Models of Social Action and Homeless Support Services Mapping for some Major European Train Stations

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> **Abstract_** *This article summarises the main results obtained from a study carried out in the framework of the EU HOPE (Homeless People in European Train Stations) Project. This study describes and compares the phenomenon of social marginalisation in five major European train stations: Rome's Termini Station, Gare du Nord in Paris, Berlin's Zoo Station, Brussels' Gare Centrale, and Luxembourg's City Station. It focuses on homeless people, and aims to describe the systems of social organisations and agencies that provide support in the railway stations concerned – precious resources for meeting the needs of the homeless population in those areas. This paper provides a detailed description of changes being experienced by these homeless populations; comparisons between stations are made, and a critical analysis of the action methods adopted by the various social organisations is undertaken, which highlights their strengths and weaknesses, their levels of cooperation, and their relationships with other actors operating within the stations. Finally, some policy recommendations are made aimed at strengthening these networks of help and support.*

> **Keywords_** *Railway Stations, European Capital Cities, Homelessness, Social Organisation, Support Services, Comparative Action Models.*

Introduction

The railway station – whose buildings are tangibly and symbolically crucial to urban social dynamics – assumes many different functions, some of which are not directly related to its original role (Bowie, 1996). A physical point for travel and a specific expression of mobility behaviours and styles, the railway station becomes a shelter and a reference landscape for urban marginalisation (Bonnet, 2009). This article argues that the dynamics of social exclusion develop and unfold around train stations – at times visible, sometimes concealed – and that the main actors involved are people in difficult positions on the one hand, and support and protection agency workers on the other. Moreover, train stations, in their various representations, play a significant symbolic role, namely that of a *non-place;* that is, a discontinuous and anomalous entity in respect of the ordinary urban fabric. They acquire a deep meaning, which attracts *non-people* – those who have no visibility or social role. Hence, train stations become a sort of identity marker for a wide variety of migrants and, in particular, those people who have no social identity and who therefore identify themselves with reference to the shifting coordinates of railway station buildings.

Social marginalisation in railway stations has intensified problems around economic activity in stations, which has been increasing over the last few years following major renovation initiatives and the introduction of business activities in spacious transit areas, where shops have been opened that are also accessed by non-travellers (ISFORT, 2003). The strengthening of the railway station's business role – which has taken place in almost all major European cities – entails an increase in the demand for security, and action against whatever impacts on the security and comfort of shopping areas that are no longer only visited during the initial or final part of people's journeys (Damon, 1995; Damon, 1996; Doherty *et al.*, 2006). From this perspective, the presence of marginalised people in train stations is considered to present a multitude of problems in terms of health conditions, social needs, security and simple aesthetics. Solving such a complex problem requires an equally complex, awareness-based and, preferably, shared strategy in order to be effective – one which balances the demand, or imperative, for security with the demand, or need, for solidarity (Giannoni, 2007; Loison, 2006; Domingo, 2007; Tosi, 2007).

This paper describes and compares the systems in some major European train stations, where social organisations and agencies provide support to marginalised populations. In some respects, the range of social agencies operating within railway stations is as wide as the variety of people they support and help; various non-profit public and private organisations coexist with institutional decentralised offices and desks – generally structured associations, parish groups, volunteers, offices providing specialised services such as healthcare, counselling, legal, social/professional rehabilitation services, housing, and so on (Edgar *et al.*, 1999; Anderson,

2010). It is an extremely varied world in which those offering support demonstrate extremely different motivations, cultural backgrounds, methods and organisation; although they are active in the same place and tackle the same problems, their specific aims and the scope of their activity can differ widely, which can mean unpredictable exchanges and methods of cooperation (ISFORT, 2001; ISFORT, 2005). Therefore, the social mapping of a railway station that focuses on homeless people, provides a detailed description of the social organisations helping them, and analyses relations between those involved, becomes an important strategy in the identification and implementation of measures aimed at combining security and solidarity, as well as strengthening the relevant social organizations and assessing their impact on the system as a whole.

