

## **Ethnographic Research with Homeless Populations**

American Statistical Association Meetings, November 2, 2012, New Orleans, Louisiana

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### **Abstract**

We sought to discover what type of strategy would lead to the most complete and accurate enumeration of homeless populations with the US Census. This research was carried out as a part of a larger 2010 US Census Bureau study designed to develop optimal methods for the enumeration of individuals in group quarters, which includes correctional and skilled nursing facilities, college residence halls, military quarters, and domestic violence and homeless shelters. Our findings led us to make recommendations to ensure more complete coverage as people cycle within shelters, living out of doors, and living doubled up with other poor households.

### **Ethnographic Research on Homelessness**

There is a long history of ethnographic work on homeless populations within anthropology and sociology. We used the ethnographic method of trying to understand the lives of homeless individuals and families in order to best understand how the Census coverage for homeless populations could be most complete.

The following are some examples of ethnographic homeless research.

James Spradley (1970) described the lives of alcoholic men who were intermittently homeless in Seattle in *You Owe Yourself a Drunk*. The book's title comes from the answer that one of the men, who had been repeatedly incarcerated for public drunkenness answered when Spradley asked him why he went back to drinking after spending 30 days in jail.

In 1988 Irene Glasser described the culture created by poor and homeless diners at a soup kitchen in *More Than Bread: Ethnography of a Soup Kitchen*. This description occurred in the early days of the revival of soup kitchens as the US moved away from cash assistance of the poor and homeless and provided temporary housing and food in the form of emergency shelters and soup kitchens.

In 1991 Kim Hopper vividly described the survival strategies that were employed by men whose 'home' was a public airport ("Symptoms, Survival, and Redefinition of Public Space"). The men, who were reluctant to enter into the public shelters, found that they had safe refuge in the airport if they could try to 'blend in' with the thousands of travelers who passed through the airport each day.

In *Tell Them Who I Am* Elliot Liebow (1993) conducted extensive participant observation in two homeless shelters for women as he described the lives of the women and barriers to finding permanent affordable housing. He found that a survival strategy of some of the

women who worked was to pretend to be housed so that their employers would not realize they were homeless. He also described the mutual support that women gave each other as they coped with homelessness.

Philippe Bourgois and Jeffrey Schonberg (2009) in *Righteous Dopefiend* present us with text and photos of survival of individuals addicted and homeless living in the highway underpasses and streets of San Francisco. The book documents the life and death crises that plague the homeless individuals.

*Needed by Nobody* is an ethnography of homeless individuals who live and work in the underground economy at a major train station in St. Petersburg, Russia, by Tova Höjdestrand (2009). She is accepted by the homeless community and learns the history of many of the homeless she meets as they struggle to survive on a daily basis in public places.

*Parenting in Public* by Donna Haig Friedman (2000) is one of the few ethnographic works on the lives of homeless families. In the book Friedman captures the lives of homeless families as they are under the surveillance of shelter staff who monitor their child rearing.

### **The 2010 US Census and Homeless Populations**

The strategy of the 2010 Census operation to include the homeless population through the Service Based Enumeration which involved census takers being present at places where homeless individuals and families are. The schedule was as follows:

March 29, enumerate all individuals in homeless shelters

March 30, enumerate all individuals in soup kitchens and food van lines

March 31, enumerate all individuals at pre-identified targeted unsheltered outdoor locations.

In addition to the above, individuals and families living with another household (often referred to as the doubled up homeless) were to be included in the U.S. Census form that all households received by mail before April 1, 2010, regarding the people staying at the residence on April 1, 2010. If an individual believed that he/she had been missed in the Census he/she could have filled out the five question Be Counted form. The Be Counted forms were to be made available at many community sites as well as at the Questionnaire Assistance Centers. Finally, a homeless person could have been counted in the Transitory Location Enumeration which was administered between March 22, 2012 and April 16, 2012. This enumeration was designed for people who are mobile and may be living in places such as motels, hotels, marinas, circuses or carnivals.

