4

DEFINING AND COUNTING HOMELESSNESS

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Introduction

In February 2020, the United Nations Commission for Social Development called for a global effort to "address homelessness," a momentous recognition of a social and public health challenge impacting member states across the board (United Nations Commission for Social Development, 2020). One of the first questions to be addressed in tackling homelessness: just how widespread is it?

A "definitive count of the size of the homeless population" is beyond realistic expectations. "The best that one can hope for," Wright and Devine wrote 30 years ago, "is a more or less plausible count with known and hopefully small uncertainties attached to it" (Wright & Devine, 1992). Even by this benchmark, the world is falling short. Not only do "definitions and measurements" vary considerably across countries and regions, but so does the existence of operational definitions that allow for quantification and efforts to estimate the scope of homelessness. Between 3.8 and 216 million people meet official definitions of homelessness, a range too broad to offer meaningful guidance (Tipple & Speak, 2009).

Some argue against the measurement of homelessness as a distraction from efforts to address the problem. We, however, consider an assessment of a problem's scope, causes, and characteristics as a necessary precondition for addressing the problem to, as Tipple and Speak wrote in 2009, facilitate "investment" and enable "lobbyists or officials to direct funding to address the problem."

The experience in the United States may provide guidance as the world seeks to "harmonize measurement and collection of data on homelessness to enable national and global policymaking" (United Nations Commission for Social Development, 2020). In contrast to the qualitative research traditions more prominent across Europe, the results-driven governance style predominant in the United States has engendered an infrastructure and a subfield of homelessness research

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devoted to its quantification that we think can, when examined critically, offer lessons as the world seeks to rise to the UN's call to address this "obstacle to human rights" and "violation of human dignity" (Culhane, Fitzpatrick, & Treglia, 2020; United Nations Commission for Social Development, 2020).

The Fight to Define Homelessness

Counting homelessness is "itself a controversial endeavor" (Wasserman & Clair, 2009, p. 50), with debates among advocates, governments, and researchers on two planes: who to define as homeless and how to count them. A wide range of definitions emerged from American sociologists between the 1950s and the 1980s, with conceptualizations ranging from anyone with inadequate housing to those sleeping in "literally homeless" settings – public or privately funded shelters and people sleeping on the streets or other areas not meant for human habitation (Burt & Cohen, 1989; Jencks, 1994; Lee, Tyler, & Wright, 2010; Stern, 1984; Treglia, Montgomery, & Culhane, 2016).

The U.S. government, dating back to its first official report on homelessness in 1984, has generally enumerated homelessness using a more restrictive definition – including as homeless individuals and households sleeping in shelters designated for "the homeless" or unsheltered settings ("places not meant for habitation"). Compared to others that are homeless by other definitions, they are the easiest to count and present the most extreme of housing instability and are therefore targeted for funding and services. Advocates and service providers, many of whom see financial and political interests in higher numbers, have traditionally argued for broader definitions that, in addition to those counted as homeless by the government, include people on the brink of homelessness or who are doubling up or couch surfing with friends or family. The research community has largely subscribed to the Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) narrower definition – sometimes explicitly and in other instances confining their studies or estimates of homeless to those meeting the criteria of literal homelessness.

Battles over definitions and measurements grew during the late 1970s into the 1980s as homelessness moved beyond "skid row" neighborhoods and became a problem too large and geographically dispersed to politically ignore (Hopper, 1992; Shlay & Rossi, 1992; Stern, 1984; Wright & Devine, 1992). The 1980 decennial census was the first systematic estimation of the extent of homelessness, including as homeless 23,000 people who listed a shelter as their permanent residence on the Census form (Jencks, 1994). In the same year, Mitch Snyder, then the leader of the Community for Creative Non-Violence (CCNV) and still, 30 years after his death, among the most well-known of homelessness advocates, offered a very different assessment.

Snyder called colleagues in a smattering of American cities and metropolitan areas and received their "best guesses" of local homelessness. Data represented a variety of geographic units, time periods, and units of analysis and were "unusable as a means of extrapolating the number of America's homeless" (Kondratas, 1991, p. 632). Despite this, the CCNV stated that 2.2 million Americans, or 1% of the

population, were homeless. These estimates, though lacking in any semblance of methodological rigor, became conventional wisdom.

