



## ECPA 2005

### Belgium Entry

1. What is the title of the project?

HERSCHAM: project to prevent disturbance by homeless people in the Brussels subway

2. Please give a short general description of the project.

The main objective of this project is not to solve the problem of the homeless, but it is a first attempt to better understand and control the problem as well as the sources of it.

3. Please describe the objective(s) of the project?

The creation of a climate of trust between people who live on the streets and other external partners in order to reduce as much as possible the social disturbance and 'beyond-the-norm' attitude (i.e. crime) caused by homeless people.

4. How was the project implemented?

Two staff members of the Herscham project (federal police men) try to get in touch with homeless people first. Afterwards they organize sessions, in which they inform their 'customers' and try to improve the contacts with authorities such as police services and social organisations.

5. Were partners involved in planning and/or development and/or implementation of the project? If so, who were they, and what were their roles?

The project could not have succeeded without cooperation between Local and Federal Police, security companies and many non-profit organisations. They each played their role in an intensive and convincing way.

6. How did you build in plans to measure the performance of the project?

Elements to measure the performance are most of all the observations made on the field by police services and social organizations. However, it was difficult to build in measuring, because there was no clear registration before this specific project started.

7. Has the project been evaluated? How, and by whom?

The project was measured by the number of interventions from - mostly- police services. Also the appeals for the Herscham staff members were taken into account.

8. What were the results? How far were the objectives of the project achieved?

Observations by services as the transportation company showed that disturbance caused by homeless has strongly been reduced in most of the stations.  
The number of interventions by police has also declined drastically.  
A monthly average of 170 appeals are made to the Herscham staff members.

## Project HERSCHAM

### 1. Introduction

Every big city, like Brussels, is confronted with the problem of homeless, clochards, people with no settled home, ... Those people cause 'nuisance' because they smell or because they are drunken or beg. People usually skirt round them.

They are also often victims, victims of a system in which they cannot settle. The development of a project through which members of a police service exclusively focus on a public of homeless, is rather unique. We know about two comparable initiatives: the BAPSA (Brigade d'Assistance aux Personnes Sans Abri, or Brigade for Help to the Homeless) in Paris and a unit of the New-York police.

As from the beginning of the project, a distinction has been made between the 'professional' beggars, mainly of East-European origin, and the homeless according to the definition of the European Federation of National Organizations working with the Homeless (FEANTSA); *Is homeless every person who is not able to have and maintain access, with his/her own means, to an appropriate personal housing, or every other person who, in spite of the social services' assistance, is not able to maintain a personal housing.*

The first group of beggars, which belongs most of the time to organized bands, is clearly part of the criminal sphere, whereas the second group has a right to our help.

It is clear that this project will not allow us to solve the problem of the homeless, but it is a first attempt to better understand and control the problem as well as the sources of it.

The origin of the name HERSCHAM also needs to be briefly explained. Although a number of mythological gods and/or saints took pity on cast out people, none of them was really close to what we looked for as the fictive figure of HERSCHAM who acts as the God of the beggars in an online computer game Warhammer. Hence the name.

### 2. Geographical delineation of our working field.

Although the railway police post Metro is specifically competent for the 68 Brussels' metro station, the big railway stations (Brussels South, Central and North) were involved in the project as from the start. The biggest attention is given to the so-called 'North-South axis'.

Even though the target group is not only to be found on this axis, there is a suction effect which implies that those who want to be helped find the way. We also know about some cases of homeless outside Brussels, who want to make an appeal to the Cell Herscham.

This delineation is purely practical and mainly linked to the limited number of personnel working in the project.

### 3. Sources

A particularity of street public lies in the very few data about the number and origin of those people. According to the research 'La problématique des personnes sans-abri en Région de Bruxelles-Capitale (the problem of the homeless in the Brussels Region), carried out by the Institut de Sociologie of the ULB, Brussels included end 1999 about 1550 homeless persons. Although homeless people are regularly present in our network, the exact number is not known, but it varies around 300 persons. Among these 300, the Herscham has regular contacts with about a hundred, and sporadic contacts with about fifty.

The presence of homeless people especially causes a subjective feeling of insecurity among the users of the public transportation, because the homeless people usually sit altogether and ask people for charity or because they drink alcohol in group or simply because they swan around.

The fact that they hang around in a commercial environment, i.c. the public transportation company M.I.V.B. and N.M.B.S., makes the issue even more complex.

The kind of offences caused by this group of people is principally limited to:

- the development of feelings of insecurity by 'occupying' sections of a station;
- drunkenness - violation of public order - fights (among them);
- polluting a metro or railway station (garbage left behind, urinating in public, making a fire, ...);
- neglecting children, animals;
- illegal stay;
- begging (from passive begging to aggressively approaching passers-by).

#### 4. Partners

It is clear that the project Herscham is not aimed at taking the place of social organizations active in that field. The persons in charge of the project only want to intervene in order to facilitate some niche activities, such as providing for official documents.

Applying social prevention techniques by the police services without consultation with the social organizations is strongly discouraged. Therefore, we offer the partners our know-how in order to actively look for solutions. In that respect, it is essential to tailor as well as possible our offer of services to their needs.

