

# Bringing Lethbridge Home



## Lethbridge Homeless Census 2008

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# Executive Summary

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The 2008 Homeless Census was conducted on October 9, 2008. The purpose of the Census is to provide comparative data to previous years Homeless Censuses, to understand possible service gaps, and provide current information for planning and monitoring the outcomes of homeless initiatives.

Although this is the 5th annual Homeless Census, this report provides the first opportunity to conduct a comparative analysis over a four year period. Minor revisions have been made to the methodology to improve the quality of the data. The addition of an interview to a sample of guests at the Shelter helped us determine where the guests lived previously (what community/location they lived in) and what has brought them to Lethbridge. These revisions are not significant to affect the ability to conduct this analysis but are meant only to improve the quality of data we receive.

## **Key Findings:**

On the evening of October 9, 2008, 72 people were counted as homeless in the Street Census. Agencies that participated in the Census included emergency shelters and transition homes who reported serving a combined total of 204 homeless individuals. This resulted in the combined total of 276 individuals reported living 'homeless' identified by the Street and Agency Census. 24 children, were also enumerated as homeless and 5 youth under the age of 18 were enumerated at Wood's Homes, the Emergency Youth Shelter.

Homeless Census (2004, 2005, 2006, and 2007) research used in the analysis of the data collected, hypothesized that 80% of the homeless population are not visible, and therefore not accessible to the Census enumerators (Raising the Roofs, 2004). Additional research indicates up to half as many of the homeless population is hidden and cannot be specifically counted (Crisis, 2008). While many bodies of literature indicate the extent of the hidden homeless, one theme remains consistent: the actual number of homeless is significantly higher than that enumerated in a Census of this type and this population is very difficult to enumerate.

The Census included a question pertaining to an individual's ability to secure housing. The data collected revealed 15% of respondents cited their inability to pay rent on a continuous basis as their main reason for not securing a permanent, affordable residence. 29% respondents stated the lack of rental availability as a major barrier. It is also important to note that some respondents also cited racism as a barrier to obtain housing.

Supporting evidence for these findings was gained by examining the ratio of people on waiting lists compared to the number of units available for the subsidized housing agencies (Lethbridge Housing Authority (LHA) and Treaty 7 (Urban Indian Housing Authority). The Lethbridge Housing Authority (LHA) currently has 737 households on the waiting list, and provides subsidies and rent supplements to 1219 households. LHA provides subsidies to parents with dependant children, seniors, and individuals in need of subsidized housing (Personal communication, October 15, 2008). Treaty 7 Urban Indian Housing Authority has a wait list of 98 complete applicants (Personal communication, Jackie Blackwater, October 16, 2008).

# Introduction

The issue of homelessness is one that cannot be ignored in Lethbridge. Homeless Censuses conducted over the past four years show an ever increasing population of people in Lethbridge who are living in places that are not permanent, healthy and/or sustainable or meant for human habitation. The complexity of this issue requires a comprehensive approach to ‘end homelessness’. This systematic and collaborative approach needs to focus, not only on charitable volunteerism, but also on support and contributions from every facet of society, all levels of government, citizens, as well as the public and private sectors.

The 2008 Homeless Census is a tool used to assist Social Housing in Action (SHIA) in to further implement Bringing Lethbridge Home, a Strategic Plan to ‘end homelessness’ in Lethbridge. The study provides a “snapshot in time” of the homeless situation in Lethbridge. In this effort, SHIA can continue to use a comprehensive approach to eliminating, not managing, homelessness in our community, as outlined in “Bringing Lethbridge Home” (2007).

“Bringing Lethbridge Home” outlines the strategy SHIA and the City of Lethbridge are undertaking to end homelessness in Lethbridge. SHIA is charged with the duty of implementing this plan, and in response to this duty, has developed and implemented a Housing First Philosophy to create a better understand the process involved in ending homelessness:

Housing First is an approach to ending homelessness that centers on providing homeless people with housing quickly and then providing services as needed. What differentiates a Housing First approach from traditional emergency shelter or transitional housing approaches is that it is “housing-based,” with an immediate and primary focus on helping individuals and families quickly access and sustain permanent housing. This approach has the benefit of being consistent with what most people experiencing homelessness want and seek help to achieve. Housing First programs share critical elements:

- There is a focus on helping individuals and families access and sustain permanent rental housing as quickly as possible and the housing is not time-limited;
- A variety of services are delivered primarily following a housing placement to promote housing stability and individual well-being;
- Such services are time-limited or long-term depending upon individual need; and
- Housing is not contingent on compliance with services. Instead, participants must comply with a standard lease agreement and are provided with the services and supports that are necessary to help them do so successfully.

# Purpose

The 5th annual Homeless Census builds on the processes and recommendations acquired from previous Homeless Census. It follows the general format of the Lethbridge Homeless Count (Fenton, 2004), (Gail, 2005), the Lethbridge Homeless Census 2006/2007 (Buchanan, 2006) and the 'Biennial Count of Homeless Persons in Calgary' (Stroick, 2004). Although similar to previous counts, revisions have been made to gather more comprehensive information including the locations of where people are 'sleeping rough' and the reasons people are not able to access safe, affordable and sustainable housing.

Using the information gained from the 2007 Homeless Census, the SHIA Research and Evaluation Committee (a sub-committee of SHIA) identified a need to further determine the extent of homelessness in Lethbridge. The foundation of our research is built from the results of the 2005, 2006, and 2007 Censuses and provides data that can be comparatively analyzed in relation to the data from the recent 2008 Census.

The Homeless Census 2008 was conducted on October 9th, between the hours of 7 p.m. and 9 p.m.. The purpose is to provide a 'snapshot' in time to determine the extent of homelessness in Lethbridge. The Census is undertaken, not only to document the existence of this issue, but also to create community awareness and provide necessary data to plan and develop policy for future community responses to the homeless situation in Lethbridge.

