

Wellesley Institute backgrounder:

Toronto's homeless street count - lots of heat, but little light

How many homeless people live in Toronto: Are there 500? 5,000? Or perhaps even 50,000? On April 15, 2009, hundreds of homeless outreach workers and volunteers are set to visit about half of Toronto neighbourhoods for Toronto's second count of homeless people and street needs assessment. The results are expected in late June or early July. Counting the homeless is critically important – it allows the city to set targets for funding and programs, and to evaluate the success of homeless initiatives. Toronto's street count is modelled on similar counts that are done in literally dozens of cities across the United States and several Canadian communities.

The problem is: the street count won't generate a reliable number. Virtually every expert, including city officials, acknowledge that street counts – based on “point in time” methodology and visual identification – significantly undercount the real number of people who are homeless.

And, it won't yield reliable information on the physical or mental health needs of people who are homeless. There are plenty of scientifically valid research reports on the needs of homeless people (at least three dozen, at last count, including several commissioned by the Wellesley Institute). Last time around, the most widely heralded “finding” from Toronto's street needs assessment was that the vast majority of people who are homeless would like to have a home. Frankly, this wasn't news.

Here are nine fundamental concerns with street counts and street needs assessments:

1. Homeless counts generate **lots of heat but little light**.
2. There is **no consistent or accepted methodology** for street counts.
3. Toronto's street count uses the “point-in-time” method, which **misrepresents the magnitude and nature** of homelessness.
4. Toronto's street count will **survey only half the neighbourhoods** in the city.
5. Toronto's street count **relies on volunteers to make assumptions** about the homeless status of those who wouldn't / didn't volunteer to participate.
6. Concern #6 – **Only the “visible” homeless are counted**, even though invisibility is a survival strategy for Toronto's homeless people.
7. The single biggest group of homeless people – the **“hidden homeless”** – **are deliberately left out** of Toronto's homeless count.
8. Toronto's “needs assessment” **relies on assumptions and voluntary disclosure**, not informed clinical assessments of physical, mental health and other needs.
9. The city's homeless count **ignore the dozens of previous counts, needs assessments and detailed research studies** on Toronto's homeless population.

The leading Canadian academic authority on housing and homelessness, Dr. David Hulchanski of the University of Toronto's Centre for Urban and Community Studies, has stated that there is no reliable way to count the homeless:

“We need to concede that all attempts at counting the homeless 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 the 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 number¹.”

Lots of numbers, lots of questions

Street counts have generated plenty of questions and political debate over the years. In 1983, the Centre for Creative Non-Violence (a homeless advocacy group based in Washington, D.C.) used expert advice and statistics from service providers to estimate that there were 3 million homeless people in that country. A year later, the Reagan administration offered its own estimate of 250,000 to 350,000².

In 2004, the U.S. National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, using findings drawn from the Urban Institute and the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers, estimated that there were about 3.5 million homeless people in the United States, including 1.5 million children³. Meanwhile, the conservative National Alliance to End Homelessness has estimated that there are 750,000 homeless people⁴.

It's not just at the national level where counts have generated conflicting claims and controversy. Los Angeles' 2005 homeless count has been billed as “the largest community enumeration ever performed”. The results were released in January of 2006 and the 198-page study found:

“The overall homeless population of the Los Angeles Continuum of Care at a given point in time is estimated to be 82,291 people. Approximately 72,413 were unsheltered, and 9,878 people were living in either emergency shelters or transitional housing programs at the time of the census”⁵.

Almost immediately, critics (who have been pushing for a reduction in homeless funding and programs) attacked the numbers as inflated. On the other side of the continent, the February 2006 homeless count in New York City reported 3,843 unsheltered people (a 13% decrease from 2005), with 31,038 in the city's shelters⁶. It seems surprising, on the face of it, that New York City (population: 8 million-plus) would have half the homeless population of Los Angeles (population: 3.8 million).

¹ J. David Hulchanski, *A New Canadian Pastime? Counting Homeless People: Addressing and preventing homelessness is a political problem, not a statistical or definitional problem*, University of Toronto Centre for Urban and Community Studies, December 2000, p5.

² For more on U.S. homeless counts, see Anita Drever, *Homeless Count Methodologies: An Annotated Bibliography*, Institute for the Study of Homelessness and Poverty, University of California, Los Angeles, February 1999

³ National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, *Homelessness in the United States and the Human Right to Housing*, January 2004.

