



The Homeless and the Census

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With the 2020 census upon us, taking a look at the track record of the census for counting the homeless, and examining this year's plan. First, however: why is the census important for the homeless population? It is easy to see it as a low-priority issue when basic needs such as food and housing are consistently failing to be met, but an accurate census count is crucial for many of the problems the homeless face. Census data on the homeless population is used in policy decisions regarding the homeless, such as funding for many programs providing basic needs. If accurate data is not provided, these programs risk being underfunded or misguided, and therefore ineffectual. For example, a 2001 report by the Census Monitoring Board found that the 2000 census undercount of the homeless would cost \$3.6 billion in federal funding for homelessness-related programs. And, as a report by Brendan Kearns for the National Coalition for the Homeless has pointed out, minimal efforts by the Census Bureau to count homeless convey a sense that they do not matter to the wider society, that they do not deserve to be counted.

People experiencing homelessness are more likely to be undercounted for several reasons. First, the census is typically counted according to residences, so those without permanent addresses may be missed. Their living situations, such as outdoor areas, also tend to be hard to reach for officials. Finally, the homeless are significantly more likely to lack internet access, meaning they cannot take the census online. All of these factors combined make the homeless particularly hard to count, and mean that the homeless have consistently been undercounted for decades. Many municipalities make counting the homeless even more difficult by criminalizing many aspects of their existence, such as sleeping in public; many individuals fear that census officials will report their living situations to the authorities, who can use the information to prosecute them. This makes them less willing to talk to census officials, and therefore less likely to be counted.

The 2020 census has planned to take several measures in order to ameliorate these issues. People who receive services from shelters, soup kitchens, and mobile food vans will be counted, as well as those who live in previously identified outdoor areas where people are known to sleep. Similar measures, as in the 2000 and 2010 censuses, have proven inadequate in the past, however. For example, this method of counting fails to

count those living in abandoned buildings. The COVID-19 pandemic has further hindered these plans by the Census Bureau, as they have been forced to delay the in-person questioning at the sites measured. The failures of the past prove the need for more innovative ways to accurately count the homeless now.

References:

<https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/factsheets/2020/dec/census-counts-homeless.pdf>

<https://nlihc.org/resource/importance-2020-census-people-experiencing-homelessness>

https://nationalhomeless.org/publications/DownfortheCount_CensusReport.pdf