

The Biennial Count of Homeless Persons in Calgary: Frequently Asked Questions

WHAT IS THE *BIENNIAL COUNT OF HOMELESS PERSONS*?

The City of Calgary has conducted a census or 'count' of homeless persons every two years since 1992. This City of Calgary initiative provides information that is used for The City's ongoing research and planning activities, but has also been published as a recurrent report since 1996 for the benefit of homeless serving agencies and others.

HOW DOES THE CITY OF CALGARY DETERMINE WHO IS A *HOMELESS PERSON*?

The formal definition of *homelessness* that has been used for every census conducted by The City of Calgary since 1996¹ is:

Homeless persons are considered to be those who do not have a permanent residence to which they can return whenever they so choose.

This definition includes people who are living on the streets as well as those who are staying in emergency shelters or facilities offering longer term shelter and support for people who would otherwise be living on the streets.

HOW IS THE COUNT DONE?

How the count is conducted will be changing in 2008. From 1992 through 2006, the count included two components. The first was a *survey of facilities and service agencies*. Facilities include emergency shelters and transitional housing facilities (such as homeless shelters, women's shelters, and supportive mental health or addictions facilities), where shelter is provided for people who do not have a permanent residence of their own. Service agencies include all hospital emergency departments, police and prison services, emergency social services, and Calgary Transit (whose staff survey remote bus routes and LRT stations). The survey of facilities and service agencies will continue to be conducted the same way that it has been in the past so this component of the count will remain the same.

¹ This definition was formalized for the count undertaken for the first published report of the research findings. See City of Calgary, 1996: 2; 1998: 1; 2000: 2; 2002b: 2; 2004:3; and 2006: 4.

In 2008, the second component of the count will change. In previous years, a *street count* was conducted by teams of volunteers who canvassed specific geographic areas in the city where homeless people had been observed to reside. This included the downtown core and other commercial and residential areas, inner city parks, remote parks and river pathways, and areas frequented by sex trade workers. In recent years, as homelessness has increased in Calgary, the street count boundaries have also increased dramatically. Consultation with service providers in 2008 revealed that street homelessness is believed to have spread significantly in the past couple of years. Street homelessness is now evident in many parts of the city that are well beyond the bounds of where the street count would have typically been conducted.

The City of Calgary can no longer effectively conduct a street count because the extent of street homelessness has exceeded our ability to coordinate a point-in-time count that will adequately and safely locate and count the street homeless population. Because of this, the 2008 Count of Homeless Persons and subsequent counts will not include a street count. Instead, the extent of street homelessness will be estimated in two ways.

HOW WILL STREET HOMELESSNESS BE ESTIMATED?

The City of Calgary will estimate street count numbers using a probability model based on past count data and weather conditions. Our research has shown that the proportion of the homeless population counted on the streets in the areas where The City of Calgary has conducted a street count varies quite predictably according to the weather on the night of the count. A greater number of homeless people seek shelter when it rains or snows, regardless of temperature.

During dry weather counts, an average of 12.75% of the total number of homeless persons enumerated are counted on the streets. During wet weather counts (with rain or snow during or just before the evening count), an average of only 5.05% of the total number of homeless persons enumerated are counted on the streets. By using a probability model based on past count data and weather conditions on the day of the count, we hope to obtain a useful estimation of street homelessness in the Centre City, near river parks and pathways, and in other areas surveyed in the past. Statistical analysis is underway to refine the model to ensure that it is as accurate as possible (City of Calgary, 2008).

However, since we know that we will be underreporting the *total* number of people who are living on the streets in Calgary, a second method of estimating street homelessness will also be explored prior to the count in order to understand how street homelessness has changed over time. The City is examining historical bylaw data about reports related to homelessness (the number and location of reports), and exploring whether or not these data can be correlated to changes in the street homeless population during past counts. If we find there are sufficient data, we will report this information as well.

WHO IS EXCLUDED FROM THE COUNT?

Not every homeless person in Calgary can be counted (or included in a street count estimate) because not everyone who is homeless is visible. Since the 'hidden homeless' tend not to be counted, the actual number of homeless persons reported to be living in any community is always underestimated. The *Biennial Count of Homeless Persons in Calgary* does not have a means to identify and include persons who, on the night of the count, may be 'couch surfing' (i.e., staying with friends or family); sleeping in vehicles or abandoned buildings where they would not have been seen; camping in heavily wooded areas that are difficult to search; or living outside of the areas that would previously have been surveyed as part of a street count.

IF SOME PEOPLE ARE MISSED, WHY DO THE COUNT AT ALL?

Knowledge about homelessness in Calgary has grown substantially in recent years. The City of Calgary has contributed to this knowledge base by conducting a count of homeless persons every two years since 1992. The *Biennial Count of Homeless Persons* provides a snapshot of the visible homeless population in Calgary, its size, and some of its characteristics. Institutional data are also collected on the bed capacity and bed occupancy of the facilities that are surveyed and the number of persons who are refused shelter on the night of the count. The data collected enable us to see how this snapshot of the size and composition of the homeless population has changed over time and what it is likely to be in Calgary *on any given night*.

