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Julien Damon
Translated by Godfrey Rogers

I.N.E.D | « Population »
2002/3 Vol. 57 | pages 555 - 567
ISSN 0032-4663
This document is the English version of:
DOI 10.3917/popu.203.0569

Available online at :

How to cite this article :
DOI 10.3917/popu.203.0569

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The Terminology of Homelessness in France in News Agency Dispatches

Julien DAMON*

In what follows we present the results from a study conducted with an original data source, the Agence France-Presse (AFP) news agency dispatches, to analyse the process of naming populations and social problems. The example taken for this descriptive and methodological exercise is the abbreviation SDF which stands for *sans domicile fixe* (meaning “With no permanent residence”) and is a generally accepted shorthand term for homeless people. Over the last twenty years France’s homeless have acquired a greater presence both in the streets and in political debate. But do we know exactly who we are talking about? Research has clarified the profile of the population and the living experience of those commonly denoted by a variety of different terms, such as roofless, socially excluded, tramps, vagrants, beggars, homeless and so forth\(^{(1)}\). Leaving aside the socio-demographic analysis of this population and the question of whether a “best” term exists, our objective here is to establish two things. First, that for the last ten years the SDF abbreviation has been by far the most widely used in public debate to denote the persons and problems previously characterized as tramps and vagrancy. Second, that if SDF is indeed the most widely used term, it remains relatively ambiguous, being frequently used as a synonym for other terms (roofless, tramps, etc.) which do not have exactly the same meaning and which carry different connotations at the level of representations.

I. Semantic diversity

Who are the SDF? Who is a vagrant? What is a beggar? Definitions are many and varied, and have been formulated in a long succession of studies, circulars, royal edicts, republican laws, municipal by-laws, public pronouncements and private discussions. Terms such as *chemineau* (hobo), *trimardeur* (vagrant), *nomade* (wanderer), *clochard* (tramp), *marginal* (socially marginalized), *sous-prolétaire* (sub-proletarian), *sans-abri* (roofless), *sans-logis* (homeless), *exclu* (socially excluded), or of course the SDF acronym are elements in the semantic apparatus that has gradually formed in France around poverty and vagrancy. Each of these words is attributed a loose definition that varies according to individuals and circumstances. Some words are little used nowadays, such as *chemineau* in France, comparable to “hobo” in the United States\(^{(2)}\).

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\* Bureau de la recherche de la Caisse nationale des allocations familiales (CNAF).
Translated by Godfrey I. Rogers.

\(^{(1)}\) For the state of our knowledge about the homeless in France, see the volumes edited by Maryse Marpsat and Jean-Marie Firdion (Marpsat, 1998; Marpsat, Firdion, 2000). See also the early results from the large-scale survey conducted in 2001 by INSEE with help notably from INED (Brousse, de la Rochère, Massé, 2002).

\(^{(2)}\) On the diversity of the hobo population (from migrant workers to street people) in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, see Anderson (1921).
Rather than trying to establish a perfect or even operational definition— an approach that often leads to the invention of a new term— it is more useful to give a description of actual situations. We might begin with the concrete and up-to-date example of the people who can be observed begging on street corners, rummaging through dustbins, sleeping in the street or on hot air outlets, or who harangue passengers with their problems in the métro or in railway station corridors. These people have come to symbolize extreme poverty and social exclusion. They are usually referred to in French as exclus, sans-abri or SDF. The term of vagrant is no longer widely used, though anyone asking for money in a public place can expect to be labelled as a beggar, and begging is widely identified with homelessness. As the American economist O’Flaherty (1996) rightly observes, however, not everyone who is reduced to begging is homeless. Nor do all homeless people beg. Yet begging is widely viewed as an activity limited to the homeless, and vagrancy as a way of life associated with having nowhere to live. These identifications can restrict our understanding of the diverse and dynamic conditions experienced by the individuals labelled as beggars, vagrants or SDF.

Instances of the SDF acronym can be found in the records of the police and local welfare boards in the nineteenth century, but it is only very recently that the term has entered general usage. It combines and subsumes the meanings associated with loss of housing resulting from social exclusion or from natural calamities, and designates individuals such as the tramp (a picturesque figure requiring no organized collective response), the vagrant (inspiring mainly fear), or the beggar (accosting people in public places). Down-and-out lone men, homeless families and a range of quite distinct phenomena (lack of housing, the spectacle of misery in public places, begging, etc.) are thus lumped together under the same label.

