

Fact Sheet

Questions and Answers on Homelessness Policy and Research

The Decennial Census and Homelessness

The first Census occurred in 1790, and consisted of just four questions. Since that time, the United States has increased efforts, changed methods, altered principle criteria and time frames, and expanded the survey considerably. While some Censuses of the 19th century included populations similar to those we consider "homeless," only Census operations beginning in 1970 identified specific efforts to count the homeless population.

The following is a description of the official methods of including people experiencing homelessness in the census and, when available, the results of those efforts. Additionally, a brief look into the enumeration of populations similar to those we consider homeless today is included towards the end.

1970

The first official count of homeless (and others without a usual place of residence) occurred in the 1970 Census operation. Transient Night or "T-Night" was a special count of people, considered transient, living in hotels, motels or other places having greater than 50 rooms for "transient guests." This count was conducted on March 31, a day before Census Day. Similar places with fewer than 50 rooms were counted as a part of the regular Census enumeration. The Census Bureau visited T-Night locations prior to the enumeration period to determine if they met the criteria above. Forms were then mailed to the clerks of these places, and the clerks were then to distribute enumeration forms to each room. If the person occupying the room indicated that they had another place of residence, though no one there to report them, the form was mailed to the right jurisdiction. Otherwise, people counted in transient locations were counted as part of the Group Quarters population in that district.

Another operation conducted on April 6, Mission Night or "M-Night," counted people living in missions (shelters), "flophouses," or similar hotels/motels with a cost of less than \$2 a night, train and bus stations, local jails, detention centers and other similar places where people spent less than 30 days. People counted as a part of M-Night were included in the Group Quarters population.

1980

The 1980 Census operation included another M-Night effort, where census workers enumerated people around shelters, all night movie houses, bus and train stations, "flophouses," or transient low cost hotels/motels, emergency shelters, any hotel or motel costing less than \$4 a day, local jails, and other similar places where the average length of stay was less than 30 days. This count occurred on April 8, one week after Census Day, and lasted until midnight.

Approximately 6 weeks after M-Night, a "Casual Count" was conducted over a two week period in selected urban areas – generally large central cities. The Casual Count was conducted during daytime business hours, lasting until 8pm. Census workers visited pool halls, street corners, employment offices, welfare and food stamp offices, and public parks to identify people who may have been missed by the household Census count.

Results: There is no definitive number for those counted during the M-Night efforts. However, 50,794 people were enumerated and identified as living in "low cost transient quarters." Approximately 44,000 people were interviewed as a part of the Casual Count, and roughly 13,000 people added to the population as a result of that count (many were removed during the de-duplication process). The results of the Casual Count are considered by the Census to be an undercount. Altogether, the number of people who were counted as a part of the M-Night effort (including those who had no permanent residence elsewhere, but who may not have been homeless) was 176,256.

1990

In 1990, the Census aimed to improve upon T-Night and M-Night with "Shelter and Street Night" or S-Night: A one night shelter and street enumeration which was conducted to include people who were not covered by regular census procedures. There were five distinct types of locations where people were enumerated:

1. Shelters (public and private, temporary and permanent);
2. Shelters for runaway and homeless youth;
3. Shelters for abused women and their children;
4. Unsheltered locations; and
5. Boarded up/abandoned buildings.

The shelter counts (1,2, and 3) occurred on March 0 from 6:00pm to midnight. These counts took place in 10,600 shelters pre-identified by local governments. These sites included hotels/motels costing less than \$12 a night whether or not the people living there considered themselves homeless, and hotels/motels, regardless of cost, used primarily to shelter homeless people. The street count occurred on March 21 from 2am to 4am, at 24,300 street sites across the country. The count of people living in abandoned buildings occurred between 4 a.m. and 8 a.m. to capture people coming out of such buildings.

There were many problems associated with the 1990 effort. While many recommendations were made to improve the homeless enumeration, due to a late start in planning, there were only few improvements. Only 1/3 of jurisdictions provided shelter information, most unsheltered locations were not included, and enumerator issues (such as leaving before finishing a shelter count due to time, refusing to count certain people due to their employment status, not showing up to count, etc.)

Results: Approximately 228,000 individuals were identified as a part of S-Night efforts. Census Bureau acknowledges it as an underestimate.