The HOPE Project: an Overview

The 'HOPE in Stations' (Homeless People in European train stations) project aims to improve the organization of services for homeless people in and around railway stations. The broad objective is to see train stations as places for organized services for homeless people. The analysis of social mapping in European railway stations, discussed in this paper, constitutes a specific phase in the assessment process of the HOPE project. In particular, it forms part of the preliminary inventory, supplementing and enriching the socio-political analysis of how homelessness in railway stations is addressed by those taking part in the project.

The objectives of the social mapping, the research process and the methodological approach

The principal objective of the social mapping is to draw a quantitative and qualitative map of the social organisations that provide support and assistance to homeless people in railway stations or in the area around stations. The analysis also involves a brief look at other entities or stakeholders within the station for whom the presence of homeless people represents a possible problem: rail companies, commercial operators, security personnel and so on. It does not, however, take the customers of railway stations into consideration, i.e. the passengers and those who make purchases. In more general terms, the social mapping should involve a description for each station of the applicable model of intervention in situations of social exclusion (assuming that there is one!), focussing on homeless people and highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the model in question. The survey involved railway stations in five European capitals involved in the HOPE project: the three active partners – France, Italy and Belgium – and the two partners with an

intermediate status – Germany and Luxembourg. The railway stations involved are: Paris, Gare du Nord and Gare de l'Est; Rome, Termini Station; Brussels, Central Station; Berlin, Zoo Station, and Luxembourg, Main Station.[1]

The research consisted of three temporally interrelated activities. The first involved a detailed reconstruction of the services provided by social organisations in the stations (Navarini *et al.*, 2001; Pleace and Quilgars, 2003); the characteristics of users and associated trend changes (where possible distinguishing the data on homeless people); methodologies adopted for intervention; levels of cooperation with other entities in the stations, particularly other social organisations; (self-) assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of intervention models; and the assessment of support available at various levels for strengthening the response to problems faced by homeless people in these stations (Wolf and Edgar, 2007). In methodological terms, the analysis was conducted through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the managers of the various organisations, and analysis of the documentation available from those organisations.

The second section was targeted at gathering quantitative and qualitative information on the homeless population living *at* and *around* the stations: the number of homeless people; the conditions governing their presence (permanent/temporary, inside/around the rail complex); their sociodemographic profiles (sex, age, level of education, ethnic background, legal/illegal status); their needs; and trends, in terms of changes in these parameters over recent years. In methodological terms, the analysis was conducted through interviews with the social organisations (see above) and, in some stations, through participant observation carried out during the day and at different times of the week (on the use of this method see e.g. Spradley, 1980; Jorgensen, 1989; Tedlock, 1991; deWalt and deWalt, 2010). The observation aimed to:

- ascertain the presence of socially marginalised people in the station, with a particular focus on physically and/or mentally disabled people with the characteristics of homeless people, and describe their demeanour and attitudes;

- understand the types of people present, focussing on such features as nationality, gender, age, dress, posture, possible behavioural disorders;

- understand which areas in or around the station are most frequented by marginalised/homeless people;

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1   The survey was performed by a Working Group made up of Isfort (coordination) and four national researchers who were responsible for the local surveys: Christophe Blanchard (Paris and Luxembourg), Franca Iannaccio (Rome), Patrick Italiano (Brussels) and Carla Wasselmann (Berlin). The final Report, on which this paper is based, has been carried out by Carlo Carminucci (Isfort) and Giampiero Forcesi (Isfort).

- observe the relationships between people in this group, and the behaviour of other people towards them;

- point out possible contextual factors that can influence the homeless presence at the station such as meteorological factors, the presence of security staff (more/less relevant during the day/week), and the opening hours of shops.