II. An original study based on the AFP news dispatches

Our demonstration of the diversity of situations associated with the SDF abbreviation is based on the AFP dispatches—a source that until now has been relatively little used, at least in a systematic manner, for analysis. We consider only the subject matter of the dispatches, all of which were examined for the study. No attempt is made to analyse the actual process of the production (and selection) of news, which itself contributes to the production of events.

These dispatches are important by virtue of the intermediate position they often occupy between a phenomenon and its processing by the media, which in turn necessarily affects how a problem is formulated in political debate. Much of a journalist’s work involves treatment of these dispatches, since they are commonly reproduced either in full in short pieces or in part in longer articles. The terms chosen to qualify and describe problems are particularly important since their impact will be felt throughout the press. The members of the AFP agency thus have a crucial function as relays. Freelance and staff journalists, local and national correspondents, collect, process and transmit a wide variety of news. Their choice of terms is the reflection not of a particular editorial policy but of the diversity or homogeneity of

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(3) Some commentators have suggested new terms in an attempt to avoid the semantic confusions attached to the terms denoting vagrants, tramps and the homeless. Thus Durou and Rimailho (1970) chose “for its evocative power” an outmoded (but imprecise) term: vagueux. Porquet (1987) in his influential participant observation survey suggests a neologism: the “stiffs”, a word borrowed from US slang.

(4) An approach based on this visibility of persons and their activities is applied in the United States by the sociologist Jencks (1994) and the economist O’Flaherty (1996) in their research on the homeless.


(6) For an example of a study on these lines, see the article by Kingston (1996) on AFP’s coverage of Irish news.
the names applied to populations and social problems. While not exaggerating the influence of these dispatches, they provide us with a prism, rather than a filter, through which to observe semantic changes in the acts of labelling and classification.

**Box 1**

**AFP: a key source of news**

Agence France-Presse (AFP), the world’s oldest news agency, was founded in 1835 by Charles-Louis Havas. The agency took its present name in 1944 when the news and advertising branches of the Havas group were split. Under the terms of its special statute adopted in 1957, and still a subject of debate, the agency has a public interest mission to supply “accurate” and “impartial” news. AFP is neither a private company nor a public corporation; it is in fact closer to a consortium of which public authorities and the press are both clients and administrators.

Operating in a highly competitive sector that includes in particular Reuters (UK) and Associated Press and Bloomberg (USA), AFP’s contributors currently number 2,000 (1,200 of them journalists), present in every continent, who cover news stories and produce dispatches, photographs and computer graphics. As an organ of the press, AFP’s vocation is to supply news to the other media. It also supplies news in a structured and ready-to-use form to the main public and private institutions, and the state is its largest single client.

Since 1983, all AFP dispatches are fully archived in a database known as “Agora”. Like the daily dispatch service, this is divided up under several headings: “World News”, “Documentary”, “Sport”, “International”, “Economy”, “AFP General”. Here we use the latter general news category, corresponding to around 50,000 dispatches per year, a figure that has varied little over the last twenty years.

The dispatches can be consulted through either AFP or Européenne des Données, using Minitel (France’s domestic videotex terminal) and Internet (3615 AFP, www.afp.com, www.pressed.com). A charge is made for this service, either per item or on subscription. However, the dispatch titles alone can be accessed at no charge.

Strictly speaking, a distinction should be made between the processing of an issue by the media and by a news agency. However, since these dispatches appear highly representative both of articles published in the press and of broadcast items and programmes, such an analysis can be the basis for reaching general conclusions.

For the period 1983–2001, more than 2,000 dispatches from AFP’s general information service (see Box 1) contain the **SDF** abbreviation, and in over 1,000 it appears in the title of the dispatch. Since our approach is relatively innovative, it is appropriate to give some details of the method employed.

A first point concerns the care needed in using abbreviations, since the letters **SDF** do not stand only for **sans domicile fixe**. They also stand for **Scouts de France**, **Stade de France**, and a large (anglophone) political party in Cameroon, the “Social Democratic Front”. Consequently, many dispatches that contain the abbreviation in fact have nothing to do with homeless people and must be set aside. We decided to retain all the dispatches that dealt explicitly with the homeless, excepting those that used the **SDF** acronym in contexts not directly related to a description of the population or measures in its favour (theatre previews, film reviews, and the like)\(^7\). In total, our corpus comprises over 2,000 dispatches describing situations or presenting factual information, giving details of initiatives, proposals or analyses, or reporting the speeches and views of politicians and personalities on the subject of homelessness. As a final restriction, we included only dispatches that deal with the situation in France.

