

Counting People Experiencing Homelessness

A GUIDE TO 2020 CENSUS OPERATIONS

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- People experiencing homelessness likely have been undercounted in the census for decades.
- The 2020 Census will capture data on people experiencing homelessness primarily through **Service-Based Enumeration** (counting people at places where they receive services, such as shelters and meal centers), **Enumeration at Transitory Locations** (counting people at places like hotels and campgrounds), and through a probe question on the census form.
- Support from local leaders and community members is essential to ensuring the most accurate count.

- **Shelters for children** who have run away, who have been neglected, or who are experiencing homelessness;
- **Soup kitchens and regularly-scheduled mobile food vans**; and
- **Targeted outdoor locations**, including encampments and other locations where people sleep unsheltered.⁴

The SBE operation will run for three days, from **March 30 through April 1, 2020**.⁵ During the SBE, census takers will conduct in-person interviews with individuals using a paper census form.⁶ Service providers at shelters, soup kitchens, and regularly-scheduled mobile food vans can choose which day (or night) their facilities will be counted during the SBE period. Non-sheltered outdoor locations, which will be identified in advance, will be counted on April 1, 2020.⁷

The Census Bureau will identify service-based and outdoor locations through internet research, outreach to advocacy organizations, and outreach to elected officials of state, local, and tribal governments. Advocates can connect with Partnership Specialists at their Regional Census Centers (census.gov/regions) in 2019, or their local government's census coordinator, to help ensure that all service-based and outdoor locations are included in the count.

People experiencing homelessness likely have been undercounted in the decennial census for decades.¹ As a result, the needs of this diverse population—and the communities where they live—may not be represented or prioritized fully and appropriately. There are a number of ways that the 2020 Census will count people experiencing homelessness in the United States. However, more can and should be done to ensure that this population is measured as accurately as possible.

How will the 2020 Census Count People Experiencing Homelessness?

The primary operations for counting people experiencing homelessness in the 2020 Census are the **Service-Based Enumeration (SBE)**, part of the broader Group Quarters operation,² and **Enumeration at Transitory Locations (ETL)**.³

SERVICE-BASED ENUMERATION

The SBE operation counts people experiencing homelessness by locating them at places where they receive services and at outdoor locations, including:

- **Shelters with sleeping facilities** for people experiencing homelessness;

Figure 1: Hundreds of Thousands of People Were Counted at SBE Locations in 2000 and 2010

Type of SBE Location	2000 Census		2010 Census		Percent of Change
	Count*	Percent*	Count*	Percent*	
Total	283,898	100.0	422,972	100.0	49
Shelters	184,008	65.0	210,036	49.7	14
Soup Kitchens and Regularly Scheduled Mobile Food Vans	76,465	27.0	175,434	41.5	129
Targeted Nonsheltered Outdoor Locations	23,425	8.0	37,502	8.9	60

*Counts are unweighted.
*Percentages do not sum to 100.0 due to rounding.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2013

For more on the importance of counting people experiencing homelessness and the related challenges, see:

Will You Count? People Experiencing Homelessness in the 2020 Census

(<http://www.georgetownpoverty.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/People-Experiencing-Homelessness-HTC.pdf>).

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Before SBE begins, Census Bureau staff will contact administrators at service-based locations to collect information that will help facilitate the count. This operation is called **Group Quarters Advance Contact (GQAC)**. The GQAC operation will take place in **February 2020, under the direction of the Area Census Offices**.⁸ The information collection will include:

- Verification of the organization’s address and contact information;
- Estimated number of people to be counted;
- Best date and time for conducting the count; and
- Legal and security constraints or issues, and confidentiality procedures.⁹

ENUMERATION AT TRANSITORY LOCATIONS

The ETL operation counts people in transitory locations who do not have a stable home elsewhere, including people experiencing homelessness. Hotels, motels, and campgrounds are included in this operation, for example.¹⁰

ETL locations will be identified during the broader **Address Canvassing** operation, which is taking place through Fall 2019. Address Canvassing is the process of creating and verifying a list of all residential addresses, including group facilities such as college dorms, before the census starts.¹¹ Transitory locations will be also contacted ahead of ETL to verify addresses, number of spaces or units, and other information as part of the **Advance Contact** operation. **Advance Contact** will take place from February 24 to March 21, 2020.¹²

The ETL operation will take place from April 9 to May 4, 2020.¹³ Census takers will count people at transitory locations in person using a paper census form.