The focus of the Census is to acquire quantitative data from individuals interviewed on the street as well as those accessing agency supports to aid in their current situation. Qualitative observations on demographic characteristics, such as gender, age, ethnicity and familial presence, of the people interviewed were also incorporated into the study. The people interviewed were also asked to comment on the reasons they believe have held them back from obtaining secure, affordable and sustainable housing, as well as their feelings on the accessibility of subsidized housing in Lethbridge. The Lethbridge Housing Authority and Treaty 7 Urban Indian Housing Authority were contacted to discuss the number of subsidized housing units in Lethbridge, as well as the number of individuals currently on wait lists for these units. Local churches and religious organizations known to serve the homeless population were also asked to participate in the Census.



# Quick Facts and Conclusions

Below is a list of facts that were exposed the evening of the 2008 Homeless Census:

- Results show a 60% increase in homelessness from 2007
- 72 people were street homeless; 43% were intending to sleep outside the night of the census
- 204 were homeless in emergency shelters
- 5 children under the age of 18 were in the Emergency Youth Shelter
- 29 children and 24 families were homeless
- Evidence of 61 sites where people "Sleeping Rough"
- 30% increase of people "Sleeping Rough"
- 43% of the homeless are **not** from lethbridge or local reservations
- 78% of the street homeless were reported to be male and 22% female
- 61.5% were between the ages of 31 and 59
- Over 40% of the homeless stated that housing and employment, family, and friends have encouraged them to come to Lethbridge
- Homelessness is not exclusive to Aboriginal people. 55% are **not** a visible minority





## Definitions

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The definitions used in the 2008 Homeless Census are:

- **Homeless** - An individual who is:
  - living on the street; staying in places not meant for human habitation;
  - moving continuously among temporary housing arrangements provided by strangers, friends, or family; staying overnight in temporary shelters, or;
  - unable to stay at their permanent address on the night of the Census
- **Ability to secure affordable housing** – An individual who is unable to find affordable housing that is within their means, and remains sustainable and secure.
- **Hidden Homeless** – A formula used in the Raising the Roof (2004) campaign indicates that an estimated 80% of the homeless population are not visible and are considered ‘hidden’. These are the people who are: couch surfing, staying in multiple family homes, staying with friends/family, or cannot be otherwise be enumerated the night of the census
- **Emergency Shelters** – Provide temporary accommodation for homeless individuals and families who would otherwise sleep in the streets. The shelters generally include supports such as food clothing and support services. Transition housing agencies, are included in this definition as people accessing this type of housing would be fundamentally homeless, if not for these services.

These definitions have been used with the intent in creating a more inclusive term for “Homelessness”. Methodological constraints require specification around the types of agencies that provide services to this population. The definition of homeless has also been created in an attempt to incorporate the 2004 Homeless Count (Fenton, 2004), the First Report Card on Homelessness in Ottawa (Evaluation Working Group, 2005), the Biennial Count of Homeless Persons in Calgary (Stroick, 2004), and those definitions

# Census Methodology

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The Homeless Census was conducted on October 9th, 2008 between the hours of 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. On the evening of the Census, the temperature was between 5 and 7 degrees Celsius. This date was chosen in order to maintain consistency and to provide an accurate comparison with the previous year's censuses conducted on: October 6, 2005, October 12, 2006, and October 11, 2007.

The Lethbridge Homeless Census was modeled after the Calgary Biennial Homeless Count and further refined to meet local needs and conditions. A dual focus including a 'Street Census' and 'Agency Census' was employed. Engaging these two areas concurrently optimizes the use of available resources while decreasing the likelihood of double counting.

The main purpose of the Census is to determine how many individuals in the Lethbridge are currently living without a home in shelters, on the streets, in the coulees, parks, vehicles etc. In addition to actual numerical data, this study attempts to determine reasons that may undermine an individual's ability to obtain secure affordable housing.

The following are 3 areas in the methodology are notable:

1. In order to minimize potential risk and to ensure volunteer safety, enumerators did not investigate the coulees the evening of the census. This was due to the low visibility and potential risk of injuries due to falls and rugged terrain etc.
2. Revised Data Collection Sheets (Appendix A and B) were used by enumerators observing respondents ages. This Revised Data Collection Sheets defined four age categories: 18 and under, 19-30, 31-59 and 60+.
3. Demographic information included an observation component regarding visible minorities.

In 2008, the Census further expanded to include a specific survey designed for the Lethbridge Shelter and Resource Center. Volunteers that enumerated the guests at the shelter were asked to record information pertaining to:

1. Where the clients moved from (communities, provinces etc.) , and;
2. What brought them to Lethbridge (family, work, opportunities etc.)

The following sections describe the methodologies for both the Street and Agency Censuses used in the 2008 Homeless Census.

# Street Census

Areas most frequented by the homeless were the primary targets for the enumeration. Although these areas were established from previous Censuses, the services of the Lethbridge Regional Police Service, Emergency Medical Services, the Mobile Urban Street Team (MUST), the Lethbridge Emergency Shelter and the City of Lethbridge Parks Department were accessed to confirm existing areas and determine any new key areas. These individuals' expertise and familiarity with the homeless population assisted in renewing and adding to the areas of focus. These grid areas were identified and assigned to teams (Appendix G).

Teams were designed to include four members, two males and two females. Each team was assigned based on volunteer turnout and led by an experienced Team Leader. The teams were instructed to cover their assigned areas within a two-hour period. Teams were assigned one clipboard and instructed to follow a set protocol when interviewing the individuals they encountered, which included a few brief questions and observations (Appendix E).

The Team Leaders were provided with a map of their focus area, screening questions, Data Collection Sheets, emergency contact numbers, and contact information for the Lethbridge Shelter & Resource Centre, YWCA Harbour House, the Mobile Urban Street Team (MUST) and the Youth Emergency Shelter (Woods Homes). Granola bars were provided as a thank you to the respondents.

For safety, the teams were instructed to stay together at all times and were provided with flashlights, flashing beacons with whistles, and emergency contact numbers. Each team was required to report in every 30 minutes to a Census Coordinator by use of the team cell phone.