\(^7\) It is noteworthy that the **SDF** abbreviation is so well established that it is often used to describe situations that have very little to do with street homelessness. Dispatches of the kind “After a long time as **SDF**, the Archaos circus is now established in Marseilles” were excluded from our corpus.
We decided to extend our study to include some much older terms that still feature in the vocabulary of homelessness. This allows us to compare the frequency of use of the terms “mendiant (beggar)”, “vagabond (vagrant)”, “nouveau pauvre (new poor)”, “sans-logis (homeless)”, “clochard (tramp)”, “sans-abri (roofless)”, “sans domicile fixe (with no permanent residence)” and the SDF abbreviation. This exercise could of course have been extended to include other expressions such as zonard (dropout), routard (drifter), sous-prolétaire (sub-proletarian) or marginal (socially marginalized). Dispatches using the latter term are far too numerous for us to be able to isolate those dealing directly with the homeless. On the other hand, we counted the dispatches (title and text) in which the terms “sous-prolétaire” and “zonard” occur. For “sous-prolétaire”, we obtain fewer than ten instances, not all of which concern poverty in France. Use of this term in French public debate during the 1980s and 1990s was thus completely incidental. By contrast, the term “zonard”, which some homeless people use to describe their situation (8), is more common (some thirty dispatches). Choices always have to be made, however, and it was decided not to include this term in the analysis. This in no way affects our general conclusion that the SDF abbreviation is employed as a synonym for all the other terms.

For each of the terms selected, as was the case for SDF, attention had to be limited to France and to dispatches on the subject of poverty, vagrancy, and social exclusion. For example, people are often referred to as homeless as a result of natural calamities such as extreme weather conditions or fire. Sorting the dispatches required a considerable investment of time and effort. A further difficulty is that several dispatches dealing with the same event may succeed each other in the space of a few hours or minutes. It was decided to count only one dispatch for each event.

One last important methodological observation needs to be made. In some dispatches several different words are used to denote the same phenomenon. This prevents us from calculating the exact total of dispatches that have dealt with homelessness on the basis of the different terms used. Thus the text or title of a dispatch may contain both the abbreviated and full forms of SDF—“Un sans domicile fixe écroué pour le meurtre d'un autre SDF dans le Rhône” (A homeless man is incarcerated for the murder of another SDF in the Rhône département) (16/08/01). Also, different terms are sometimes used to improve readability—“Soupçonné d'avoir causé la mort d'un sans-abri, un SDF présenté au juge” (Suspected of having occasioned the death of a roofless man, an SDF appears in court) (27/12/93) — or to express differences within the population—“Papy le clochard trouve qu'il y a trop de SDF” (Papy the tramp believes there are too many SDF) (17/12/92). Duplication of this kind is especially common and makes it impossible to count the number of dispatches using the different terms and thus to obtain the total number of dispatches dealing with the general issue referred to by these separate terms. We begin by focusing on the descriptive terms used in the titles of the dispatches dealing with homelessness, and then extend our investigation to all those whose title or text or both use different terms for this issue.

### III. SDF and synonyms in the dispatch titles

Table 1 and Figure 1 present the annual number of dispatches whose title contains the SDF abbreviation or one of the synonyms that we have selected. They illustrate precisely the change in the terminology used, and the growth of media interest in the issue.

Figure 1 shows that the SDF abbreviation has only very recently become established as the standard term for denoting the phenomena of vagrancy, social marginalization, extreme poverty, and homelessness. As regards AFP, this generalization can be dated precisely to 1993 — whereas only two dispatches had the SDF abbreviation in their titles in 1992, they numbered over 150 in 1993.

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Table 1 and the diagram also give an image of the growth of media interest in these issues, as observed through the AFP prism. They show that it is indeed from the early 1990s (and to be precise from 1993) that homelessness acquired a high media profile. The explanation for this is straightforward. The year 1993 was characterized by: (i) economic recession associated with a collapse of French public confidence and an upsurge in fears about unemployment and poverty, (ii) two hard winters during which the deaths from cold of many rough sleepers were reported, notably by AFP, (iii) the emergence of the market for street papers (Macadam Journal, La Rue, Le Réverbère, etc.) which gave the homeless a much greater public visibility, (iv) important institutional initiatives, such as the setting up of the SAMU social (mobile emergency care for rough sleepers) in Paris, (v) the role of the social exclusion theme in the election campaign for the 1995 French presidency. 

