

## **REACHING AND ENUMERATING HOMELESS POPULATIONS**

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### **Abstract**

In this presentation we identified the coverage issues and possible solutions to improve the census coverage for the homeless. We utilized ethnographic methods to provide an insider point of view of homeless populations in three Northeastern cities. We conducted post enumeration focus groups with homeless individuals and informal interviews with staff at homeless services regarding their experiences with the 2010 Census. Among our findings were: where homeless people stay is characterized by a great deal of fluidity and mobility, which impacts the census; there are important differences between single adult and family shelters; homeless single adults often cycle, within a short period of time, between shelters, out of doors, and doubled-up households; homeless singles may be barred from the shelter; homeless families were most often living doubled up before their stay in homeless shelters; homeless families were able to stay in the family shelter until housed; and homeless people who were living outdoors or staying with family or friends appeared to be under counted. The enumeration in the two soup kitchens observed involved different strategies with different levels of success. A minority of the focus groups participants felt certain they had been counted. The presentation concludes with specific recommendations for future censuses in the U.S. to insure more complete census coverage for people experiencing homelessness.

### **Enumerating Homeless Population in the 2010 U.S. Census**

The United States Census counts every resident in the U.S. every ten years in order to determine the number of seats each state has in the U.S. House of Representatives and in order to distribute billions of dollars in federal funds to local communities. The decennial census is mandated by the U.S. Constitution and has occurred every ten years since 1790. Census enumerators visited every household door-to-door for the decennial enumeration until the 1960, when the Census Bureau began mailing the census forms to households (US Census Bureau Factfinder for the Nation 2000).

There are many well documented challenges to obtaining an accurate decennial count (Schwede 2010). Portions of the population that are undercounted include renters, young men, non-relatives, immigrants and those whose residences are in flux. From the beginning of the US Census in 1790, the Census has been address based. One group that presents a great challenge to the decennial census is the homeless, who by definition do not have a permanent address.

In order to include homeless people in the 2010 U.S. Census, the U.S. Census Bureau conducted a Service-Based Enumeration (SBE) on March 29, 30, and 31, 2010 using a seven-question Individual Census Report (ICR). The SBE was a part of the Group Quarter Enumeration (GQE) operation that sought to count individuals living in group

quarters such as college residence halls, prisons, nursing homes, and homeless shelters. The GQE is a separate operation during the 2010 Census, which included around three percent of U.S. population in 2010. The strategy of the SBE for homeless populations was that on the first night the census takers enumerated individuals and families in emergency shelters, transitional shelters (typically those shelters with a longer stay and more intensive services than an emergency shelter) and in hotels and motels used to house the homeless. On the second day the enumerators visited individuals at regularly scheduled mobile food vans and soup kitchens. The third day the enumerators counted people at pre-identified targeted nonsheltered outdoor locations (TNSOL) such as at bus stops, encampments, or cemeteries.

An individual could have been counted at all three types of settings. For example, the person could have been enumerated at a shelter the first day, at a soup kitchen the second day, and at an outdoor encampment the third day. The person could also have been counted within a household *and* at a SBE site since there are people who have a permanent residence who may utilize soup kitchens. In the attempt to count people once and only once and at the correct location in the census, the Census Bureau has a mechanism in place for unduplicating persons within the SBE universe. The Census Bureau conducts a computer and clerical person match using demographic response data on the SBE questionnaires in order to identify duplicates within the SBE universe. Based on pre-determined criteria, duplicates are removed from census count. After the unduplication process, those persons who were enumerated at soup kitchens and/or regularly scheduled food vans that provided a valid usual home elsewhere address were removed from the SBE Group Quarters location and were counted at their permanent residence (Barrett 2012).

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 residences received before April 1, 2010. . The first question asked the individual filling out the form how many people were living or staying in the house, apartment, or mobile home on April 1, 2010. The second question asked if there were “additional people” staying there on April 1, 2010. This second question could include homeless individuals and families staying with the householder.

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. Our research indicated that a number of homeless individuals briefly stay in inexpensive motel or hotel rooms between stays in shelters, outdoor locations, and doubled up.