This began a series of volleys between government officials and social scientists – two groups with very different motivations – and advocates led by Snyder. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) responded with a report to Congress in 1984; having surveyed its own list of homelessness experts and shelters directors in large cities, HUD estimated that between 250,000 and 350,000 people were experiencing homelessness, a conclusion corroborated by secondary analyses of their data by the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) and ICF, Inc., and disavowed by Snyder, who sued HUD for negligence (Burt & Cohen, 1989; Kondratas, 1991; Shlay & Rossi, 1992; Wright & Devine, 1992).

Methodological advancement continued during the late 1980s along two tracks. On one, a series of studies built a consensus for a national homelessness best guess of between 500,000 and 1 million, or between 25% and 50% of Snyder's earlier proclamation (Burt & Cohen, 1989; Kondratas, 1991; Wright & Devine, 1992). At the same time, Peter Rossi and others developed and refined methodologies for local counts, particularly to enumerate hard to find street homeless populations. Rossi emphasized methods that reduced bias and quantified uncertainty, and the most credible estimates of street homeless still lean heavily on his work (Rossi, 1991).

These paths merged in the 1990 S-Night (the "S" representing "'shelter and street'") Count, an effort to enumerate literally homeless individuals as part of the U.S.'s decennial census (Shlay & Rossi, 1992; Wright & Devine, 1992). During the night of March 20, 1990, teams from the Census Bureau counted people in "all known shelters" in five participating cities, and the following morning counted people in streets, abandoned buildings, and other unsheltered settings. The count was controversial before it even happened – Mitch Snyder urged people experiencing homelessness to avoid locations in which they might be counted, lest, he argued, they lend credence to an effort designed to underestimate homelessness for political purposes. Despite his attempted boycott, Snyder wrote in the Washington Post that S-Night "needed no interference from me to doom it to failure" (Snyder, 1990, p. D8).

The effort produced an estimate of 228,621, or less than half of the likely range suggested by credible contemporary studies. No one, including the Census Bureau, considered this an authoritative enumeration, though it offered an opportunity to test relevant methodologies at scale and with high stakes. Generally, the shelter portion of the count ran smoothly, while street counts varied widely in their reliability. Perhaps the most notable methodological advancement of S-Night Count was the use of a "plant-capture" quality assurance mechanism, in which trained observers stationed in unsheltered geographies to be canvassed could record whether they'd been counted and, thus, assess the count's exhaustiveness (Hopper, 1992; Martin, 1992; Wright & Devine, 1992). Snyder's passing in the summer of 1990 meant that the S-Night result, even with Census Bureau's caveats, lacked the robust advocacy response that the federal government could have counted on earlier.

Though debates faded from the pages of national newspapers, researchers in the 1990s continued their efforts to more comprehensively and precisely estimate the scale of homelessness. Bruce Link and colleagues used phone surveys to establish five-year and lifetime prevalence rates in 20 large metropolitan areas (Link et al., 1994). His survey of 1,507 U.S. residents found lifetime and five-year literal homelessness rates of 7.4% and 3.1%, respectively. A parallel development, at around the same time, was the rise of homeless management information systems (HMIS) – administrative databases to track shelter usage and manage homeless services operations and procurement.

New York City was the first to adopt such a system in 1986 and Philadelphia followed suit in 1990. By the end of the decade, 12 communities had a "sufficient portion of shelters represented" to produce meaningful assessments of homelessness' scope and prevalence. Culhane and colleagues were the first to use these data to assess homelessness prevalence; estimating point-in-time (PIT), annual, and five-year prevalence rates in New York City and Philadelphia and producing rates similar to those found by Link (Culhane, Delowski, Ibanez, Needham, & Macchia, 1994). Five years later, Metraux and colleagues conducted a similar exercise in nine communities (Metraux et al., 2001).