It can also be noted that 1993 saw the publication of numerous books dealing with social exclusion and in particular with homelessness, some of which have been influential. These include the volume edited by Bourdieu (1993), the French translation of Hobo by Anderson (1921), the second book by Paugam (1993), the results of the ethnographic approach used by Gaboriau (1993), and the works by the journalists Prolongeau (1993) and Silber and Keita (1993).
Until 1992, these dispatches were usually classified under the heading of poverty. After this date, they were divided equally between the themes of poverty and social exclusion\(^{(10)}\), or appeared under both headings at the same time. During the winter months, the largest number of dispatches were about the number of deaths from cold. During the rest of the year, they usually come under the headings of justice, crime and \textit{faits divers} (short news items).

### IV. The seasonal dimension of media and political attention

Publication of the dispatches follows a highly seasonal pattern. The dispatches, particularly those that use the term \textit{sans-abri} (roofless) and the SDF abbreviation, appear mostly in the winter months, under the headings of poverty, cold, and miscellaneous news. Their number is related to the severity of the weather conditions. The exceptionally cold months of January 1985, January 1987 and February 1991 produced many dispatches, which accounted for the rise in the total number of dispatches in those years.

Figure 2 displays the cumulated monthly totals of AFP dispatches devoted to the homeless from 1993 to 2001 and shows clearly that media attention is greatest at certain times of the year, with in particular a peak occurring around Christmas and the New Year.

\(^{(10)}\) For greater precision it would be useful—though beyond the scope of this study—to compare the changing frequency of the themes of “exclusion”, “poverty”, “insecurity” and “homelessness” in the dispatches from the same period.
Since winter 1954, the deaths of homeless people during periods of intense cold have been the subject of a sustained media mobilization. From the mid-1980s, this mobilization has become something of a regular feature at the end of each year, in a cycle that starts with the first cold weather, reaches its peak around Christmas and falls off quickly in the spring. In countries with Judaeo-Christian traditions, the period preceding the end-of-year festivities is when feelings of sympathy towards the destitute and the homeless are strongest (Bunis, Snow and Yancik, 1996). The level of sympathy and the scale of charitable or collective initiatives thus follow an annual cycle that peaks in December.

The same pattern has been observed in the United States. Kirchheimer (1989), Snow and Anderson (1993), followed by Hewitt (1996) have shown a sharp increase in the number of articles devoted to the homeless in America around the festive season, and the relative lack of interest in these issues at other times(11), following a cycle very similar to that observed in France.

V. SDF and synonyms in dispatch titles and/or texts

We also counted the dispatches containing SDF in either the text or the title or both, as a way of assessing the degree to which this abbreviation has become institutionalized and is used in contexts that go beyond the problems and initiatives specifically related to the homeless (Table 2 and Figure 3). We thought it useful to measure the extent of the term’s use in dispatches of a more general nature, which deal with broader social issues albeit with a clear emphasis on the situation of homeless people or on measures to help them, or both. For a comparison with the use of other

(11) It is relevant to note that coverage of homelessness was greatest in the United States at the end of the 1980s (Hewitt, 1996), while in France the peak was reached in the mid-1990s.
descriptive terms, the same exercise was performed for the SDF abbreviation in its full form (sans domicile fixe) and for the term clochard (tramp). We also included the word for “begging” (mendicité), to assess the importance accorded to this question.

Table 2 and Figure 3 are instructive. First of all they show that begging only began to receive attention when the anti-begging by-laws passed by local councils became an issue in France. The first of these anti-begging measures was introduced at Montélimar in 1991; their number increased as of 1993 though they did not become a major news story until 1995. The new Penal Code that came into effect in March 1994 no longer treated begging as an offence, and this could be seen as the reason for the lively public debate that arose over these by-laws in 1995. But this interpretation is not tenable since the number of these by-laws rose in 1994, although the offences of vagrancy and begging had been suppressed, without there being any outcry or controversy. A final comment on begging is that the few dispatches in which this subject is treated between 1988 and 1991 are precisely those dealing with the progress in the work of reforming the French Penal Code(12).

