

Abstract from the study

“Les glaneurs alimentaires” (Food Scavengers) for the DIESSES and the High Commission for Active Solidarities against Poverty. Paris, France, January 2009.

Food Scavengers

Supermarkets throw out tonnes of food every day because it past its sell-by date. But a growing number of people, called scavengers are cashing in by collecting some of the waste.

In 2008, certain French media and associations engaged in combating poverty started highlighting food scavenging. Mr. Martin Hirsch, the “High Commissioner for Active Solidarities against Poverty” wished to better understand this phenomenon and ordered this study from the **CERPHI**. This study was the first one to be carried out in France on this issue.

Four sociologists observed twenty or so gleaning locations (food markets and retail shopkeepers’ trashcans), in three cities (Paris, Dijon and Amiens) during one month. They carried out forty interviews with scavengers who were present on these sites.

Who are the urban food scavengers? There is no typical profile of the scavenger. They are men as well as women, French or foreigners. All ages are represented in our sample: from 18 up to 83. Most of them have housing as it is difficult for the homeless to glean. Gleaning needs energy, organization and a place for storing and preparing gleaned food. Some of them live thanks to public welfare; some have a part time or occasional job; one third of our sample has no permanent income.

What are the relationships between scavengers? They differ according to locations and the number of scavengers in the same location.

They can be tense and aggressive if there is competition between them on the same site, or when they don’t know one another, or when the right moment for gleaning is short, and when shopkeepers are opposed to gleaning. This is the case when the trashcans of the supermarkets are taken out at the last moment, just before the arrival of the trash collectors; it is a similar situation for large food markets where retailers carry out their own disposal of leftover food to compactors, also at the last moment.

Scavengers are more casual when they have enough time, know one another, when there are enough resources and when they feel the shopkeepers are tolerant. Then they follow an obvious code of good behavior: they leave a clean place and share the gleaned food.

Why scavengers do what they do? All of them live on a very tight budget, which prevents them from buying all their food. Most of the scavengers don't turn to welfare: either because they think that it is not intended for them (they think they are not "poor" enough), or because they don't wish to be part of the welfare system. Gleaning is not a consequence of the failure of food welfare. Scavengers want to keep their dignity and independence by getting themselves their food. Some of them, especially housewives also turn for help to food welfare and scavenging is used as a complement (One must specify that food welfare differs according to locations and seasons and people don't always find this help sufficient to feed their family).

A minority and especially young people have an ideological motivation against food waste and consumer society.

What are the relationships between scavengers and shopkeepers? The shopkeepers' attitude is the result of a compromise between two contradictory elements:

On one hand they are responsible for their trash (legal constraints) and they feel pressure from the local authorities or from their hierarchy (1) in order to maintain tidiness around their trashcans (2) in order to avoid a crowd of scavengers.

On the other hand, they feel compassion or solidarity towards people in need.

The shopkeepers' attitude also depends on their perception of the scavengers' population: youngsters, foreigners, group of scavengers are less accepted than old people or housewives.

There is a risk that the relationships may become more difficult with the increase of the number of scavengers and with more restricted regulations.

Is the phenomenon evolving, is there an increase? No scientific survey has been carried out up to now. But scavengers themselves, shopkeepers, residents and associations witness an increase of the number of scavengers and a wider extension of their profiles. On some urban markets over the week ends, one can observe up to 40 or 50 scavengers.

What must be done to stop this process, should it be stopped?

Gleaning food is not legally forbidden, only disturbance in the streets is forbidden. Furthermore, the issues on waste management are still vague.

Stopping the phenomenon would imply finding a way to improve the financial situation of these people. Otherwise, there is no sign that it should be stopped, it helps people in need. It is efficient as it enables people to feed themselves and for a large number of them to preserve their dignity. There is presently no specific risk linked to scavenging.

Following the survey led by the CERPHI, the *High Commissioner against Poverty* sent a letter to the French “Banques Alimentaires” (food welfare centres) and to the Federation of Food Distributors asking them to diversify the products which are distributed to social welfare organisations and to study and set up procedures for the disposal of unsold goods.