2000

This was the first year that the Census Bureau implemented the Service-Based Enumeration. These counts were conducted at emergency shelters, transitional shelters, shelters for unaccompanied youth, hotels, motels, soup kitchens, regularly scheduled mobile food vans, and targeted outdoor locations. The effort was conducted over three days:

March 26 –enumeration in emergency shelters

March 27—enumeration in soup kitchens and regularly schedule mobile food vans

March 28—targeted outdoor locations

“Be Counted” forms, designed for people who do not have a usual place of residence and were likely missed by the regular census procedures, were used and were available in homeless service locations. However, there was a limited effort to reach the individuals who may have been missed.

There were numerous issues associated with the 2000 count as well. These include but are not limited to: the limited number of outdoor sites included in the count, shelters that were not open during the day were not included, shelters that were only open for two days a week were not included.

Results: 283,898 people were counted as homeless in 14,817 locations. Approximately 50 percent of the locations were shelters. 62 percent of people were counted at shelters, 28 percent at soup kitchens/food vans, and 10 percent outdoors.

2010

Service-based enumeration will be conducted at homeless service locations to provide an opportunity for people experiencing homelessness to be included in the census. These locations include: emergency shelters, soup kitchens, regularly scheduled mobile food vans, and targeted non-shelter outdoor locations. This effort will be conducted over three days:

March 29 –enumeration in emergency shelters

March 30—enumeration in soup kitchens and regularly schedule mobile food vans

March 31—targeted outdoor locations

Additionally, a “Be Counted” questionnaire has been developed for people who do not believe they were counted in the census effort. Questionnaire assistance centers (QAC) will be set up in libraries, post offices, community centers, gas stations, etc. and will provide people with assistance in filling out the questionnaire. Another way the Census aims to capture people without a “usual home elsewhere” is through enumeration of “transitory locations.” These include RV parks, campgrounds, hotels, motels, marinas, racetracks, circuses, and carnivals.

*Improvement over 2000: More comprehensive list of shelters and homeless service providers, Bureau worked with local government and advocacy organizations to create a list of shelter locations. Additionally, there is more planned outreach to ensure that more people are included in the census.

Inclusion of Homeless prior to 1970

While there was no official effort to count the homeless prior to 1970, a number of questions that appeared in various Censuses point to the government's acknowledgement of their existence. In 1850, for the first time, "pauper" was included on the Census questionnaire alongside deaf, dumb, blind, insane, idiotic, and convict. Paupers were considered poor beyond a failure to meet an income threshold, and the word indicates a sort of dependency on government or private assistance to survive. By 1854, when the Census results had come out, the New York Times was contesting the numbers. An article identified, quite specifically, that the "outdoor paupers" were not included in the U.S. Census, and asserted that the Census' number of paupers (134,392) was deficient by 50 percent.

The number of paupers counted in "poorhouses/almshouses" (which acted much like emergency shelters today) in 1850 was only 40,000. In 1860, there were 42,000 paupers counted in poorhouses, almshouses and workhouses (for those who were able to work). The late 1800s and early 1900s show a clear movement toward the institutionalization of the "dependent class," those who were physically, mentally, or financially unable to take care of themselves. These numbers are intended to give only an impression; it is safe to assume that these data are beset with inaccuracies, going far beyond the issues we face with Census data today.

Results: Between 1870 and 1920, anywhere between 40,000 and 75,000 people were counted living in poorhouses. The following are the Census results for people living in poorhouses and almshouses for the years 1870 to 1920:

1850—39,798
1860—41,694
1870—39,562
1880—44,732
1900—55,000
1910—52,947*
1920—74,781
1930—55,045

There was some indication that the Census Bureau attempted to enumerate the "outdoor poor," in 1880, though marked as a failure. In 1910, the Census Bureau put out a special report on Paupers living in Almshouses, and amended the Census count to reveal a significant difference from what was included in the Census data. The report found that 84,000 people (an increase of over 30,000) were living in poorhouses at the time of the Census. Further, they found approximately 88,000 people were identified as admitted to almshouses at some point throughout 1910. After 1920, this data was no longer included in the census reports.

The level of detail regarding the type of Group Quarters in which a person resides was eliminated in 1940. While people living in what amounts to an emergency shelter were counted, they were included in a "non-institutional group quarter" category or an "other" category and indistinguishable from other, non-homeless people. The 1940-1960 Censuses have little to no data on the number of people who may have been experiencing homelessness.

** Number was amended in 1914, when the Census Bureau put out a special report on Paupers in Almshouses. The new number was 84,198.*