## **METHODOLOGY FOR 2010 ETHNOGRAPHIC HOMELESS ENUMERATION STUDY**

Previous research on homeless populations suggest that more foundational knowledge and exploratory research are needed to understand how best to count this population. This study used qualitative ethnographic methods to understand the complexity of the living situation of the homeless population and to generate strategies to improve census coverage of this group. Ethnography is the written description of a culture after a period of intensive observation and participant observation by the anthropologist who has lived within the culture of study. In taking extensive field notes and analyzing them, one is attempting to understand not just the behaviors one can see but the *world view* of the culture that makes those behaviors possible.

We conducted ethnographic research related to the 2010 Census during the three months leading up to the Service Based Enumeration and two months after the enumeration for the purpose of gaining the homeless individual's and family's points of view of the census operation. Our primary data collection methods were unobtrusive observation, participant observation, brief interviews, and focus groups. These methods contribute to an ethnography of homeless populations.

We met homeless individuals wherever they were: in shelters, soup kitchens, and on the streets. We used the state-wide homeless coalition's listing of all services for the homeless as our guide for where to find homeless individuals and families. We further supplemented this list with additional locations based on our increasing knowledge gained by being in the field. We did not attempt to employ a statistical sampling of sites (such as venue sampling, discussed in chapter of this volume) but rather we tried to be in all of the locations utilized by homeless persons.

### **Observation of Census Day at two soup kitchens**

A very important strategy of our research was to unobtrusively observe the census workers in action in the Monday noon time soup kitchens in two our study cities. In both cases the observer did not interact with the enumerators and was treated as a client of the soup kitchen.

### **Post enumeration focus groups at shelter and soup kitchen**

In order to discover the homeless individuals' experience with the 2010 Census and to learn about the barriers to census participation from portions of the homeless population from an emic (insider) point of view, we conducted two focus groups on April 8 and 16, 2010, soon after service based enumeration. We conducted one focus group at the shelter for single men and women and another focus group at the large soup kitchen that also serves as a day respite for homeless people.

The focus groups questions were: What was your personal experience with the recent 2010 Census count? Can you think of any way that the Census could improve the accuracy of their count of people who do not have their own place? In addition to those questions we asked follow up questions for clarification during the groups.

### **In depth interviews with service providers**

We conducted interviews with homeless service providers including: the Housing Hotline director, who knew many of the homeless living in the shelter and out of doors; the Housing Authority Community Center director who was knowledgeable about local homelessness and who places homeless families in local low cost motels; the Community Police Officer who knew the people living out of doors and in the shelters; the police officer in City Three who knew the people living out of doors; and the Director of Social Services Three who was knowledgeable about homelessness.

## **ANALYSIS**

Through our observations, brief interviews, and focus groups with homeless people who were living in the singles shelter, the family shelter, out of doors, motels, mariner's single room occupancy/shelter, and those living doubled up, we were able to observe various patterns that have implications for the Census. We took extensive field notes after our visits to each site and used text analysis (Bernard 2011) in order to discover the behavior and movement of homeless individuals and families that could present barriers to Census inclusion. We were guided by the principles of *grounded* theory, wherein the researcher generates an overall theory of causal relationships based on the analysis of the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

## **FINDINGS**

We analyzed our field notes and discovered characteristics of each setting and patterns of behavior that have implications for the enumeration of homeless populations. Below we provide summaries of our findings from the observations, focus groups and interviews.

### **Enumerating homeless individuals and families within homeless shelters will capture only a portion of the homeless population on a given night.**

The shelter for single individuals includes people who stay for short periods of time as they cycle through living out of doors, with other people or families (doubled up) or can afford their own rents. Our ethnographic work in the shelter for singles took place in the lounge of the shelter, where people were watching TV and talking. Many people staying in the singles shelter see this as a temporary situation until they can find a job. Living in a shelter is a back-up plan if they have absolutely no where else to live.

Family shelters house families until they find their own apartment which means that these shelters are often full. In the family shelter, the staff appeared to engage the parents (mostly mothers) in activities that would assist them in leaving homelessness, such as job training, GED classes, mental health treatment, and substance abuse treatment.

### **People who are not following the shelter rules, or who have not followed them in the past, can be barred from entering or staying in a shelter. Many have to find an outdoor location in which to sleep or have to double up.**

We were able to observe two people as they were being barred from the shelter:

- One evening we spoke with a 30 year old African American man who had been released from prison in 2007 and told us that he could not go back into public housing because of

his felony conviction. Before staying at the shelter he had been with his fiancée. The next week we observed that he was very drunk. The shelter manager asked him to leave.