All volunteers participated in a mandatory orientation prior to conducting the census (Appendix D). The orientation provided instructions on conducting the census and a Lethbridge Regional Police Officer educated volunteers on safety precautions. As part of the planning, detailed Hazard Assessment was presented to, and approved by, the City of Lethbridge Risk Management Team. Every volunteer was required to provide personal contact information and to sign an Oath of Confidentiality (Appendix C). The volunteer's contact information was recorded to provide Workers Compensation Coverage. Volunteers were required to sign in, indicating the time they arrived, and sign out, indicating the time they returned from conducting the census. Volunteers were also given the opportunity to provide feedback on their experience by completing a Volunteer Evaluation Form.



# Agency Census

The 2008 Homeless Census provided participating agencies with instructions and Data Collection Sheets for conducting the Census with clients/guests the night of October 9th, 2008.

At a meeting with the participating agencies, the Census Coordinator provided agencies with written instructions for conducting the Census including definitions and directives on completing the Data Collection Sheets (Appendix A). The instructions were then explained and any questions pertaining to the data collection were answered. Agencies not in attendance were contacted and the information was forwarded to them. The meeting provided an opportunity to discuss and elaborate upon the purpose and roles of the census, and to receive constructive input on how to improve the census process from an agency perspective.

The agencies were instructed to interview their clients on the evening of October 9th and were provided with the contact information for the Census Coordinator in the event of any further inquiries or clarification requirements.

As in the 2006 and 2007 Homeless Census, individuals who received transitional housing services were included in this portion of the census.



# 2008 Census Results and Comparative Analysis

The data collected from the 2008 Homeless Census shows a significant increase in the number of people identified as “Homeless” in our community. A total of 276 people were identified as “Homeless”, a 60% increase from 2007.

As in previous years, a team of volunteers assisted the Lethbridge Shelter & Resource Centre with the Agency Census. The Shelter staff reported that 115 people stayed at the Shelter on the evening of October 9th. 36 individuals were enumerated by the volunteers at the Shelter; 24 people enumerated in the Street Census informed volunteers that they too would be staying at the Shelter on the evening of the 9th. Based on this information, we can assume that the remaining clients who stayed at the Shelter that evening could have been enumerated by volunteers at the Shelter if they had stayed at the Shelter longer than time for the census allowed. There were 204 people enumerated by the agencies, a 60% increase from the 2007 census. Figure 1 indicates the increasing trends in homelessness over the past three years.

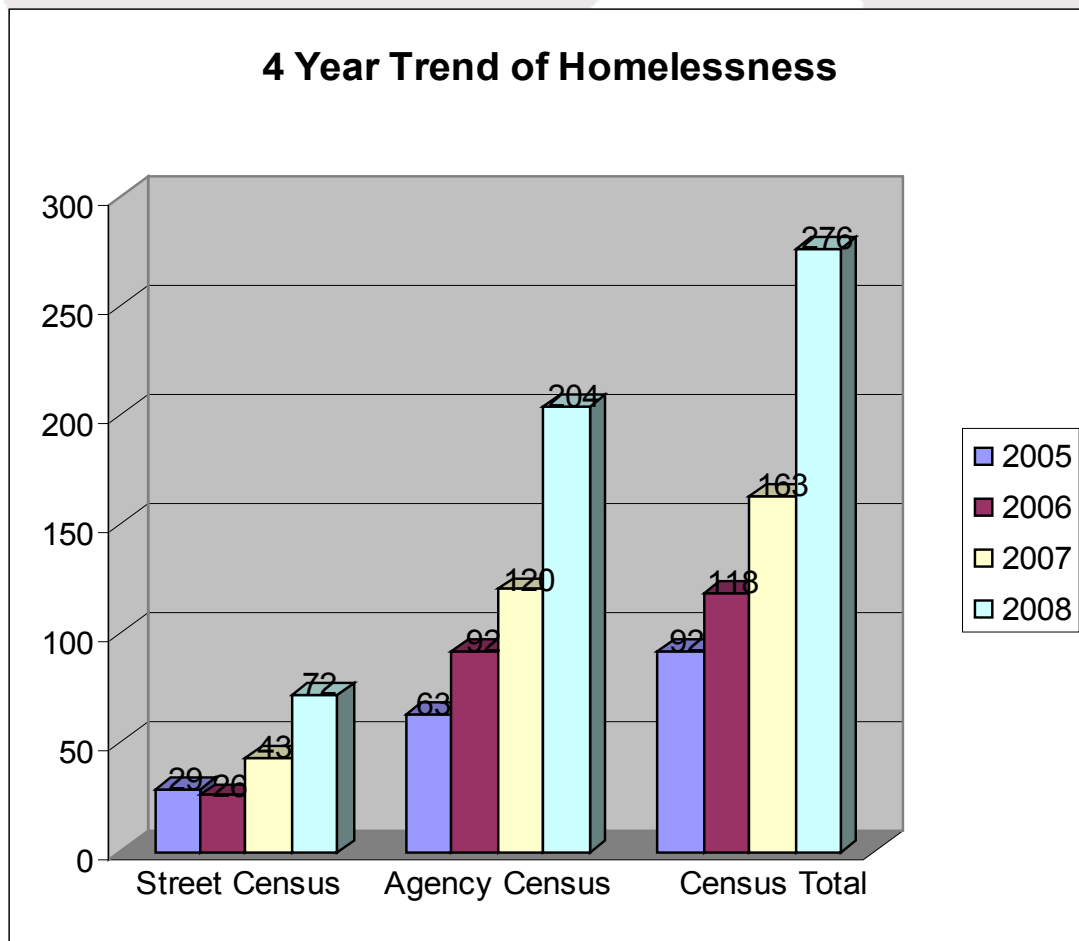
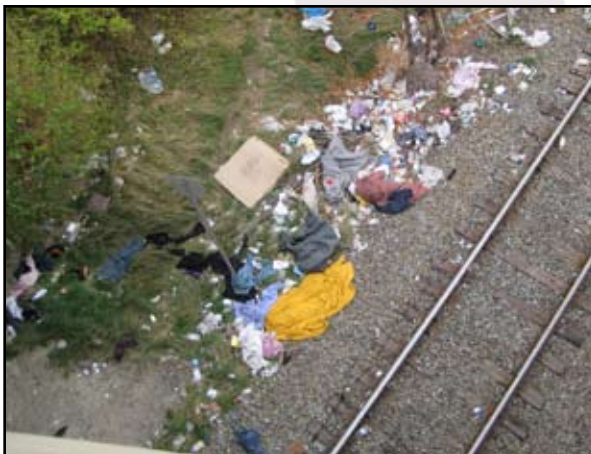
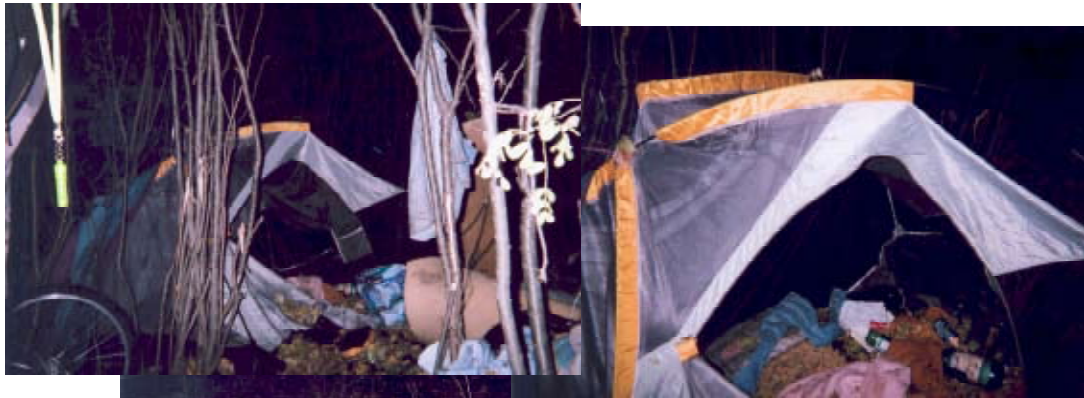