The federal government set its eye on national-level regular and standardized reporting, which required broad adoption of administrative databases. In 2001, Congress charged HUD with assisting communities in the development of HMIS and by 2005, 93% of communities had, or were in the process of implementing, one. In parallel with that development, some communities ran and published their own official estimates of homelessness, some of which went beyond those HMIS systems.

Mandated Homelessness Reporting

In the mid-2000s, HUD began leveraging the billions of dollars it provides in homeless service funding to compel local data collection and reporting that could be rolled into a national report. In 2007, HUD released its first Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress on a sample of 80 municipalities and, in the same year, mandated that all communities receiving federal homelessness dollars through the McKinney-Vento Act provide annual estimates of homelessness prevalence.

These local estimates are provided by approximately 400 Continuums of Care (CoCs), collectives of service providers and governments through which communities apply for and receive homelessness funding from HUD. They report two sets of estimates each year, which are then compiled in Parts 1 and 2 of HUD's AHAR. The first is a measure of point-prevalence providing a "Point-in-Time" (PIT) estimate assessment of the number of people experiencing "literal homelessness," including "sheltered homelessness," meaning people living in emergency shelter and transitional housing, and "unsheltered homelessness" referring to people sleeping on the streets or in other areas unfit for human habitation. HUD mandates that each CoC produces a PIT estimate of homelessness reflecting a

single night in the last ten days of January; the observation period is intended to standardize estimates and, by conducting the count in winter, maximize the number of people in sheltered settings, where they are easier to count than on the streets or in other spaces.

Part 2 of the AHAR estimates annual prevalence of sheltered homelessness, providing an unduplicated count within each CoC of people accessing shelter and transitional housing from October 1 – September 30 (mirroring the federal fiscal year). HUD is also developing the Longitudinal System Analysis (LSA) reporting platform, which will go a step further. Rather than limiting estimates to prevalence and basic demographic characteristics, the LSA will, for the first time, provide national-level estimates of service use characteristics and trajectories of people experiencing homelessness.

Estimating the Number and Characteristics of Homelessness

As was the case in the 1990 S-Night Count, enumerating sheltered homelessness is relatively straightforward. Given the HMIS mandates imposed by HUD, counts of those living in "sheltered homelessness" settings, whether in emergency shelters, transitional housing, or low-demand shelters (referred to as "safe havens"), are generally pulled directly from administrative databases. Unsheltered homelessness is a very different story and was the subject of much of Peter Rossi's experimentation in Chicago in the late 1980s. Systematically finding and counting people taking up quarters outside or in transit hubs, abandoned buildings, cars or Recreational Vehicles (RVs) and other "uninhabitable" settings is an arduous task, and HUD communities employ a range of methodologies that vary widely in their statistical rigor.

Measuring Unsheltered Homelessness

These methodologies can be broadly divided into two categories: street-based and service-based counts. In street-based counts, outreach workers, often working alongside volunteers, fan out across a defined geography to find people sleeping unsheltered. They generally occur late at night or very early in the morning – while people are still "bedded down" – and can take on many different forms. Some, like Philadelphia, PA, visit only homelessness "hotspots" – specific areas with known homelessness often in downtown areas and other spaces known for concentrated homelessness (train stations, airports). These hotspot approaches, though they represent only a sample of a jurisdiction's geography, do not include any statistical extrapolation to uncanvassed areas and no quantification of the uncertainty embedded in the sample, making these estimates relatively methodologically weak. Others, like Boston, MA, canvass their entire geography; while this eliminates the uncertainty and ad hoc nature of the hotspot approach, it is feasible only for small, urban geographies able to recruit a large number of enumerators.

A third option is the geographically stratified probability sample. Here, communities divide their total geography into distinct and standardized areas, and then stratify those areas based on the likelihood of finding homeless individuals using

information from prior counts and other institutional knowledge, like observations from street outreach teams, and a statistically valid random sample of areas is pulled from each stratum.