- We saw two large men in their 40s fighting over who was going to be able to sit in a specific chair in the shelter lounge. As they were verbally arguing, they took their fight to the dorm room behind the lounge. When one of the men hit the other one, the shelter worker asked the assailant to leave.

There is also evidence that in addition to barring people, the shelter workers will control who enters the shelter. The following excerpt from our field notes illustrates this:

- As I (Glasser) was entering the shelter at 6 pm, a woman outside of the shelter, thinking that I was in need of a bed, told me that she had been told that the shelter was full. After I did get into the shelter the shelter worker on duty told me that in fact they were not full.

Being barred from the shelter, or being asked to leave after being admitted has important implications for the Census, since being barred means that the person needs to find alternative places to stay, such as out of doors or doubled up.

### **Those living alone out of doors are difficult to find and enumerate.**

As we talked with people eating in soup kitchens we met a number of individuals who shared their stories with us about currently living out of doors. These people are difficult to enumerate, as they were not living in an encampment as out of door homeless do in some locales, but in separate, and private places, hidden from view. The out of doors homeless are variously called sleeping rough (England), *les sans abri* (France, Quebec), and *los sin techo* (Latin America) (Glasser 1994, Glasser, Fournier, and Costopoulos 1999).

### **Potential Undercount of Homeless Individuals Through a Service Not Recognized as a Homeless Serving Shelter**

A key to the Census of homeless individuals is the accurate listing of group quarters so that the census workers can approach the correct sites. This takes much time and research as sheltering homeless individuals and families might be intentionally discrete. For example, in one city a husband and wife sheltered homeless individuals through religious auspices, but were not listed in state-wide homeless coalition lists.

We found a single room occupancy hotel (SRO) that was designed for mariners who were between ship jobs but is in fact used as a shelter by homeless people. It was not included in the lists of resources of the Coalition for the Homeless although it could have been eventually included as a Group Quarter location as the Census Bureau was continually adding locations in the Service Based Enumeration (Durante 2012). The shelter consists of ten rooms on the top floor of a historic building (this service has existed since 1919) that is on a wharf. Each person has a room and there is no cooking in the room. The rest of the building has a café that is open to the public, and rest rooms and showers that are open from 6 am to 6 pm.

**Low cost hotels and motels may house homeless individuals who are between shelter stays and need specific strategies for enumeration.**

A number of people told us about sleeping in motels as an alternative to staying in a shelter, on the streets, or with a friend. Two of the people in this situation indicated that they would be unlikely to open the door in the motel to a census worker. The director of the Community Center of the Housing Authority, told us that she places homeless families in motels as an alternative to the family shelter, especially if she believed that the stay would be short and not too expensive for the City. The single people appeared to be paying for the motel room themselves.

- We talked with a man and woman at a noon time soup kitchen who were staying at a local motel for the winter. They had a camper and said they would leave the motel by April 15 in order to camp in the woods. They said that they got their mail at their PO Box and that they would not talk with anyone who came to their door.

**Living doubled up with another household is a frequently utilized alternative for homeless individuals; enumeration in doubled up situations is very difficult**

It was very common for people to have stayed with family and friends before and between episodes of living in a shelter or living out of doors. Since most of the people who hosted the people were renters themselves, with leases that specified who was to be in the apartment, there was a deterrent to including the guest on the census form for the household. Further, the hosts themselves were sometimes living in hard-won subsidized housing. Despite the assurances of confidentiality of the US Census and despite the specific question on the householder form asking about *additional* people staying at the residence, people with whom we spoke to believed that the householder would not want to risk jeopardizing their housing by admitting to additional people staying with them.

**Homeless individuals are often in flux in terms of where they sleep each night.**

In the first focus group at the shelter, which took place one week after the census takers had come to the shelter, five out of the 10 people in the focus group (all currently staying at the shelter) believed that they had *not* been counted by the Census because they were not at the shelter that night (March 29) but were doubled up, or because they did not want to cooperate with the Census. The doubled up people felt that the households they were staying with would *not* include them because they all received subsidized housing and could get into trouble for having someone stay with them who was not on the lease.

In discussions with shelter workers who were on duty the night of the Census we found out that if someone did not fill out the form for any reason, they (the workers) filled out the form for them, although the people staying at the shelter did not appear to be aware of this.