Figure 1

# Evidence of Sleeping Rough

Evidence of people “sleeping rough” increased from 43 sightings in 2007, to over 60 sites in 2008. 61 of the sites were identified by volunteers and a service provider informed us of additional sites located in the coulees, and along the railroad track. The images were captured by the Census Coordinator the day after the Census. Additional sites identified during the Census were captured on October 12th.

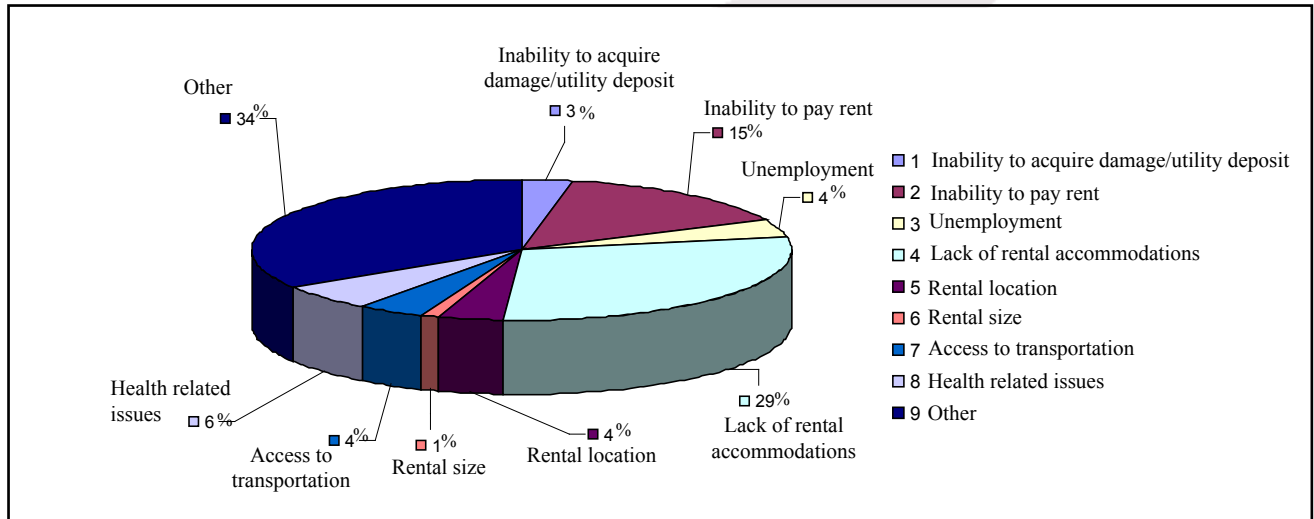




# Ability to Secure Affordable Housing

Each of the 276 respondents interviewed from either the Street or Agency were identified as being unable to secure affordable housing.

Respondents were asked for reasons they were experiencing housing barriers. The qualitative response was categorized and Figure 2 illustrates the range of responses. 15% of the respondents declared “their inability to pay rent” as the main barrier in obtaining permanent affordable housing. An additional 29% of respondents claimed that the lack of available rental units is the explanation for their inability to securing affordable housing.



**Figure 2**



# Demographics

The 2008 Homeless Census included volunteer observations on the demographic profile of individuals responding to the Census questionnaire. These observations included: gender, age, ethnicity and familial presence.

Figure 3 provides a four year comparison of respondent's ethnicity based on volunteer observations and inquiry over a four year period.