Similarly, we are also able to see which institutions or agencies have provided shelter to homeless people through the years and, in turn, appreciate how the response to homelessness in Calgary has evolved along with greater understanding of the issue. Currently, "Calgary has over 140 different non-profit agencies and government departments providing more than 2,000 programs and services to people experiencing homelessness" (CCEH, 2008: 8). The City works with the nine 'sectors' that collaborate with the Calgary Homeless Foundation,² which provide shelter to the homeless and participate in the count by completing facility enumeration forms.

² Eight sectors serving the homeless were first identified by the Calgary Homeless Foundation (2003: 29; 38-42) in *The Calgary Community Plan 2004-2008*. These sectors are known as Aboriginal, Absolutely Homeless (previously called Singles), Addictions, Families, Mental Health, Seniors and People with Disabilities (previously called Seniors), Women Fleeing Violence (previously called Family Violence), and Youth. A ninth sector, Immigrant Housing, was formed in 2007.

WHEN DOES THE COUNT TAKE PLACE?

The count is completed every two years on a Wednesday in mid-May. The 'mid-month, mid-week' timing was arrived at by consultation with service providers, who identified the need to select a date when the effects of government income receipt on homeless persons are moderated. The count takes place during intake hours for facilities and extends from 6:00 p.m. on the night of the count to 6:00 a.m. the following morning for service agencies. Participating facilities and service agencies complete enumeration forms that are returned to The City of Calgary. The data are analyzed and a report on the findings is published, usually in mid-July.

This process relies on the ongoing participation of facilities and service agencies and is highly consultative with regard to the adjustment of census parameters. For example, in consultation with expert stakeholders, The City of Calgary has adjusted the parameters for each successive count (which is standard research practice for any census) to incorporate newly available information as to where homeless Calgarians might be found. As a result, the list of facilities and service agencies that are surveyed is revised for each count to include to the fullest extent possible the organizations that are known to be sheltering the homeless in Calgary.

HOW HAVE CHANGES TO THE CENSUS PARAMETERS AFFECTED THE REPORT?

The level of detail in the information collected and reported about homeless persons has increased over time, beginning in 1992 with simply the number of persons who had slept in an identified facility or who were observed sleeping on the street in a small part of the downtown core. This has evolved to include data on the observed age, sex and population group characteristics of homeless individuals; the number of homeless families (with or without children); the number of homeless children and youth; and whether or not homeless youth staying in facilities have child welfare status. All of these data are now reported in the *Biennial Count of Homeless Persons in Calgary*.

At the institutional level, information is also collected on each facility's maximum capacity; the number of persons refused shelter on the night of the count and the reasons for refusal; the number of beds occupied on the night of the count; and any unusual events or circumstances that may have affected the count (e.g., unusually inclement or balmy weather, increased police activity, and so on). Since 2004, the *Biennial Count of Homeless Persons in Calgary* has also provided a breakdown of emergency and transitional beds available and occupied on the night of the count. These are reported by facility for each sector providing shelter to Calgary's homeless population.

HOW ARE EMERGENCY AND TRANSITIONAL BEDS DEFINED?

In *The Calgary Community Plan 2004-2008: Building Paths Out of Homelessness*, the Calgary Homeless Foundation (2003: 9) defines a number of housing terms, including ‘emergency shelters’ and ‘transitional housing’:

1. *Emergency Shelters* – Provide temporary accommodation for homeless individuals and families who would otherwise sleep in the streets, generally including supports such as food, clothing and counselling.
2. *Transitional Housing* – Provides short or long-term accommodation while assistance is obtained to address problems such as unemployment, addictions, mental health issues, educational deficits, physical and cognitive disabilities, and domestic violence. Transitional housing units typically provide access to a mix of support services that enable an individual to move towards self-sufficiency. Privately owned, for-profit, affordable rental units are not included in this category.

For the *Biennial Count of Homeless Persons*, a simpler definition has been used on the census forms distributed to facilities by The City of Calgary: *emergency shelter* refers to shelter where there is the promise of only one night of accommodation, whereas *transitional shelter* refers to the promise of two or more nights’ accommodation. Agency definitions of ‘transitional shelter’ vary widely according to each agency’s mandate and funding requirements, ranging from days, weeks or months and even to years, when homes for independent or supported living are not available for people to move into.

WHAT IS ABSOLUTE HOMELESSNESS AND HOW DOES THIS FIT WITH THE COUNT?