The second focus group took place on April 16, 2010 at the large soup kitchen which also functions as a day respite in a city close to the capital city, two weeks after the census takers had been to this soup kitchen. When we asked the 15 participants if they believed they had been counted, there was much confusion. The three people who had stayed in a shelter the night of March 29 thought that the form had been filled out for them and that

“they had no choice” about participating in the Census (completing the Census is in fact not mandatory). The six participants, who were doubled up with someone else, thought that they would not be counted in that household, because the doubled up situation was very temporary. They said that if they are staying in someone’s apartment for one night, how could the person say that they were “living there”? In fact the Census uses the words “living” and “staying” in the householder form in order to avoid implying more of a relationship between people at the same address than is actually true.

Two participants did not seem to remember where they actually were on Monday, March 29, so they didn’t know if they were in the shelter or with a friend, the two possibilities they suggested.

Four of the participants did not respond to the question.

We asked the members of both focus groups for suggestions of how to improve the homeless count in future decennial censuses to be sure that everyone, including themselves, is included in the Census. The following were their suggestions:

- Utilize word of mouth from peers.
- Have a toll free number available that people can call if they were missed by the Census.
- Send people to places where homeless people hang out during the day.
- Continue to send census workers to soup kitchens to count people who may have been missed.
- Consider doing the Census before the winter shelters (also called no freeze shelters) close. Many close at the beginning of April, and may be cleared out by March 29.
- Consider giving out incentives (money or grocery cards) for people who answer the Census, especially those who have someone else staying with them (the doubled up)

### **Enumeration at soup kitchens is a potentially effective method of including the out of doors homeless and the doubled up in the Census**

We conducted unobtrusive observations of the census workers in two soup kitchens in order to make recommendations for subsequent censuses. The two soup kitchen observations were two days apart (March 29 and March 31, 2010). The soup kitchen enumerations were conducted by two different census teams with two different strategies. We were not sure how much each soup kitchen team of enumerators had collaborated with the soup kitchen directors or how much they had collaborated with each other. The purpose of the soup kitchen enumeration is to count people who might not be included in other enumerations, such as people living out of doors or people doubled up with another person. The soup kitchen enumeration can also count people who might have been at a shelter on March 29 but who did not participate in the Census. In both soup kitchen enumerations, everyone was asked to fill out the ICR form even if they felt they had been counted somewhere else. As stated earlier, the Census Bureau has a

mechanism in place for counting the person at their usual address even if they fill out the ICR form at a soup kitchen.

The observation of the soup kitchen enumeration of March 29 took place in a weekly soup kitchen that serves approximately 75 people each Monday. The soup kitchen included single men and women (approximately 75% of the patrons were male) and English and Spanish speakers.

As lunch was being served, the director of the soup kitchen spoke about the fact that there were census forms at the tables. He said that the census count was very important for the local community and asked that people fill out the forms. He turned the microphone over to the person directing the census count who talked about the importance of counting everyone. He said that he knew that some people would have already filled out forms at their homes, but said that it was okay to fill out another form, since they would be cross-checked. He told people that they could drop the completed forms off as they exited the church basement.

The second soup kitchen enumeration observation took place March 31, 2010 at a soup kitchen in a city near the capital city which was one of the field sites of this ethnography. There were 15 people sitting at the tables waiting for lunch to begin. Six census workers set up at two large tables off to the side of the church hall. The person directing the Census count made an announcement about the importance of the Census and said that they would be asking people to fill out the census form even if they had filled one out in another location.

Some people engaged in lengthy discussions about why they did not wish to fill out a form. One individual, a middle-aged white male, said that the Census “stunk”. He suggested that every time a Census had been done in a country in any part of the world genocide soon followed. He also asked why the Census found it necessary to take GPS images of every address

### **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. This was due to a high level of cooperation between the homeless individuals, the group quarters administrators, and the census workers. We learned from one of the post enumeration focus groups that the shelter residents understood that cooperating with “the authorities” (participant’s words) which includes the Census, is the price one pays for entering a shelter and that the benefits of receiving shelter for the night outweighs the costs of anonymity.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE HOMELESS ENUMERATION**

Our research has led us to recommend strategies for the enumeration that we believe will improve the coverage of homeless individuals and families in future censuses in the U.S.. These include:



### **Improve Enumeration Strategies on the Doubled Up Population**

We recommend the continued development of effective strategies for counting the homeless guest within a household. Throughout our study and many other studies of homelessness, a pervasive observation is that staying doubled up with family and friends is a frequent precursor to living on the streets or a homeless shelter (Bolland and McCallum 2002). The host is most often a member of a lower income household. If the host is a renter with a lease that prohibits guests from staying longer than a specified period of time (such as 30 days) hosting a doubled up person could jeopardize the host's family's housing.