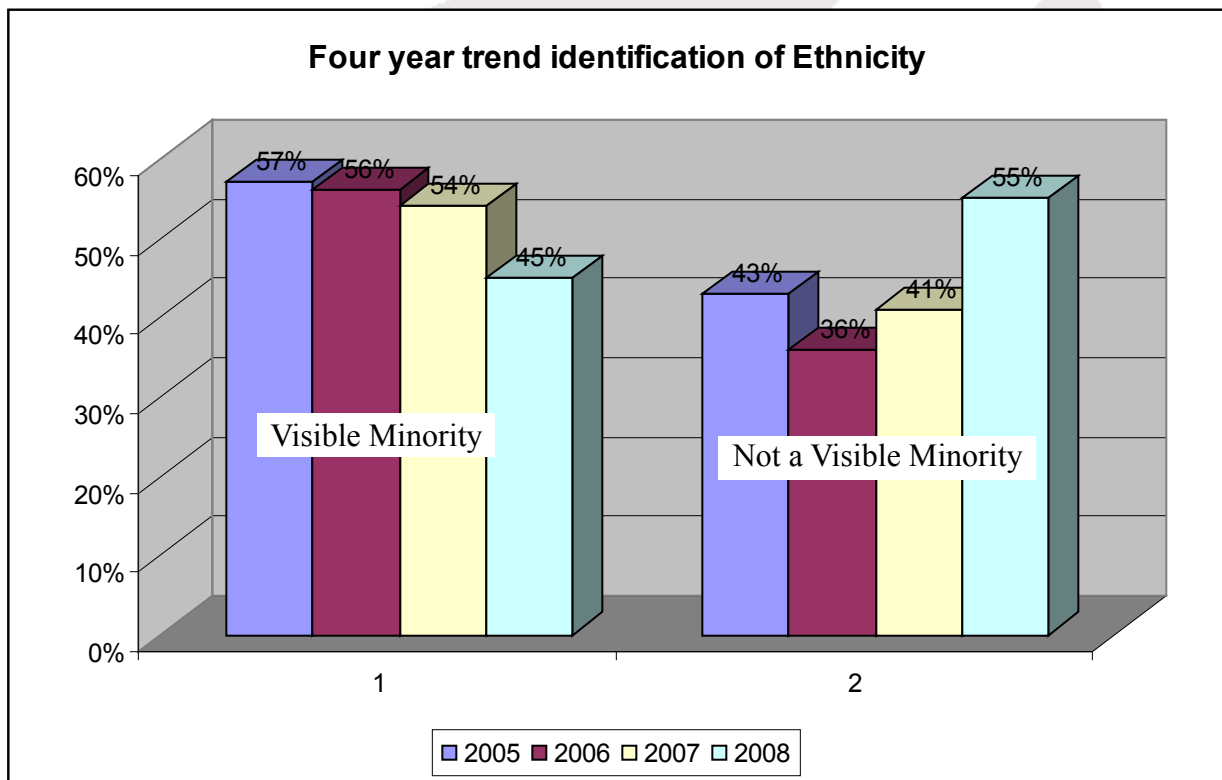


Figure 3

# Demographics Continued

Figure 4 illustrates the age distribution of the respondents from the 2007 Census. In the 2007 Homeless Census respondents were asked to identify their age group.

The 2008 Homeless Census presents the age category that best described respondents by means of volunteer **observation only**.

The purpose of age distribution is to obtain a 'picture' of the ages of the Lethbridge homeless population.

Due to the change in methodology from the 2007 and 2008 censuses, the results cannot be directly compared. However, interpretation of the results can provide an indication of trends.

Figure 5 illustrates the results of the observations from the 2008 Census.

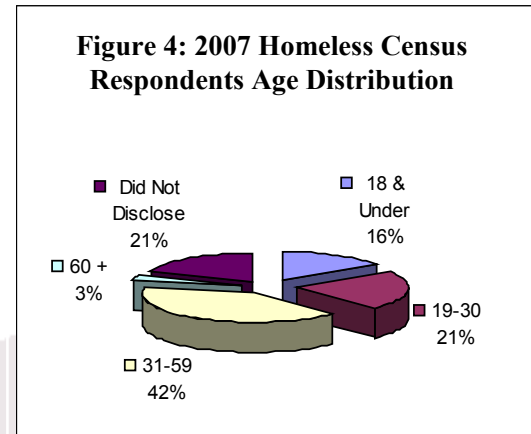


Figure 4

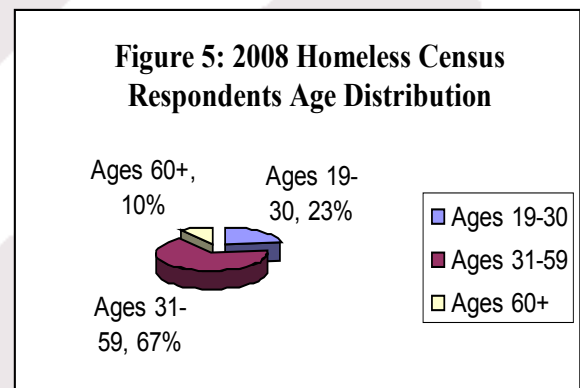
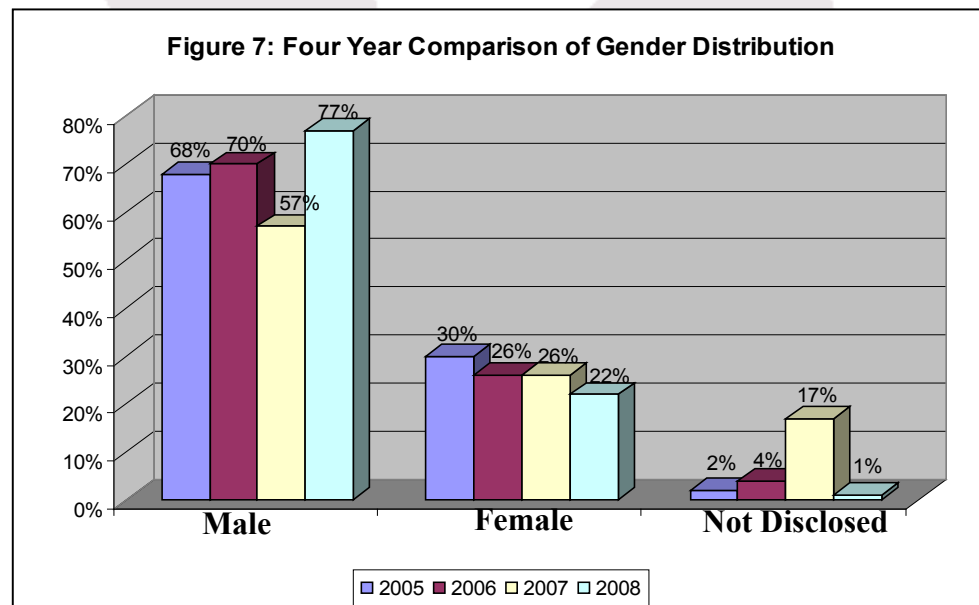