The third section was dedicated to the analysis of stakeholders and involved semi-structured interviews with a small group of major entities in the stations (representatives of rail companies, commercial operators, security personnel, cleaning personnel, etc.); information was collected on their perceptions of the seriousness of social marginalisation in the station, their knowledge of the actions taken by other parties in addressing problems (social organisations, rail companies), and on intervention models and specific measures that could be adopted (ORS-GRVS, 2009).

Activities undertaken

The various stages of the research process were completed between May and November 2010. In total, 47 social organisations were surveyed; three institutional organisations in Paris and 19 stakeholders were interviewed; and participant observation was undertaken in Rome and Berlin. Preparatory activities were undertaken in Rome to test and ensure the complete functionality of the methodological instruments and of the research teams carrying out the surveys in each station (online training and a methodological workshop).

A summary of the research activities is provided in Table 1 below. A Working Group made up of ISFORT as coordinator and four national researchers carried out the survey who were responsible for the local surveys in Rome, Berlin, Brussels, Paris and Luxembourg.

Table 1. Summary of research activities

	Preparatory activities	Research tasks			
	Training and methodological workshop	Pre-testing	Participant observation	Social organisations surveyed	Stakeholders interviewed
Rome Termini Station	X	X	X	10	6
Paris Gare du Nord	X	(no)	(no)	15 (+ 3 "institutional")	6
Berlin Zoo Station	X	(no)	X	10	-
Brussels Central Station	X	(no)	(no)	8	7
Luxembourg Station	-	(no)	(no)	4	-
Total	47	19			

The railway stations involved and the profile of their homeless populations

Rome's Termini Station was involved in the study. It records some 600 000 users per day, and plays a key role in city, regional, national and international transport systems. Since 1999, the station has been undergoing major rehabilitation works that have significantly altered its organisation and functions, and transformed it into an urban square, rich in services and shopping opportunities. It seems that such changes have also made it more appealing to disadvantaged people, while homeless people have partially moved outside the railway station building to its surrounds, or to minor railway stations including Ostiense, Trastevere and Tiburtina.

Two Parisian railway stations were studied, namely Gare du Nord and Gare de l'Est, which are very close to each other and centrally located in the 10th *Arrondissement*. They record some 800 000 passengers overall per day, and together constitute one of the main railway infrastructures in the world. Gare du Nord alone records some 500 000 passengers a day, thus ranking first in Europe and third in the world. These railway stations have also been recently refurbished with the introduction of new shops. In Brussels, the survey targeted the Central Station, which records the highest number of passengers per day – 140 000. It is very close to the city centre, near the *Grand Place*, and is therefore very busy with tourists and employees of the many offices located in the area. It is very well linked to the other city railway stations – *Gare du Nord* and *Gare du Midi* in particular – which are all located in the city's central districts.

In Berlin, analysis focused on the Zoologischer Garten railway station, also called Bahnhof Zoo, located on the outskirts of the Charlottenburg neighbourhood, and named after the nearby zoo. It records 120 000 passengers a day and for a few years now has been serving only regional railway lines (a total of 400), having lost the national and international ones. 600 subway lines also serve the station, which was renovated in the 1990s creating significant improvement in terms of security conditions. The first social Help Desk was opened here in 1979. In Luxembourg, the Luxembourg City Central Station is both the national railway station of this small country and an international train station. It is very busy with cross-border traffic and foreign trains. It is located two kilometres from the city centre, near the Bonnevoie neighbourhood where all social services are located. Renovation works started in 2006, and the train station has now been fully refurbished. The shopping area has also been significantly enlarged.

Despite significant effort, no reliable data could be found for any of the countries on the number of homeless people in the relevant cities or nationwide. The figures shown in Table 2 below are therefore estimates or generalisations. In fact, in some cases data was collected in a targeted way, on a specific day, through detailed observation of a single train station (e.g. Rome and Berlin), while in some other cases, more generic estimates were made, sometimes regarding less specific areas (e.g. Paris). In some cases an increase in the presence of very marginalised young people was reported (Paris and Luxembourg), as well as an increase in the 'new poor' (Rome and Berlin). The number of immigrants and asylum seekers – especially from Eastern Europe (including Roma people) and areas of conflict or poverty – was reported to be increasing almost everywhere. Conversely, the number of long-term homeless people seems to be stable and quite low, though these also show a limited likelihood of rehabilitation.

