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ABSTRACT

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A Neglected Special Population: The Homeless

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Research techniques that were used during the last 20 years to examine the homeless were investigated to identify the types of homeless people studied and the advantages/limitations of various research strategies. The objectives of this investigation were to: 1) review and critique the type of data collected and the research methods used by investigators to study the homeless, 2) determine how homelessness had been defined and operationalized, and which subgroups of the homeless population had been studied, 3) make recommendations about the type of data that should be reported in studies on the homeless to aid in comparing and interpreting such data, and 4) clarify gaps in the content and methods of past research that apply to policy questions. The findings suggest that much of the research that has been done is descriptive, exploratory, and atheoretical. The authors concluded that studies should provide explicit conceptual frameworks, along with more systematic data on the facilities and subjects under study. The deficiencies in sampling strategy and operational criteria for homelessness were seen as major barriers to the use of existing research in policy development.

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Homelessness, the plight of people who lack adequate shelter and the personal resources such as money, family and friends to acquire shelter, has gained increased attention within the last few years (Levine, 1984; Levinson, 1963). This attention has included numerous media accounts (i.e., Cordes, 1984; McCarthy, 1982), mayoral investigations (Cuomo, 1983), and congressional hearings on the homeless. This investigation is an in-depth review of the research methods that have been used to study the homeless. It examines the characteristics of the homeless samples, the study sites, the study chronologies, the conceptual frameworks, and the methods that have been used by previous researchers. The purpose of this review is to provide a better understanding of who the homeless are, how people come to be homeless, and a sense of the proportion of the problem according to social scientists.

The Social Science Literature

The issue of homelessness is not a a new field of study for social scientists. There is actually a wide range of literature that has been published on this topic. Very old accounts can be seen in historical and literary pieces (Clemens, 1917, Holmes, 1912; Hotten, 1860; Mohl, 1971; Ripton-Turner, 1887; Solenberger, 1911). Sociological and anthropological research in the form of observational studies began in the U.S. and Great Britain during

the early 1900's (Anderson, 1923; Graham, 1926; Nascher, 1909). This research continued during the Great Depression with an emphasis on the homeless as hobos, tramps, vagrants, and migrant laborers (Caplow, 1940; Cross & Cross, 1937; Culver, 1933; Gray, 1931, Kerr, 1930; Locke, 1935; Outland, 1939). In the 1950's, 1960's and early 1970's, studies focused on the homeless as occupants of skid row, primarily chronic male alcoholics (i.e., Bahr, 1969a, 1969b; Blumberg, Shipley, & Moor, 1971; Jackson & Conner, 1953; Levinson, 1957; Myerson & Mayer, 1966; Spradley, 1970; Wood, 1979). After the widespread deinstitutionalization of mental patients during the late 1960's, studies examined the homeless as the chronically mentally disabled (Lazare, Cohen & Jacobson, 1972; Leach, 1979; Priest, 1976; Segal, Baumohl & Johnson, 1977).

Taken as a whole, what these and other studies show is that homelessness, as a "social problem" is not a new phenomenon. It has been around for some time; however, its relative importance and how it is defined in terms of "who" makes up the homeless population tends to change over time.

Objectives and Significance

Despite the longevity of this issue, there is a major shortcoming in the relatively current literature. The varied methods that have been used to study the homeless have not been systematically explored and critiqued. Therefore, no consensus exists among social scientists on conceptual, operational or methodological approaches to research on the homeless. The objectives of this review are:

1. To review and critique the type of data collected and the research methods used by investigators to study the homeless during the last 20 years, from approximately 1964 to the present time.

2. To determine how homelessness has been defined and operationalized, and the subgroups of the homeless population that have been studied.

3. To make recommendations on the types of data that should be reported in most studies on the homeless to aid in comparing and interpreting such data.

4. To clarify gaps in the content and methods of past research that apply to policy questions.

METHOD

Procedure

The method that was used to identify studies for this project was relatively simple and straightforward. First, a computerized literature review was conducted to identify published research on the homeless. Twenty-six keywords were used in the search. These included the homeless, hobos, vagrants, derelicts, displaced persons, and the chronic/deinstitutionalized mentally ill.

Sociological Abstracts, Psychological Abstracts and the Social Science Citation Index comprised the data bases that were used for the search. A second search was done towards the end of the project to verify that the first search was exhaustive and that all the relevant published articles had been identified.

