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# A New Canadian Pastime? Counting Homeless People

*Addressing and preventing homelessness is a political problem,  
not a statistical or definitional problem.*

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How many homeless people are there? In Toronto? In Canada? Who knows? No one knows. For some, it seems, trying to count them is more important than taking action.

There is agreement on two observations: the number is very large (measured in the many thousands, not the dozens or hundreds), and the number is increasing.

In Toronto we know the exact number of people who use emergency shelters on any night. About 4,500 people now compared to about 1,000 in the early 1980s. We do not know how many other people are houseless on a given night. Nor do we know how many people in a given year have been homeless.

If we had precise numbers, would 'we' – all of us in Canada who are fortunate enough to be adequately housed – then take action?



The National Post is now wondering how many homeless people there are. In a Christmas gift to Canada's unhoused people a 'news' article notes "it's difficult to gauge how bad the problem actually is." ("Trying to make homelessness add up: Every group in town seems to have a different number and a different definition of the problem," National Post, December 23, 2000.) This, of course, implies it may not be a very bad problem after all. (As President Clinton might say, it all depends on how you define 'bad.')

Why should the National Post – or any of us – be worried about better statistics, when there are certainly thousands? Why not at least start by resettling a few hundred into adequate, affordable housing rather than invest time and energy in counting? If Conrad Black and others like him knew the exact number would they then join in the movement to decrease and eventually eliminate homelessness in Canada? Not very likely.

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Discussions of the number of unhoused people usually mix two very different questions: How many unhoused people are there right now (that is, on a given day or night). And, how many people have been unhoused over a given period-of-time (that is, how many people are affected by the problem). The first is called a 'point prevalence' measure (a point-in-time count) and the second is called a 'period prevalence' measure.

Period prevalence is a measure of the cumulative impact of the extent to which a given condition affects the total population of an area. It is helpful in developing preventative programs. Point prevalence counts, in contrast, have very little practical or policy relevance.

The rationale for research on determining the extent of a particular problem is to provide the public and policy makers some knowledge so as to define the appropriate magnitude of the intervention. In the case of homelessness, we already know enough about the magnitude of the problem. It is huge compared to the current magnitude of federal and provincial efforts to address the problem.

Point-in-time counts of the unhoused in a community focus on *individuals* affected by the problem, rather than the problem itself. The point-in-time count does not distinguish between those who are only unhoused for that particular night, those who are periodically unhoused (slipping back and forth), and those who are long-term houseless. All require housing but each group has somewhat different needs based on their very different experiences. Point-in-time counts also assume one homogeneous homeless population.

In addition to confusing these two very different questions about prevalence, the National Post article then slips from this statistical question to the alleged problem of *defining* the problem itself. "But another problem is that "homeless" and "homelessness" do not have exact definitions" we are told. Another National Post article on the same day quotes Ontario's housing minister as saying the following about homelessness: "This is kind of the Rubik's Cube of public policy," said Mr. Clement. "Just when you think you've got one face of it sorted out, there's five other sides that you've got to work on."

For those who want to counsel and justify inaction, nothing can top the problem of defining homelessness. Homelessness is an awkward term serving as a catchall for a contemporary form of severe destitution. It involves socio-economic arrangements that exist quite apart from those troubled by them. It is a term applied to different social, economic, and political realities, as well as realities in the lives of the people affected.

For policy and program purposes it should be easy enough to define. It is the absence of a secure, adequate and affordable place to live.

If Mr Clement, for example, was to be 'homeless' tonight he would have no problem defining the precise situation he was in nor would he have any problem defining what it was that he required to end his 'homelessness.' For some, the "problem of defining the problem" serves as a convenient and self-serving "Rubik's Cube." For them, until we can precisely define the problem and very carefully measure it, it is simply irrational and irresponsible to try to do something about it.

We already know that it is impossible to count a mobile population that lacks a permanent address. All our statistics about people and their households start with their address – their

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fixed location. Housed people may decide to move from one fixed location to another, but they always have an address. Unhoused people do not.

We also know that definitions do matter. The way a problem is defined tells us not only where to look for what we seek but also how to recognize it when we find it.

The best advice on defining “homelessness” for research and policy purposes has been proposed by a researcher at the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (“Homelessness: A proposal for a Global Definition and Classification,” by Sabine Springer, Habitat International, Vol. 24, 2000, pp. 475-484.