Table 2.— Number of AFP dispatches on the issue of the homeless, with the SDF abbreviation or a synonym in the title or the text

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Mendicité</th>
<th>Clochard</th>
<th>Sans domicile fixe(b)</th>
<th>SDF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1983(a)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>556</td>
<td>936</td>
<td>1,635(c)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a) Counted from 01/07/83.
(b) In the period 1983–2001 more than 3,000 dispatches contain the words sans, domicile, and fixe. In addition, the term is often used to describe situations that have nothing to do with homelessness. Reprocessing left a total of 936 dispatches in which the term was indeed applied to the context of homelessness. It can be noted that the term sans domicile fixe tends to be used in discussions of social questions, whereas “clochard (tramp)” is more often used in short news stories reporting acts of savagery, the discovery of bodies, etc.
(c) Due to the reprocessing we performed, this total is less than the 2,000 dispatches of our corpus (cf. supra).

Source: Agence France-Presse.

The most noteworthy point is the growth in use of the SDF abbreviation. Although used since 1983, it appeared only sporadically before 1993. Furthermore, although a count of the dispatches with SDF in their title (cf. Table 1) could suggest that media attention fell off sharply after 1995, when the content of the text is also taken into account we see that use of the term in fact continued to increase until 1998, and has fallen since 1999(13). This invites the conclusion that after 1995 homelessness received less media coverage in its own right but remained in the news as a component of social problems that were themselves discussed within the broader conceptual framework of social exclusion.

VI. From “tramp” to “homeless person”

Use of the word for “tramp” (clochard) has varied significantly. During the main periods of extreme winter conditions (January 1985, January 1987 and February 1991), this word was used more than any other. However, whereas “tramp” was the term most frequently used in the dispatch titles throughout the 1980s (excepting 1987) (cf. Table 1), it was subsequently overtaken by “roofless” (sans-abri) and SDF.

In summary, therefore, this study finds that the SDF abbreviation has replaced all other terms and in particular “clochard (tramp)”. These results have significant implications. The clochard used to be seen as a colourful figure on the streets of French towns and cities, eliciting varying degrees of sympathy, surprise and con-

(13) This decline since 1999 is to be seen in the context of the broader trends for public opinion and the media to be less concerned by questions of poverty in periods of economic recovery. On this point see our comments in Futuribles (no. 265, 2001, pp. 70–3) on “compassion fatigue”.
tempt, and (though only when judged necessary) action by the authorities, usually of a coercive kind\(^{(14)}\). None of this applies to the homeless person, whose image differs from that of the tramp in at least two respects (see also Box 2). First, an *SDF* is thought of as someone in a situation of social exclusion, an unspecified term but one clearly associated with the need for public intervention. Broadly stated, the tramp is considered to have “chosen” his or her way of life (a widely-held though highly questionable view), whereas the victim of social exclusion, in this case a homeless person, is seen as caught up in socio-economic processes beyond his or her control, and as requiring either preventive or remedial interventions. The second important difference between the images associated with the two terms occurs because both the term *sans domicile fixe* and, as a corollary, its abbreviation, contain the word for residence (*domicile*). Thus there is a direct association with a housing problem, which was not the case for the tramp. The latter was viewed as a marginal, eccentric, or socially ill-adapted individual. The former, by contrast, is primarily someone with nowhere to live.

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**Box 2.**

**Tramp and SDF: a symptomatic treatment by the cinema**

Like the AFP dispatches and the press and television news, cinema films can also be used for studying a social phenomenon, and for two reasons. First, films can give an idea of the representations that are currently fashionable. Second, they have a role in spreading beliefs and ideas, whether credible or erroneous. A number of films on the subject of tramps, marginals and *SDF* have achieved box-office success. In this respect, two periods can be identified, corresponding to two very different representations of homelessness. In the first period (long before the 1970s and the first academic investigations of poverty), the *clochard* (the term used in the films) is presented as a poor devil or as something of an anarchist. He lives as he does from choice, is adopted by the inhabitants of a neighbourhood, delivers philosophical commentaries on life, and is unable — and apparently unwilling — to change his situation. Bearded, colourful and alcoholic, the *clochard* is radically different from the people around him. This profile is clearly observed in two important films: *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (directed by Jean Renoir, starring Michel Simon, 1932) and *Archimède le clochard* (directed by Gilles Grangier, screenplay by Michel Audiard, starring Jean Gabin, 1959).