In addition, known researchers in the field were contacted (by mail and follow-up phone calls) to solicit unpublished reports, manuscripts, and research proposals. A total of 114 studies, proposed studies and articles were identified using these two techniques. Of these, 75 were actually relevant to the project's objectives and comprise the project's sample.

Instrument

The studies were viewed and coded with a protocol developed by the authors (See Figure 1). This protocol was created in the following manner. A few representative studies on the homeless were reviewed to see how studies in this area were "typically" structured. The authors subsequently integrated this information with their own knowledge of research design. Several areas

emerged as key components of a valid report for a research study from this process.

They included:

1. The characteristics of the sample including demographic, clinical and historical information;

2. Characteristics of the study site such as the type and number of facilities involved, as well as the geographic scope and location of the site;

3. The chronology of the study including when it began and ended, and its duration in weeks;

4. The conceptual framework of the study, whether it was theoretically based and how terms were conceptualized and operationalized; and

5. The methods employed within the study such as how the sample was selected, the basic design of the study, how the data were collected, who collected the data, the type of data that was collected, and the data analysis technique that was used.

Once a draft of the protocol had been completed, it was piloted. Revisions, based upon the results of the pilot effort, were then made in the protocol. A total of 194 variables were included in the final protocol.

Review of the Studies

All of the studies were reviewed by the authors. In order to ensure that the critiquing process was consistent and reliable, a series of studies were reviewed and discussed by each of the authors. The results indicated a satisfactory level of consistency between the authors (Cohen's Kappa = .88).

Data Analysis

A coding scheme was developed for the data. All the data from the protocols were coded and placed into a computer data file for analysis purposes. Descriptive statistics, frequency

distributions, were used to analyze the data (SPSS; Nie, Hull, Jenkins, Steinbrenner, & Bent, 1975).

RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

Demographic Characteristics

The homeless studies reviewed in this project presented a number of sample characteristics in their study write-ups. Table 1 shows 85% of the studies reported information on the demographic characteristics of the homeless subjects in their samples. Most of the studies reported information on the gender (81%) and ages (75%) of the respondents. Studies were less likely to report the race, employment status, marital status, income and educational attainment of subjects.

Clinical Characteristics

Information on the psychiatric diagnosis of subjects was reported by 56% of the studies. Of these, 28 of the studies that used clinical categories to report the findings reported substance abuse as a diagnosis, 20 reported psychosis, 15 reported personality disorders, 10 reported affective disorders, 6 reported organic disorders, and 5 reported mental retardation.

Historical Information

Studies also reported historical information on their subjects. They tended to report on subjects' families (53%), subjects' history with public assistance agencies (55%) and subjects psychiatric history (51%) more often than other types of historical information.

- 41 studies reported whether subjects had contact with public assistance agencies.
- 32 studies reported whether subjects had been previously hospitalized or treated for mental disorders.

- 11 studies indicated whether their subjects had received a psychiatric diagnosis in the past.
- 21 studies reported on the frequency of contact subjects had with their family members.
- 19 studies reported whether subjects had families.
- 8 studies reported on the socio-economic status of the subjects' families.
- 6 studies provided information on the psychiatric history of the subjects' families.

Study Site

Facility

As can be seen in Table 2, 85% of the studies reported on the type of facilities that were involved.

- 44% were homeless shelters.
  - 27 studies used shelters for men.
  - 18 studies used shelters for women.
  - 9 studies used shelters for families.
- Most of these were done in public shelter facilities (17 of the men's 9 of the women's and 3 of the family were publicly-funded).
- 20% used soup kitchens or similar food programs (5 of which were publicly-funded programs).
- 40% used other types of facilities such as single-room occupancy hotels, missions, and bars.

Observation Sites

Less than half of the reviewed studies (40%) reported information on the type of observation sites and the geographic scope of the observation sites (44%) where the data were collected.

- 26 studies were done in urban areas.
- 2 studies were done in nonurban areas.
- 17 studies had observation areas in a single facility or location within a city or state.
- 12 had areas in multiple facilities or locations within a city or state
- 1 study had areas in multiple cities within a state
- 1 study had areas in multiple cities and states.

Conceptual Framework

The reviewed studies were, for the most part, atheoretical. However, 63% of them did report an operational definition of homelessness and all but 1 of the studies had some type of criteria for selecting homeless subjects (See Table 3).

- 38 studies that had criteria used only a person's presence at the data collection or observation sites.
- 27 studies used a person's presence at the site in combination with other criteria such as his/her mental state or whether a person had social supports or resources.
- 9 studies used the duration of a person's homelessness as a criterion for selecting subjects.

