



## COUNTING THE HOMELESS

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The U.S. Constitution requires an accurate count of the entire U.S. population every ten years. Historically, census counts have been per household; people without homes were simply not counted, erasing critical sections of the American populace.

The Census Bureau first began counting homeless populations in 1970 through hotels and motels in an evening called Transient Night and then sent enumerators to short-term homeless shelters. In 1980, Census enumerators went to areas with high transient populations and encampments, in an effort named Mission Night. Local governments then began providing the Census Bureau the addresses of homeless encampments in 1990. From that information provided by local governments, the Census Bureau found that between 29 and 72 percent of the homeless population had not previously been counted.

The 2020 Census was originally scheduled to count people experiencing homelessness on March 30 and April 1, 2020. The count was, however, delayed until September 22-24 due to COVID-19 shutdowns around the country. The Census Bureau worked with local

groups to identify locations where people are known to sleep. They also counted people at service locations such as shelters, soup kitchens, and regularly scheduled mobile food vans. Services providers decided whether people at their facility would be counted by census taker interviews or the service provider opting to provide the census taker with a paper listing of census response data for each person served or staying at the facility.

The undercounting of homeless populations violates the constitutional requirement that all individuals be counted in the decennial census. Coordinating with local officials is an important part of improving the count and local governments across the country have developed systems for their own homeless counts and outreach. In California, all counties have developed their own strategies to accurately count their homeless populations in recent decades. In addition to the constitutional requirement to accurately count the population, local governments must also follow directives put in place by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). HUD mandates cities submit a count of the homeless population every two years; this is meant to track changes through data and shape the

direction of future homelessness programs.

HUD also requires the homeless population be counted through a “point-in-time count.” HUD defines “point-in-time count(s)” as a count of all individuals experiencing homeless, whether they are sheltered or unsheltered, on a single night of the year. Although a “point-in-time count” typically indicates a visual street count, the methodology for a point in time count is left to the city’s discretion. The “point-in-time count” has been criticized as ineffective as it does not consider the movement of homeless individuals. This then raises issues for the Census, as opponents of the “point-in-time” count argue that it severely undercounts the true homeless population. A study using administrative data collected from homeless service providers estimated that the annual number of homeless individuals is 2.5 to 10.2 times greater than can be obtained using a point-in-time count.”To avoid undercounting as much as possible, California counties have added supplemental surveys to assist them in counting their homeless populations.

### San Francisco

Currently, San Francisco County counts its homeless population every two years, in accordance with HUD’s directives. San Francisco’s point in time count has four components. First is the general street count, which is administered through the San Francisco Department of Homelessness and Housing Services (SFHSH). The

street count is a visual count in which volunteers canvass the city’s encampments, transit stations, abandoned buildings, and parks. The street count is held in the last week of January, per HUD mandates. The count spans two days: it begins in the evening and continues until the mid-afternoon the next day. Second, on the same night as the street count, canvassers count homeless individuals at San Francisco shelters.

Third, weeks after the street and shelter counts, the SFHSH administers a survey to a sample of the city and county’s homeless population to collect demographic information. San Francisco also hires an independent firm, Applied Survey Research (ASR), to conduct two homeless surveys. ASR and San Francisco HSH work together in improving survey methodology and data collection. San Francisco expanded HUD’s definition of homelessness to include individuals who are “doubled-up” in the homes of family or friends, individuals staying in jails, hospitals, or rehabilitation facilities, and families living in Single Room Occupancy (SRO) units. According to ASR, the survey takers are either currently or formerly homeless, enabling them to communicate with homeless individuals more effectively. Surveyors are recruited through the San Francisco Office of Civic Engagement & Immigrant Affairs Community Ambassadors Program.

Finally, recognizing the difficulties in counting homeless youth, San Francisco also conducts a survey specifically for homeless youth to profile their experiences.



*Homeless tents in San Francisco*

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Notably, to increase youth participation in the homeless youth survey, volunteer teams are led by youth under the age of 25.

## Los Angeles

Los Angeles County's homeless count is overseen by the Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority (LAHSA). Long Beach, Glendale, and Pasadena, however, conduct their own homeless counts and are therefore not included in LA County's effort. LAHSA uses various survey methodologies to project the size of the county's homeless population every two years. LA County has three types of homeless counts: the traditional point-in-time street count, a demographic survey, and a youth count survey. The three-day street count takes place at the end of January and is administered in the evenings.

For the 2020 Homeless Street Count, Los Angeles County increased its training for volunteer counters. To identify homeless residents of LA County, LAHSA uses a standard "ABC" acronym. "A" stands for "appearance," which relies on the physical appearance of an individual and may include factors such as disheveled hair. "B" stands for "behavior" and pertains to the overall behavior of an individual, such as running a gen-

erator out of a parked RV. "C" stands for "condition," which is as open-ended as it sounds, pertaining to the "general visual condition of an individual."

