**Chapter Five: Methodology** 

Having established the demographic group that comprises the study population and the structuring of the shelter system relevant to that population, this chapter details the methodology of this study. The sampling design and the interview process are explained here, with some attention to the scientific and personal challenges which confronted the researchers.

# The Sampling Design

As reported in the previous chapter, the demographic group selected for sampling in this study - single men and women, 20 to 45 years of age, without accompanying children - are segregated in the shelter system, as are most other people, by their age, gender and family status. Therefore, not all of the shelters serve the population specified for this study; indeed most sheltering facilities restrict access to that population. In order to sample as representatively as is possible from the diverse facilities that *do* serve the study population, a number of factors had to be considered: How many survey participants would be sought? What facilities and non-shelter locations would be selected for sampling? And, how would one randomly or representatively sample from within these locations as best as possible?<sup>1</sup>

Since the survey requires lengthy conversation and in-depth questioning of participants, a relatively small sample was decided as most appropriate. Researchers

would approach 45 people and ask for their participation in the survey.

Before any sampling was undertaken, it was decided that the sample should represent the heterogeneity of the study population with regards to the distribution of their sheltering circumstances, their gender composition and their disability status. Hence, sampling targets were set to assure this heterogeneity. First, the participants would be sampled from shelters of different size so as to match the availability of shelter alternatives for this population, as shown in Table 14. Second, a minimum target of 25% of the participants being women would be sought, slightly over-representing this group, but maintaining the gender diversity of the single adults. Third, wanting to assure that persons with problems such as mental illness, substance abuse or disability, or persons with a previous hospitialization from mental illness, were adequately represented in the sample, a minimum target of 25% of the survey participants was set to be persons with such "disabilities," with no maximum target set. This last criterion would be monitored daily as the sampling proceeded, with no intervention planned to assure this "disability" representation unless it appeared that such persons were being "undersampled" according to the 25% criterion. (No intervention was eventually required as the target of 25% was achieved, indeed surpassed.) Finally, considering the importance but uncertain size of the "unsheltered" homeless population, and not wanting to bias the sample in the direction of those who are sheltered, a minimum target of 25% of the sample was to be selected from "street" or non-shelter locations.

Choosing from among the diverse shelter and non-shelter locations where participants would be sought was the next decision of the sampling design. Shelter sites could not be randomly selected because there was sufficient reason to suspect that many of the shelters would choose not to cooperate with the study. Moreover, since arrangements had to be made in advance of the data collection, shelters were selected

where it was believed that there was a reasonable assumption of cooperation by shelter management,<sup>2</sup> and where any selection effects operating in the choice of shelters could be minimized by control over sampling procedures *within* the chosen shelters. Control over the random selection of participants within shelters was judged as more important (as well as more convenient) than control over the random selection of shelter sites, since the shelters were not the subject of study, but the residents within the shelters.

A total of six shelters were eventually chosen for sampling. Wanting to match as closely as possible the adminstrative structure of shelter alternatives available to the study population, an emphasis was made on the large shelters for men (facilities with 100 beds or more), and the medium shelters for women (facilities with between 11 and 99 beds). The eventual distribution of the sample by shelter size is shown in Table 15, providing a close match to that same distribution for those subpopulations as shown in Table 14. Two large shelters for men, the city's own shelter on Ridge Avenue and the Volunteers of America on Broad Street, were selected from among the five large facilities serving the men. One medium and one small shelter for men were also chosen to maintain the the representativeness of shelter-size in the sample: the Committee For Dignity and Fairness Shelter on Spring Garden Street (capacity of 55), operated by a homeless advocacy organization, and St. Joseph's Shelter for Men on Front Street (capacity of 10), operated by the Franciscan community in the Kensington neighborhood. The women were primarily chosen from two medium-sized shelters, the same Committee For Dignity and Fairness Shelter from which the men were sampled (it is coed), and the Women of Hope boarding home on Lombard Street. The Women of Hope boarding home is operated with the administrative assistance of the Sisters of Mercy, and primarily serves persons who have had mental disabilities or previous psychiatric hospitalization. This facility was chosen to assure the inclusion of people who have had

psychological problems in the sample, though it resulted in the women participants being disproportionately disabled by mental illness relative to the men. A small shelter for women, St. Clare's Shelter, operated by the Franciscan Community in Kensington, was chosen to include a small shelter for the women's sample. The survey participants from the "streets" were chosen primarily from two locations, the area including the Federal Reserve Bank and Benjamin Franklin Park, and another city park known as Logan Circle. However, a few participants were also selected from street locations in center city that were not congregating areas for groups of homeless people. These few locations were street corners and alleys where individuals were asked about participating in the survey.