In 2002, the Calgary Homeless Foundation commissioned a comprehensive study on homelessness in Calgary, which will be updated in 2008. The authors note that “the definition of homelessness continues to be debated.” Following extensive community consultation, a majority of community stakeholders preferred the United Nations’ definition of homelessness, “which clearly differentiates between the absolutely and the relatively homeless” (Gardiner and Cairns, 2002: 33).

The United Nations defines *absolute homelessness* as “individuals living in the street with no physical shelter of their own, including those who spend their nights in emergency shelters.” In contrast, *relative homelessness* is defined as “people living in spaces that do not meet the basic health and safety standards” including protection from the elements; access to safe water and sanitation; security of tenure and personal safety; affordability; access to employment, education and health care; and the provision of minimum space to avoid overcrowding (Gardiner and Cairns, 2002: 33).

The United Nations two-part definition of homelessness was used in the *2002 Calgary Homelessness Study* (Gardiner and Cairns, 2002: 33) and subsequently in *The Calgary Community Plan 2004-2008: Building Paths Out of Homelessness* (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2003: 9). Since only those individuals and families who do not have a permanent residence to which they can return whenever they so choose are included in the *Biennial Count of Homeless Persons*, The City of Calgary only enumerates people who are absolutely homeless.

HOW ARE PEOPLE WHO ARE *RELATIVELY HOMELESS* COUNTED?

The City of Calgary does not enumerate the relatively homeless population since there is no proven methodology for doing so. However, by using Canada Census data provided by Statistics Canada, The City does report on the size and characteristics of populations who are *at risk of becoming absolutely homeless* because they have low income³ and are overspending on shelter according to national guidelines.⁴ The City's research briefs on housing need, as well as many other related reports, are posted on The City of Calgary website. Please visit www.calgary.ca/affordablehousing and click on the link to 'Research on Affordable Housing and Homelessness.'

HOW DOES THE CITY OF CALGARY'S BIENNIAL COUNT OF HOMELESS PERSONS RELATE TO CALGARY'S 10-YEAR PLAN TO END HOMELESSNESS?

In January 2007, the Calgary Committee to End Homelessness (CCEH, 2007) was established by 24 corporate, government and community leaders to develop a 10-year plan to end homelessness in the city. The committee used a planning model promoted by the Interagency Council on Homelessness (2006), which is being implemented in hundreds of American cities and counties. At the press conference announcing this initiative, Calgary Mayor Dave Bronconnier stated that "bringing together all sectors of our community, along with all three orders of government, offers an excellent opportunity to develop a long-term strategy for tackling homelessness in Calgary. The City of Calgary fully supports this initiative" (CCEH, 2007).

³ Low-income households that are in need of affordable housing are defined by Calgary City Council as households with income of "65 percent or less of the area Median Income" (City of Calgary, 2002a: 18), meaning households with a before-tax income of \$37,621 per year or less (Statistics Canada, 2003a). Data from the 2006 Canada Census will be available for Calgary in the fall of 2008.

⁴ Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation's shelter cost guidelines state that any renter household spending more than 30% of gross household income on shelter is overspending on housing. Rental costs include "rent and payments for utilities (water, fuel, and electricity) where they are paid separately from rent" (CMHC, 1991: 4).

The Committee released *Calgary's 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness* on January 29, 2008. It includes “12 guiding principles, five strategies and one objective: ending homelessness in Calgary” and sets short and long term milestones in order to measure its success (CCEH, 2008: 9-12). Strategy 4 in the Plan is designed to improve data and systems knowledge. Its first goal is to introduce a mandatory Homeless Management Information System to provide “real-time data on how long people are homeless, what their needs are, what the causes of homelessness are, how people are interacting with our systems of care, how effective our interventions are, the number of homeless people, and detailed demographic and biographical information” (CCEH, 2008: 37).

Once the Homeless Management Information System is in place, there will no longer be a need to conduct a point-in-time count of homeless persons. Until that time, The City of Calgary will continue to conduct a count of homeless persons every two years.

HOW CAN I PARTICIPATE IN THE COUNT OF HOMELESS PERSONS?

The *Biennial Count of Homeless Persons* does not provide volunteer opportunities for the general public. To learn about other opportunities to help the homeless, please contact either the Calgary Homeless Foundation at (403) 262-2921 or visit www.calgaryhomeless.com (click on *How to Help?* at the bottom of the homepage) or the Calgary Committee to End Homelessness at (403) 262-2921, ext. 291 or visit www.endinghomelessness.ca (click on *Volunteer* on the left side of the homepage).

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

To learn more about Calgary's 10-year plan to end homelessness, please visit the project website at www.endinghomelessness.ca.

To view past count reports, please visit www.calgary.ca/affordablehousing and click on the link to ‘Research on Affordable Housing and Homelessness.’ Then select ‘Biennial Count of Homeless Persons’ on the left side of the research homepage.

For additional information on the 2008 *Count of Homeless Persons*, please e-mail The City of Calgary at homeless.count@calgary.ca.

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