Table 2 – Approximate information on the number and characteristics of homeless people in the stations surveyed, as well as relevant changes

	Homeless in the Station (and surrounding areas)	Types	Changes
Paris (**Gare du Nord and de l'Est**)	Between 600 and 800	Between 40 and 60 years of age; European (French, Belgian, Polish, Romanian), Maghrebi, Sub-Saharans and Caribbeans; often with alcohol problems; many with psychiatric problems; rarely seek out the associations and rarely accept meals (approximately 200) Young people, often with dogs, sometimes drug addicts (approximately 30) Exiles, refugees and asylum seekers, above all Iraqis and Afghanis; then Tamils from India; also Roma; mostly men aged from 16 to 35 years (approximately 150–200) Romanians, both young people and families, and young prostitutes, often stopping on their way to London or Amsterdam (approximately 150)	From 2002, the year when the transit zone between France and Great Britain was closed (Calais), there has been an increase in political refugees and asylum seekers stopping at Paris and gravitating towards the stations. There has also been an increase in young people with dogs and young people using narcotics, because there is considerable drug trafficking in the 10th arrondissement. More Romanian prostitutes.
Brussels (**Central Station**)	Approximately 300. A count completed in one day in November 2008 within the entire historical centre identified 262 people sleeping in the street (in the area around Central Station alone, the number is much lower: 18)	In Central Station, there are about 40 'chronically' homeless (but not all of them sleep on the street all the time), about twenty of whom are present most of the time, while the others are more seasonal and younger; most are Belgian; some women; lots of alcohol; some dogs. There are many North Africans, Poles and Indians in the Nord and Midi stations, where there is more space, both inside and in the surrounding areas. Few create problems for travellers (five-ten people). Cases of theft are rare or completely non-existent.	There is an impression of an overall increase in numbers of homeless throughout the historical centre: above all, groups of migrants (illegal immigration of Asians on their way to Great Britain; migrants from Spain and Italy, where they have lost their jobs; Roma). Expulsion by the police is frequent.

Rome (Termini Station)	Approximately 130 people found sleeping on the ground in Termini Station or in the surrounding areas on one day in March 2010.	70% are non-Italian; average age 35 years; more men (80%); health fairly good; small minority of drug addicts; they find places mostly outside the station. Others, the 'historical' cases, number about ten; about thirty are 'new poor'. There are many health and hygiene problems; they often suffer from psychiatric conditions and alcoholism. They find places mostly inside the station.	They are increasing, also because of the increasing services being offered (such as health services). Numbers of migrants are increasing (especially Somalis) as well as 'new poor' (e.g. divorced men).
Berlin (Zoo Station)	It is certain that each day, approximately 400 people come to the station for a meal distributed by the associations. However, few sleep in the station or nearby.	Few people spend the night in the station or station entrances as the police are strict, but many people of various types and origins spend several hours in the station or its surrounds at various times. There are numerous young people and adolescents for whom the station is an alternative social space. A few elderly, isolated homeless people who read the papers. Some middle-aged women, even more isolated, with obvious mental health problems. Young people working as prostitutes. Drug addicts who use the mobile bus. Isolated individuals or groups who come for an evening meal or to the outpatient clinic in a nearby street.	They are increasing, above all people from the new EU countries and Roma. There are also an increasing number of German citizens, with medium- or high-level qualifications, who are in debt and have ended up on the street.
Luxembourg (City's Station)	Approximately 60 in the railway station surrounds and in the nearby coach station area.	25-30 are young (18-20 years), mostly drug addicts. Approximately 50 are newly-arrived foreigners without documents (mainly from former Yugoslavia, but also Asia, Latin America and Africa); for these people, access to healthcare is difficult, and they are accommodated only for a few days in homeless shelters. The others are 'historical' vagrants.	The numbers of highly-marginalised young people under the age of 25 are increasing; many of them are drug addicts or alcoholics. The number of illegal foreigners is increasing.