In the first place, there are the privileged partners within the general police sphere:

- the public prosecutor;
- the federal police - Director coordinator (social assistants);
- the local police.

The privileged partners, i.c. the public transportation companies M.I.V.B. and N.M.B.S. and the security firms, play a very important role since they are often as first confronted with the 'beyond-the-norm' attitude of the homeless.

In addition to those partners, there are also many (about 30) social organizations which mainly work with homeless people who regularly make an appeal to the cell Herscham:

- Home Boudewijn
- Front commun SDF
- Aide aux plus démunis
- Operation Thermos
- Casu Social
- Caw Archipel
- L'Ilot
- La Maison de la mère et de l'enfant
- La source
- Transit
- Chez nous - Bij Ons
- Article 23
- Medisch Steunpunt
- Mensen zonder papieren
- Pierre D'Angle
- BWR
- Hôpital Saint-Pierre
- Hôpital Saint-Jean
- Jamais sans toit
- Droits sans toit
- ATD Quart-Monde
- Décès dans la rue
- Home Ariane
- Association de Maisons d'accueil
- Diogenes
- .....

#### 5. Detection and identification of the problems

The homeless cause objective insecurity (public drunkenness - fights - ...) as well as subjective insecurity (odor nuisance - perception of the passers-by - ...).

At the start of the project, no one knew either about the extent of the problems caused by the group of homeless, or about the circumstances in which a homeless person is the victim of a criminal offence.

The willingness of the homeless to file a complaint as a victim is rather minor, due to the little involvement in the social life of this group.

The 'victims' of the nuisance caused by the homeless are essentially the commuters who use the public transportation and especially do not want to spend time declaring some incivilities by the homeless.

Since the start of the project, statistics about the homeless as perpetrators as well as victims, have been kept up to date. These data allow us to have a clear insight in the phenomenon.

#### 6. The activities and priorities of the cell HERSCHAM

The general objective of the cell HERSCHAM is:

The creation of a climate of trust with the street inhabitants and the external partners in order to reduce as much as possible the social nuisance and 'beyond-the-norm' attitude (i.e. crime) caused by those street inhabitants.

Two colleagues are almost fulltime active in the cell Herscham on a voluntary basis.

Every month, they organize 4 intra muros permanence periods, i.e. in an antenna office situated in the North Station (every Wednesday) and 4 extra muros permanence periods, i.e. on the field (every Thursday).

1 member of Herscham is thus active on an annual basis -

1520 hours (performance norm) - 396 hours (police intervention) - 792 hours (permanence) = 332 hours free space

The free space is mainly filled in by the following activities:

- the identification of the street inhabitants. This means that they try to have an insight in the real identity of a person and his/her family and social situation.
  - The real identity because the street inhabitants chiefly use only the first name or nickname. For documents to be delivered, a full identity is indispensable.
  - Retrieving the family situation can be important in case of an accident, death, ... so as to inform the family if necessary.
  - Retrieving the social situation can also be useful in order to better react to the true needs of street inhabitants (medical situation, possibilities to stay over at a place for the night, ...)
- On their demand, referring street inhabitants to the aid organization (social card) which is the most appropriate for them.
- Reducing feelings of insecurity among the users of the public transportation by making clear agreements in terms of rules of life. Especially during severe winter, it is not advisable to put the homeless man/militaire in the street. By making good agreements, the nuisance can be reduced to a minimum or even to zero for the travelers.
- Reducing the unfairness towards street inhabitants. Since their ability to cope for themselves and their (legal) readiness are rather low, they are often exposed to the arbitrariness not only of the police services, security services, but also of rack-renters, of the social sector, ... Through consultation with those partners, it is possible to univocally decide what reduces the tensions between both groups.
- The image of the police among street inhabitants is rather negative and vice-versa. Through a better insight in each other's environment, communication problems can be reduced to a minimum.
- Regulating their situation in terms of identity documents for Belgians. In some cases, this regulation can be enough to qualify for social wage, social service's benefit, ...
- Regulating signals. A big number of street inhabitants are signaled as CSB (Centraal Signalementen Blad, Central Signals Paper). It mostly concerns a signal for the detection of a place of stay or an unpaid fine. Only once, an arresting order has remained open. The cell Herscham tries to signal cases where it is possible and can also specifically look, together with the prosecutor, for a solution in order to suppress the signal (possibly temporarily).
- The social sector and the police services do not traditionally look together for solutions in concrete cases. The cell Herscham attempts

to put an end to the prejudices existing among the social workers of those aid organizations and vice-versa, and to come to a constructive and durable dialogue. A know-how transfer between colleagues is therefore essential.

- Inside the railway police, efforts are also made in order to spread, as much as possible, the philosophy of the cell Herscham among the own colleagues and the colleagues of other police services, so as to come to an oil spot effect.

Determining a strict priority is a difficult exercise. From the point of view of the police, the priority must be given to the regulation of identity documents and signals. From the point of view of the community police, the empowerment and the good relationship with the partners are the pillars of this police concept.

## 7. Preconditions and critical success factors

### 7.1. External preconditions

- A first precondition is the legal framework in which the cell works. It must be clear that the co-workers of the cell remain first of all policemen and that they are bound to Art. 29 of the Code of Criminal Procedure. If they learn about an offence, they must inform the prosecutor.
- The attitude of the prosecutor towards the project is a rather deciding factor for the project to function. Especially in terms of judicial signals, a dialogue with the prosecutor can lead to good solutions for all the parties.

### 7.2. Internal preconditions

#### 7.2.1. Values

- The project totally fits in the philosophy of the 'community policing'.
- The project addresses to the weak people in our population group.
- The project also reproduces the search for solutions within the framework of our competences.

#### 7.2.2. Strategy

- We start from the point of view that the problem of the homeless cannot be solved on a police level, but fits in a broad social context. However, we are regularly confronted, as policemen, with the outer effects of the phenomenon. Therefore, the project aims at limiting as much as possible the social nuisance caused by the homeless. Taking preventive measures towards the target group has a dissuasive effect on the beyond-the-norm attitude.

#### 7.2.3. Systems and procedures

- The project fits in the philosophy of the community policing, such as carried out by the railway police in Brussels (SPC), i.e. the Metro, Centre and Eurostar. Beside the contact with the partners, dealers, authorities, ..., a bond is created with a target group.
- As far as the procedures are concerned, a distinction is made:
  - In case of a request for assistance, the initiative must come from the person concerned. We assume that if a person does not want to be helped, all the steps make little sense.
  - If the homeless committed an offence or caused nuisances, the initiative is taken by the policemen.
- If it concerns a judicial offence, the prosecutor must be informed; if it concerns an administrative offence (violation of the public order or drunkenness), an Officer of the Administrative Police must then be informed.
- The staff members Herscham must keep a report of their activities so as to make it possible to easily use them later on (searches in own documentation, statistics, overviews, problems synthesis, ...)
- The project works at best in case of fixed permanence days. One fixed day during which people come from the police post to the antenna, and one fixed day during which the personnel Herscham goes on the field on its own in order to make contact with the people who are not able to come to the antenna by themselves.
- An important source of information is among others the intervention papers of the control services of the MIVB, NMBS and private security firms. Minutes drawn up by SPC and the local police contain sometimes valuable data. It is important that those data quickly come to the people of Herscham, so that they can, if necessary, react quickly and precisely.

#### 7.2.4. Structures

- The project Herscham fits in the structures of SPC Metro. The persons in charge work in a relative autonomy, but as far as interventions, means and personnel management are concerned, they depend upon SPC Metro. This means that they are also once mobilized for interventions of all kinds.
- The post superior SPC Metro remains the final person in charge of the project.

#### 7.2.5. Personnel

- Two staff members is a minimum in the Brussels context. It is important for the same staff members to come into contact with the homeless in order to create a relationship of trust with the homeless.
- In order to insure the continuity, it is however also advisable to involve other colleagues in the project. In case someone is sick or is on vacation, the other colleagues can step in.
- The personnel working inside the project Herscham is preferably bilingual or is at least able to express itself in both national languages.

- Most of the time, the project members work in plain clothes, but it is strongly advised that they regularly carry out patrols in uniform. This mainly aims at avoiding any confusion about the role of the staff members.

## 8. Possibility to apply the project in other police services

The project can fit in every police service in which people are ready to be interested in the homeless. Especially big cities, which are by definition more confronted with the problem of homeless people, can benefit from the development of such a project. Different services have already asked us if our cell organized training sessions. Our staff is ready to share its experiences.

## 9. Evaluation

Since no specific statistics were kept in the past concerning the situation of the homeless, it is difficult to sketch an evolution of the situation on a longer period of time.

The reputation of the cell Herscham is rather general in the Brussels social sphere thanks to the numerous contacts taken with all the bodies. The congratulations letters received by the Commando of the post Metro indicate that those contacts satisfy most of the time every partner.

The cell Herscham has already been mentioned in the national press as well as in publications of the service Internal Communication of the Federal Police. A website has recently been started, on which the activities of the cell can be followed: [www.herscham.be](http://www.herscham.be).

The evaluation elements which can be taken into account are the observations made on the field by the colleagues and significant third parties, such as public transportation companies and social organizations.

- The observations of the significant third parties (i.e. the ambiance papers of the transportation company) show that the nuisance caused by the homeless has strongly been reduced in most of the stations.
- The number of interventions of the ordinary intervention teams and the welcome services have drastically declined. The homeless also know now that they can make on Wednesday and Thursday an appeal to specialized policemen, so that they don't come to the offices whether it is relevant or not.
- The homeless make an appeal to the service of the cell Herscham 170 times a month on average.
- An anecdotal, but therefore not less important aspect, are the family reconciliations which are created thanks to the intervention of Herscham; the identification of the abandoned luggage by the homeless who are otherwise mistakenly considered as suspects; people who qualify for a benefit by the regulation of their documents, which allows them not to live in the street anymore; the organization of places to sleep for the homeless in real need, ...

## 10. Conclusion

The project currently works at its cruising speed.