Methodologies vary further within these categories. In New York City, which has received recognition from HUD for its methodological rigor, enumerators survey everyone they encounter about their housing status, regardless of their appearance. Other communities conduct "windshield surveys" in which they drive or walk assigned geographies without speaking with anyone, designating individuals as homeless based entirely on appearance. Such estimates are subject to the biases of the enumerators, many of whom are volunteers without relevant experience and less than an hour of training.

Service-based counts are the other primary method of capturing the unsheltered homeless population. In this methodology, homeless, food assistance, case management, and other service providers likely to be frequented by homeless individuals ask service users about their housing status on a given night (usually the previous night). HUD allows for communities to survey service users over a seven-day period after the designated night.

Limitations of HUD-Approved Methodologies

Research has demonstrated notable shortfalls in these methods, limiting their exhaustiveness, reliability, and validity, and suggests that they may skew our understanding of who is experiencing homelessness at any given time (Glynn, Byrne, & Culhane, 2018; Glynn & Fox, 2019; Schneider, Brisson, & Burnes, 2016; Williams, 2011). For one, levels of sheltered homelessness, and to some degree levels of unsheltered homelessness, are utilization-driven, meaning that those who cannot or choose not to avail themselves of services are excluded from estimation of homelessness. A shelter system at full capacity, for example, cannot register an increase in homelessness, regardless of demand. Second, as has been argued with respect to homelessness and poverty generally (Bane & Ellwood, 1986), PIT estimates overrepresent chronic homelessness and underrepresent the short-term spells that categorize around 80% of all shelter stays (Culhane & Kuhn, 1998; Culhane, Metraux, Park, Schretzman, & Valente, 2007).

Another serious limitation of the one-night PIT is that it is extremely sensitive to single-night changes that could affect the number and location of people experiencing homelessness. Cold and rainy nights lead people who may normally be sleeping in public view to take refuge in a shelter, a temporary non-homeless accommodation like a hotel room or a friend's couch, or an unsheltered location like an abandoned building that is more protective against the elements and farther from public view.

Finally, regardless of weather, the unsheltered count can fail to find people who are out of sight or in areas unknown to homelessness officials. A 1990s survey of formerly homeless people, for example, found that 59% of people who experienced literal homelessness had spent time living in their cars and 25% were in other "makeshift housing" arrangements like boxcars or caves (Williams, 2011),

a finding corroborated by Hopper, Shinn, and colleagues' 2005 survey conducted in conjunction with New York City's inaugural citywide PIT (Hopper, Shinn, Laska, Meisner, & Wanderling, 2008a). Another study, examining deaths among the street homeless population, found that many who died were in areas not routinely served by street outreach teams and, resultantly, were unknown to homeless support systems (Metraux et al., 2016).

These shortfalls are more likely to result in undercounts rather than overcounts, and researchers and local agencies responsible for their PIT counts have devised a range of strategies for incorporating that error into their assessments of homelessness prevalence. One, to our knowledge used only by New York City in the United States and Toronto in Canada, uses the plant-capture mechanism employed by the 1990 S-Night Count to estimate the undercount of the unsheltered PIT (Hopper, 1992; Hopper, Shinn, Laska, Meisner, & Wanderling, 2008b; Wright & Devine, 1992). In this method, an outside agency places teams of "decoy" homeless individuals into a sample of areas to be visited by enumerators, and they record whether they were approached by enumerators. A second strategy is a post-enumeration survey in which users of social service centers in the days following the count are asked about their housing status on the designated PIT night; those indicating homelessness are asked more detailed information about their location during the PIT, particularly focused on whether they would have been visible to enumerators. Both methods were tested by Hopper, Shinn, and colleagues (2008) as part of New York City's inaugural full-city unsheltered PIT in 2005. The plant-capture method found that 22% of decoys were likely missed and, as a result, the final estimate was increased by the same amount. The post-enumeration survey, which provided only preliminary numbers, estimated that as few as 33% of unsheltered adults were definitely visible in some parts of the city, meaning that up to two-thirds of individuals unsheltered on the PIT night would likely have been counted. Looking to the Hopper study, Glynn and Fox (2018) adjusted published unsheltered homelessness estimates upward by 40% in their study of urban homelessness dynamics.