PROBE QUESTION ON CENSUS FORM

Some people experiencing homelessness reside temporarily in the homes of family and friends, who might not think to include them on their household

Figure 2: The Census Questionnaire Will Include a Probe Question to Ensure That All Residents of a Household Are Counted

How many people were living or staying in this house, apartment, or mobile home on April 1, 2020?

Number of people =

2. Were there any additional people staying here on April 1, 2020 that you **did not include** in Question 1?

Mark all that apply.

- Children, related or unrelated, such as newborn babies, grandchildren, or foster children
- Relatives, such as adult children, cousins, or in-laws
- Nonrelatives, such as roommates or live-in babysitters
- People staying here temporarily
- No additional people

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018

census form. In fact, over 4 million people live “doubled up” with family or friends in low-income households alone.¹⁴ The Census Bureau includes a *probe question* on the census form, in an effort to identify people who should be included but may have been left off the form, as well as people who were included but should not have been. The 2020 Census form will specifically ask about people staying at residences temporarily, to nudge respondents to include them.¹⁵

What are the Challenges?

On one night in 2017, there were over half a million people experiencing homelessness in the U.S., according to U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) data.¹⁶ The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty argues that HUD’s point-in-time methodology leads to a major undercount of unsheltered people and fails to include people who are staying with friends or family due to economic hardship.¹⁷ **Therefore, the number of people experiencing homelessness that the Census Bureau must reach is likely much higher than HUD estimates.**

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An accurate count of people experiencing homelessness in the census is important because census data are used to guide the distribution of federal funds through assistance programs. This includes housing programs that provide rent payment assistance, such as Section 8 Housing Assistance, the Rural Rental Assistance program, and Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness (PATH).¹⁸

However, **fear and distrust may be a major barrier** to accurately counting people experiencing homelessness. People experiencing homelessness may fear or not trust any person who seems to be connected to government for a number of reasons. Consider that in some places activities like sleeping, eating, sitting, or asking for money in public are criminalized.¹⁹ What's more, people with mental illnesses are often jailed rather than offered treatment and support,²⁰ and researchers estimate that 1 in 4 people experiencing homelessness has a mental illness.²¹

Youth experiencing homelessness are at increased risk of being stopped by police and arrested, and youth of color report more police harassment than White youth.²² People of color are generally overrepresented among the population of people experiencing homelessness.²³ Gay, transgender, and gender nonconforming youth also experience homelessness at disproportionate rates and are significantly overrepresented in the juvenile justice system.²⁴

People experiencing homelessness may also be concerned that their census responses will adversely affect their access to public benefits. For example, people living with friends or family in violation of public housing rules might be afraid that the Census Bureau will share answers with a public housing authority, which could result in eviction. (In fact, such data sharing is unlawful.²⁵)

Other factors that may make an accurate count more challenging include:

- **Hard-to-Reach Locations:** People experiencing homelessness can be hard to locate through traditional census methods.²⁶ And while the

census attempts to count people by reaching every known address, some people experiencing homelessness live in places not intended for habitation, such as abandoned buildings and public areas.²⁷

- **Internet Access:** The Census Bureau plans to promote internet response as the primary way to answer the 2020 Census.²⁸ However, people experiencing homelessness are far less likely to have internet access than the general population.²⁹
- **Age:** Young children (under the age of 5) are missed at disproportionately high rates in the census.³⁰ Of the 1.5 million people living in shelters in 2015, nearly 120,000 were children between ages 1 and 5, and over 32,000 were children under age 1.³¹

What Can You Do to Ensure a More Accurate Count of People Experiencing Homelessness?

- **Become a 2020 Census “partner” and help ensure that the Census Bureau’s Partnership Program gets the funding it needs.** Budget shortfalls are putting this important program at risk. Partners (organizations, associations, institutions, and the like) get timely updates about 2020 Census operations, as well as promotional and educational materials ([census.gov/partners](https://www.census.gov/partners)).
- **Stay informed about key census policy and operational developments.** The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights publishes many helpful resources at [civilrights.org/census](https://www.civilrights.org/census). Resources from the Georgetown Center on Poverty and Inequality can be found at georgetownpoverty.org/issues/democracy/census. The Census Project (thecensusproject.org) provides regular updates on census-related activities in Congress and the administration.