However, the visual ABC criteria potentially undercounts the population as it excludes homeless residents who may be couch surfing or do not externally signal homeless status. For instance, someone walking around at night without a shopping cart may be homeless, but he or she will likely not be counted if his or her appearance, behavior, and condition does not match that of a typically homeless individual. Undercounting is a large risk in Los Angeles County because protocols indicate that locations like vacant buildings and darkened alleys are off limits to volunteers and other participants because of safety concerns.

LAHSA's second point-in-time count is a demographic survey, a joint effort with the University of Southern California. The methodology to divide geolocations and project populations in the county was based on statistical inference drawn from 2017 data. The purpose of LAHSA's demographic survey is to collect data on the sample of homeless adults in LA County that would otherwise not be found in the traditional visual count and to determine the multiplier for the number of homeless residents living in cars, makeshift shelters,



*Tenting on skidrow.*

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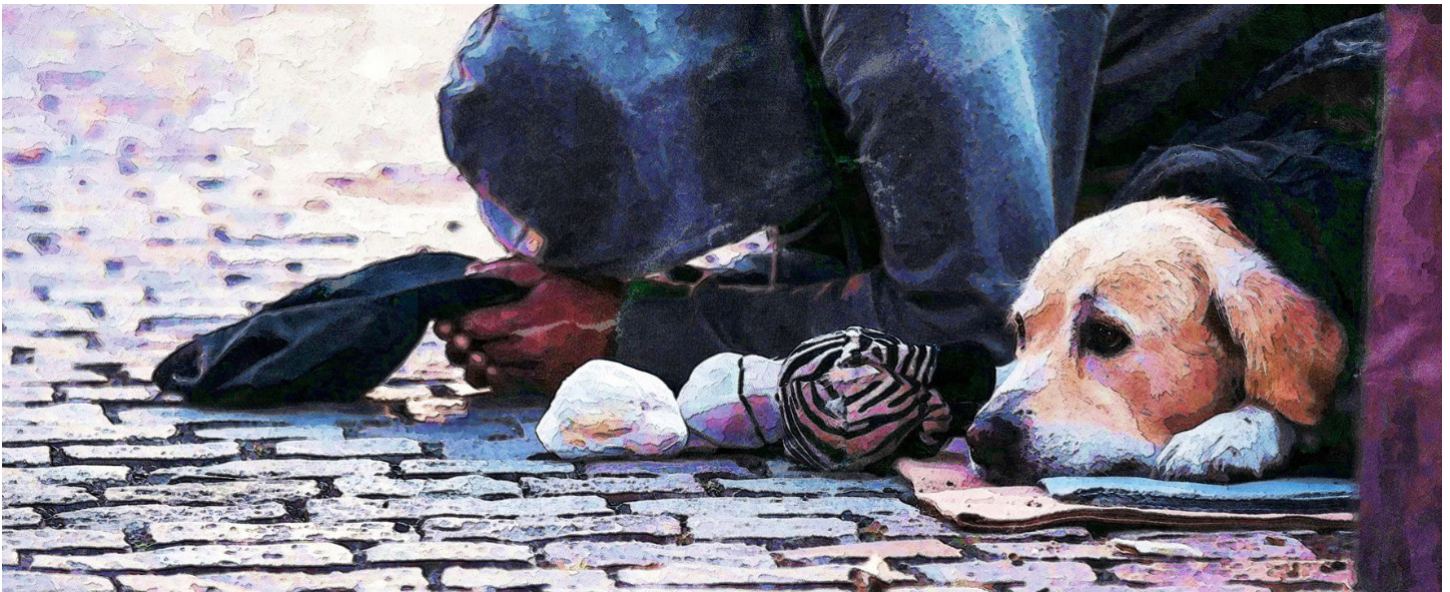


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etc. to project the population for the next year. First, census tracts were divided into 15 service planning areas in the county. Then, binary indicators are assigned to each of the 15 service planning areas to indicate hotspots of homelessness in the county. These binary indicators calculated how many surveyors would go to each location in the county. Finally, the data was used to project the population for the following year.

Lastly, LAHSA's youth survey also serves as a point-in-time count. The Youth Count is a survey-based count of unsheltered transition-age youth (TAY), unaccompanied minors, and young families. First, LAHSA identifies hotspots for youth homelessness. Not to be mistaken for the ABC acronym used to identify homeless individuals in a visual count, the ABC acronym in the youth survey categorizes 16 census tracts in LA County based on the likelihood of identifying homeless youth. "A" census tracts contain drop-in centers and youth hotspots identified by youth and youth providers. "B" tracts have historic youth count data and street count youth data. "C" tracts do not have hotspots or historic youth count data. Second, based on the letter assigned to each census tract, LAHSA determines which tracts to survey from each group. In "A" tracts, volunteers attempt to survey 100% of the homeless youth population. In "B" tracts, 50% of homeless youth are selected randomly to survey. In "C" tracts, 10% are selected randomly. Third, once the homeless youth surveys are collected, LAHSA multiplies the survey responses by

sample weights. According to LAHSA, sample weights are calculated by taking the inverse of the probability of selection. To incentivize high participation, homeless youth are given \$10 VISA gift cards for completing the survey.