⁴ National Alliance to End Homelessness: www.endhomelessness.org.

⁵ Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, *2005 Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count*, January 2006.

⁶ New York Department of Homeless Services, www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/html/statistics/statistics.shtml

Prof. Marybeth Shinn of New York University, a leading U.S. expert on homelessness, says the New York count is based on a flawed methodology. The enumerators were told to count only “visible” homeless people (the same instructions given to Toronto’s counters). According to Shinn, up to 68% of homeless people “were not visible to enumerators... Street counts are likely to miss a substantial portion of the unsheltered homeless individuals they attempt to count⁷.”

Wild variations in homeless counts also occur in Canada. Academic experts and advocates report that many street counts seriously undercount the number of homeless people. (Toronto municipal staff has acknowledged that undercounting is a serious problem.) Is the big increase in those cities due to rising homelessness, or more accurate counts?

The lessons from homeless street counts, and the swirl of controversy surrounding the numbers, raise two basic questions:

- **HOW** is the count done, and
- **WHO** gets counted?

Toronto’s count relies on “snapshot”

There is no consistent or accepted methodology for doing street counts, which is one reason why there are so many different sets of numbers. Among the different methods are:

- point-in-time surveys (which count homeless people on one particular day), or
- period-prevalence counts (which count the homeless over time).

The differences between the two are significant, and can lead to different sets of numbers. As the U.S. National Coalition for the Homeless notes:

“The high turnover in the homeless population documented by recent studies suggests that many more people experience homelessness than previously thought and that most of these people do not remain homeless. Because point-in-time studies give just a ‘snapshot’ picture of homelessness, they only count those who are homeless at a particular time. Over time, however, some people will find housing and escape homelessness while new people will lose housing and become homeless. Systemic social and economic factors (prolonged unemployment or sudden loss of a job, lack of affordable housing, domestic violence, etc.) are frequently responsible for these episodes of homelessness. Point-in-time studies do not accurately identify these intermittently homeless people, and therefore tend to overestimate the proportion of people who are so-called “chronically homeless” -- particularly those who suffer from severe mental illness and/or addiction disorders and therefore have a much harder time escaping homelessness and finding permanent housing. For these reasons, point-in-time counts are often criticized as misrepresenting the magnitude and nature of homelessness.⁸”

In addition, counts can rely on information from surveys, or data from service providers (such as drop-in centres or other services for the homeless). The differences in the numbers in Adelaide

⁷ Quoted in *New York Daily News*, April 26, 2006.

⁸ National Coalition for the Homeless Fact Sheet #2, *How Many People Experience Homelessness*, June 2005.

are based on different sources: The researchers went to service providers, while the official count relied on census data.

Period-prevalence counts are less common. A 1994 study analyzing shelter admission data and telephone surveys reported that, over a five-year period, 3.27% of New York City's population and up to 3.1% of the United States population find themselves in homeless shelters⁹.

Toronto's 2003 homeless report card noted that in 2002, a total of 31,985 different people stayed in an emergency shelters (not including the abused women's shelters)¹⁰. A technical paper prepared for the Toronto Mayor's Homelessness Action Task Force in 1998 also reviewed homeless prevalence data for Toronto¹¹.

Toronto's count: Only half the city actually surveyed

Toronto's homeless count used "point-in-time". A group of 1,100 professionals and volunteers visited about 270 neighbourhoods. This represents about half the city. The teams were sent throughout the central core, plus another 130 or so to outlying areas.

The assumption that all the city's street homeless would either be in the central core, or in selected parts of the outer areas, raises further questions about the Toronto methodology. Many recent studies, such as the United Way's *Poverty by Postal Code*¹², show that deep poverty is growing, especially in the outlying parts of Toronto – including Scarborough and North York. Since poverty is a major pathways to homelessness, the assumption that homeless people will mostly be in the downtown and selected outlying neighbourhoods must be questioned.

Toronto's count: Most homeless people are left out

After deciding how to do the count, the next most important question is: Who to count?

Toronto decided to count "visible" homeless people. The teams were supposed to approach everyone they met on the streets and ask if they were homeless. If the person said yes, they were asked to answer a 7-page survey. If the person said no, or if the person was sleeping or otherwise seemed incapable of participating, then the teams were supposed to guess. Here are Toronto's guidelines on how to spot a "genuine" homeless person:

- "carrying bags, backpacks, garbage bags, suitcases, blankets, shopping cart, sleeping bag, and / or bedrolls",
- "sleeping on the street or other public place", or
- "sign indicating homeless and requesting assistance / money"¹³

⁹ Dennis Culhane et al, *Public Shelter Admission Rates in Philadelphia and New York City*, Housing Policy Debate 5, 2 (1994).