As Springer notes, homelessness is a term burdened with many possible meanings. The U.N., in its data collection and research efforts, will start using the term “houselessness.” How do you collect data on ‘home’-lessness? Houselessness, in contrast, is a much clearer, straightforward term. Whatever other problems some people in society may have, some of which are often included under the term ‘homelessness,’ the term houselessness presents no such confusion. It refers to the one crucial factor all homeless people have in common. While homelessness is not just a housing problem, it is always a housing problem.

Houseless people fall into three very clear categories: the ‘absolute’ houseless, the ‘concealed’ houseless and those who are ‘at risk’ of houselessness. In addition, there are many more ‘inadequately housed’ people, some of whom are at imminent risk of houselessness.

**Absolute Houselessness.** Houseless persons are defined as people sleeping rough or using public or private shelters.

“People sleeping rough, which means in the street, in public places or in any other place not meant for human habitation are those forming the core population of the “homeless”. Those sleeping in shelters provided by welfare or other institutions will be considered as a part of this population. Persons or households living under these circumstances will furthermore be defined as “houseless”.”

**Concealed houselessness.** People who are houseless but temporarily housed with friends or family is another category, referred to as “concealed houselessness.”

“Under this category fall all people living with family members or friends because they cannot afford any shelter for themselves. Without this privately offered housing opportunity they would be living in the street or be sheltered by an institution of the welfare system. This phenomenon is extremely difficult to enumerate.”

**At Risk of Houselessness.** In addition to absolute and concealed houselessness, some people are at grave risk of losing their housing and can be categorized as people “at risk of houselessness.”

“Another group living under the threat of “houselessness” are those facing the risk of losing their shelter either by eviction or the expiry of the lease, with no other possibility of shelter in view. Prisoners or people living in other institutions facing their release and having no place to go to are considered as part of this population.”

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**The Inadequately Housed.** Not all people who have their own place to live are adequately housed. People have the human right to adequate housing. All societies have the obligation to make progress on the adequate housing of all people. Being inadequately housed, therefore, is not the same as being houseless, but it can lead to being at risk of houselessness.

“Before becoming houseless many people have been living in “substandard housing” situations. Their way out of houselessness is also likely to pass by this sort of housing unit. Households with a feeble and perhaps insecure income are likely to live in substandard housing units and might also experience houselessness because of economic difficulties. Their situation is somehow comparable with those without shelter, as they are all deprived of the human right of a housing situation without health hazards, allowing the full development of the individuals’ capacities. Therefore, the population living in substandard houses should be included in the study of houselessness as the population which feeds mostly the group of houseless, but which is also likely to receive them when they attempt to escape the situation.”

What does all this mean for ‘counting the homeless’? It can help those who attempt such a count to be much clearer about what they are trying to count (that is, one or more of the specific categories – absolute, concealed, or at risk). Other than that, not much.

We need to concede that all attempts at counting the houseless are doomed to failure (insurmountable methodological flaws). There are too many who do not want to be counted, too many places where the houseless can find a place to stay for a night, no method at all for counting those in the ‘concealed houseless’ category, and attempts to count are never provided enough resources to produce a somewhat defensible number.

Researchers also know from experience that a primary obstacle to counting unhoused people is that multiple purposes exist for embarking on the estimation task and there are many constituencies clamouring for different kinds of information (inclusions and exclusions from the count). Thus, the intended use of and the impetus for asking ‘how many’ plays a role in framing the parameters for a particular study. In the end, confusion and charges of bias are the inevitable result. The numbers produced in any ‘point-in-time’ count are estimates that were either already known (and thus held in suspect by some), or numbers that cannot possibly be true (and thus held in suspect by others).

Even if we take the time and resources to produce a somewhat defensible estimate we remain stuck with a final question: so what? What difference will such a point-in-time count make? Who will do what with the number? How many houseless people will be better off as a result?

Those who are currently unhoused need to be adequately, affordably and securely rehoused as quickly as possible. Those who are at risk of becoming houseless need measures that will prevent that outcome. We already know more than enough about the nature and magnitude of the problem to embark on rehousing and prevention programs. Addressing ‘homelessness’ is a political problem, not a statistical or definitional problem.

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