### **Inland Empire - San Bernardino and Riverside Counties**

Homelessness is increasing in the Inland Empire, increasing the need for accurate homeless counts within the region's counties. The IE Business Daily reports that between 2018 and 2019, "visible" homelessness rose by 22% in Riverside County. It rose by 23% in San Bernardino County. In an attempt to accurately count unsheltered residents in the Inland Empire, both San Bernardino and Riverside counties utilized ESRI Survey123 software for ArcGIS.

San Bernardino County made two major changes in its 2019 count. Through ESRI, whose headquarters is located in the county in Redlands, California, the county incorporated mapping into its homeless street count and subpopulation survey and specifically targeted undercounted areas.

San Bernardino County's homeless count has two components: a street point-in-time count and subpopulation survey. These are administered by the San Bernardino County Homeless Partnership, the San Bernardino County Office of Homeless Services, and

the Institute for Urban Initiatives. Unlike San Francisco and Los Angeles counties, which largely conduct their counts in the evening, San Bernardino County conducts its count early in the morning from 6:00am to 10:00am in one day. As part of the visual count in San Bernardino County, volunteers offer homeless individuals hygiene kits.

San Bernardino simplified the way surveyors administer its subpopulation survey by using ESRI's Survey 123 for ArcGIS in 2019, replacing surveys collected with traditional pen and paper. To administer the street count and subpopulation survey, San Bernardino County divided the county into three regions: West Valley, East Valley, and High Desert. Each of the three regions were divided into 20 planning communities. Before the count begins, the 60 total planning communities are each designated as red, yellow, or green implementation areas. Each of the 60 planning communities have "key persons teams," comprised of community leaders who are knowledgeable about that particular community's homeless population, specifically, where that community's homeless population congregates.

The key-persons teams also rank the implementation areas inside their respective planning communities. Red Areas were defined as implementation areas where there are no homeless persons. Yellow Areas were defined as implementation areas where only professional outreach workers might go due to concerns with its safety and accessibility. Green Areas are implementation areas where homeless populations have been identified. Volunteers were only sent to Green Areas in San Bernardino County.

Riverside County's unsheltered point-in-time count has four components: a street count, a service-based count, a follow-up count and survey, and a youth count. In 2019, the street count was conducted from 5:30am to 9:30am in one day. The service-based count, held at food-banks and agencies that commonly provide services for unsheltered individuals, spanned three days, from 8:00am to 1:00 pm. Likewise, the youth count spanned three days and was held from 2:00pm to 8:00pm. The follow-up count and survey were conducted in the seven days following the initial street count to count unsheltered individuals living in unincorporated



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areas of the county. Before the counts began, law enforcement and city officials identified common locations for homeless individuals. Once these areas were identified, they were mapped to make plots for volunteers to canvass. Volunteers were briefly trained beforehand. According to Riverside County, the geolocation components of their surveys created more precise reporting of counts in the county. Further, the county partnered with UC Riverside for assistance in data visualization and analysis.

To motivate the effort, local news outlets in Riverside County sought 700 volunteers for the count. Before conducting the count, volunteers are required to attend a training, which covers the purposes of the homeless count and how to use the survey app. Volunteers participating in the Youth Count must also attend sensitivity trainings, which cover issues of youth LGBT homelessness and child abuse. All volunteers, regardless of which count they are assisting with, must bring a smartphone or tablet, and expect to walk a minimum of two hours. Similar to San Bernardino County, Riverside County conducts its visual point in time count in a single morning, from 5:30am to 9:30am. Its youth count, however, is conducted on three consecutive nights, from 2:00pm to 8:00pm.

Riverside County officials aimed to interview every homeless individual during the street point-in-time count, but varying circumstances made that goal impossible. Instead, about one-third of the data points

from the point-in-time count were observational surveys. These surveys recorded the “perceived gender, ethnicity, age, physical description” of homeless individuals. As such, individuals who were either unwilling or unable to be surveyed were still included in county totals. Methodologies used for the youth point-in-time count were identical to the traditional point-in-time count survey.

Undergraduates at UC Riverside cleaned and processed the point-in-time count data using Python. They also reverse-geocoded data to municipalities and other county precincts using ArcGIS, and created visualizations using Tableau. Rather than target specific locations for homeless populations, Riverside targeted specific demographics, including veterans, children, families with children, young adults, the elderly, and those who are chronically homeless.

## **Conclusion**

The challenges in counting unsheltered people in California are numerous. Recognizing that many homeless individuals may not fall under traditional criteria, California counties, including San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Bernardino, and Riverside, have innovated their homeless counts, supplementing the traditional street count with a number of surveys conducted through universities, geospatial information systems, and independent research firm partnerships. ♦

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