¹⁰ City of Toronto, *Toronto Report Card on Housing and Homelessness*, 2003, p3.

¹¹ Joseph Springer et al, *A Profile of Toronto's Homeless Population*, June 22, 1998.

¹² The full report is available at www.unitedwaytoronto.com.

¹³ Part 2: Street Needs Assessment, City of Toronto.

Concentrating on visible homeless people (those who fit certain assumptions) ignores a reality of life on the streets. Invisibility is a survival strategy for homeless people, especially since Toronto adopted more restrictive measures in February of 2005. The city's campaign to eliminate homeless people from Nathan Phillips Square and from under bridges and in parks has forced many homeless deeper into the urban infrastructure. Many don't want to be identified. And they may not dress or act in a way that is assumed to be characteristic of homeless people.

The U.S. National Coalition says:

“Regardless of the time period over which the study was conducted, many people will not be counted because they are not in places researchers can easily find. This group of people, often referred to as ‘the unsheltered’ or ‘hidden’ homeless, frequently stay in automobiles, camp grounds, or other places that researchers cannot effectively search. For instance, a national study of formerly homeless people found that the most common places people who had been literally homeless stayed were vehicles (59.2%) and makeshift housing, such as tents, boxes, caves, or boxcars (24.6%) This suggests that homeless counts may miss significant numbers of people who are homeless, including those living in doubled-up situations¹⁴.

“Hidden homeless” left out of Toronto’s count

Toronto’s homeless count included “visible” homeless people in the parts of the city where the survey teams visited, along with a count of the city’s shelter system. The single biggest group of homeless people – called the “hidden homeless” – were deliberately been left out. These are people without secure housing temporarily staying with family or friends. Sometimes, they are called “couch-surfers”. Many experts and research studies suggest that the number of hidden homeless exceeds the numbers in shelters or on the streets. Municipal officials agree that the hidden homeless represent a part of the homeless population. But officials continue to insist that the hidden homeless be left out. They don’t suggest why, but perhaps it is because the hidden homeless are virtually impossible to find and therefore to count.

One measure of one part of the hidden homeless population in Toronto comes from a 2004 study for the City of Toronto on evictions. Experts, advocates and most research studies agree that evictions represent a significant cause of homelessness. The City of Toronto’s 2004 eviction study found that 29% of tenant households that were evicted went to homeless shelters. Another 29% of evicted households joined the ranks of the “hidden homeless” by finding temporary (and insecure) shelter “couch-surfing” with family or friends¹⁵. A total of 30,499 tenant households (which adds up to more than 76,000 women, men and children¹⁶) faced eviction in Toronto in 2005¹⁷, an increase of about 10% over the previous year. Add up the numbers and the eviction rate adds as many as 22,000 people to the “hidden homeless” population annually.

Assessing the needs of Toronto’s homeless population

¹⁴ National Coalition for the Homeless Fact Sheet #2, *How Many People Experience Homelessness*, June 2005.

¹⁵ Linda Lapointe, *Analysis of Evictions Under the Tenant Protection Act in the City of Toronto*, City of Toronto Shelter Housing and Support Division, March 31, 2004, p71.

¹⁶ Based on an average household size among evicted households of 2.5, according to the 2004 Lapointe study.

¹⁷ Ontario Rental Housing Tribunal, 2005 statistics.

Toronto officials say that a key reason for the count is to determine the needs of homeless people and make sure that there are adequate and appropriate services for them. However, most members of the survey teams don't have the clinical training to properly assess the physical or mental health condition of the homeless people they encounter. While the survey results will offer an interesting glimpse, the "hit-and-miss" nature of the count means that detailed assessment and informed clinical judgement is missing.

The sparse information from the April homeless count will *not* be able to provide statistics or evidence for making a proper assessment of the needs of homeless people, including:

- the number of shelter beds that are required.
- the food and water needs of the homeless.
- their physical and mental health needs, and proper services to meet those needs.
- the special needs of specific groups, such as women, children, Aboriginal people, immigrants and refugees, various ethno-cultural groups.
- the number of new subsidized and supportive housing units that are required.
- the number of rent supplements (rent-geared-to-income housing subsidies) required.
- the non-housing support needs of the homeless.

