

Why Do We Count and Survey Homeless People? (by Joe Colletti, PhD, Institute for Urban Initiatives, September, 2012)

For more than 200 years most people in the United States have tried to avoid homeless people. So why is there an increasing interest in counting and surveying homeless persons since the past decade? The U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has required local homeless continuum of care systems to count homeless individuals and families during the last 10 days of January in order to receive HUD grant funds since 2003. In addition, HUD requires the gathering of information about homeless subpopulations that include the chronically homeless individuals and families, persons with HIV/AIDS, persons with mental illness, unaccompanied youth under age 18, substance abusers, veterans, and victims of domestic violence. As a result, over 400 systems of care throughout the United States count and survey homeless persons within their jurisdictions with the help of thousands of local volunteers.

These activities have helped reverse a centuries old trend of avoiding people who have been termed with a variety of names that connoted aversion and avoidance. During the colonial era “vagrants” and the “wandering poor” were expressions used to describe persons without a home. Vagrants were avoided because they were social outcasts and the wandering poor were avoided not only because they were social outcasts but because they begged for money. Right after the Civil War, tramps and bums were two words used to describe people without a home. Tramps would often ignore the public as they travelled from place to place and seemed to like to sleep outdoors. When they interacted with the public they did so primarily because they wanted a short-term job for some handy money. Bums were known as people who lived in the same outdoor area day after day and begged for money. As a result, avoiding the area in which bums lived was easier than avoiding the person.

During the depression it was impossible to avoid so many people who lived outdoors in shantytowns, tent cities, and encampments. During this era, an increasing number of shelters were created to get as many people indoors as possible. It is interesting to note that one of the first, if not the first, homeless census was conducted during this period of time as part of the Federal Emergency Relief Act that established the Federal Transient Service in 1933.

After the depression, aversion and avoidance was easier. Homelessness was publically evident among single men who were over the age of 50 and often called “bums” or “winos.” The latter was a term meant to describe someone who was an alcoholic and who drank cheap wine. Such persons lived outdoors in the core of cities along the sidewalks, streets, and alleys that made up skid rows and other areas that made up the central business districts of downtown areas.

Beginning in the 1980s, however, the homeless population included a greater diversity of persons. Families, women, women with children, runaway youth, and non-whites swelled the ranks of local homeless populations. By the end of the decade, members of the public

began to increasingly ask, Who are all these people? and Where did they come from? Several attempts were made to count and survey homeless people by government, academic institutions, and nonprofit organizations. Figures that numbered several hundreds of thousands of people were quoted. Different subpopulations during different times were quoted as the fast-growing segment among all homeless persons. The latest number of homeless persons is approximately 650,000 which is based on data collected during the last 10 days of January in 2009. The same is true for subpopulations.

During the last 10 days of this month hundreds of local continuum of care systems will be counting and surveying homeless people within their boundaries. They have been planning for months. If you would like to participate, there is still time!

You are likely to find information about the local count and survey in your area through a web site. Finding the web site may or may not be easy. Try searching through your favorite search engine. Information about homelessness concerning your city or area is likely to come up. You may have to do some further searching. If you live in Southern California e-mail solutions@urban-initiatives.org and Urban Initiatives staff will assist you. By the way, community service groups, congregations, businesses, and neighborhood associations are always welcomed to participate in local counts and surveys.

A primary intent behind homeless counts and surveys is to help determine whether or not a local homeless population is increasing or decreasing. HUD requires local homeless systems of care to explain if the number of chronically homeless persons increased and if the number of permanent supportive beds designated for such persons increased or decreased as part of the Continuum of Care Homeless Assistance application process. Local jurisdictions should compare their data and see if the homeless population and specific subpopulations are increasing or decreasing. Doing so could help determine whether or not to end certain services, start new services, or continue various services currently offered. Historically such determinations have not been easy to make. Thus, your participation in homeless counts and surveys not only helps reverse a centuries old trend of avoiding homeless people, but helps jurisdictions consider next steps concerning effective homeless service provision.