Figure 5

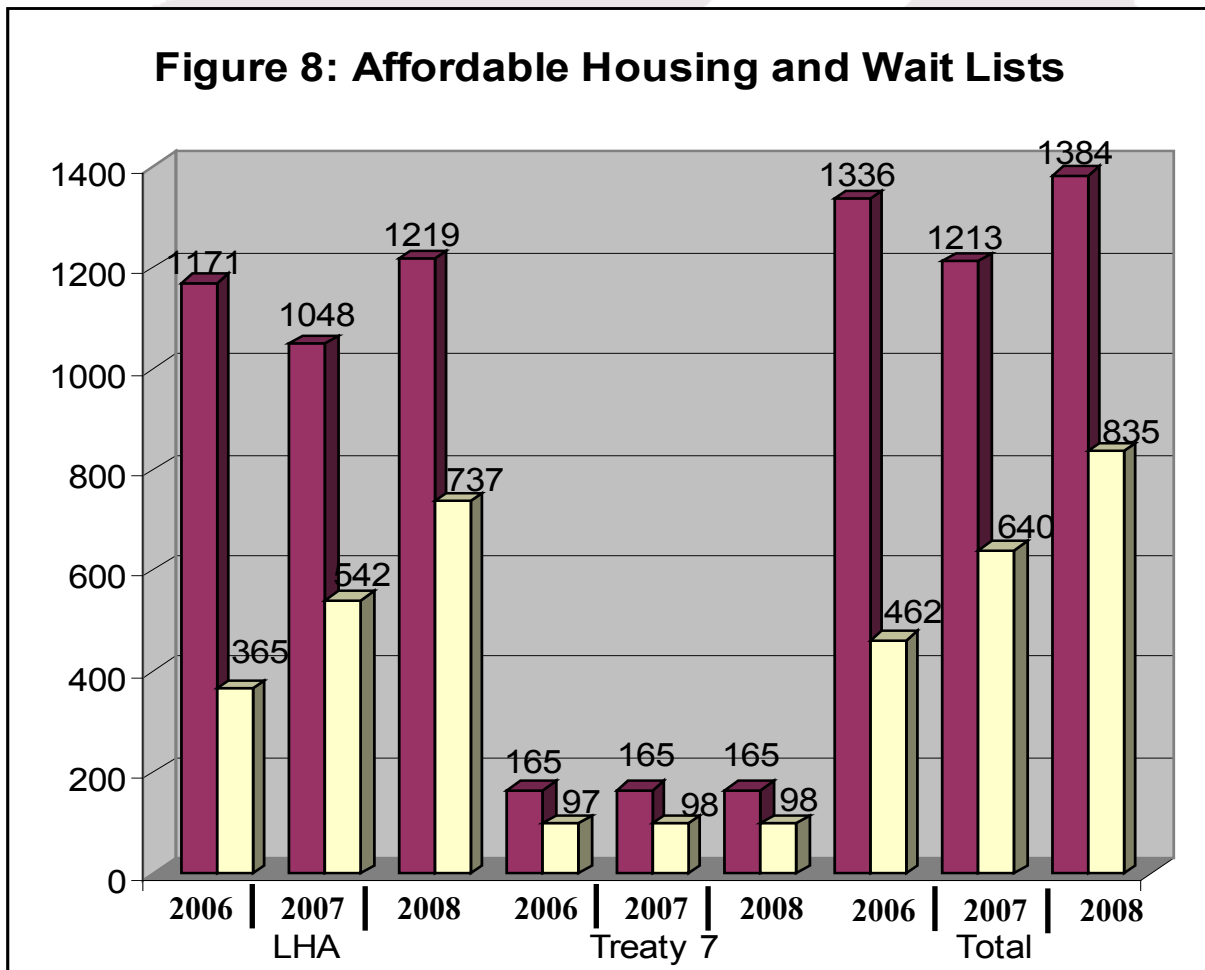
Enumerators, through observation, identified the gender of the respondents. Figure 8 compares the gender distributions from the 2005, 2006, 2007 and 2008 Homeless Censuses.



# Discussion

Lethbridge has an increasing homeless population. This is proven by the results of the 2008 Homeless Census. Due to the inherent nature of the Census, we are unable to identify every homeless person, and the hidden homeless, in every location, at the exact time the 2008 Homeless Census was conducted. However, results indicate that there is an increased population accessing the Emergency Shelters in Lethbridge and an increased homeless population on the streets. There is increased evidence where people are sleeping rough, as well as an increased use of agencies providing services to the homeless population.

Responses indicate a majority of the homeless population either can not afford to pay rent, or are unable to find a suitable, affordable place to live. Waiting lists for two housing agencies providing subsidized housing and rent supplements in Lethbridge, Treaty 7 Urban Indian Housing Authority and Lethbridge Housing Authority, indicate the severity of the issue. Though 1384 households are currently receiving assistance, 835 households are currently on waiting lists for subsidy services.



**Figure 8**

- Household Units Receiving Subsidized Housing and/or Rent Supplements
- Household Units on Waiting Lists for Subsidized Housing and/or Rent Supplements

## Discussion Continued

The 2008 Homeless Census provides “a snapshot in time” of the characteristics of the homeless population in the City of Lethbridge. In order to develop new services, programs and to monitor existing services and programs, an understanding of the client population, the impact of services and their continuing needs must be available. Demographic information for this study was gained through respondents age as well as enumerator observations of gender, familial make up and ethnicity. The data collected indicated a generalized pattern of the homeless population: 77% of respondents are male, 45% of respondents belong to a visible minority, and over 60% of respondents are between the ages of 31 and 59. There is a historical belief in Lethbridge that homelessness is an Aboriginal dominant issue, and people that belong to a ‘Visible Minority’ are definitely overrepresented. Responses indicate 55% of the respondents from the Agency Census are not a ‘Visible Minority’. This Census concludes that homelessness is not exclusive to the Aboriginal population of Lethbridge.