The second period of film-making, contemporary with the formalization of the homelessness issue in its present form, saw the production of *Une époque formidable* (directed by and starring Gérard Jugnot, 1991) and *La Crise* (directed by Coline Serreau, 1992). In these two satirical comedies with a social message, homelessness is clearly depicted as something that can happen to anyone, and in particular to people in the higher social categories. Mention must also be made of the sombre and beautiful film, *Les amants du pont Neuf* (directed by Leos Carax, 1991). While the film is not explicitly about a descent into social marginalization due to unemployment and family problems, one of its two protagonists, who ends up leading an extremely marginal existence on the street, comes from a well-off background. In summary, the films of the 1990s — and the many drama series that have dealt with homelessness are not considered here — have helped to spread the idea that “it can happen to anyone”.

Over the last twenty years, media coverage of the homeless has reflected the messages coming from voluntary associations and local authorities that have observed a change in the population requesting assistance. At the level of public debate, the homeless, whose situation it has often been claimed “can happen to anyone”, are not tramps. The emphasis previously placed on personal choice, drinking problems, and marginal status has shifted towards a formalization in terms of collective responsibility, lack of housing, inadequate shelter provision, low incomes and the need for immediate measures of help.

\(^{(14)}\) For an analysis of the tramps of the post-war period, cf. Vexliard (1957), and for the differences in terms of characteristics and representations between tramps and vagrants, see Vexliard (1964).
It is to be noted that the people identified as homeless use descriptive terms that differ little from those employed by society at large. A distinction between SDF and tramps is often observed in the labels adopted by the homeless themselves. In informal conversations with homeless people, some of whom have lived on the street for long periods, it is striking to see how they reject the label of tramps and accept that of SDF. This is consistent with the more general trend to formalize homelessness that has taken over from the categories identified with the decades of post-war prosperity. Those targeted by measures for the homeless tend to be viewed as victims who have little in common with the tramps who are believed to have adopted their way of life through choice. This widely held view is strongly endorsed by those directly involved.

Users of services for the homeless have close contact with fellow users and develop an acute sense of social classification for identifying their peers and distinguishing potential “enemies”. Stereotyped views about the tramps (voluntary situation, incurable alcoholism, laziness, etc.) are widespread among those who willingly accept the SDF label.

Relevant in this respect are the results of an opinion poll carried out in 1994 “among the homeless” by the CSA polling organization for the newspapers La Croix and La Rue in conjunction with the Fédération Nationale des Associations de Réadaptation Sociale (FNARS). When asked: “Which of the following words do you think define you best?”, 53% of the respondents said SDF, 40% said “unemployed”, and 29% said “free”. For the words “excluded”, “poor” or “marginal”, the proportions were 21%, 19% and 12% respectively. Only 1% were prepared to define themselves as “tramps”. The homeless are thus extremely reluctant to identify themselves with the figure of the tramp.

For people on the street the problem is the need for somewhere to sleep. For others it is the lack of acceptable and affordable housing. For beggars it is one of inadequate incomes and minor public order disturbances. Because homelessness now embraces all these questions, it elicits responses in terms of emergency shelter, long-term housing provision, social regulation of public places. In addition, by its association with the tramp though also with the poorly housed, it retains the dimension of marginality and social maladjustment, and thus also prompts responses at the level of social policy. Lastly, it also draws on the concept of the “new poverty” and thus requires solutions in terms of employment, income and emergency assistance.

At present, the category of SDF does not so much replace as incorporate the existing categories of tramp, street dweller, vagrant, beggar, new poor, etc. The preponderance of the SDF abbreviation means there is a general representation of the target for support measures which combines all the other images. The solutions pro-

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(15) Use of the SDF abbreviation by the people most directly involved is now widespread. Indeed, it may even be linked to the claim to a common group experience (cf. Pichon, 2001).

(16) For a summary, see “Sans domicile mais pas sans opinion …”, La Croix (04/01/95). The survey appears in full in La Rue (no. 14, January 1995), with an analysis by Serge Paugam and a box entitled “Tout, sauf clochard! (Anything, but not a tramp!)” where we can read “The homeless define themselves primarily as actors in society and the economy who have been denied a role to play”.

(17) A number of methodological comments are in order. The survey was conducted on what is presented as a “representative national survey of 503 people reporting having no permanent residence”. However, without costly methodological and empirical refinements (which could not be adopted for this poll), it is not possible to form a representative sample of a population whose size is unknown! The interviews were conducted on people being assisted by 62 voluntary organizations of the FNARS network, so it is more accurately a poll of users of the services provided by these organizations than a true poll of the homeless in general.