### **Methodology**

To understand the emic (insider) point of view and to observe the Census homeless count we conducted ethnographic observations within three Northeastern communities. For the

first five months of 2010, we made multiples observational visits to all of the shelters (for individuals and families), soup kitchens, day respite for homeless individuals, single room occupancy (SR) lodging, and group home. In addition we conducted observations of American Community Survey and the Census enumeration at two of the soup kitchens in our field sites. Finally, we held post Census focus groups in a singles shelter and a soup kitchen in order to discover homeless individuals' experience with the 2010 Census.

### **Ethnographic Observations**

We analyzed our field notes of our ethnographic observations (note: for a fuller discussion of our findings refer to the American Statistical Association paper "Reaching and Enumerating Homeless Populations" Glasser, Hirsch, and Chan 2012) and noted the following themes:

***Finding and enumerating homeless populations with shelters will only capture a portion of the homeless population on a given night.*** People may be barred from the shelter, stay doubled up for the night, stay out of doors, or rent a room in a low cost motel

***Not all lodging for homeless individuals may be included in the group quarter count:*** we found housing designed for mariners that was being used to house homeless individuals that was not included on lists of homeless facilities

***Individuals doubled up with other poor households may not be counted during the householder count.*** The renter (the host) may believe that their housing will be jeopardized by housing a guest. Doubling up is a common response to poverty and homelessness.

***The soup kitchen count may not be as effective as it could be.*** The Census at soup kitchens is important in order to find those who may have been missed by the group quarters shelter count, yet we discovered inconsistent strategies for the soup kitchen count.

***There was a high level of cooperation between the homeless service providers such as shelter and day center administrators and the U.S. Census***

Based on our post enumeration focus groups and our conversations with shelter staff after the night of the Census, it appeared that if the individual or family had been in a shelter or group home on the evening of the Census there was a high probability that they would be included in the count.

### **Recommendations**

We offer the following recommendations for further including homeless populations within the US Census:

***Further develop ways for the doubled up population to be included in the Census.*** The doubled up homeless are hidden from view, and will only be included if the householder who fills out the Census form sent to all apartments, housing, and mobile homes before

April 1 includes the homeless family or individual in their Census form. Most of the doubled up homeless with whom we spoke felt that they had not been included in their host's household Census form.

***Make more extensive use of the Be Counted Forms which are designed for individuals who believe that they were not included in the Census.*** We found little awareness of the Be Counted forms among the homeless individuals with whom we spoke and we did not observe the Be Counted forms prominently displayed in homeless serving agencies.

***Develop collaborative efforts and research between the US Census Bureau and the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).*** In the past decade HUD has developed strategies to enumerate homeless populations through the Point in Time count which enumerates each homeless individual and family living in shelters or out of doors.

***Implement consistent and effective strategies for the Census enumeration in soup kitchens.*** Soup kitchens are important venues in which to locate the out of doors homeless, the doubled up homeless, and those individuals who may not have been in the shelter the evening of the count.

***Utilize networks of homeless individuals and advocacy and service organizations in order to spread the word about the importance of including everyone in the Census.*** Homeless individuals told us throughout our work about how word spreads throughout their communities and that homeless individuals could have been put to use in encouraging individuals to be counted. Most states also have homeless advocacy groups who could also be further enlisted to help.

## **Conclusion**

We utilized the ethnographic method in our observations of the homeless enumeration of the 2010 Census which enabled us to witness the difficulties of enumerating all homeless individuals and families in the Census. Our analysis of our field notes led us to recommend more involvement from the networks of service providers and of homeless individuals themselves that will lead to a more complete coverage both in terms of a complete listing of all service locations and in garnering more interest in the Census by homeless individuals. We also recommend a more consistent soup kitchen enumeration strategy, more extensive use of the Be Counted forms, further collaboration with the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and further research and development that would lead to including the doubled up family or individuals in the US Census form filled out by households that are covered in the April 1 Census. We also noted the excellent cooperation between the US Census and those professionals who staff the homeless serving organizations.

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