The 2008 Homeless Census revealed 21 families who were homeless on the evening of October 9, 2008. These families included 24 children. Woods’ Homes, the Emergency Youth Shelter, provided services for 5 youth the night of the census. One respondent indicated she was pregnant.

During the debriefing, Enumerators also indicated they encountered a group of individuals who disclosed the location of 10+ people sleeping rough in a tent village, just north of the Lethbridge Shelter and Resource Center. Volunteers were asked by these individuals to avoid visiting the location as it may not be safe for volunteers to enter that specific area.



# Limitations

The 2008 Lethbridge Homeless Census provides valuable data concerning the marginalized homeless population. It provides a “temperature gauge” for the “climate” of homelessness in our community. Due to variables and limitations of the data collected, this enumerations validity has limitations in its applicability to the population of people experiencing homelessness in our community.

The actual collection of Census data on October 9, 2008 was subject to a variables that could have affected the outcome. These could include, but are not limited to:

- Weather conditions
- The date reflecting an irregularity in income for the homeless population of Lethbridge, resulting in “invisible homelessness”
- Individual being intimidated by the Street enumerators
- Perceived or actual threat to volunteer enumerators preventing them from approaching potential respondents
- Lack of support from agencies that provide services to the targeted population
- Inability to enumerate in Lethbridge at the same point in time, both outside and indoors
- Possibility of visual and/or spatial restriction causing people to be missed in a specific location
- Lack of ability to enumerate the hidden homeless

This list is not comprehensive, nor does it mean the listed limitations will necessarily occur. Nevertheless, they must be noted to understand the variables and limitations of the collected data.

It is important that the use of the information obtained from this study be limited in its scope, as the data obtained might not accurately define the homeless population in Lethbridge. The Census provides a generalized description of the visible population, and highlights the existence of homelessness in our community.



# Volunteer Evaluation Results and Recommendations

Immediately following the 2008 Homeless Census, volunteer Street Enumerators were asked to complete an evaluation on their perceptions of the Census process and its organization (Appendix F). Evaluations were based on a scale of 1-5, with 1 indicating “Strongly Disagree” and 5 indicating “Strongly Agree”. Figure 9 indicates that the average score of the 68 volunteer evaluations we received was between 4 and 5.

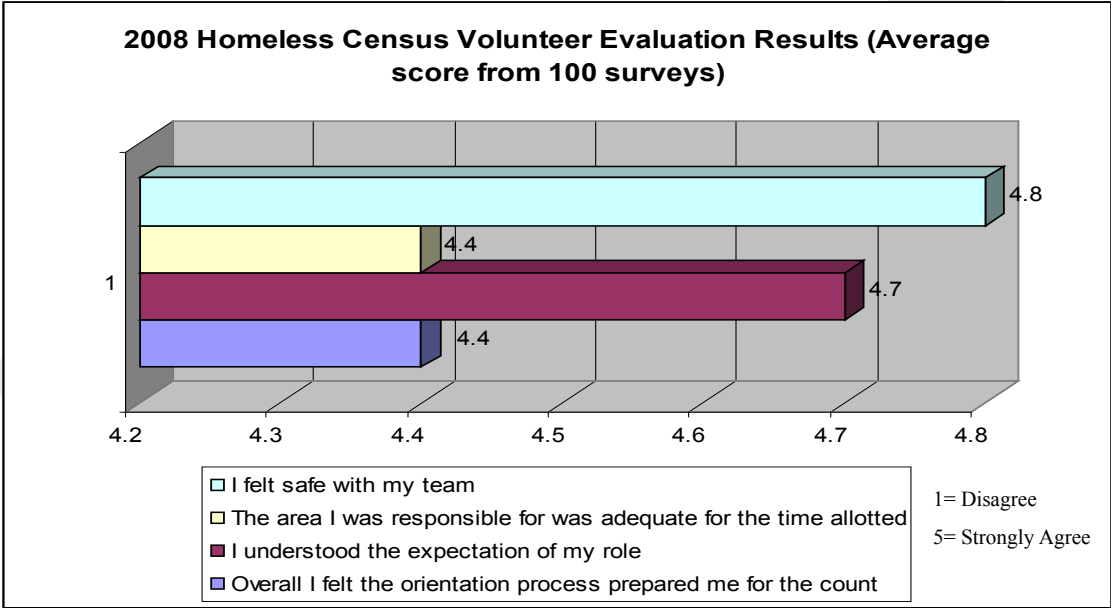


Figure 9

The three most frequent recommendations made by the volunteers were:

- Enumerate later in the evening, or earlier in the year.
- Provide more granola bars, or more than just granola bars, to respondents.
- More experienced Team Leaders

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# Appendix C: Oath of Confidentiality



CITY OF  
*Lethbridge*

As a condition of my engagement as a volunteer I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to maintain confidentiality of all information of a personal, financial, or technical nature disclosed to, or ascertained by me in the performance of my engagement, including any information, policy or knowledge generated as a function of the homeless census conducted on behalf of the City of Lethbridge.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Witness

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

# Appendix D: 2008 Homeless Census Orientation Agenda

## **Team Leader Orientation: 5:00 – 5:30 p.m.**

- Assign grids (hand out clip boards)
- Review Script
- Cell phones
- Hand out Grab bags (granola bars, getting connected booklets)
- Answer any questions

## **Volunteer Registration & Meal: 5:30-6:15 p.m.**

- Sign In
- Sign Oath
- Provide Volunteers with flashing lanyards/name tags

## **Welcome & Orientation: Go to Council Chambers 6:15 – 6:45 p.m.**

- Diane Randell (Introduction of Census and Dr. Bowie)
- Dr. Gary Bowie (Thank volunteers)
- (Safety orientation – Sgt. Leon Borbandy)
- Colin White
  
- o Questionnaire/data collection sheet explanation
- o Emergency numbers and rover explanation/safety concerns
- o Respect and rights for the homeless AND volunteers
- o Check in every ½ hour
- o Announce teams and designated meeting areas

## **Meet with Team Leaders: 6:45- 7:00 p.m.**

- Confirm team contact number with registration
- Decide who's driving

## **Conduct Homeless Census 7:00-9:00 p.m.**

# Appendix E: 2008 Homeless Census Questionnaire

## PROCEDURE

6. Introduce yourself as a Volunteer for Social Housing in Action. Explain that you are doing a count for people who don't have a place to sleep tonight and ask permission to talk with them. Inform them that it will take only a minute and that they have the right to quit at any time.