Methods

The Sample Selection Process

The reviewed studies usually reported information on the methods that were used to conduct the study. Table 4 illustrates that 85% reported on how subjects were selected. Of those that indicated such a process, most selected subjects based on their availability and/or willingness to participate (37 studies), or at random (18 studies).

Experimental Design and Analysis

Ninety-five percent of the studies reported on their research design. The majority of them (44 studies) involved group comparisons with constrast groups, but not control groups. Many did not have group comparisons and were essentially descriptive accounts (23 studies).

All but 1 of the studies reported information on the type of data that was collected:

- 5 studies only used archival data,
- 24 studies used some archival data,
- 22 studies used observational data,
- 17 studies used participant observation accounts,
- 8 studies used case studies,
- 51 used interviews, and
- 26 used surveys (See Table 5).

All but 1 of the reviewed studies reported on the data analysis procedures. Most of the analysis was descriptive (42 studies) or descriptive and bivariate (19 studies). Nine studies (12%) were purely narrative accounts.

The Data Collection Process

Ninety-one percent of the studies reported on the data collection process. Most of these reported on how the data were collected (92%) and on where the data were collected (84%). With regard to the data collection method,

- 27 studies relied on observations and participant observations at the site,
- 50 studies on face to face interviews or surveys read aloud,
- 9 on surveys completed by subjects, and

- 3 on mail surveys.

Where the data were collected varied among the studies. Thirty-seven studies collected the data on the facility premises, 7 on the streets or in public areas, and 11 collected data in both locations. Most of the data were collected by the principal investigators (15 studies), facility staff (12 studies), and research assistants (6 studies).

Only 7 of the reviewed studies reported on the length of time it took to administer their instruments. Three of these administered their instruments in an hour or less.

Summary of the Findings

Sample

- Studies were more likely to report the gender and ages of the respondents than other demographic characteristics. A significant proportion had all male samples -- approximately 1/3 of the studies.

- When studies used clinical categories to report on the psychiatric diagnosis of their samples, substance abuse, psychosis and personality disorders were the most frequently reported categories.

Study Site

- Over 1/2 of the studies were conducted at one facility even though the number of facilities that were involved in a given study ranged from one to over 200. Most of these were shelters or facilities such as missions, single-room occupancy hotels, and bars.

Conceptual Framework

- Most of the studies did not rely upon any theoretical or conceptual framework to examine homelessness. Forty-six studies, did, though, have an operational definition of homelessness. About half of these used a person's presence at the study site as their sole criteria for operationalizing homelessness. Only 1 study used a person's economic status (income) as a criterion and factors like social support and the duration of a person's homelessness were considered by relatively few studies (10 and 9, respectively).

Methods

- Most of the studies selected subjects based upon their availability or willingness to participate in the study. Only 19 studies used random samples. Most of the studies were descriptive or relied upon group comparisons or contrast groups. A number of studies used interviews and surveys to collect data. These were face to face interviews or surveys read aloud. Only 9 studies reported on the length of time that it took to administer the instruments. Primarily, descriptive and bivariate statistics were used to analyze the data.

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions that follow address each of this investigation's four objectives:

1) By reviewing and critiquing previous research on the homeless, we found that the studies that have been done on the homeless are primarily descriptive and exploratory. They are, for the most part, studies that document the characteristics of users of various types of facilities that provide services for the homeless.

- A wide variety of research methods were used to study the homeless; however, investigators had preferences for certain techniques and information. The legacy of the "skid row derelict" still appears to influence how the homeless population is conceptualized. For example, gender, age and race, were the three most frequently collected demographic variables. This seems to reflect an effort to either confirm or disconfirm the stereotype of homeless people as older white males; more precisely, as older white males with alcohol and/or psychological problems, since more than half of the studies also collected information on psychiatric diagnosis.

- The research design of many studies tended to be rather unsophisticated, with the majority of the studies sampling simply on the basis of convenience. Typically, anyone who use the studied facility or was in the observation area and was willing to participate was included in the sample. Random selection rarely occurred. Most authors did, however, have contrast groups in their design which helped to highlight differences between homeless subgroups.

- The kinds of data collected were well balanced among interview, survey, observation, participant observation, and archival sources.

2) Homelessness has not been well defined nor conceptualized. We found the research on homelessness to be largely atheoretical. Studies rarely use a theoretical perspective or an explicit conceptual framework to study the

homeless. While different subgroups of the homeless population have been studied, it is difficult to draw inferences about these different groups because the population from which they have been drawn is not clearly defined.

