



Frequently Asked Questions about The City of Calgary's Biennial Count of Homeless Persons

WHAT IS THE *BIENNIAL COUNT OF HOMELESS PERSONS IN CALGARY*?

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 public report since 1996.

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 (2002b: 2) 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.

WHO IS INCLUDED IN THE COUNT?

Since its inception, the count has always included two components – a *survey of facilities and service agencies* (including social service shelters, women’s shelters, hospitals, police services, emergency social services, and outreach and community service providers) and a *street count*, in which teams of volunteers canvas specific geographic areas in the city where homeless persons have been observed to reside (including the downtown core and other commercial and residential areas, inner city parks, remote parks and river pathways, and prostitution strolls).

WHO IS EXCLUDED FROM THE COUNT?

Not every homeless person can be enumerated in a census 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, do not have a permanent residence to which they can return if they so choose but, instead, 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

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; and 2000: 2.

are difficult to search, or living outside of the “observation catchment area” (i.e., the geographic areas that are formally surveyed as part of the street count).

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

Knowledge about homelessness in Calgary has grown substantially in recent years in terms of general awareness about the issue, its locus and magnitude in the city, and the number of local service providers that have started, stopped or resumed serving the homeless population or any of its identified sub-populations (which, in Calgary, are served by eight “sectors” collaborating with the Calgary Homeless Foundation²). The City of Calgary has contributed to this knowledge base by conducting a census or “count” of homeless persons every two years since 1992.

Every two years, the *Biennial Count of Homeless Persons* provides a snapshot of the “visible” homeless population in Calgary, its size, and some of its characteristics (e.g., the observed age, sex and racial characteristics of persons enumerated; number of homeless families and children; and the child welfare status of youth staying in facilities on the night of the count). Institutional data are also gathered on the bed capacity of facilities that are surveyed, the number of persons refused shelter on the night of the count (and the reasons for refusal), and any unusual circumstances that may have affected the count (i.e., unusually inclement or balmy weather).

The data collected enable us to see how this snapshot of the size and composition of the homeless population changes over time. Similarly, we are also able to see which institutions or agencies have provided services to homeless persons through the years and, in turn, develop an appreciation of how the response to homelessness in Calgary has not only changed, but has grown along with greater understanding of the issue.

HOW IS THE COUNT DONE?

The City of Calgary uses a standard process to conduct the *Biennial Count of Homeless Persons*. The count is undertaken every two years on a Wednesday in mid-May from 9:00 p.m. to midnight. 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 income receipt on homeless persons are moderated. The time was similarly chosen to ensure that persons who were seeking indoor shelter would most likely have been admitted through agencies’ intake procedures.

Participating agencies and street count volunteers complete enumeration forms that are returned to The City of Calgary for review and analysis. The data are analyzed and a report on the findings is published, usually within a few months of the count.

The *Biennial Count of Homeless Persons* is also as inclusive as possible in recruiting key stakeholders to participate as volunteers during the count. Representatives of

² The eight sectors identified by the Calgary Homeless Foundation (2003: 29; 38-42) in *The Calgary Community Plan 2004-2008* are: Aboriginal, Addictions, Families, Family Violence, Mental Health, Seniors, Singles, and Youth.

agencies serving the homeless, the Calgary Homeless Foundation, and all three orders of government are invited to participate as facility volunteers or as members of “street teams” who serve as enumerators for the street count. The invitation for volunteers is extended to outreach workers and others with street experience, and to staff from various business units at The City of Calgary. Concerted efforts are made to include an Aboriginal volunteer on each team of volunteers.

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. The 2002 study updated information contained in a 1997 report by mapping the homelessness system in Calgary; identifying how individuals and families move through the system; identifying gaps in the system; and developing a profile of the population at risk of becoming homeless by identifying the factors that may precipitate homelessness for individuals and families.

The report authors note that “the definition of homelessness continues to be debated.” Following extensive community consultation, a majority of those consulted preferred the United Nations’ definition of homelessness, “which clearly differentiates between the absolutely and the relatively homeless.” This definition was used in the *2002 Calgary Homelessness Study* (Gardiner and Cairns, 2002: 33) and subsequently in *The Calgary Community Plan 2004-2008* (Calgary Homeless Foundation, 2003: 9).

As reported by Gardiner and Cairns (2002: 33), the United Nations has defined two forms of homelessness. One is known as *absolute homelessness*, which refers to “individuals living in the street with no physical shelter of their own, including those who spend their nights in emergency shelters.” The second, *relative homelessness*, refers to “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.

The *Biennial Count of Homeless Persons in Calgary* enumerates persons who, on the night of the count, sleep outdoors, as well as those who spend the night in emergency or transitional facilities. 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 count, The City of Calgary only enumerates persons who are absolutely homeless.

HOW ARE PERSONS WHO ARE *RELATIVELY HOMELESS* COUNTED?

The City of Calgary does not enumerate the relatively homeless population directly. By using Canada Census data provided by Statistics Canada, the City is examining the size and characteristics of populations who are at risk of becoming absolutely homeless because they have low income (defined by Calgary City Council as households with less than 65 percent of median gross annual household income in the city of Calgary in the year 2000, as reported in the 2001 Canada Census) and are overspending on shelter according to national guidelines, live in homes in need of major repairs, or live in overcrowded conditions. This research is available on The City of Calgary’s website,

www.calgary.ca by selecting the “A to Z” Directory on the right hand side of the screen. The entry for *Affordable Housing* will link to the web page where more information can be found.

HOW MANY PEOPLE ARE HOMELESS IN CALGARY?

The City’s 2006 Count of Homeless Persons estimated a total of 3,436 persons who were homeless in Calgary on the night of May 10, 2006.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For additional information on the *Biennial Count of Homeless Persons in Calgary*, go to www.calgary.ca and select the “A to Z” Directory on the right hand side. The entry for *Affordable Housing* will link to the web page where more information can be found.

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