The social organisation network and services provided

The vast majority of the social entities operating in railway stations are non-profit organisations. However, this wide category includes associations that do not receive public funds and have no remunerated staff (although just a minority), social cooperative societies, and foundations, with some of them even receiving significant public funding on a long-term basis. Furthermore, whether they are religious or lay organisations does not seem to affect the types of services provided, how they are delivered, or their quality. All organisations operating in the Paris, Brussels, Berlin and Luxembourg train stations get public funding, but this is not the case in Rome; organisations operating at Paris' train stations get a share of public funding, as do seven out of eight of the associations located at Brussels' Central train station whose representatives were interviewed; all organisations operating at Luxembourg City train station receive similar funding, while in Berlin in particular, federal laws provide for a wide variety of services for homeless people (making access to such services easier), and task solidarity associations (mostly Evangelical and Catholic organisations) with providing such services. In Rome, on the other hand, six out of the ten organisations interviewed get no public funding. Where there are a higher number of predominantly state-funded organisations (i.e. in Paris, Brussels, Berlin and Luxembourg), there is a wider range of more diversified services for homeless people, and, of course, better remunerated and more skilled personnel providing those services. At Berlin's Bahnhof Zoo, for example, there are more than 60 full-time workers, while in Brussels there are 50. There is a third element that seems to be linked to public funding – more cooperation between the relevant social organisations. In fact, *Operation Thermos* in Brussels coordinates all voluntary groups distributing meals at Brussels' Central Station, and also delivers training to the volunteers in other association. This aspect will be discussed in greater detail later.

Significant differences were observed in terms of the services provided, their variety in particular. As has already been pointed out, a wider range of services, something that could potentially mean that the various needs of marginalised people are better met, seems to depend mainly on the presence of national and local welfare systems that invest heavily in policies that target homeless people and extreme poverty, and that also support non-profit organisations in this field on an ongoing basis. Service variety seems to be crucial to their success. Of course, in and of itself it does not guarantee quality, effectiveness or efficiency, but it is a precondition for these.

Table 3 – The distribution of social organisations by type of services provided
(in brackets if the service is indirect or is only a kind of orientation)

	Paris (12 organisations)	Rome (10 organisations)	Brussels (8 organisations)	Berlin (10 organisations)
Listening and identifying homeless' needs	9	4	8	10
Distribution of meals	6	7	3	7 (+3)
Distribution of blankets	3	3	5	4 (+4)
Distribution of clothes	2	3	4	7 (+3)
Temporary shelter to sleep and wash	2	3	2	3 (+6)
Permanent night shelter		1	1 (+2)	2 (+7)
Canteen	1	1 (+1)	3	2 (+7)
Medical assistance and infirmary	2	3 (+1)	6 (+1)	3 (+7)
Psychological assistance	3	1	4	10
Support/guidance for social inclusion	7	2 (+4)	6	10
Support/guidance to get a house	2	1 (+1)	5 (+3)	4 (+6)
Support/guidance to get a job	6	1 (+1)	2 (+3)	1 (+2)
General legal assistance	3	1 (+2)	1 (+3)	2 (+8)
Special services for drug/alcohol addicts/mental illness	1	1	4 (+3)	1 (+9)
Special services for specific sub-populations	7		5	3 (+7)
Other (access to internet, phone, postal address, safe deposit, public relations, etc.)	…	2	4	5 (+5)