# Insert Table 15 about here

Sampling from within these specified environments was done to preserve this goal of "as representative as is possible." The small- and medium-sized shelters for both men and women were each managed by people who agreed to the study condition of "randomly selecting persons from the guest registers." Hence, the participants from these locations were selected by a random procedure, and then asked for their participation. The larger shelters and non-shelter locations provided the greatest challenge for subject selection. Neither of the large shelters responded to letters requesting permission to sample randomly from guest registers, and telephone calls to the shelters were equally unsuccessful in obtaining any response. Consequently, the interviewers went into the two shelters as overnight guests to observe the potential sampling possibilities within the shelters. Both shelters were subdivided by long-term and one-nighter populations, and both seemed managed with a distinctive antagonism between staff and clients,

introducing potential biases if one were either to select from within the shelters, or under the apparent authority and consent of staff. Therefore, it was decided that potential participants would be approached outside these facilities, according to the following guidelines: Since each interviewer was to do a maximum of two interviews a day, potential participants from these sites would be approached either in the morning or in the late afternoon (to avoid getting only non-working people during the day). The rule for approaching potential participants was that the first person next to whom the interviewer stood (usually in line) or sat (usually at meals), and who was not otherwise engaged, in either conversation or doing some activity, would be asked for his or her participation. This last condition was introduced so that the interviewers were not disturbing or interrupting people, or viewed as an annoyance. This procedure worked very well in recruiting participants at the large shelters. Sampling from the nonshelter locations, at Ben Franklin Park and at Logan Circle, was done with the same guidelines in mind. Interviewers were to approach the first person that they saw in the park who was not otherwise occupied. Interviewers were to presume that everyone in these parks was homeless, so that the subject selection was not biased by people who "looked" homeless. This procedure also worked well, as only one person was eventually approached who wasn't "without a place to live." The other non-shelter locations, where individuals were found alone in center-city street sites, were simply asked for their participation on a first-sighted first-asked basis. Consequently, in such instances, identification was based on "looking" homeless (this occurred in only two cases).

The demographic characteristics of the eventual sample are summarized in Table 16.

Of the 45 persons approached by interviewers, 43 agreed to participate (96%).

Thirty-one men (72%) and 12 women (28%) comprise the sample. The average age of

30.1 years is nearly the same for the men and the women, and suggests that the sample is more young than old within the age range of 20 to 45. Like the homeless population of Philadelphia that they represent, this sample of men and women is predominantly black, with relatively small white and Hispanic representations. The median length of time homeless in the sample, as would have been suggested by the literature, is less than six months. The women in the sample have a higher median length of time homeless, due to the intentional sampling of women from a boarding home for the mentally disabled. So too does the entire sample have a much higher "average length of time homeless" than the "median length of time homeless," due to the concentration of extreme values in the over-represented group from nonshelter or street locations.

Insert Table 16 about here

## The Interview

### The Interview Schedule

This is an intensive study of a relatively small sample of homeless men and women, and of how they became homeless in the context of family, work and social relations. Therefore, it required that survey participants provide deeply personal information about their own biographies; a task best met by a structured, yet comfortable and relaxed, open-ended interview. The interview schedule for this study was developed over several months, and after two pilot tests. The primary investigator (the present author) had interviewed eight homeless people from different cities across the United States about their experiences of becoming homeless (see Culhane & Fried, 1988), which provided the initial insight into the relevant issues that such an interview should explore. A more systematic interview schedule was then developed and tested on two

homeless people in Boston, to assess the depth of information which it could elicit, given the sensitivity and personal nature of the information. Some changes were made in consultation with an advisory committee, and a final version of the interview schedule agreed upon (see Appendix A). The Committee on Human Subjects in the Psychology Department at Boston College reviewed and approved the interview schedule and interview procedure to assure its adequate protection of the human rights of survey participants.

The interview was designed to minimize the stigmatizing impact of being part of a "study" of homeless people, while still being able to elicit the sensitive information involved in the personal stories of "becoming homeless." This goal was accomplished by designing the interview to treat the participants as "experts" on homelessness who were privy to critical information in which the interviewer was interested, rather than by designing the interview to treat the participants as "others" who were eventually going to be objectified by the interviewer. This goal was concretely accomplished by setting the more personal questions regarding ones own homelessness within a context of other, less personal questions that are of interest to the researcher, but not of direct relevance to the present study. To that end, the first series of questions explore the participants' views on the shelter system (what do they think of it; how often do they use it; why do people avoid it; what goes on in the shelters; what ought to be done with the shelters). A second set of questions explores the social and political opinions of the survey participants (questions regarding participants' beliefs about equity, justice, and human rights in the United States) again helping to create an atmosphere where participants feel respected by the interviewer. After approximately twenty minutes of conversation on the shelters and about social opinions, the questions turn more personal. Participants are asked about how they obtain money, and how they spend their money.

Included in this section of the interview are questions on work, views on work options available to homeless people, and the kinds of work people have done or are doing since they became homeless, and about the wages they receive. Also included are questions on illegally obtained money. Then, the interviewer asks, "What's your story? How did you end up 'without a place to live?" (The word "homeless" was avoided in the entire interview, since many individuals classified as "homeless" in this study do not consider themselves "homeless," and may be offended by the label.) This section of the interview explored with participants their view on what happened that they are now living in shelters or in public places; where did they live prior to the shelters or streets; how did relations with one's family affect this process, or how were they affected; how did these changes affect work and employment, or how were work and employment affected by changes. Participants were questioned on the specific transitions that took them from the place where they begin their stories, to their current situation. Questions were asked regarding the subjective experience of these changes, and the effects of these changes on one's outlook and well-being. Finally, a set of questions explored the individual charactistics and significant biographical events of the participants. Participants were asked about any previous institutional living, health problems, disability, and substance abuse, both prior to becoming homeless, and after becoming homeless, and the perceived relationship between such personal issues and homelessness. And lastly, participants were asked about their work histories, educational attainment and military service. The interview concluded with the interviewer asking participants if they had any questions or things to add. The interview usually took from 50 to 90 minutes to complete.

#### The Interviewers

The interviewers for this study were myself and a research assistant. Both of us are

white males, and were 25 years old at the time of the data collection. We attempted to appear relaxed and informal to the participants, and wore modest and simple clothing. We spent each weekday in August and early September of 1988 in the network of soup kitchens and shelters primarily serving the single male population in center city Philadelphia. Single women and families were also included in some of these locations, but the researchers, by virtue of our gender and family status, were usually excluded or spatially separated from these groups. This daily appearance in the shelter and soup kitchen network was done for purposes of participant-observation, as well as to make ourselves visually familiar to potential participants. In fact, before attempting to interview people at any of the large shelters or nonshelter locations, we made sure that we were seen in those environments for the two preceding days. This was also done in the case of the boarding home for mentally ill women. We were careful not to appear alligned with shelter management or soup kitchen staff at any of these locations, usually by simply mixing with the clients, and by avoiding contact with staff. This was done so that potential participants would not feel that their confidentiality would be compromised or that their participation would have an effect on their access to resources. We went through the soup kitchens and large shelters as did the other clients, and did not draw attention to ourselves or make ourselves known to shelter management. Occasional questions from clients about us or the aims of the research were answered honestly.

It should be noted that the presence of these two white males in an environment almost exclusively comprised of black men and women presented some personal challenges to us as interviewers and observers. People usually thought that we were either cops, or looking for drugs, and, on a couple occasions, people suspected that we were both. This perceived status sometimes served as a source of security because

people seemed less likely to harass or challenge us, though people were easily convinced of our intentions and seemed comfortable with us. Because we usually travelled alone, we had to confront some hostile people on occasion, and were sometimes asked quite forcefully for cigarettes or money. Carrying cigarettes and giving them away on request acted as a good mediating influence, and often served as a means of meeting people and striking up conversation. In a couple instances, we offered to take people out to eat instead of giving them money.

Sometimes we received priveleged treatment because of our status as white men. For example, this occurred at two temporary employment agencies, where upon our separate entrances into a room packed with young black men, we were each called to the front of the long line to receive job placements. These offers had to be tactfully refused so as not to inspire anger from the people whom were potential participants in our study. But on other occasions, especially in the shelters and at the soup kitchens, this special attention could not be avoided, and it was interesting to observe the more considerate way in which we were treated by staff, and the more kindly way in which our questions were answered. As another example, even at Adult Services, the attending guard never searched me on my numerous entrances into the facility, even though he had no reason to presume that I was anyone but another client. Reception workers at Adult Services also looked quizzically at me, and seemed to assume that I had other intentions than seeking shelter, even though I was no better dressed or more neat in appearance than the others there. Again, the salient difference appeared to be racial. On one other occasion, on account of my race, I was approached by a young black man about participating in some "salt and pepper" scams. This is a nickname given to illegal tricks played on unwitting persons, playing off of the racial difference and the unwitting victims' presumed lack of association between us.

Of course, there were other instances in which we were not treated specially, and therefore were subjected to the same humiliating treatment as everyone else. For example, we were not exempted from the body searches at the Ridge Avenue shelter for men, and were the subjects, along with many others, of loudly barked orders by a "counsellor" who made us wait in the rain for two hours before admitting us. On one other occasion worth noting, I was ordered by a "guard" at one of the soup kitchens to pay him \$1 in order to be admitted to the meal two minutes late. People who were his friends went in without paying anything, while a small group of us were asked to pay. When I protested and demanded to see the management, one of his friends pulled me aside, and threatened to assault me if I pressed my case any further. Future researchers should beware of the "power cliques" among the homeless at the shelters and the soup kitchens.

While confrontations are to be expected in this area and type of research, it should be noted that some friendships and alliances also formed among the researchers and the homeless. Both of us ended up establishing a circle of friends, with whom we exchanged a lot of joking and discussion. Since I had a car, and this became known to several people, I ended up taking people to work, to the doctor, to the welfare office, and on one occasion, to a man's mother's house so he could get boots for a job he had taken. One of the afternoons a few of us even "cruised" around their former neighborhoods. Hence, the relationships between the researchers and the homeless was sometimes very friendly, and most of the time very cordial.

#### The Interview Procedure

Potential participants were selected by the interviewers according to the procedures outlined in the previous section on sampling design. Interviewers, always acting alone, approached the potential participants by introducing themselves, and by asking if the

selected person would be interested in participating in a survey of people "with no place to live" or "without housing." Participants were told that they would receive \$10.00 for their cooperation, or, if a diner was the cite of the interview, participants would be bought something to eat and given five dollars. As has been stated, in the case of the small and medium shelters, shelter management were cooperative with the researchers. and allowed for random sampling from guest registers. Interview space was also set aside in each of these small and medium shelters where participants and interviewers could speak in relative privacy. If the participant had a preference for being interviewed away from the shelter or in a nearby cafe or restaurant, the interviewers accommodated those preferences. In the more difficult cases of the large shelters and nonshelter locations, participants were usually interviewed in either a nearby fast-food restaurant, some semi-private outdoor location, or, as in two instances, a nearby tavern. Some of the street or park interviews were conducted on site, with as much privacy as was possible to arrange under such circumstances. Both at the large shelters and at the street locations, participants were only offered five dollars and lunch, rather than \$10.00 or a choice, because the interviewers were concerned about the potential impact of people circulating rumors about the cash on hand with the interviewers. Interviewers approached potential subjects in the large shelters and nonshelter locations either in the early morning - after breakfast in the shelters, or in late afternoon - before entrance in the shelters. This was done to assure that a bias was not introduced in the sample against working persons. Overall, only two people of the 45 people who were approached refused to participate in the interview.

The actual interviews began with the interviewer reading a letter from me, listing my institutional affiliation, explaining the purpose of the study and explaining the participants' rights as human subjects (see Appendix B). As required by the oversight

Committee on Human Subjects, the letter informed participants that they and the information they provided would remain anonymous, that they could terminate the interview at any time with no loss of compensation for participation, and that they could refuse to answer any question or questions that they so chose. Participants were also informed that the interview was being audio-taped, and that the recordings of their voices would be heard only by the principal investigator, and for the production of a later written transcript of the participants' answers. This introductory letter was read aloud to the participants by the interviewer to assure that persons who were illiterate understood the conditions of their participation, and to avoid the potential embaressment that would be posed by asking participants if they could or could not read the letter. (As a result of this action, several participants insisted on reading the letter aloud themselves, in an apparent attempt to establish that they were not illiterate, or that they did not need it read for them.) Participants were given a copy of this letter to keep, and their verbal consent to the conditions of the interview was obtained on audio tape. Written consent was avoided, as it was decided that asking people to sign something would intimidate many potential participants.

The interviews proceeded with little difficulty, though the interviewing process was perceived as intense and demanding by the interviewers. Three persons terminated the interview before its completion; in two cases because the subject matter was getting emotionally difficult to discuss, and in one case because the participant was tired of the questioning. In two cases the interviews provided information of confused and little qualitative value for analysis, since the participants' reasoning was partially incapacitated by an apparent mental illness. By far the majority of the participants expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to discuss their homelessness, and said that they felt that the interview was "interesting," "good," or "insightful." A few

participants seen after their interviews asked if they could do the interview again, now that they had "practiced" it, or because they "liked" it, or as in one case, because the participant wanted another chance to go to lunch.