Using the American Community Survey microdata file information on income and household relationships NAEH estimates that nationally there were 6,800,587 doubled up individuals in 2010 (NAEH 2012). It is clear from our research that cycling between doubling up, the shelters, and the streets (for the single person) is a common pattern of homelessness.

### **Make Extensive Use of the Be Counted Form**

The self administered Be Counted forms could have been instrumental in reaching those homeless people who told us that they did not remember filling out the census form or who believed that the person they were staying with on April 1 did not include them in the household form. However, we saw little evidence of the Be Counted form. We saw the Be Counted form in a rack with other community information in City One in the lobby of a community center that also houses a food pantry and a daily breakfast program. However, without a person to distribute the forms and explain how to fill them out, it appeared unlikely that the Be Counted form would have been utilized by the homeless of City One. The Be Counted form has been the subject of extensive cognitive testing (Childs, Gerber and Norris 2009) and is continually being developed for clarity and accuracy.

### **Develop consistent and effective strategies at soup kitchens for enumeration of non sheltered homeless and for those who were not included in the shelter count. Some specific suggestions include:**

- Have the census workers be available at the tables where people are eating in order answer questions as people were filling out the forms at the tables and check that everyone has filled out the form as they are leaving the soup kitchen.
- Do not confront people as they enter the soup kitchen as this may result in refusals to cooperate and may cause some people to leave without eating.
- Leave the census forms at each place setting at a table and have the soup kitchen director make an announcement about the importance of the Census.
- Employ census workers who can speak the native languages of the local community.
- Make multiple visits to the same soup kitchen to insure that everyone is counted.

- Make pre visits to soup kitchens in order to discover which days have the greatest numbers of individuals in the dining room.

### **Develop a close collaboration with homeless networks**

Finally, we recommend a closer collaboration with networks of homeless and formerly homeless individuals in order to be certain that all of the homeless serving agencies are included as sites to be visited for the enumeration. Some of the problems we encountered in being sure to include all of the potential places that homeless might have been due to the lack of knowledge of homeless networks on the part of the census workers. An interesting example of becoming acquainted with homeless individuals and families before the census is India, which has had a protocol for including the homeless in the national census since 1961 (Gandotra 1977). In 1991 the Indian census takers were instructed to take a count of all of the “houseless” (their term for homeless) who were living on the pavement on the blocks that were assigned to the census taker in a three week period of time (Glasser 1994). Thus, on the night of the census the workers already knew the population to be included.

### **Further the Collaboration between the Census Bureau and the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)**

As researchers who have been long been involved in studies of homelessness, we recommend further collaboration between the Census Bureau and Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for the development of homeless enumeration methodology since both agencies have considerable knowledge and research regarding homeless enumeration. HUD’s ability to enumerate the homeless became feasible once it was required that states and cities receiving HUD funding establish administrative databases called Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS). Plagued early on by problems with accurate data entry and reporting issues, these systems are becoming increasingly reliable as a means of getting accurate counts as well as sources of important performance measures for programs designed to end homelessness.

Both the Census Service Based Enumeration and the HUD Point in Time count attempts to count every homeless person, even if they are staying out of doors. Both use surveys at homeless serving sites. The primary difference is the Census does not use administrative databases such as HMIS to conduct the count. Both surveys underrepresent the doubled up homeless in their counts. Based on our participation in PIT counts in two states we also observe that the PIT is accomplished by the homeless service providers networks (called Continua of Care) which make the PIT coverage as complete as possible.

### **CONCLUSION**

Understanding the patterns of behavior among homeless individuals and families in the decennial censuses has important implications for the accurate and complete surveying of this hard to reach populations. Our ethnographic work during the year of the 2010 Census enabled us to witness the difficulties of enumerating all homeless individuals and families in the Census. Our work 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. Many states in the US have active homeless coalitions that include homeless individuals who could be recruited to be helpful to the decennial census. We recommend on-going research and efforts to improve the coverage of the large numbers of individuals and families who double up with family friends because they have no other home.

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