE CORRECT TERMINOLOGY**
Words help us to define the reality. The appropriate use of words contributes to improving communication, avoiding any bias or manipulation.

Below is a glossary of terms indicating which ones are the most suitable and why.

**TERMINOLOGY FOR CONCEPTS**

**Empowerment**
In the social sphere, it is a concept that reinforces and promotes the autonomous skills of the person from the start of the support process to help them with their decision within a plural environment of opportunities and possibilities.

**Homelessness**
This term refers to the phenomenon of homeless people. It can be translated to *sensellarisme* in Catalan which is the recommended term to use in Catalan.

**Housing first**
*Housing first* emerged in the United States in the 1990s. Due to the extensive literature available in English and the scarce knowledge in
Catalonia, it is recommended that the term is used in English for the time being, rather than translating it to Catalan. It represents a care model for homeless people based on facilitating social support and housing from the start of the process. The person commits to complying with three minimum conditions: contributing some of their own income, avoiding conflicts with the neighbours, and accepting a visit by the support team once a week. After some years of implementation in countries like Canada and Finland, housing first has proven to be successful and guarantees the stability of people with addictions and mental health disorders. The model is currently being defined throughout the Catalan region and in some case, the translation primer la llar can be found.

Scale model
The scale intervention model consists of a successive scale of goals and milestones, previously defined in the social programme, which the person has to reach before accessing shared housing.

Poverty
In relation to homeless people, this is solely an economic aspect of the diverse circumstances surrounding them.

Homelessness
There is not one particular definition that is accepted by the EU member states. In some of them, homelessness is still limited to the more visible and needy category of people that sleep in the street, e.g. people that sleep outdoors overnight. This view does not consider people that live in shelters as homeless people or those that live in very precarious conditions, or those at imminent risk of becoming homeless due to insecure employment or property - people who do in fact count as part of the concept of homelessness.

In the European Consensus Conference in 2010, the partners and the European Commission agreed on the ETHOS\(^1\) definition for Homelessness and Housing Exclusion. This definition comes from the physical, social and legal interpretation of the meaning of a “home”. It classifies the four following circumstances as homelessness or as extreme forms of housing exclusion:

- **Without a roof**: people that live outdoors and people that live in emergency housing.
- **Homeless**: people in accommodation for people without a home, in women’s shelters, shelters for immigrants, people who have come out of different social institutions and people that receive long-term aid due to their homelessness situation.
- **Insecure housing**: people living in insecure or unsafe conditions, in danger of eviction or violence.
- **Unsuitable housing**: people that live in unsuitable housing, unconventional accommodation, such as caravans, without proper access to public supplies such as water, electricity and gas, or who live in overcrowded conditions.

\(^1\) ETHOS - European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion
TERMINOLOGY ON HOUSING, RESOURCES
AND SERVICES

Accommodation centres and shelters
Hostels are a type of accommodation for groups of people, available only at night-time and on a temporary basis for homeless people. They technically have other names, such as “drop-in centres”. They form part of the classic solution for addressing ongoing homelessness by offering accommodation until the person secures a job or passes the first stage for access to temporary housing. However, the hostel network works with other residential services that provide medium and long term accommodation, with more private spaces and activities and services 24 hours a day.

Day centre
Day centres are spaces for daily services and care. Their task is to care for the people who live in the street and to address their personal needs (hygiene, food), and also help to support people with accommodation, such as those in a hostel.

Street team
Teams that work in the street in order to address the situation of people that cannot access the service points provided for homeless people. Depending on the team, they work on establishing medium term contact or take immediate action, to respond to emergencies due to the cold, for example.

Housing
Under the concept of housing, we can distinguish between the availability of flats, or any type of property, and the programmes developed in the context of this housing.

Inclusion housing
This refers to social programmes which temporarily provide people in the inclusion process with accommodation that is generally shared and linked to a social support project.

Social housing
This is the type of housing with which the Government aims to guarantee that all city residents can have a roof over their head, and which can be accessed based on certain conditions and requirements.

Job placement
This is one of a series of temporary measures and programmes aimed at recovering habits, skills and motivation in the search for work, in order to resolve the situation through a labour activity that generates income and allows the person to live an independent life.

Social inclusion
Various terms have been used to refer to the process of a person overcoming the exclusion and precarious situation that they were in: reinsertion, insertion, inclusion. Just as in the exclusion process, there are many elements that form part of the process, but reference is more often made to aspects whereby the person has to adapt more rather than those where society has to modify its behaviour. In many cases, it is necessary to maintain a certain level of permanent support so that the person being helped holds on to what they have achieved by overcoming the challenges they faced.
The entities and Government mainly provide economic support due to the high cost of housing and the low income guaranteed.

Having minimum, basic or guaranteed income would allow many people who become or have become homeless to overcome the situation with a lot less intervention in terms of time. At the same time, it would also prevent many people getting into this situation. In reality, part of the cost of dealing with homelessness corresponds to providing goods and services which, if this type of income existed, the person could pay for themselves.
#homelessness

The situation in which homeless people live is unknown by the majority of the population, as well as the public sector and the media, who often reproduce stereotypes and perpetuate the stigma that falls upon them. This guide offers information, sources and recommendations for better use of images and language, seeking a standardised and less archetypal view of the reality of homelessness: how it affects the homeless people themselves, the myths being circulated, the roles of entities and municipal services... And it provides a terminology glossary for the media coverage of this situation, entitled with the highly significant motto: “Podries ser tu” or “It could be you”.

FCIC