The 2009 count: Latest in a long series

Toronto has had dozens of counts, along with detailed and professional assessments of the physical and mental health needs of homeless people. Most included recommendations. Almost all these reports have been neglected.

Here is a selected listing of recent homeless counts and needs assessments in Toronto:

1. *Report of Committee on Homeless and Transient Men*; June 1960; Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto
2. *Report on Skid Row*; November 1977; City of Toronto Planning Board
3. *People Without Homes: A Permanent Emergency*; January 1983; Social Planning Council of Metro Toronto
4. *No Place to Go: Homelessness in Metropolitan Toronto*; January 1983; Metropolitan Toronto Community Services Department and Metropolitan Toronto Planning Department
5. *Housing and Health*; October 1984; City of Toronto Department of Public Health
6. *Off the Streets: A Case for Long-term Housing*; September 1985; City of Toronto Alternative Housing Subcommittee
7. *Report of the Inquiry Into the Effects of Homelessness on Health*; March 1987; Toronto Union of Unemployed Workers
8. *Homeless Not Helpless*; September 1990; City of Toronto Healthy City Office
9. *The Street Health Report*; May 1992; Street Health
10. *State of Homelessness Report*; 1996/97; City of Toronto Community Services
11. *Mental Illness and Pathways into Homelessness*; January 1998; Clarke Institute of Psychiatry, Wellesley Hospital and Queen Street Mental Health Centre
12. *Homeless Voices*; March 1998; City of Toronto Health City Office
13. *Taking Responsibility for Homelessness*; January 1999; Report of the Mayor's Homelessness Action Task Force
14. *Report Card on Homelessness*; 2000; City of Toronto
15. *Homelessness and Health: An epidemiological study* by Dr. Stephen Hwang; 2000; Canadian Medical Journal
16. *State of the Disaster*; Winter 2000; Toronto Disaster Relief Committee
17. *State of the Disaster: Update 2001*; Winter 2001; Toronto Disaster Relief Committee
18. *Homelessness, Drug Use and Health Risks in Toronto*; Spring 2002; Street Health

19. *Homeless 'squeegee kids': Food insecurity and daily survival*; 2002; Social Science and Medicine
20. *Toronto Report Card on Homelessness*; 2003; City of Toronto
21. *Risk of death among homeless women: a cohort study and review of the literature* by Angela M. Cheung, Stephen W. Hwang, April 2003, Canadian Medical Association Journal
22. *The Shelter Inspection Report*; May 2003; Toronto Disaster Relief Committee
23. *Bed Bugs in Toronto*; December 2003; Centre for Urban and Community Studies
24. *Homelessness in Toronto: A Review of the Literature from a Toronto Perspective*, 2004, Community Social Planning Council of Toronto
25. *From Tent City to Housing*; June 2004; Emergency Homelessness Pilot Project
26. *Borderlands of Homelessness Women's Views on Alternative Housing*, Revised 2004 (first published 1996), Women's Services Network
27. *Homeless Older Adults Research Project Final Report*, November 2004, University of Toronto Institute for Human Development, Life Course and Aging
28. *Palliative Care and the Homeless*; January 2005; St. Joseph's Health Centre
29. *Failing the Homeless: Barriers in the Ontario Disability Support Program for Homeless People with Disabilities*, 2005, Street Health, Wellesley Institute
30. *Count us in: Inclusion and Homeless Women in Downtown East Toronto*; June 2006; Ontario Prevention Clearinghouse, Ontario Women's Health Network, Toronto Christian Resource Centre and Toronto Public Health
31. *Coming Together: Homeless Women, Social Support and Housing*, 2007, University of Toronto, Sistering, Regent Park Community Health Centre, Wellesley Institute.
32. *The Effects of Supportive Housing On the Health Status and Service Utilization of Homeless and Hard-to-House Adults*, 2008, Centre for Research on Inner City Health, Evangel Hall, Wellesley Institute.
33. *Better Off In A Shelter? A Year of Homelessness and Housing for Immigrant, Non-Status and Canadian-born Mothers*, 2008, Centre for Urban and Community Studies.
34. *Invisible Men: Female-to-Male Transgendered Persons and Homelessness in Toronto*, 2008, 519 Church Street Community Centre, Wellesley Institute.
35. *Street Health Report 2007: Health Status of Homeless People*, Street Health, Wellesley Institute.

For more information on housing and homelessness: www.wellesleyinstitute.com.

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