The social organisations operating at Rome's Termini train station provide a very limited range of services; more than half of the services surveyed are provided by a single organisation, and it is only in the provision and distribution of meals that a range of providers is evident. At this station overall, there is a prevalence of distribution services (including the distribution of meals, blankets and clothes) over those of healthcare and psychological counselling, legal aid, and social/professional rehabilitation services. Only one permanent canteen, one permanent night shelter and one active addiction service were reported to be available. In Paris, the range of services provided by social organisations in the two train stations was wider. At Brussels' Central Station, all services are delivered directly or indirectly by at least two organisations, and the most prevalent service is, like Paris, that of listening to the needy. Brussels-based organisations mainly provide healthcare, social reha-bilitation, addiction support services, and help for those affected by mental health issues. The range of services provided at Berlin's Bahnhof Zoo is even wider; all 10 organisations interviewed provide listening services, psychological counselling, and social inclusion services. They all share the same goal, namely listening to the needy and identifying the most appropriate solutions for each person's specific

needs. A wide range of services is also provided at Luxembourg City railway station, although its small size makes any comparison with the other railway stations surveyed problematic.

Service providers: issues arising

The figures on homeless people benefiting from the various services at the railway stations surveyed are difficult to interpret and even more difficult to compare, due to significant differences in context, and the fact that the organisations involved collected data with different criteria. It is also very difficult to make a distinction between people that can really be considered homeless, and all other needy people that benefit from the services in question. The interviews with social organisation representatives, and an analysis of the little available monitoring data, suggest a number of common concerns.

All stations reported an increase in migrants using services, especially those from Eastern Europe including Poles, Romanians, and those from future EU access countries. The reported increase was particularly sharp in Berlin; at the Franklinstrasse shelter near Berlin's Bahnhof Zoo, it was reported that the number of migrants had doubled over the last two years, and an increase was also recorded in all other train stations. The Emergency Shelter and the Help Centre, both located near the same train station in Berlin, also reported an increase in the number of German citizens with medium or medium-high education who have accumulated debt and fallen into poverty. This was also reported by Rome's Help Centre, where some of the men presenting found themselves in serious financial difficulty following divorce. Similar cases of middle-class people running into debt or experiencing poverty were reported by the organisation working at Luxembourg City's train station. In Rome, over one-third of the people who utilised the Termini railway station Help Centre were under 29, and in Paris, young people that periodically hang out at the train station or sleep on the street – sometimes with their dogs – many of whom are drug addicts, have become one of the most significant target groups for social organisations, although they number just a few dozen. The same applies to the Luxembourg City train station.

Interaction with railway companies

In Paris, Rome and Brussels, the organisations surveyed include among their priorities or future goals the improvement of relations with the relevant railway companies. In Paris, three out of the twelve social associations have entered into agreements with the SNCF, which allow them to carry out 'maraudes', or patrolling activities, at the railway stations whereby they can approach homeless people and ascertain their needs. The organisation can then sit at a table with personnel from the railway company and discuss the actions to be carried out. In Rome, relations with the FS

(Ferrovie dello Stato: Italy's state railway company) are also good, but this only applies to *Europe Consulting* (that, based on a Memorandum of Understanding signed with the FS, they run the Help Centre and Daytime Shelter located in the Termini train station building) and *Caritas* (whose personnel carry out their activities for homeless people in premises made available by the FS). There are, as yet, no permanent mechanisms in place for coordination or regular consultation. In Brussels, respondents insisted on the need for personnel from the railway and security companies to become more cooperative. Only recently, for example, the Luxembourg Railway Company (CFL) adopted an approach of cooperation with the relevant social organisations, designating one staff member the permanent point of contact for social organisations in December 2010.

Interaction with other stakeholders

A questionnaire was specifically designed to determine the perceptions of stake-holders in respect of the presence of homeless people in stations, their knowledge about actions being taken by social organisations to address issues of homeless-ness, and their opinions on interventions underway and what could be done to improve them. Naturally, it is not easy to generalise the views of such a diverse range of stakeholders, who in this case included the rail companies, rail employees in direct contact with socially excluded individuals, retailers, security personnel, cleaning personnel, representative of local councils and so on. Before attempting to draw any conclusions, we will therefore begin by examining the information that emerged from the survey, station by station. It should be noted that no stakeholder interviews were conducted in Berlin or Luxembourg, as the individuals in question were not available to take part.