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FUNDERS AND PHILANTHROPY

- **Join FCCP's Funders Census Initiative (FCI 2020).** FCI 2020 (funderscommittee.org/working-group) supports funders by providing resources and information, and by connecting foundations with peer institutions and experts.
- **Share resources and information with the organizations you fund** that work with people experiencing homelessness. Ensure that these organizations know about the census and encourage them take steps to ensure an accurate count of the communities they serve.

LOCAL SERVICE PROVIDERS AND ADVOCATES

- **Directly engage people experiencing homelessness** to share the importance of the census and encourage participation. In particular, trusted community members can play an important role in reassuring people experiencing homelessness who distrust or fear government employees.
- **Work with Regional Census Centers and Area Census Offices to identify outdoor, service-based, and transitory locations** census-takers should visit. Find your regional office here: census.gov/regions. Area Census Offices will open by Fall 2019.

- **Form or participate in a Complete Count Committee (CCC).** CCCs (census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/2020-census/complete_count.html) are groups that promote responses to the census by leveraging knowledge of the local community.³² CCCs can be an effective tool for organizing outreach to people experiencing homelessness by helping to identify outdoor, service-based, and transitory locations and directly engaging with people experiencing homelessness, for example. Successful CCCs include a broad range of civic and community leaders.

Complete Count Committees Leverage Local Knowledge



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2018

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References are listed as URLs for brevity.

¹ http://nationalhomeless.org/wpcontent/uploads/2013/01/DownfortheCount_CensusReport.pdf

² <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2018/06/08/2018-12365/proposed-information-collection-comment-request-2020-census>

³ <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/planning-docs/2020-oper-plan3.pdf>

⁴ https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/planning-docs/GQ_detailed_operational_plan.pdf

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/planning-docs/2020-oper-plan3.pdf>. The municipal locations of the 248 Area Census Offices (ACO) are posted at https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census/2020-census/planning-management/memo-series/2020-memo-2017_21.html. Specific locations (addresses) for each ACO and the geographic area they cover will be available in 2019.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/planning-docs/2020-oper-plan3.pdf> The ETL operation also covers locations such as recreational vehicle parks, racetracks, and marinas.

¹¹ https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/planning-docs/ADC_detailed_operational_plan_v2.0.pdf

¹² https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/planning-docs/ETL_detailed_operational_plan.pdf

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ <https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness-report/>

¹⁵ <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/2020/operations/planning-questions-2020-acs.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2017-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://www.nlchp.org/documents/HUD-PIT-report2017>

¹⁸ <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/working-papers/Uses-of-Census-Bureau-Data-in-Federal-Funds-Distribution.pdf>

¹⁹ <http://nationalhomeless.org/issues/civil-rights/>

²⁰ <https://www.nami.org/Blogs/From-the-CEO/August-2014/Criminalization-of-Mental-Illness-It%E2%80%99s-a-Crime>

²¹ <http://www.treatmentadvocacycenter.org/fixing-the-system/features-and-news/3965-research-weekly-homelessness-increases-among-individuals-with-serious-mental-illness->

²² <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/07418825.2018.1463389>

²³ <https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/what-causes-homelessness/inequality/>

²⁴ <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/lgbt/reports/2012/06/29/11730/the-unfair-criminalization-of-gay-and-transgender-youth/>

²⁵ https://www.census.gov/history/www/reference/privacy_confidentiality/title_13_us_code.html

²⁶ <https://www.endhomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/2016-soh.pdf>

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ http://www.georgetownpoverty.org/wpcontent/uploads/2017/10/LCEF_2020_Census_Poll_Report-Final-002.pdf

²⁹ http://nationalhomeless.org/publications/DownfortheCount_CensusReport.pdf

³⁰ <https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial/2020/program-management/memo-series/2020-report-2010-undercountchildren-ommissions.pdf>

³¹ <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/2082-housing-assistance-a-critical-support-for-infants-toddlers-and-families>

³² <https://www.census.gov/2020completecount>