- For most studies, the conceptual and operational aspects of population definitions were weaknesses. Only in rare cases, such as a study by Segal, Baumohl, & Johnson (1977) was there an attempt to understand a particular type of homeless person in the context of a theoretical framework. Often it was assumed that if people were tattered in appearance, or if they used a particular facility, they were homeless. No attention was given to the issue of whether people had been temporarily displaced, or had been homeless for years.

3) Several recommendations can be made about the type of data that should be reported in homeless studies. Studies on the homeless should provide explicit conceptual frameworks and more descriptive data on the facilities where the studies are conducted, and the types of people that these facilities serve so that we have a better sense of "who" is represented by their homeless sample. More attention needs to be focused on defining homelessness by including additional factors such as the lack of soial support and the duration of homelessness. For example,

- Report demographic and historical information on the subjects. Also provide descriptive information on the facilities under study. This information will provide the reader with an idea of the subpopulation(s) studied, and the kinds of facilities and services the subjects were using. This is important because different services attract different clients. In addition, a common information base makes studies more comparable.

- Provide explicit operational (if not conceptual) definitions of homelessness. Arce, Tadlock, Vergare and Shapiro (1983) have suggested using the duration of homelessness as one means of developing a typology for homeless subgroups. Collecting this information on the duration and pattern of subjects' homelessness is a useful first step in defining the problem.

4) Policy statements about who the homeless are and what their needs are must be made very judiciously. Future program policy could be greatly aided by a research literature base that clearly establishes linkages between the type of homeless people studied and the types of services that they need and use. In addition, because the research efforts to date have been primarily exploratory, a major gap was evident in the area of program evaluation. Few studies have attempted to evaluate interventions. Before interventions can be designed and evaluated, however, the field must be grounded in a conceptual framework. Only then will interventions targeted at specific groups of homeless people have a reasonable chance of success.

Research on homeless people is inherently difficult due to their high mobility, inaccessability, and the often debilitating effects of their environmental and psychological circumstances. It, therefore, requires an unusual degree of creativity and resources on the part of investigators. These considerations must temper one's overall impression of the literature.