Stakeholders at Gare du Nord and Gare de l'Est in Paris appear to be fairly tolerant of homeless people; they acknowledged the considerable progress made by the SNCF in addressing their needs through its support of specialist associa-tions. Retailers, however, while valuing the actions of the railway police, feel excluded from collaborative efforts aimed at meeting the needs of homeless people, and they do not show any particular appreciation for the work of the social organisations, which they feel should be more active; this may be because these operate mainly in the evening and at night and are therefore unseen by retailers. The railway police in Paris (the SUGE) are critical of the already limited coopera-tion between the relevant social organisations, and have noted that activities of treatment and recovery by a hospital near Gare du Nord are too loud and disrup-tive. With regard to the three associations that have agreements with the SNCF, security personnel expressed the wish that they would show more interest in the coordination meetings organised on a monthly basis. All of the stakeholders

would like greater collaboration between the various entities involved, including a pooling of resources to protect security and image, and to identify valid responses to the needs of homeless people.

In Rome, no particular alarm has been expressed by stakeholders within Termini Station over recent years at the presence of socially excluded people in the station, thanks to the support provided for many years by the FS to the Help Centre, and even before that to the diocesan entity *Caritas*. These two social organisations, by guaranteeing to handle the most problematic situations, have reduced the negative impact of the phenomenon of homelessness on the image of, and daily life in, the station.

At Brussels Central Station, the presence of homeless people in the station is, for the most part, perceived as highly problematic by stakeholders, who simply wish for them to disappear, and who do not believe that it is the responsibility of the SNCB to deal with them. Retailers in particular have a very negative view of socially excluded people in the station; neither do they have a positive opinion of the social organisations, about which they actually know very little. They are also critical of SNCB security personnel because they believe they are too tolerant. Customers using the metropolitan and urban transport systems (both of which operate within the Central Station) are ambivalent about homeless people. STIB (the transport operator) has observed the necessity of strict cooperation with the social associations in respect of psychological issues affecting people in difficulty. SNCB security personnel (Securail) believe that it is appropriate to use a repressive approach, and are critical of the social associations; the association Operation Thermos, in particular, is criticised for attracting too many homeless people when it organises the distribution of food, and the security personnel are opposed to the distribution of food in the station in general. Indeed, in other stations in Brussels, the distribution of food is prohibited. However, both Securail and the retailers seem to be aware that a repressive policy, intended merely to protect the station's image and keep homeless people at a distance, is not effective and does not resolve the problem. Team Hersham, made up of local police specifically trained on contact with people in difficulty, uses a very different approach based on human contact and on trust; it was these police agents who invited the SNCB security personnel for training to clarify the roles of each entity in the station, to reduce repressive attitudes, and to increase collaboration between the urban social services and the social organisations that operate in the station. According to the operators in this team, the SNCB is too concerned about its own image.

Overall it appears that where rail companies have provided space and support for social organisations to work with homeless people, the tolerance of stakeholders has increased, particularly among travellers, but also among all those who use the stations more generally, including retail outlets and commercial services.

Conclusion

This comparative analysis of social organisations providing homeless support services in some major European railway stations provides information on this hitherto largely neglected sphere of service provision. A key finding is that where the railway companies concerned have supported the relevant social organisations in their delivery of services to homeless people, the tolerance level of passengers and, in general, of all train stations users (including shopkeepers, owners and shoppers) is increased. Furthermore, in order to better tackle the mistrust that exists in some stations vis-à-vis homeless people, and even the social organisations helping them, it seems advisable to involve all stakeholders in a much greater way in coordinating the social actions carried out at the train stations. Hence, social organisations and railway management should also involve the security companies, railway police and shop owners in their activities.

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