Population-based surveys are another method of working around the constraints of these HUD approval methods. The aforementioned Link's study assessed homelessness across the general population and, in a recent analysis, Agans and colleagues used a telephone survey to ask about homeless individuals sleeping on private property likely out of view from enumerators (Agans et al., 2014; Link et al., 1994). Others have used household surveys to assess prevalence of homelessness among youth, a group widely recognized to be underrepresented by traditional HUD methods (Cutuli, Treglia, & Herbers, 2020; Morton et al., 2018).

Healthcare records present additional opportunities for estimating homelessness prevalence, although these are limited to healthcare users. One method for doing this is through examination of diagnosis codes. The International Classification of Diseases (ICD) system, used to document health conditions, includes a V60.0 code to indicate "lack of housing" and which researchers have used as a record of homelessness. Madigan and colleagues' (2020) examination of hospital records in Illinois estimated steady increases in homelessness from 2011 to 2018, with somewhere between 15,815 and 23,758 people experiencing homelessness in the latest

year (Madigan, Forst, & Friedman, 2020). Montgomery and colleagues have derived estimates of veteran homelessness based on screening questions administered to Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) healthcare facilities users (Montgomery, Szymkowiak, Marcus, Howard, & Culhane, 2016).

Targeting Subpopulations

The enumeration of specific subpopulations has received additional attention, some because they are disproportionately difficult to find and count; others because they are deemed extraordinarily worthy of being counted and served.

Veteran Homelessness

Military veterans are among those in the latter category, considered "deserving" because of their military service, and the annual PIT counts played a valuable tool in evaluating veteran-focused homeless services initiated and expanded during the Obama Administration. The VA made large investments in its permanent supportive housing program, HUD-VASH, targeting veterans experiencing chronic homelessness, and created the Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) to address short-term homelessness. In 2016, as President Obama's second term was coming to an end, the administration pointed to a 47% decline in veterans' homelessness, as measured by the national aggregation of annual PIT counts, as evidence of the effectiveness of its programs (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2021).

Official data likely understate the VA's success, as efforts to improve the identification of homeless veterans and expand homeless services that evolved under President Obama would, on their own, result in an increase in the number of identified homeless veterans. Estimates of veteran homelessness are also made complicated by difficulties in the identification of veterans accessing community-based homeless services. Veterans accessing community-based (non-VA) homeless services are generally identified through one or more questions about previous military service. Two studies comparing shelter records with military service and VA records found that non-VA shelters actually underidentified veterans. Metraux and colleagues (Metraux, Stino, & Culhane, 2014) and Treglia (Treglia, 2016) noted that fewer than two-thirds of non-VA shelter users with a military discharge record were correctly identified as veterans in HMIS. Veterans who were younger and women were most likely to be missed, which could reflect either a reticence to reveal military experience, less comprehensive veteran screening among these groups, or questions poorly calibrated with operational definitions of veteran status.

Youth Homelessness

Estimating the number of youth experiencing homelessness may be among the most challenging endeavors in defining, measuring, and addressing homelessness. Three operational definitions exist across federal agencies and legislation for the

purposes of enumeration, varying in their age parameters, living circumstances, and time periods – making comparisons impossible. HUD's literal homeless definition applies to youth, and estimates are based on its PIT methodology. Homeless children include anyone in a family aged 17 years or younger and counts as "unaccompanied youth" unaccompanied individuals under the age of 25. The Department of Education's (DOE) operationalization of homelessness is guided by the McKinney-Vento Act as it has been amended through the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Though its measurements are limited to school-aged children, it includes as homeless "individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence," which includes people living in doubled-up living arrangements and "couch-surfing," and provides estimates that span a school year, rather than a single night (U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2018). The third piece of relevant legislation is the Federal Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA), which is administered by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Unlike the McKinney-Vento-driven language guiding HUD and DOE, RHYA's definition of youth homelessness is driven not by an individual's specific sleeping location than it is by their general circumstances, defining as homeless anyone under the age of 21 "for whom it is not possible to live in a safe environment with a relative, and who has no other safe alternative living arrangement" (U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2018).