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TABLE 1

INFORMATION REPORTED ON THE SAMPLE

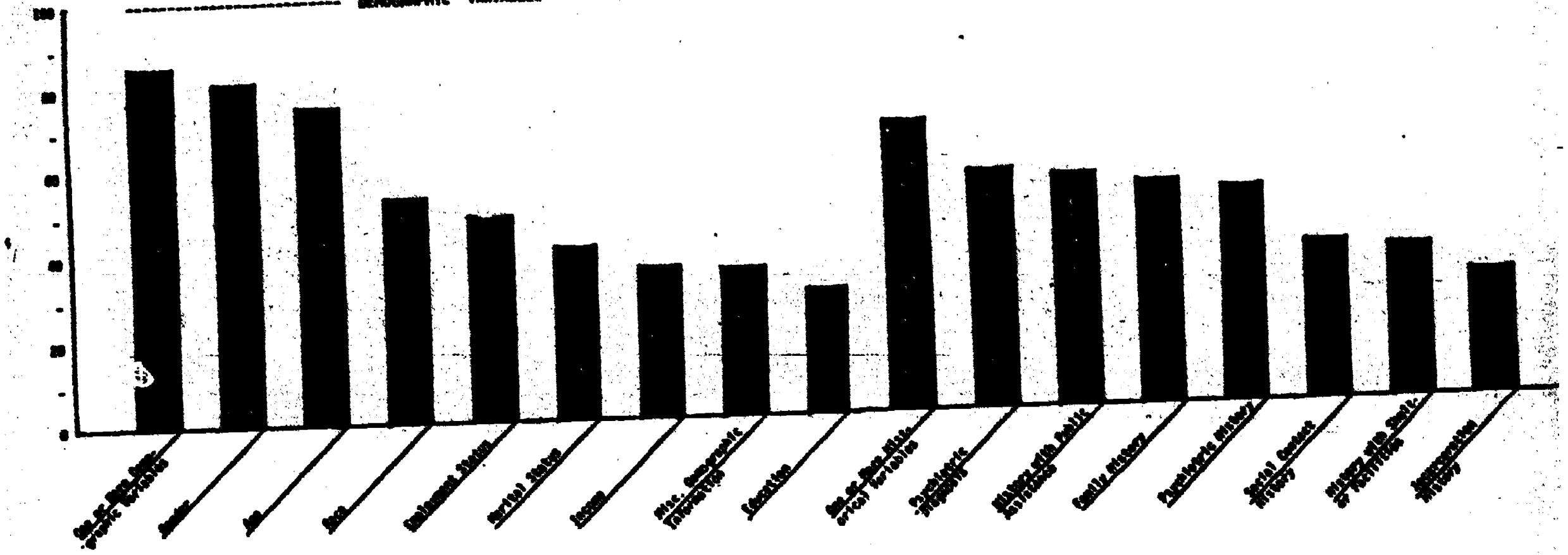

TABLE 2

TYPES OF FACILITIES STUDIED

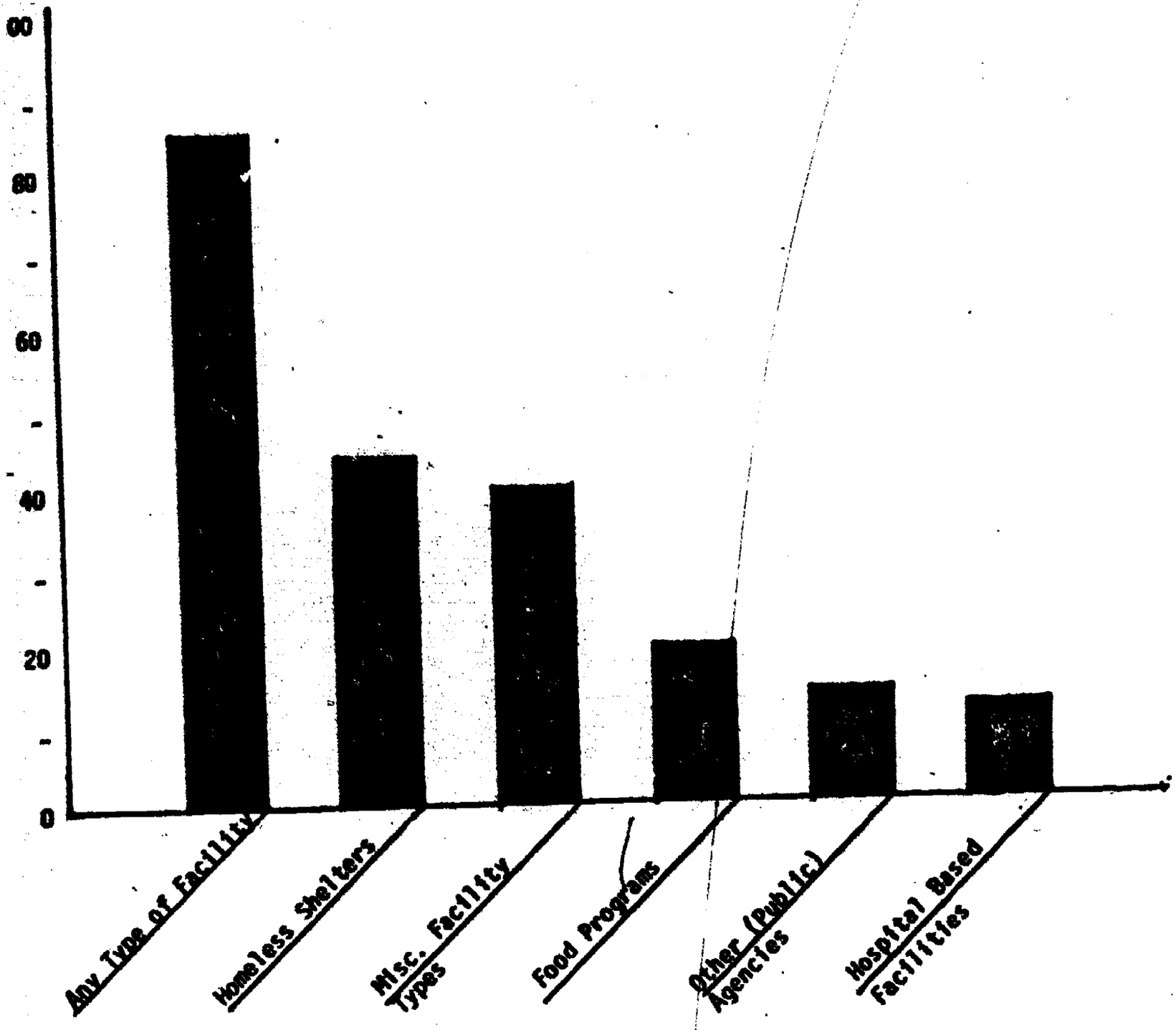

TABLE 3

CONCEPTUAL BASIS FOR SUBJECT SELECTION

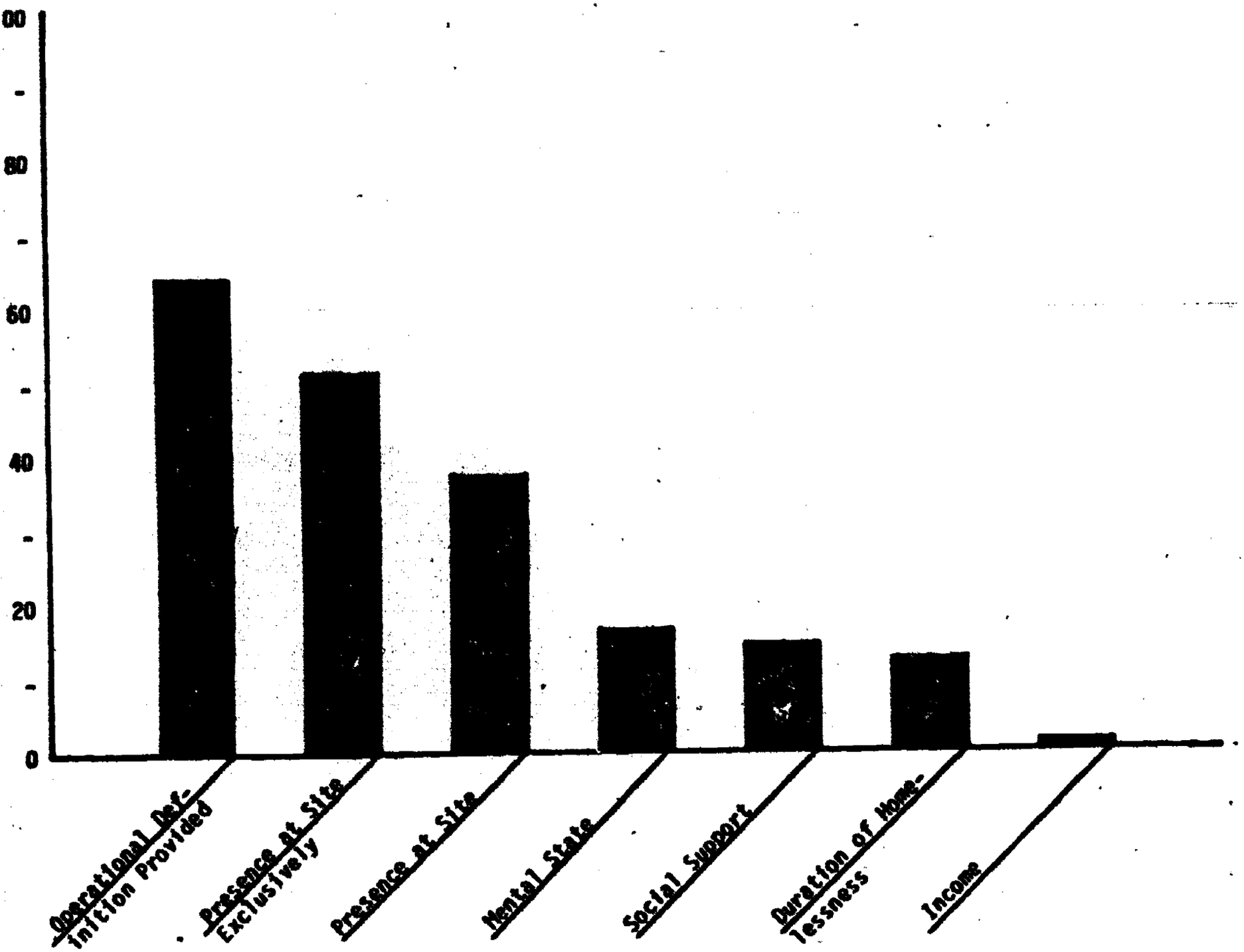

TABLE 4

SAMPLE SELECTION METHODS

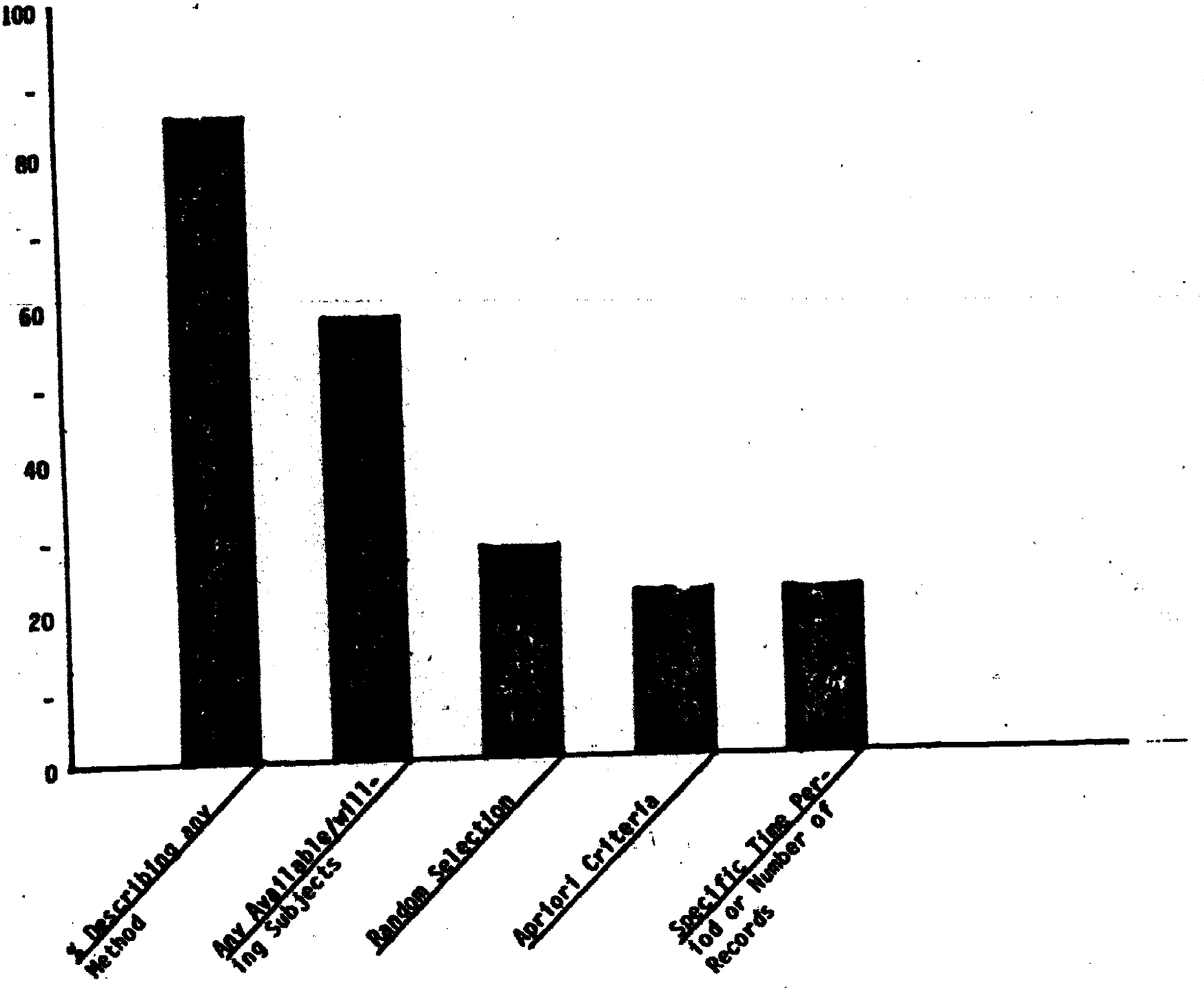

TABLE 5

TYPES OF DATA COLLECTED

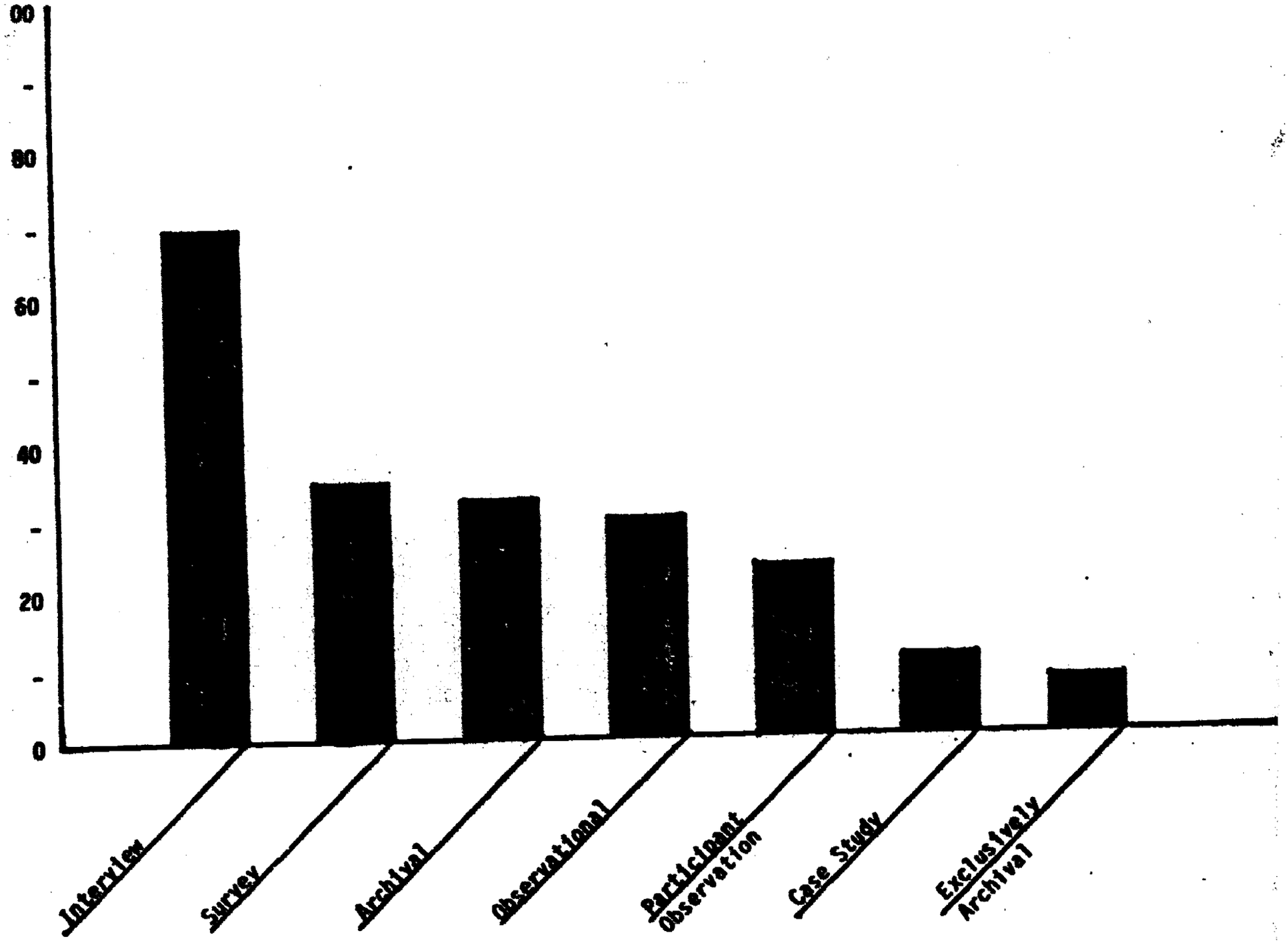

FIGURE 1

ITEMS FROM THE PROTOCOL

E. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

E1. Author or theory central to study: (y) (n) (na)

E2. Conceptual definitions of homeless: (y) (n) (na)

E3. Operational definitions of homeless: (y) (n) (na)

E4. Basis of classification for the types of homeless people studied (y) (n) (na)

1 none, other than their presence at the facility/observation site
2 their presence at the facility/observation site
3 mental state
4 income
5 availability of social support or resources
6 duration of homeless status, based on:
67 unspecified
66 other:

F. METHODS

F1. The subject selection process (y) (n) (na)

1. random
2. based on availability/willingness to participate
3. based on apriori criteria (e.g. only homeless aged 18-25) note criteria:
4. based on a specified time period, or # of records

67. unspecified
66. other:

F2. Design of the Study (y) (n) (na)
(CIRCLE ONLY ONE)

1. no group comparisons (purely descriptive)
2. within-subject comparisons
3. group comparisons with contrast groups, but not control groups
4. post-test only
5. pre- and post-testing
6. design employing control and experimental groups

Experimental conditions

1 therapy/counseling
2 medication
3 shelter (vs. no shelter)
4 substance detoxification
5 other medical care
6 multiple treatments:
66 other:
66 other design: