

EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES IN SURVEYS FOR ELUSIVE POPULATION: THE CASE OF RESIDENTIAL TOURISM

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INTRODUCTION

Although Spanish holidaymakers mostly choose to spend their summer vacations in accommodation other than hotels, few studies have approached this phenomenon quantitatively – especially using tourist destinations chosen by this group as the study area.

Methodological difficulties involved in studying holidaymakers during their holidays are a possible explanation for this deficit. Nevertheless, such a study is necessary because of the numerical and economic importance of residential tourism and its major environmental, demographic, sociocultural, and political impacts. The aim of this article is to show the main difficulties that researchers face in making a quantitative study of residential tourists. The article describes, firstly, the challenges faced at the epistemological level because of the elusive nature of the target population, and secondly, the solutions adopted in a specific study are offered as guidance. The results of this study are compared with a classic study of tourists in origin to demonstrate the validity of the approach. The study offered as an example is a survey of residential tourists made in several towns on the Spanish Costa Blanca (near Alicante).

1. EPISTEMOLOGICAL ASPECTS: ADAPTATION AS KEY TO UNDERSTANDING

Methodological flexibility and adaptation to the object of study are essential for achieving research goals. We can develop skills that respond to the particularities of the

object by mixing methods, ensuring that the individuals employed in producing the data are duly qualified, employing triangulation strategies, and non-probability sampling in search of sufficient reliability for decision making.

Flexibility – understood as the essential methodological adaptation to the characteristics of the population under investigation – is crucial in the case of an elusive population. We are dealing with a social science approach to populations for which there are no official records and so whose numbers or exact location are unknown. Residential tourists are intensely mobile, seasonal in their behaviour, and able to occupy areas that are difficult to access.

There are various reasons for defining the residential tourist population as elusive: 1) the population is widely dispersed because of extensive city development; 2) the population is very mobile and this makes it difficult to establish the length of stay; and 3) and the remarkable lack of official data on this group at a municipal level.

Establishing the universe of residential tourists in a given destination is a difficult and complex task. There is no data at the municipal level regarding numbers, composition, use made of residential dwellings, nor location. As a result, we are unaware of their socio-demographic characteristics, what they do in their leisure time, their level of satisfaction, or degree of loyalty to the destination. This lack of local knowledge hinders the development of strategies for local tourism.

2. METHODOLOGICAL AND TECHNICAL PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN A CASE STUDY

The research example for displaying the solutions adopted is *Residential tourism: demand analysis and proposals for restructuring consolidated destinations* (hereinafter RESTOUR).

One of its objectives was to study the social profile of residential holidaymakers on the Costa Blanca (hereinafter RHCB) and this profile was studied with a survey of holidaymakers in five towns on the Costa Blanca: Benidorm; Altea; Denia; Santa Pola; and Torrevieja. This approach presented significant difficulties from the beginning. The basic data for a 'classic' sample did not exist: namely, the size of the study population at the municipal level and its socio-demographic characteristics; the periods of residence (dates of stay in the destination); and the spatial distribution within a large area.

2.1. Difficulties in estimating the size of the population

Firstly, the RESTOUR research team faced a lack of local data on the number of Spanish holidaymakers choosing residential accommodation on the Costa Blanca. The solution adopted for RESTOUR was based on four triangulated references: a) number of dwellings of potential tourist use; b) estimates of the production of municipal solid waste; c) in-depth interviews with key experts; and d) statistical estimates from local and official tourism surveys. To minimise sampling error in each chosen locality, and in view of the project resources available, it was decided to use a sample size of 400 individuals in the towns of Denia, Benidorm, Santa Pola and Torrevieja. This sample size was calculated under the assumption of simple random sampling and implied a maximum sampling error of 5% for a confidence level of 95.5%.

2.2. Difficulties in selecting the sample

The second difficulty was rectifying the format of the sampling distribution. The lack of knowledge of the qualitative and quantitative characteristics of the population prevented the establishment of quotas, strata, or other sample selection criteria. The dispersion of holiday homes across a wide territory impeded the use of random routes as the sampling method. The solution adopted for this problem was to gather information on those urban areas with the greatest influx of holidaymakers. Five experts were interviewed in each town in order to locate the areas with the greatest number of pedestrian tourists, and the time periods with the highest footfalls. Sampling *points* and *routes* were established in each locality using this information.

2.3. Difficulties related to the collection of information

Given the design of the study and the difficulties of fieldwork in tourist destinations, the classic problems associated with obtaining data were carefully studied in the case of RESTOUR. The interviewers were carefully selected, attention was paid to any possible quality deficits related to the personal characteristics of the respondents and interviewers, and care was taken in the registration and recording of data. Special attention was paid to gathering the most reliable data in order to compensate (as far as possible) for other difficulties faced in this research.

3. COMPARING THE METHODOLOGY: SURVEY RESULTS IN DESTINATION COMPARED WITH THE OFFICIAL REFERENCE SURVEY

To meet the objective of this research – which was the study of an elusive population using highly flexible methodological tools and a constant triangulation of data – it was necessary to test the reliability of the whole strategy. To do this, the RHCBC profile produced by the RESTOUR destination survey was compared with the profile produced by the FAMILITUR 2008 survey. The aim was to discover how far the RESTOUR results could be extrapolated to the studied universe (RHCBC in 2008).

Two types of questions in the RESTOUR survey could be compared with those in the FAMILITUR survey: 1) questions relating to the individuals traveling with the respondent (in the travel group), namely, those regarding age and gender; 2) questions concerning the respondent: namely, marital status, education level, province of origin, length of stay, and employment status.

- 1) Gender and age comparisons for the members of the travel groups revealed minimal and statistically insignificant differences between RESTOUR and FAMILITUR.
- 2) No significant differences were found in the interviewee-specific questions. The most important differences appeared in the percentages of married individuals, but these differences did not exceed the margins of accepted error. The greatest differences regarding the level of education occurred in the 'primary school level

only' group although differences did not exceed the margins of accepted error. The distribution regarding the home province of the holidaymaker was also similar.

Given the strong predominance of short stays (from one week to 15 days) two categories of response were grouped for the time spent at the destination. The coincidence with FAMILITUR was almost total. Finally, results for the respondent's employment status were similar. It can therefore be seen that the results from the two surveys were similar in general terms.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Avoiding the difficulties presented by elusive populations would restrain the acquisition of knowledge regarding the objects of study – which in the case of residential tourism can be crucial for the sustainability of the area and local communities.

The information needed for the survey was obtained through a strategy of mixed qualitative and quantitative information triangulation. Each of the four sources or techniques used provided information that complemented the others, so that an estimate of the population universe could be made. The sample selection was designed following the same strategy (triangulation, interviews with key experts and field observation) in order to adapt the work to the reality and behaviour of respondents. By studying the destination surveys we were able to control bias as far as possible (within the limitations of the project). This article proposes a reflection by sociologists studying tourism on: the use of surveys; the theories that enable hypotheses to be made and their use in the formulation of questionnaires; fieldwork and data collection; the process of statistical analysis; and inductive processes in the formulation of inferences.