(18) It can be noted that this dislike and even fear of the tramp among homeless people is not new. This was clear from the Le Quotidien de Paris (24/07/87): “Dreaded by the homeless: to end up as a tramp”. From even further back, a feature article in the Nouvel Observateur (08/12/69) on the “new slave traders”, also reported strong antipathy to “tramps” among people housed in reception centres and forced to work on markets, for example.
posed thus tend to take an infinite variety of forms—public action for the homeless includes providing shelters for rough sleepers and settled accommodation for homeless households, extending social support to tramps, implementing prevention and penalties for beggars and vagrants, prescribing appropriate treatment for runaways, and so forth. This creates difficulties for public action addressed at this group. The target—or targets—of this public action form a heterogeneous population, or at least a collection of individuals in heterogeneous situations\(^{(19)}\).

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At the end of this analysis, we would emphasize that the SDF abbreviation is not an official category as is sometimes suggested\(^{(20)}\). Indeed, it appears in very few legislative and regulatory texts. None of the circulars sent out to France’s prefects each year since 1984 in preparation for the winter campaign on the “poverty/insecurity” theme contain the term SDF. Reference is instead to people who are “disadvantaged”, “have no legal residence”, are “excluded” or “socially marginalized”. Moreover, the SDF abbreviation is not found in any code or law. There are numerous legislative and regulatory texts devoted to people and activities of “no permanent residence”, but they concern mainly nomads and itinerant tradespeople\(^{(21)}\).

From a strictly legal viewpoint, the term SDF has no substance. In the texts, it is laid down that the state, in theory, has an obligation to help people who are described as sans résidence stable or sans domicile de secours, terms denoting the absence of housing stability and an official mailing address\(^{(22)}\). So if the administration—and we need to specify which part of the administration—was alone responsible for labelling social problems and for categorizing populations, we would expect the abbreviations SRS or SDS to be more widely used than SDF. But this is not the case, and SDF is the most frequently used term in the AFP dispatches, but also no doubt inside the administration, as well as in café conversations, journalism, and academic debate.

The term’s success is not the result of a moral or ideological victory of particular actors or commentators seeking to promote their ideas or demands. Rather it is the outcome of the interaction between voluntary organizations, the media, the authorities, and the persons who self-identify as SDF. The term is in no sense an official category—SDF is a general category that requires no further qualification given that its use is extremely widespread and extends far beyond official circles.

In conclusion, the SDF abbreviation is entirely acceptable for analytical purposes. More rigorous characteristics, like those used in the INED and INSEE surveys, allow more precisely defined objects to be constructed for the purpose of


\(^{(20)}\) See for example Pichon (2001), or Bruneteaux and Lanzarini (1999) who favour the term “sub-proletarian” to “SDF”.

\(^{(21)}\) An inventory of legislative and administrative texts concerning people “with no permanent residence” was drawn up in 1988 by Jacqueline Charlemagne and Gérard Pigault on behalf of France’s Gypsy community. This collection, under the title “SDF”, contains nearly 800 pages of laws, decrees, circulars, instructions and notes. In all these normative texts, however, covering the period 1912–1988, the SDF abbreviation is practically non-existent. Since 1988, normative output on homelessness treated as a problem of poverty has increased but without ever using the SDF abbreviation.

\(^{(22)}\) Since decentralization, the state has responsibility for people sans domicile de secours (with no address for official purposes). This notion, which emerged during the Revolution and was subsequently enshrined in law, applies not directly to individuals but to legal situations. It denotes the place of residence for official purposes of a beneficiary of social assistance. This place of residence is an administrative address chosen for legal acts or payments. In the case of social policies concerning the homeless, the address is usually that of a voluntary organization recognized by the authorities, which enables individuals to receive mail and claim their rights.
scientific investigation. The fact remains that the social problem under investigation can legitimately be referred to as “homelessness”.

As regards the more general lessons to be drawn from this study, we believe that the approach adopted and the use of AFP data could usefully be extended, by means of more sophisticated methods (textual analysis, for example), to the investigation of other social problems, for studying the calendar of their appearance on media and political agendas, the changing attention (relative and absolute) they receive, and the changes observed in the terms used for their description and definition.

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Julien DAMON, CNAF, Bureau de la recherche, 23 rue Daviel, 75013 Paris, tel: 33 (0)1 45 65 54 96, e-mail: julien.damon@cnaf.cnafmail.fr