Traditional enumeration methods are particularly likely to produce underestimates of homeless youth. Homeless youth, more than older adults, are likely to refuse homeless and other social services and resist being found and, even when asked, are less likely to identify as homeless. As a result, probably no domain of homelessness enumeration has been the beneficiary of as much innovation and effort. Some of these enhanced efforts are extensions of more traditional methods, such as extending the reach of PIT counts beyond traditional homeless service providers and extending the window in which providers survey and count potentially homeless youth from one day to seven.

Surveys are also being used to identify and quantify youth homelessness. Morton and colleagues (2018) surveyed a representative sample of 26,161 adults whose households included 13–25-year-olds to establish a one-year prevalence rate, finding that 3.4% of 13–17 year-olds reported literal homelessness and 5.3% identified as homeless using broader definitions that included couch-surfing. For 18–25-year-olds, estimates were notably higher, 5.9% and 15.6%, respectively. Similarly, a number of studies have assessed youth homelessness prevalence through the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS), administered by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in partnership with states and local school districts to public high school students. Two studies using YRBSS data demonstrate the growth and standardization in housing-related questions that can identify homelessness prevalence using McKinney-Vento definitions; while only 8 states included relevant questions in their 2015 YRBSS, that number grew to 25 states and the District of Columbia in 2019. In a 2021 analysis of 24 states with representative housing data from 2019, the homelessness rate of 9.2% amounted to more than 500,000 homeless high school youth, exceeding DOE estimates

by approximately 60% (Cutuli, Treglia, & Herbers, 2020; Hatchimonji, Flatley, Treglia, & Cutuli, 2021).

Women and LatinX Homelessness

The operational definitions and service utilization measures relied on to enumerate homelessness exclude some groups who may meet HUD and other conventional definitions of homelessness without meeting the criteria for inclusion in official counts. Susan Baker wrote of the "Latino Paradox" in homelessness in 1996, documenting that though "African Americans are overrepresented among the homeless, Latinos … tend to be underrepresented in areas as diverse in Los Angeles, San Antonio, and New York" (Baker, 1996, p. 132). Her study of 18 U.S. cities, reliant on primary data, found that Latinos were underrepresented among the homeless population by an average of 3.5 percentage points. This disparity, she argued, was due in large part to the strength of social support networks within the Latino community that allowed otherwise homeless members to avoid the shelter system, to which she points to the high overcrowding rate among Latinos as evidence. This is no longer true on a national level, as the LatinX homelessness rate is nearly on par with their share of the population, but localized research suggests that the phenomenon persists in some parts of the country (Chinchilla & Gabrielian, 2019; Culhane, Metraux, Treglia, Lowman, & Ortiz-Siberon, 2019; Henry et al., 2019; Homelessness Policy Research Institute, 2019). Pleace (2016), building on work from Burt (2001) and Busch-Geertsema and colleagues (Busch-Geertsema, Benjaminson, Filipovic Hrast, & Pleace, 2014), wrote similarly about homelessness among women. They, more so than men, he argued, are likely to have a social support network from which they can obtain temporary but precarious accommodations that places them as technically homeless but outside of view of any system or surveyor who could reasonably count them.

Conclusion

The last 40 years have been marked by changes in how we define and enumerate homelessness in the United States. Methodological innovations, combined with the advent of HMIS and mobile phones, mean that we have never had more tools at our fingertips to accurately assess the scope of homelessness in the United States. Yet, the fundamental challenges outlined by Wright and Devine in 1991 remain true. Governments and advocates continue to spar over homelessness estimates (Coalition for the Homeless, 2020) and, despite advancements over the last 40 years, the number of people experiencing homelessness remains wildly uncertain. Sheltered homelessness has become far easier to enumerate with the advent and ubiquity of HMIS, but the uncertainty that pervaded the 1990 S-Night Count remains largely intact and, we have no doubt, will remain that way. There is no hiding from this fact, and transparency on the part of those administering, conducting, and publishing results from official counts is critical to the credibility of these estimates.

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