7. Ask... **“Have you already been counted tonight?”**

8. If “yes”, thank them and move on to the next person.

### **DO NOT RECORD ANY INFORMATION**

9. Ask... **“Where you will sleep tonight?”** (Use following options as prompts)

- Home
- Shelter
- Other agency
- Relatives or family
- Friend/Acquaintance
- Hospital
- Vehicle
- Park/coulees
- Street/doorway
- Other

## **RECORD SLEEPING PLACE BY CHECKING CORRESPONDING BOX**

If the answer is at “home” record response, thank them, and move on. Do not continue with the rest of the questionnaire.

10. Ask them... **“What has kept you from finding a place to live?”** (Use following options as prompts)

- Ability to acquire damage/utility deposit
- Ability to pay rent
- Employment
- Social programs wait list (LHA, Treaty 7, etc)
- Rental availability
- Rental location
- Rental size (# of bedrooms, etc)
- Access to transportation
- Health related issues
- Other

## **RECORD THE RESPONSE BY CHECKING THE CORRESPONDING BOX**

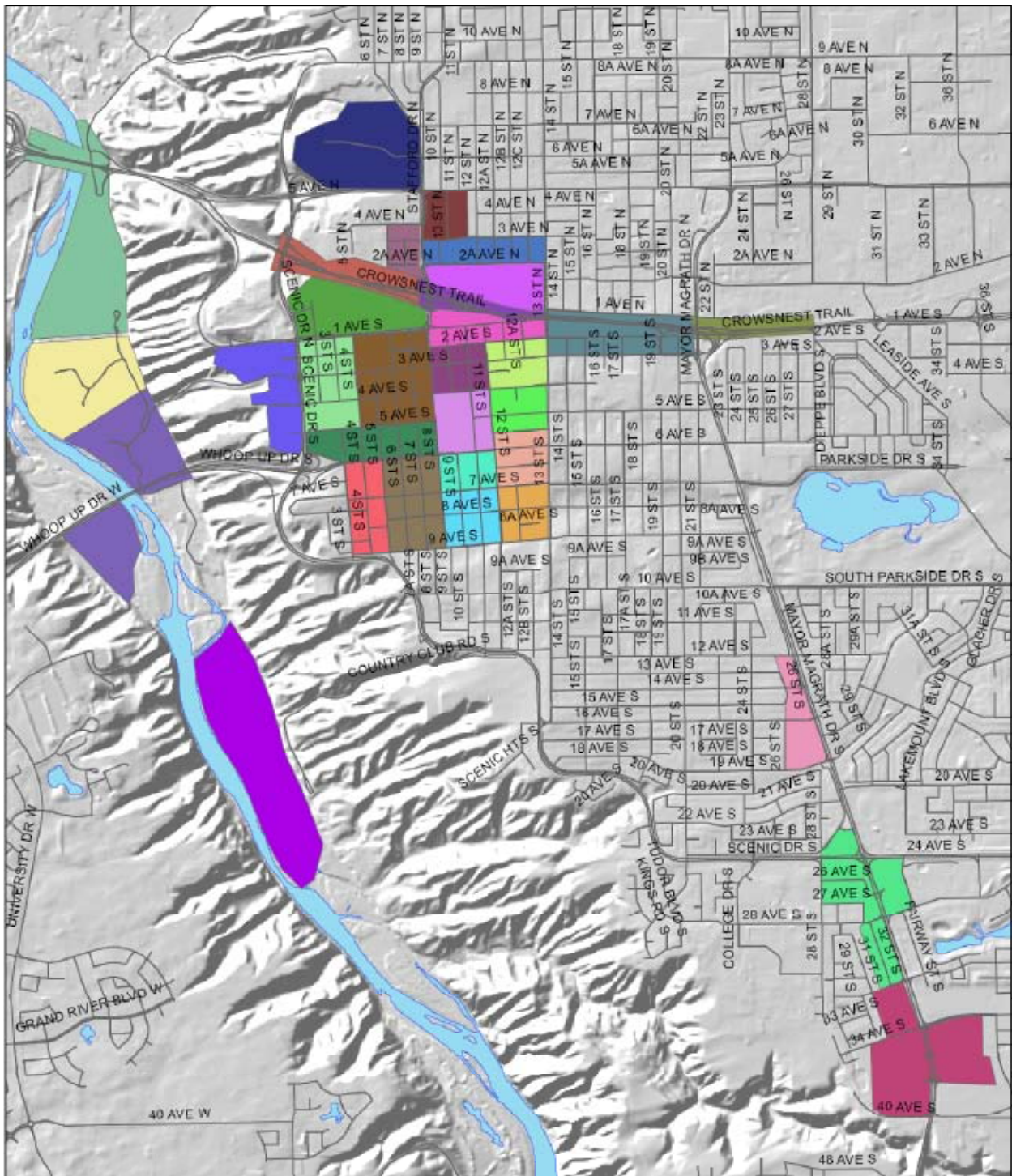
### **6. Other information (Record on Count Sheet)**

- Ask them which age range they fall into
  - 18 and under
  - 19-30
  - 31-59
  - 60 +
- Record how many families you encounter (**observation only**)
- Record how many children either “on their own” or in a family (**observation only**)
- Record the gender of the individual (**observation only**)

8. **Thank the person for their time, and present give-away.**



# Appendix G: Key Area Identification Map



 **2008 Homeless Census Zones** 